

Myanmar

Response to Information Request Number:	MMR99001.ZNY
Date:	1 February 1999
Subject:	Burma/Myanmar. Information On 1) Whether The Government Maintains Lists Of Political Dissidents, 2) Existing Exit Control Procedures Of The Burmese Government, And 3) The Ability Of A Government Opponent To Obtain An Exit Permit.
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
Keywords:	Burma / Myanmar / Political Opposition / Dissidents / Freedom Of Political Opinion / Right To A Passport / Travel Documents / Freedom Of Movement

Query:

1. Does the government maintain lists of dissidents?
2. What exit control procedures exist to leave Burma?
3. Would the government grant an exit permit to a political dissident?

Response:

An employee of The National Coalition of the Government of the Union of Burma in Washington, D.C. stated in a telephone conversation that lists are maintained by the Burmese government of party members who are held in custody and people arrested, and that these lists are confidential (Telecon, The National Coalition of the Government of the Union of Burma, 20 Oct. 1998). A US Department of State employee on the Burma Desk provided similar information, emphasizing that the lists are not publicly available, and that there is no public information about the lists (Telecon, US Department of State, 20 Oct. 1998).

An employee of the Free Burma Coalition added that the lists are completed by four Intelligence Branches, coordinated by a National Intelligence Bureau (Telecon, Free Burma Coalition, 20 Oct. 1998). A former employee of the US Embassy in Rangoon agreed with the involvement of intelligence agencies and added that police and military officers assist in surveillance of internal dissidents and dissidents living abroad. The former employee said that lists are prepared by the Directorate of Defense Service Intelligence (DDSI) (Email exchange, US Embassy, Rangoon, 21 Oct. 1998).

Evidence that the government of Burma maintains surveillance over dissidents and maintenance of lists can be openly found in the government's treatment of prominent dissident Aung San Suu Kyi. Since the release from house arrest in July 1995 of Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of The National League for Democracy (*The Toronto Star*, 5 Mar. 1997), the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has maintained detailed lists of her excursions. The lists note her activities of visiting her mother's grave with her son, and her attendance at a friend's birthday party (*AsiaWeek*, 21 Nov. 1997).

In regard to exit control procedures and the ability of government opponents to obtain exit permission, the employee of The Free Burma Coalition stated that when any Burmese

applies for a passport, he or she must fill out a 40-page application form. He stated that "the form needs to be endorsed by a government officer (Captain or above). If the applicant is a civil servant, it must be endorsed by a Department head and forwarded to the Township police and political intelligence. The application is then forwarded to the branches of the National Intelligence Bureau. Once reviewed, the application is sent to a Cabinet meeting, where it is approved or disapproved by the Ministry of Interior, Defense, or Foreign Affairs, or the Prime Minister." The Free Burma Coalition employee noted that the government officials "comb a person's background." The Free Burma Coalition employee stated that "not many dissidents have passports or exit permits. Most remain in jail or in disguise... A small number, who speak English, leave to go to college or graduate school overseas." However, the employee stated that "the government is willing to let dissidents out, particularly student activists, with the understanding that the more dissidents who leave, the better it is for them [the Burmese government], as long as the dissidents give up their activities" (Telecon, Free Burma Coalition, 20 Oct. 1998).

Other experts consulted believe that it is difficult for political opponents to obtain exit permission. The former employee of the US Embassy in Rangoon stated that people with no record of opposition have had difficulty getting passports to travel, and that usually bribery of officials is necessary (Email exchange, US Embassy, Rangoon, 21 Oct. 1998). Michael Christopher commented on difficulties non-dissidents encounter at the Burmese border in his 1997 article entitled "Reflections on a Visit to Burma." In this article, Christopher agrees with the Burmese immigration and customs experiences of Danish writer, Mogens Osterhammel, when Christopher states that passport control in Burma is "protracted and painful.... Painful, in the sense of having to bribe officials and porters with cigarettes and money in order to ensure that the ordeal is not as protracted as it could be" (*Asian Survey*. 1 June 1997).

The employee of The National Coalition of the Government of the Union of Burma in Washington, D.C. stated that most dissidents who leave Burma to escape persecution do so without travel documents, fleeing to Thailand, thus the government does not issue travel documents to dissidents (Telecon, The National Coalition of the Government of the Union of Burma, 20 Oct. 1998). The employee on the Burma Desk said, "A rare dissident has a passport, and an exit permit is less likely than a passport" (Telecon, US Department of State, 20 Oct. 1998). According to an Amnesty International employee, dissidents usually don't go through immigration channels. "Ninety percent of them go to Thailand, and then leave from Thailand; if they are dissidents, they definitely don't go to the airport" (Telecon, Amnesty International, 27 Oct. 1998).

The former employee at the US Embassy of Rangoon stated, "Many opponents have escaped Burma via routes through the jungle or ethnic controlled areas to Thailand or India. Passports are sometimes purchased in Thailand from members of the Burmese Embassy. Corruption in Burma is systemic." (Email exchange, US Embassy, Rangoon, 21 Oct. 1998)

In 1997, Thai police arrested 20 reputed Burmese dissidents, and charged them with illegal entry into Thailand. Burmese student exiles alleged that the Burmese military junta has requested that Thai military officials arrest any Burmese dissidents who illegally cross the border, an allegation that the Thai military has denied. (AFP, 27 Nov. 1997).

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