



## Armed Conflicts Report

### Burma (1988 - first combat deaths)

Update: January 2009

#### Summary

#### Type of Conflict

#### Parties to the Conflict

#### Status of the Fighting

#### Number of Deaths

#### Political Developments

#### Background

#### Arms Source

#### Economic Factors

#### Summary:

**2008** In the wake of Cyclone Nagris, a government-supported Constitutional amendment received 92.4% support in a referendum. Low intensity conflict continued in the Karen State of Eastern Burma, where a further 25 000 villagers were displaced, contributing to totals of 500 000 in the region, and 1-2 million nationwide. At least 14 civilian deaths were recorded as directly attributable to the conflict, adding to a total of at least 370 since February 2006. As death, displacement and the need for aid were exacerbated by Cyclone Nagris, the government was accused of withholding this aid to further its military control in the Karen state. Attempts to consolidate control also saw a judicial crackdown on political dissidents, including the extended house arrest of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The Junta's actions drew further international criticism, manifested in increased/extended sanctions by the United States and European Union.

**2007** On October 2, 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Council implemented Resolution S-5/1 which deplored the violent repression of pro-democracy demonstrations by the Myanmar army during August and September. More than thirty civilians died during the protests and an additional 76 000 people were displaced during 2007 as a result of continued attacks against Karen villagers by the military. As a result of the violence, it is believed that many former cease-fire groups will resume violent action against the government in 2008. In response to international criticism, the Junta appointed a liaison officer to meet with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and she was permitted to meet with other members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) for the first time in three years.

**2006** Military attacks against Karen villages intensified after the junta's relocation of the capital to Pyinawa, killing between a few dozen and a hundred civilians, and dislocating 20,000. Closed constitutional talks were held between October and December, but criticized by political opposition groups and the international community. Burma was added to the UN's list of countries that represent a threat to international peace and security, and in December the US introduced a long-called-for resolution on human rights to the Security Council.

**2005** Violence escalated as the Myanmar army clashed with rebels near the Thai border and launched several large-scale attacks on the bases of India-based Naga rebels located within Myanmar. Pressure continued to build at the UN Security Council for UN action against the military junta.

**2004** Despite some clashes, a cease-fire between the KNU rebels and the military government further reduced conflict violence. Negotiations have yet to produce a formal agreement but the government and KNU agreed to extend a cease-fire and negotiations. UN and US pressure on the government to make its "road map" to

democracy more inclusive continued through the year.

**2003** Reports of clashes between the government security forces and armed opposition groups were sparse with the only significant incident in May. In spite of a decrease in violent encounters, the political climate deteriorated as Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the main political opposition group, was held under house arrest from May.

**2002** Sporadic fighting between rebel groups and the Burmese army along the Thai-Burmese border claimed at least 100 lives. Some political progress was made when the government released Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy, from house arrest in May.

**2001** Fighting between government forces and rebels continued with some Burmese army units crossing into Thailand in pursuit of rebels and facing strong Thai army response. The ruling military regime began negotiations with the pro-democracy movement releasing more than 151 pro-democracy activists from detention. More than one hundred soldiers, rebels and civilians were reported killed.

**2000** The military continued its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, hanging on tightly to power. Government counter-insurgency operations, forced labour, forced relocation, extra-judicial executions, and other abuses also continued against several ethnic opposition groups. Hundreds of people, mostly civilians, were reported killed.

**1999** Fighting escalated between Atattmadaw government troops and rebel groups. Government counterinsurgency operations in ethnic minority areas included forced labour, looting, rape, extrajudicial execution, and the involuntary relocation of thousands. Beyond an unknown number of combatant deaths, dozens of farmers and villagers were killed by the military and several government officials were executed by insurgents.

**1998** During 1998 skirmishes between ethnic opposition armies and government forces and government-backed attacks on villages in Burma and refugee camps in Thailand resulted in dozens of deaths. The military government also continued to forcibly relocate and extract labour from targeted ethnic civilian communities.

**1997** Government offensives against ethnic insurgent forces and attacks on refugee camps resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of refugees. The military government continued to impose forced labour on many civilians, including children, and to repress political opposition groups.

