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Burma [Myanmar]

Response to Information Request Number:	MMR02001.RIC
Date:	June 24, 2002
Subject:	Burma [Myanmar]: Information on Ethnic Minorities, Democracy Movement
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Burma [Myanmar] / Arbitrary arrest / Arbitrary detention / Armed resistance movements / Child labour / Child prostitution / Civil and political rights / Corruption / Disadvantaged groups / Forced removals / Freedom of movement / Freedom of peaceful assembly / Freedom of political opinion / Freedom of religion / Military repression / Opposition leaders / Paramilitary forces / Political movements / State terror

Query:

What is the current status of ethnic minorities and the democracy movement in Burma?

Response:

SUMMARY

The highly-publicized release from house arrest of Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in May 2002 was only the most visible of a series of changes that have created a tiny opening in Burma's political space. Since late 2000, the military government that rules Burma has also held sporadic talks with Suu Kyi, allowed the party she heads to reopen offices, and released dozens of political prisoners.

At the same time, the army, which has held power in one form or another for four decades, has shown no real sign that it plans to stand down. Burmese jails still hold some 1,500

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political prisoners, the government sharply suppresses basic freedoms, and ethnic minorities continue to face forced labor, forced removal from their homes, and other severe human rights abuses. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority civilians are either displaced within Burma or living as refugees in Thailand and other neighboring countries, driven from their homes by the army or having fled civil conflict and rights abuses.

BACKGROUND

Experts see few signs that the government intends to follow up on the prisoner releases with genuine political reforms. Burma remains "under complete military control," according to an emeritus professor at Rutgers University who is a leading authority on the Southeast Asian country (Emeritus professor 18 Jun 2002). The professor also said that the cash-strapped government released Suu Kyi and other political prisoners only as part of a push to get Western sanctions lifted and international aid restored. "They want American policy changed to be able to sell more goods to the American market" (Emeritus professor 18 Jun 2002).

The U.S. government bans new investment by American companies in Burma and prevents the Government of Burma from getting loans and grants from the Asian Development Bank and other multilateral lending institutions. "As long as the U.S. will not move on multilateral funds, the Burmese are deeply in trouble" (Emeritus professor 18 Jun 2002).

The Government of Burma also faces pressure from the European Union, which continues to suspend trade preferences and most aid, and from the International Labor Organization (ILO), which in 2000 called on its members to "review" their relations with Burma (Emeritus professor 18 Jun 2002).

Similarly, Western diplomats told the FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW that Suu Kyi's release probably had more to do with attracting foreign investment than with any commitment to political reforms (Lintner 16 May 2002).

Some Asian security experts say that the government will be able to withstand Western pressure for true reforms despite the country's economic troubles as long as China continues to back the regime, which calls itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In return for Beijing's support, the SPDC has provided China with naval and increased commercial access to the Indian Ocean and allowed Chinese businesses to flourish in northern Burma (Young 6 Jun 2002).

There is also little evidence of a split between hardliners and moderates in the military of the sort that helped foster democratic transitions in other authoritarian countries, according to the emeritus professor (18 Jun 2002). Specifically, he rejected the view of some Burma analysts that Khin Nyunt, the military intelligence chief, is a relative moderate who might

favor some political reforms. He said that Khin Nyunt and army commander Maung Aye, who are vying to formally succeed the ailing Than Shwe as SPDC leader, "need each other" to stay in power (Emeritus professor 18 Jun 2002).

Some observers looked for signs of rifts within the SPDC in the March 2002 arrest of four close relatives of former military strongman Ne Win for allegedly plotting to topple the government (ECONOMIST 16 Mar 2002). Diplomats and other sources in Rangoon, however, told the FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW that the government arrested Ne Win's son-in-law and three of the 90-year-old ex-dictator's grandsons simply to undercut their growing business clout (FEER 4 Apr 2002).

Suu Kyi's release on 6 May 2002 after 19 months of house arrest followed months of talks between her and the SPDC that began in late 2000, prodded by UN special envoy Razali Ismail (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002). Following her release, Suu Kyi called for an immediate dialogue with the government on Burma's political future, with an initial focus on getting more political prisoners freed (FEER 23 May 2002).