**1996** Skirmishes between government troops and ethnic insurgents and government-supported attacks on refugee camps killed over 100 in 1996, even as the military regime increased political repression, forced relocations, and forced labour of civilians.

**1995** Although the military regime released the opposition leader in July, hundreds of people died in 1995 from government attacks on ethnic rebel bases and from government slave-labour projects.

### **Type of Conflict:**

State control /State formation

### **Parties to the Conflict:**

#### 1. Government:

(a) The military government's official title is the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC), and is currently headed by General Than Shwe. Before 1997, the SPDC was known as the Burmese State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In 2006 General Shwe transferred control of the armed forces to General Thura Shwe Mann while maintaining control of the SPDC. It has been suggested that the role transfer was made in preparation for Than Shwe to become the future 'civilian' president of the country and there is speculation that he still actively controls the military.

b) The military junta is supported by the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). The USDA was formed by the junta in 1993, and serves to rally support for the military government.

#### 2. Armed Opposition Groups:

## (a) Non-ceasefire groups:

The military junta is opposed by dozens of armed ethnic guerilla groups and other political factions that are here separated into "non-ceasefire" and "ceasefire" groups. Many "non-ceasefire" groups have signed formal ceasefire agreements. However, after Khin Nyunt was ousted in 2004, the SPDC ordered many ceasefire groups to hand over their weapons, a move that prompted several groups to unite against the government and to take up arms despite ceasefire agreements. Armed groups include:

- Shan State Army (SSA), which merged with the Shan State National Army (SSNA) in 2005, and has a militia of about 10,000 members [Military Balance lists only 3000 members]
  - Karen National Union (KNU), approximately 5000 members
  - Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), 2000-4000 members
  - Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), 800-2000 members
  - All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), approximately 2000 members
  - Democratic Karen Buddhist Army\*\* (DKBA), 100-500 members
  - Mong Thai Army (MTA), approximately 3000 members
  - Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), approximately 1000 members
  - Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), approximately 1000 members
- [Source: Military Balance 2005/2006]

Other smaller armed resistance groups include: Palung State Liberation Army, Arakan Liberation Party, Lahu Democratic Front, Wa National Army, Hongsawatoi Restoration Party, Mergui-Tavoy United Front, Lahu National Organization, National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Chin National Front, Arakan Rohingya National Organization, National Unity Party of Arakan.

\*\* Mizzima News reports that the Karen National Union was involved in clashes with joint forces of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (a breakaway faction of the KNU) and the Burmese military. Therefore, the conflict exists not only between the Army and oppositional rebel groups, but also between rebel groups.

"At least 200 Karen villagers from eastern Burma's Karen State have been forced to flee to the Thai-Burmese border since early this month in apprehension of imminent war between two Karen ethnic rebel forces." [*Mizzima News*, July 30, 2008]

"Current military rulers signed ceasefires or peace pacts with around 2 dozen ethnic guerilla groups in the country's hinterlands... Most of the ethnic armies were allowed to keep their weapons, but after former PM Khin Nyunt was ousted in October 2004, Yangdon ordered them to give up their arms—a move that prompted several rebel groups to unite against the government." [*Reuters*, April 26, 2006]

"According to ethnic leaders speaking to The Irrawaddy news earlier this week, more ethnic rebel groups that have signed ceasefires with Yangon are expected to break their agreements. The report was made after the ethnic rebel Shan State National Army (SSNA), which signed a ceasefire agreement with the military government in 1995, broke its agreement over the weekend and merged with the rebel Shan State Army-South (SSA). It was the first time in 10 years that any of the 17 rebel groups that signed a ceasefire broke an agreement." [Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, *Asia-Pacific Daily Report*, May 26, 2005]

## (b) Ceasefire groups

A number of groups which have signed ceasefire agreements with the government continue to honour these agreements by pursuing their political objectives through non-violent means. The largest of these groups include:

- United Wa State Army (UWSA), estimated 15,000-20,000 members \*Note – before signing a ceasefire agreement, the UWSA fought alongside government troops against the SSA.
- Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), approximately 8000 members
- New Mon State Party (NMSP)
- New Democratic Army – Kachin (NDA-K)

Other cease-fire groups include: Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Mongko Defense Army (MKO)

National Democratic Alliance Army, New Democratic Army-Kachin, Kachin Defence Army, Pao National Organization, Palaung State Liberation Party, Kayan National Guard, Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front, Kayan New Land Party, Shan Nationalities People's Liberation Organization

"The UWSA with 20 000 troops is the most powerful of the cease-fire groups and it is the first cease-fire group to officially declare that it will consider surrendering the weapons when a new civilian government emerges." [*Democratic Voice of Burma*, May 21, 2005]

"The cease-fire groups generally maintain their long-standing quest for self-determination and equal rights. Yet, they have chosen to pursue these goals by an alternative path that emphasizes dialogue with the government and development of their long divided and war-torn communities." [International Crisis Group - *Myanmar Backgrounder*, May 7, 2003]

### 3. Political Opposition:

The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, is the largest political opposition party in Burma. Several other political parties exist, including the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, the Arakan League for Democracy. Beyond Burma's borders, the main political opposition is the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which formed a government in exile after the elections in 1990 and resolves to dissolve once democracy and human rights are restored in Burma.

### Status of Fighting:

**2008 Sporadic conflict continued in the Karen State between the Karen National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the Karen National Union) and the joint forces of the Burmese Army and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (a breakaway faction of the KNU). At least 10 villagers reported killed, and thousands displaced in December 2007 and January 2008 due to continued conflict in the Karen State. Four civilian deaths were reported in April and May 2008. The KNU estimates that there are 25 000 Burmese army soldiers in the Karen State, who continue to target ethnic Karens. While in some cases civilians flee their homes in fear of advancing conflict, largely the Burmese Army has displaced civilians in a systematic attempt to keep them in areas of army control. Strategies include burning down homes and villages, the use of landmines around villages, forced labour (including "human minesweeping"), internment, destruction of crops, extortions and random executions. Amnesty International has accused the military of crimes against humanity. International groups have reported the use of child soldiers by multiple actors, including the Burmese Army. An estimated 25 000 civilians have been internally displaced by the conflict in 2008, adding to the totals of 500 000 displaced persons in Eastern Burma. As a whole, there are 1-2 million IDPs in Burma. Approximately 144 445 Burmese refugees have fled the country, principally to Thailand.**

**In November 2008, Burma also sent warships to the Bay of Bengal, in an unresolved dispute with Bangladesh concerning offshore oil and gas.**

"Myanmar's troops are overtly targeting civilians; they are actively avoiding KNU military installations. That is why we are describing the attacks as 'crimes against humanity',"

"The violations are widespread and systematic."

[Source: Benjamin Zawacki, Southeast Asia researcher for Amnesty International, *Irrawaddy*, November 11, 2008]

**2007** Offensives by the junta against Karen villagers continued in an attempt to decrease civilian support of armed opposition groups, with specific initiatives focused on creating and maintaining food insecurity within the Karen region. In recent years more than 3 000 villages have been destroyed by the junta and the number of displaced people in eastern Myanmar is estimated to equal at least half a million. During 2007 an additional 76 000 Karen were forced to leave their homes and at least 167 villages were destroyed. As a result of the violent suppression of protestors during August and September 2007, there are indications that several ceasefire groups along the Burma-China border have started to train new recruits and may resume armed action to demonstrate their disapproval of the government's conduct following the protests, specifically attacks against religious leaders. It was reported in April 2007 that Indian and Myanmar security forces were conducting joint military operations along the 1 643 km Indo-Myanmar border to neutralize insurgent groups. It has also been reported that troop presence in the northern Karen State and southern Karenni State has increased from 9 divisions to 10 as of the end of 2007, meaning that there are now up to 15 000 troops in those regions.