Even as Suu Kyi and several other politicians traveled upcountry or made speeches for the first time in several years, conditions remained bleak in ethnic minority areas. The recent widening of Burma's political space has done little to improve the plight of ethnic minorities, the U.S. State Department's desk officer for Burma said in a telephone interview, with abuses continuing unabated (U.S. DOS 24 Jun 2002).

Recent reports by the U.S. State Department, the UN, and Amnesty International suggest that the tatmadaw, or Burmese armed forces, continued to force ethnic minority villagers to work on roads and other infrastructure projects and carry heavy loads for troops. Soldiers also continued to extort money and seize food and livestock from villagers in ethnic minority areas. Soldiers prevented forcibly relocated civilians in areas facing ethnic-based insurgencies from returning to their homes, and, in some cases, they killed, tortured, or raped civilians (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002; UN 10 Jan 2002; AI 1 May 2002).

As this report went to publication in June 2002, more than 700 Karen refugees had recently fled to Thailand from Kyau Inn Seik Kyee township near the Thai border after the army reportedly burnt their villages as part of its counterinsurgency operations (AP 2 Jun 2002).

The Karen villagers joined more than 120,000 Karen and Karenni refugees from Burma already living in refugee camps in Thailand. The Government of Thailand also hosts roughly 100,000 Shan refugees, but prevents them from entering the camps or gaining formal refugee status (AI 7 Dec 2001). At least 600,000 other ethnic minority villagers cannot return to their homes after having been forcibly relocated by the army as part of its counterinsurgency strategy (UN 10 Jan 2002).

Ethnic minorities make up about a third of Burma's population of roughly 50 million (AI 17 Jul 2001). Ethnic minorities live throughout Burma, but are concentrated mainly in the seven states and divisions named after the Shan, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Chin, Kachin, and Rakhine ethnic groups (AI 13 Jun 2001). National identity cards, which all Burmese must carry, and passports generally indicate the ethnicity of non-Burmans, either explicitly or through the use of personal titles in ethnic minority languages rather than in Burmese (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

The Rutgers University emeritus professor consulted by the RIC said that there is also little evidence that the Government of Burma has made progress in an area of acute concern to the United States government— narcotics control (18 Jun 2002). The U.S. State Department's latest international narcotics control report says that Burma in 2001 was the world's largest opium producer and the main source of amphetamine-type stimulants in Asia (U.S. DOS 1 Mar 2002).

EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLING AND TORTURE OF MEMBERS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

Recent reports suggest that Burma's ethnic minorities continue to face widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killing and torture. Some of the worst abuses take place in parts of Burma where the army is fighting ethnic-based rebel groups.

"There continued to be many credible reports of extrajudicial killings by soldiers of noncombatant civilians, particularly in areas of ethnic insurgencies," according to the U.S. State Department's March 2002 report on Burma's human rights record in 2001. The report said there were "numerous" incidents in 2001 of soldiers raping or killing women in the Shan, Kayah, and Karen states, killing forcibly displaced Shan villagers who were unable to help the army locate Shan guerrillas, and abandoning or killing conscripted porters in Shan State and Tenasserim Division who became too weak to work (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Similarly, Amnesty International stated in its annual report covering 2001: "Extrajudicial executions of ethnic minority civilians taking no active part in the hostilities continued to be reported, particularly in the context of the army's counterinsurgency activities, when civilians were punished for alleged contacts with armed opposition groups" (AI Jun 2002).

During counterinsurgency operations, soldiers at times tortured or killed Shan, Karen, Mon, and Karenni civilians who did not give them information about the movements of ethnic-based rebel groups, Amnesty said in an earlier report (AI 13 Jun 2001).

The U.S. State Department and Amnesty International say they also have evidence of killings, rapes, torture, and other abuses by the Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and other active ethnic-based rebel movements (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002; AI 13 Jun 2001).

Since independence in 1948, ethnic-based rebel armies have fought the Burman-dominated government in an effort to win greater autonomy or, in some cases, independence. The KNU and KNPP are two of the largest ethnic-based armies still fighting (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

The KNU is active in parts of southern Burma with large Karen populations, including the Karen and Mon states and the Tenasserim and Pegu divisions, the State Department report said. The KNPP resumed fighting the government in the Kayah and Karen states following the breakdown of a 1995 cease-fire. The Shan State Army is fighting the government in the central and southern parts of Shan State in eastern Burma (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Other active rebel movements include the Chin National Front, the Naga National Council, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, the Arakan National Organization, and the Karen National Liberation Army (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Since 1989, the government has reached cease-fire agreements with 17 ethnic-based rebel armies. The deals allow the groups to keep their weapons and carry out some governmental functions in specified areas populated mainly by members of their own ethnic groups (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

FORCED LABOR

In a June 2001 report, Amnesty International called forced labor "perhaps the most common" type of abuse faced by Burma's ethnic minorities (AI 13 Jun 2001). In a May 2002 update, the rights group said that it had "recent evidence that the military is still seizing ethnic minority civilians for unpaid forced labor in counter-insurgency areas of the Shan, Mon, and Karen States, and the Tenasserim Division" (AI 1 May 2002).

Amnesty reported that the majority of the 100 mainly ethnic minority refugees and migrant workers whom it interviewed in Thailand in February and March 2002 said they had been forced to work for the Burmese military. While some of the Shan, Akha, Lahu, Mon, Tavoyan, Karen, and Burman villagers said that the armed forces seemed to be relying less on forced labor than in the past, most reported that they had been forced to work for the military within the past year (AI 1 May 2002).

Similarly, the International Labor Organization (ILO) said in March 2002 that forced labor continued unabated in Burma despite an October 2000 national law banning the practice (ILO 18 Mar 2002). As part of its effort to prod the regime to end forced labor, in May 2002, the ILO named an interim liaison officer to Burma following months of negotiations with the SPDC over the office's mandate and scope. The interim officer, Leon de Riedmatten of the Swiss-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, is tasked with laying the groundwork for a permanent liaison mission (ILO 6 May 2002).

The government apparently has stopped using forced labor on infrastructure projects with purely civilian uses, according to a January 2002 report by the top UN rights investigator for Burma, Sergio Pinheiro. Like the Amnesty International and ILO reports, however, Dr. Pinheiro's report said that other types of forced labor continued (UN 10 Jan 2002).

The apparent decline in the use of forced labor for civil engineering projects suggests that the army is using civilians mainly for military logistical support and on infrastructure projects with dual military and civilian uses. This includes building roads and railways and building, repairing, and maintaining army barracks, the U.S. State Department and Amnesty International reported. In perhaps the most brutal type of forced labor, soldiers also make civilians porter heavy loads over rough terrain for days or weeks at a stretch (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002; AI 13 Jun 2001).

Soldiers also make civilians farm fields, cut or gather wood, and cook, clean, launder, weave baskets, and get water for army units, according to the State Department report (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002). The military forces men, women, and children to provide labor and almost never pays civilians for their work, Amnesty International reported (AI 1 May 2002).

While soldiers seem to coerce labor from most ethnic groups, they use ethnic minorities far more often than members of the Burman majority, Amnesty says (AI 13 Jun 2001).

FORCED RELOCATION

The Burmese army has perhaps curbed, although by no means abandoned, its longstanding strategy of forcibly relocating ethnic minority villagers living in insurgency areas to prevent them from aiding guerrillas, according to observers.

Dr. Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur, told the UN Human Rights Commission in March 2002 that he had recent evidence that forced relocations have not ceased. He said that the army reportedly had forcibly moved many Wa villagers from the northeast part of Shan State to designated areas in the south. The same operations also uprooted several hundred ethnic Lahu and Chinese families (UN 28 Mar 2002).

Similarly, the U.S. State Department human rights report said that in 2001 "thousands" of ethnic minority villagers either fled or were driven from their homes to hastily built forest shelters, frequently in heavily mined areas without adequate food or basic medical care (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002). In recent years, soldiers have beaten, raped, and killed Chin, Karen, Karenni, and Shan villagers who resisted being moved. The report added that soldiers often loot and seize property and goods from villagers forced from their homes (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

A June 2001 Amnesty International report stated that the army still pushes many villagers off their lands, although not on the scale witnessed in the 1990s. The government, however, has done little to ease the hardships faced by the hundreds of thousands of villagers displaced since the mid-1990s. They generally cannot return home to harvest crops or collect belongings, have few means of earning livings, and have never been compensated for the loss of their land and possessions, the Amnesty report said (AI 13 Jun 2001).