"People around the world were horrified when they saw soldiers beating some people in Yangon, but far worse happens in the countryside, every day, hidden from the world," [Jack Dunford, Executive Director of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, January 3, 2008]

"The Brutality of Burma's military government goes beyond its violent crackdown on peaceful protestors... Military recruiters are literally buying and selling children to fill the ranks of the Burmese armed forces" – [Jo Becker, *Human Rights Watch*, October 31, 2007]

**2006** Since the junta's move to Pyinmana in November 2005, neighbouring Karen villages have been the targets of continued military offensives, including shootings, the burning of crops and houses, the laying of landmines, rape, the conscription of locals into forced labour, and other human rights violations. Over 200 entire villages were reported destroyed. Dry-season offensives against Karen villagers, the country's largest ethnic minority, are an annual occurrence, but this year's offensives were more intense than usual as the junta claimed the attacks were necessary to suppress anti-government insurgency.

"Myanmar's ruling military acknowledged that its army is targeting the Karen ethnic minority, saying its offensive is necessary to suppress bombings and other anti-government attacks." [Aye Aye Win, *Associated Press*, May 14, 2006]

"The predominantly ethnic Karen refugees say their houses and villages have been burned and civilians killed... Fewer than 100 civilians have been killed since the offensive began in November, because as soon as villages are tipped off about the attack, they flee. This year the operation has spread, and recently the number of destroyed villages climbed to more than 60, with more than 16 000 people on the run." [John Aglionby, *The Guardian*, May 23, 2006]

"During the past year, [the Thailand Burma Border Consortium] estimates that 82 000 people were forced to leave their homes as a result of human rights abuses and humanitarian atrocities. The area most severely affected was in northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Division, where counter-insurgency operations have displaced over 27 000 people during the past year. 232 entire villages were destroyed, forcibly relocated or otherwise abandoned in Eastern Burma during the past 12 months." [*Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)*, October 27, 2006]

**2005** Fighting escalated as hardliners within the military government opposed to ceasefires signed by the former PM consolidated their power. The Myanmar army clashed with Karen, Shan and Karenni ethnic rebel groups near the Burma-Thai border and launched several attacks against India-based Naga rebels who hold several bases within north-western Burma near the Indian border. Intense fighting also took place between the Shan State Army and the United Wa State Army. A series of bombings in the capital Yangon killed dozens.

"As many as 3,000 Myanmar soldiers have launched an offensive against a faction of the rebel National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) - Khaplang faction (NSCN-K), which is fighting for a separatist homeland for the Naga ethnic group in neighboring India. The fighting is reportedly occurring in Myanmar's western region, along the porous, 1,600-km (1,000-mile) border with India. NSCN-K spokesperson Kughalo Multano told the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) that there were no rebel casualties, although three have been arrested by soldiers." [Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, *Asia-Pacific Daily Report*, December 15, 2005]

"At least 1,000 people have been displaced after Myanmar troops reportedly launched attacks on ethnic rebel villages near the Thai-Myanmar border. Mhan Shar La Pan, Secretary General of the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) group, told reporters by phone today that government forces raided six villages in eastern Karen and Kaya states over the weekend, burning homes and farms, and detaining some civilians." [Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, *Asia-Pacific Daily Report*, November 30, 2005]

**2004** The conflict continued early in the year at a low level. The KNU, the largest rebel faction yet to do so, agreed to a cease-fire and entered into talks with the government. This virtually halted fighting. There were, however, reports of continued human rights abuses carried out by government troops, primarily in the Karen state. All sides of the conflict continue to use child soldiers in large numbers.

"In Myanmar there was little if any progress in ending child soldiering, with an estimated 70,000 children in the government armed forces. Exiled children told of being abducted by government forces and taken to military camps where they were subjected to beatings, forced labour and combat." [*Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, January 16, 2004]

**2003** The conflict between government security forces and armed opposition groups subsided in 2003 with the only major clash in May, a reportedly extremely brutal attack by pro-government forces on members of the National League for Democracy. There also were scattered reports of bombings and violent confrontations between groups. Government security forces continued to be criticized for their human rights violations, in particular their use of rape as a weapon of war against members of various ethnic groups. Both government forces and several armed opposition groups were accused of ongoing recruitment and employment of children in conflict.