Forced relocation is most common in the Shan, Kayah, and Karen states and in parts of Mon State and Pegu Division, the State Department report said. After forcing villagers from their homes, soldiers often make them work on infrastructure projects, the report added (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Overall, the military has since 1996 forcibly relocated at least 300,000 Shans from 1,400 villages, 20,000 to 30,000 Karenni villagers, and an unknown number of Karens and other ethnic minorities, according to Amnesty International. Amnesty also reported that soldiers have killed hundreds of Shan villagers for trying to return to their homes (AI 13 Jun 2001).

ARMY EXTORTION AND THEFT

Adding to the hardships faced by Burma's ethnic minorities, the government's 1997 policy of making army units live off the land has given soldiers free reign to extort money from villagers and force them to provide food and building materials, according to the U.S. State Department and Amnesty International (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002; AI Jun 2002).

Burmese soldiers often extort money or seize food by levying arbitrary fees or taxes. Refugees from Mon State told Amnesty International in February 2001 that soldiers made them pay an unofficial "paddy tax" of a certain amount of their rice harvest (AI 13 Jun 2001).

The refugees also told Amnesty's investigators that a local militia called the Pyi Thu Set, or People's Army, forced them to pay taxes, and, in some cases, provide labor. The militia is made up of civilians recruited and armed by local SPDC officials (AI 13 Jun 2001).

The Burmese military has a large presence even in ethnic minority areas where no rebel groups are active, such as the large Karen areas of Irrawaddy Division in southern Burma, according to the State Department human rights report. Villagers in these areas face more military checkpoints, closer monitoring by military intelligence, and more demands for informal taxes than do residents in majority Burman areas also free of insurgency, the report said (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Another serious problem disproportionately affecting ethnic minorities is that many

Burmese children continue to work as prostitutes or are trafficked for the purposes of prostitution. The number of children involved is not known, although the victims frequently are Shan girls who are sent or lured to Thailand (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

ABUSES AGAINST ROHINGYAS

Located mainly in Arakan State, Burma's Muslim Rohingya minority is subjected to "severe legal, economic, and social discrimination," in addition to the forced labor and other abuses commonly faced by the country's other ethnic minority groups, according to the U.S. State Department human rights report (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Rohingyas lack citizenship, making them ineligible for public education beyond the primary level and for most civil service jobs. The government denies citizenship to Rohingyas on the ground that their ancestors did not live in Burma at the onset of British colonial rule in 1824, as required by Burma's restrictive citizenship law (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002). It says the Rohingyas are Bengali migrants from neighboring Bangladesh who came to Arakan State to find work (AI 13 Jun 2001).

Moreover, Rohingyas must get permission from township officials to leave their village areas. Authorities generally do not allow Rohingyas to travel to Rangoon, although some Rohingyas obtain permission by bribing officials (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Rohingyas also face particularly harsh demands for forced labor. The Shan Human Rights Foundation and numerous Rohingya men say male Rohingyas must provide the army with up to 10 days of labor each month, the U.S. State Department report said. They are forced to carry food and ammunition under brutal conditions or, occasionally, to build Buddhist pagodas (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Certain townships in Arakan State, including Thangwe, Gwa, and Taung-gut, are "Muslim-free zones" in which Muslims may not live, according to the U.S. State Department's October 2001 report on international religious freedom. In these areas, security forces have destroyed mosques and confiscated land from Muslims (U.S. DOS 26 Oct 2001).

In 1991 and again in 1997 and 1998, tens of thousands of Rohingyas from Arakan State fled to Bangladesh to escape abuses. Most have since returned, although 22,000 Rohingyas reportedly remain in refugee camps in Bangladesh. More than 100,000 other Rohingyas live outside the camps with no formal refugee papers (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Muslims have been targeted in recent riots in both Arakan State and other areas. Offering evidence of what it called a "sharp increase in anti-Muslim violence" in Burma, the State Department religious freedom report said that government security and firefighting forces reportedly did little to contain attacks on Muslim mosques, businesses, and homes during

February 2001 riots in Sittwe, the capital of Arakan State, that killed and wounded both Muslims and Buddhists (U.S. DOS 26 Oct 2001).

Outside Arakan State, rioting in the town of Taungoo in Pegu Division in southern Burma in 2001 targeted Muslim interests and killed some 10 Muslims and 2 Buddhists (U.S. DOS 26 Oct 2001).

The government responded to the violence by further restricting freedom of movement for Rohingyas and other Muslims, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW Dec 2001).

FORCED CONVERSION OF ETHNIC CHINS AND NAGAS

For more than a decade, soldiers have tried to coerce ethnic Chins, who are mainly Christian, to convert to the country's majority Buddhist faith and otherwise "Burmanize" the population of Chin Division, located on the western border with India. Tactics include forcing Chins to "donate" money or labor to build Buddhist monasteries and shrines, ordering Christian Chins to attend sermons by Buddhist monks who disparage Christianity, and pressuring or forcing Christian Chins to attend schools for monks and Buddhist monasteries. Soldiers have also beaten Christian clergy who refused to sign statements promising to stop preaching to non-Christians. They have also torn down or forced villagers to tear down crosses erected outside Christian Chin villages (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

The SPDC has flooded Chin Division and other Chin areas with large numbers of troops. Army units reportedly have destroyed Christian churches and graveyards to clear ground for military camps and taken over churches in remote areas for use as bases. There is also some evidence that security forces have used similar tactics to try to convert Christian Nagas to Buddhism in northwestern Burma (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Religious affiliation is sometimes noted on the identity cards that Burmese citizens and permanent residents must carry at all times. It is not clear why religious affiliation is on some cards but not others, and there is no obvious pattern in the use of this notation (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

TREATMENT OF ELECTED OFFICIALS, PARTY ACTIVISTS, AND STUDENTS

In 1990, the government permitted parliamentary elections, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD), the opposition political party headed by pro-democracy leader and Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won over 60 percent of the popular vote and 80 percent of parliamentary seats. The army later annulled the election results. Since then, the government "systematically has violated human rights in the country to suppress the pro-democracy movement, including the NLD, and to thwart repeated efforts by the

representatives elected in 1990 to convene" (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Between December 2000 and early May 2002, the SPDC freed at least 280 elected officials, party activists, and other political prisoners. According to Amnesty International, this move constituted the most releases in years. Meanwhile, there have been few new arrests of NLD politicians or party activists, unlike in past years when authorities released some political figures even as they arrested many others (AI 6 May 2002). The government has also ended its crackdown on independent lawyers who tried to provide services to the NLD (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

While the government appears to have stopped arresting NLD members and other high-profile political figures, at least for now, it has continued to arrest some grassroots activists. As this report went to publication in June 2002, a military tribunal reportedly had just handed down life sentences to four cadets at the Defense Services Technical College in Maymo who wrote a letter calling for their class to get the same treatment as cadets at another academy, according to an Oslo-based radio service set up by exiled politicians. Eighteen other cadets who distributed the letter were sentenced to between one and seven years in jail (NCGUB 22 Jun 2002).

The student jailings followed the March sentencing of Salai Tun Than, a retired university professor, to seven years in prison for violating security laws. The 74-year-old Dr. Salai, an ethnic Chin, was arrested in November 2001 after peacefully demonstrating outside Rangoon City Hall in November 2001 to urge the regime to hold elections (AI 6 May 2002; HRW 27 Mar 2002).

These cases notwithstanding, the number of arrests in recent months of students and other grassroots activists unconnected with the NLD appears to be relatively small. This may be because few ordinary Burmese are willing to risk long jail terms to hold protests, hand out pamphlets, or otherwise campaign for democracy, according to the U.S. State Department's desk officer for Burma (U.S. DOS 24 Jun 2002).

The SPDC, meanwhile, has given no hint of when it might free the estimated 1,500 remaining political prisoners. Perhaps mindful that students were in the forefront of massive pro-democracy demonstrations that swept Burma in 1988, the government has released few student activists. Dr. Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur, said in his January 2002 report that the government had freed only one student leader, a member of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions whose jail term had expired in 1999 (UN 10 Jan 2002).

According to Dr. Pinheiro's report, the 1,500 remaining political detainees include some 800 NLD members, roughly 300 members of other political parties, students and other Burmese with no known political affiliations, and individuals held for allegedly supporting armed rebel groups. Among the detained party members are 15 NLD members-elect of

parliament arrested in the 1990s and 2 MPs from the Mon National Democratic Front (UN 10 Jan 2002).