"Myanmar's monks have been ordered to observe a curfew ... after violence between Buddhists and Muslims left a dozen dead, officials and witnesses said Sunday. ... The ruling junta, which is ever fearful of public unrest that could flare into protests against the regime, took swift action against the Buddhist clergy which have been involved in political rebellion in the past." [*Agence France Presse*, November 3, 2003]

"The Burmese army is using rape as a weapon of war against women from Burma's numerous ethnic minorities. ... Nearly 20 percent of the [reported] rapes were committed on military bases. In nearly one-third of the cases, higher-ranking officers committed the rapes, and in only two cases were any punishments given." [*International Herald Tribune*, April 25, 2003]

**2002** Rebel groups engaged in a number of battles with the Burmese army while government forces continued to kill, and abduct Shan, Mon, and Karen civilians. A recent report released by the Shan Human Rights Foundation and the Shan Women's Action Network highlighted the army's use of systematic rape of girls and women as a means of terrorizing ethnic groups in the Shan State. A Human Rights Watch report documented the extensive conscription of child soldiers by Burma's national army.

"Burma is believed to have more child soldiers than any other country in the world. The overwhelming majority of Burma's child soldiers are found in Burma's national army, the Tamadaw Kyi, which forcibly recruits children as young as eleven. These children are subject to beatings and systematic humiliation during training. Once deployed they must engage in combat, participate in human rights abuses against civilians, and are frequently beaten and abused by their commanders and cheated of their wages. Refused contact with their families and facing severe reprisals if they try to escape, these children endure a harsh and isolated existence." [Human Rights Watch, *My gun was as tall as me: Child soldiers in Burma*, October 2002]

**2001** Fighting between government forces and rebels continued in 2001, with the heaviest fighting along the Burmese-Thai border. Tensions between Burma and Thailand ran high as Burmese armed forces pursued rebels into Thailand, prompting the Thai army to respond with force. In January, the twin teenage leaders of the rebel group, God's Army, surrendered to Thai authorities.

**2000** The military continued its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, hanging on tightly to power. Government counter-insurgency operations, forced labour, forced relocation, extra-judicial executions, and other abuses also continued against several ethnic opposition groups. In an attempt to take control of narcotic production centers along the Thai-Burma border, the Burmese-backed United Wa State Army (UWSA) moved thousands of soldiers and civilians into areas formerly controlled by the Shan ethnic group. Earlier, Karen rebels led by a pair of 12 year-old twins held hundreds of people hostage in a Thailand hospital before Thai government security forces freed all hostages and killed the nine rebels.

**1999** Fighting escalated between Atattmadaw government troops and rebel groups, notably the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party, and the Shan State Army. Government counterinsurgency operations in ethnic minority areas included forced labour, looting, rape, extrajudicial execution and the involuntary relocation of thousands.

**1998** During 1998 the Burmese conflict saw skirmishes between ethnic opposition armies and government

forces and government attacks on Burmese refugee camps inside Thailand.

**1997** Government offensives against Karenni, Shan and Wa ethnic insurgent forces and a "massive offensive" against Karen National Union troops, combined with attacks on refugee camps, resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of refugees and the forced labour of many men, women and children.

**1996** Reports of sporadic skirmishes indicated a lower level of direct combat between ethnic armies and SLORC in 1996. The SLORC-controlled Karen Buddhist faction continued their attacks on refugee camps on the Burma-Thailand border.

**1995** With the assistance of a break-away Karen faction, the Manerplaw headquarters of the Karen National Union (shared with the All Burma Students Democratic Front) fell to SLORC forces in January, and remaining KNU bases on the Thailand border were captured by February, in an offensive described as the largest since 1992 (VoA, Jan 26, 1995). Thai/Burmese tensions rose when, in several cross-border incidents, SLORC and Karen defectors attacked the KNU in refugee camps in Thailand. In a separate conflict, skirmishes between SLORC and troops loyal to opium warlord Khun Sa in the northeastern Shan state (*Jane's Defence Weekly*, February 25, 1995) escalated when SLORC attacked the Mong Tai Army in March. Hundreds were reported killed in the dry-season offensive (VoA, March 20, 1995). SLORC also broke its cease-fire agreement with the Karenni National Progressive Party in June when it attacked KNPP headquarters (*Burma Alert*, July, 1995, Vol. 6:7).

**1994** SLORC offensives against remaining opponents continued in 1994. In May, SLORC intensified attacks on the Mong Tai Army of Khun Sa, warlord of the heroin-producing Shan state. In December, SLORC began attacks on the Manerplaw headquarters of the Karen National Union.