Also still in prison are 20 of the more than 40 independent lawyers jailed for political offenses in 2000, according to the U.S. State Department human rights report (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Burmese political prisoners face life-threatening conditions. There are "credible reports that the health of several political prisoners deteriorated during the year, and that at least six died in prison," the State Department report said (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

Among the political prisoners freed in 2001 were 67 members-elect of parliament. They included all members of the NLD Central Executive Committee, with the exception of Suu Kyi, who was freed in May 2002 (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

As always, observers see the government's treatment of Suu Kyi as a political bellwether. In keeping with its pledge to allow her to travel freely around the country, in June 2002, the SPDC permitted Suu Kyi to make an overnight trip outside Rangoon for the first time in several years (AP 15 Jun 2002).

Fueling skepticism about the SPDC's willingness to abide by its commitments to Suu Kyi is the way in which past deals unraveled. In 1995, the government released Suu Kyi after six years of house arrest in a move supposedly intended to lay the groundwork for talks. The SPDC again placed her under house arrest in 2000 following a series of inconclusive talks and disputes over Suu Kyi's attempts to travel outside of Rangoon (ECONOMIST 11 May 2002).

STATUS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The NLD and several other Burmese political parties recently have reopened some offices and held meetings and public gatherings without harassment for the first time in several years, but their activities remain tightly restricted.

After years of having offices shuttered and planned gatherings broken up, the NLD has reopened offices and held meetings and outdoor gatherings in Rangoon and Mandalay. In a break with the past, party leaders such as Vice-chairman U Tin Oo have even given a handful of speeches criticizing the government (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

In one of the largest NLD public gatherings in recent years, more than 1,000 party members and supporters gathered to hear Suu Kyi speak outside the party's Rangoon headquarters on the May anniversary of the NLD's 1990 election victory (AFP 27 May 2002).

Although the government is restricting the size of NLD meetings, the very fact that the party is meeting openly stands in sharp contrast to previous years, when authorities frequently detained hundreds of party members trying to attend planned NLD meetings and public gatherings (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

In spring 2002, the NLD's efforts to carry out routine party activities received a further boost when it was allowed to reopen two offices in Irrawaddy Division and one in Magwe Division. These were the first NLD offices to be reopened outside the Rangoon and Mandalay areas (NCGUB 4 May 2002).

A Washington, DC representative of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, a government-in-exile set up by representatives elected in 1990, said in a telephone interview that he was not sure when the NLD would be allowed to reopen more offices outside of Burma's two main cities (Representative 18 Jun 2002).

In addition to the NLD, at least four other parties have reopened offices in Rangoon, Lashio, and Kentung. They are: the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD); Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP); the Lahu National Development Party (LNDP); and the National Unity Party (NUP), which is "widely regarded as close" to the SPDC, according to the UN's Dr. Pinheiro (UN 10 Jan 2002).

Despite the recent changes, the NLD and any other democratic opposition groups hoping to carry out day-to-day party activities still face severe constraints. Dr. Pinheiro told the UN Human Rights Commission in late March 2002 that officials had stopped pressuring landlords to avoid renting office space to the NLD. He suggested, however, that officials had not eased the many restrictions on party activities that he had outlined in his January 2002 report (UN 28 Mar 2002).

Parties can hold monthly meetings in their offices, the January report said, but must get official permission for public gatherings. They also must get approval to reopen offices and, with the exception of the regime-affiliated NUP, cannot publish party materials or use photocopiers or fax machines. Telephone lines to party offices, Dr. Pinheiro's report added, are disconnected. The report also said that officials reportedly were still pressuring party members to quit their parties (UN 10 Jan 2002). In recent years, the SPDC has pressured "many thousands" of NLD members and local officials to resign, according to the State Department human rights report (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

The regime, moreover, continues to closely monitor top NLD officials. Lower-level party officials are watched as well, although somewhat less closely (UN 10 Jan 2002).

In addition to the five parties that have reopened offices, five other parties are legally registered. They are: the Union Kayin League; Union Pao National Organization; Mro (aka Khami) National Solidarity Organization; Shan State Kokang Democratic Party; and the

Wa National Development Party (UN 10 Jan 2002).

Some 200 other parties that also contested the 1990 elections were de-registered shortly thereafter (UN 10 Jan 2002).

The government, meanwhile, continues to use "coercion and intimidation" to get many Burmese, including nearly all state workers, to join its own mass mobilization organization, the United Solidarity and Development Association, the U.S. State Department reported (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002). Government employees are also generally barred from joining political parties, although this is applied selectively (U.S. DOS 2 Mar 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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