### Number of Deaths:

**Total:** Thousands (up to 3,000 during civic protests in 1988), possibly tens or hundreds of thousands, have died in the conflict.

By the end of 2007, the number of displaced persons in Eastern Burma was estimated at 500 000. Another 150 000 were displaced by the Cyclone, with some 2.4 million requiring some form of aid. Conflict beginning in February 2006 and continuing into 2008 is reported to have killed 370 people in the Karen state, although fatalities due to malnutrition and other poor conditions forced upon the civilian population are not accounted for in these figures.

[Source: Thailand Burma Border Consortium: *IDP Report, Jan-June 2008* ; *BBC*, May 22, 2008; Free Burma Rangers, April 2008]

"The crackdown in Burma is far from over...Harsh repression continues, and the government is still lying about the extent of the deaths and detentions." [Brad Adams, Asia director, *Human Rights Watch*, December 7, 2007]

"Hundreds of thousands, according to expert estimates, have died in a conflict largely hidden from the international spotlight." [*Washington Post*, January 31, 2006]

"Thousands of people have been slaughtered, tens of thousands more subjected to years of hard labour..." [*Guardian Weekly*, 25 January 2000]

**2008** Fourteen villagers have been directly killed by sporadic clashes in Eastern Burma, while 25 000 more Burmese have become displaced there due to the Karen conflict. The casualties attributed to Cyclone Nagris include 84,537 dead, 53,836 missing, and 2.4 million "at risk". The US Defence Secretary called the governments' actions (withholding aid, refusing visas to aid workers) "criminal neglect", and if this neglect was politically discriminatory, some of these deaths could be indirectly attributable to the ongoing conflict.

**2007** Following the suppression of pro-democracy protests that occurred on September 26-29, 2007, the junta released statements that 10 protestors were killed in clashes with military authorities. International human rights groups have confirmed more than 31 civilians were killed during the protests (including monks which were specifically targeted for their role in the demonstrations) however, they believe the number of deaths to be in the hundreds and some estimate the number ranges between 1 000-1 500. Investigations are continuing despite the repression of information by the state regarding the protests. Hundreds of protestors remain unaccounted for and many are presumed to have died in the conflict or subsequently in detention. Deaths of

Karen civilians continued to be between a few dozen and a hundred during the year.

"Since the crackdown there have been an increasing number of reports of deaths in custody as well as beatings, ill-treatment, lack of food, water or medical treatment in overcrowded unsanitary detention facilities across the country" [Pualo Sergio Pinheiro, UN envoy, *BBC News*, December 7, 2007]

"Many more people have been killed in recent days than you've heard about. The bodies can be counted in several thousand... They were to be killed and their bodies dumped deep inside the jungle. I refused to participate in this," [Hla Win, defected senior Burmese official, *CBC News*, October 1, 2007]

**2006** Between a few dozen and a hundred civilians, mainly of Karen background, were killed in 2006. A minimum of 20 000 people were displaced.

"According to estimates by relief groups, Burmese forces have burned down more than 200 civilian villages here in Karen state, destroyed crops and placed land mines along key jungle passages to prevent refugees from returning to their home villages. Dozens of people have died, and at least 20 000 people have been displaced over the past 8 to 10 months." [Anthony Faiola, *Washington Post*, November 17, 2006]

"Fewer than 100 civilians have been killed since the offensive began in November because, as soon as villagers are tipped off about an attack, they flee." [John Aglionby, *The Guardian Weekly*, June 2-8, 2006]

**2005** Over 100 people were reported killed in 2005, including 20 civilians killed in a major bomb attack in May. The number of deaths from intense fighting is likely far higher but difficult to determine due to lack of press freedom and lack of access to the country's remote regions where most of the fighting occurred.

"Yangon's worst bomb attacks in decades killed 11 people and wounded 162 in near-simultaneous explosions Saturday at two upscale shopping malls and a trade centre according to official figures. Witnesses said that dozens of people have been killed, but the Thai News Agency reported 20 dead, citing Thai officials." [*Agence France-Presse*, May 10, 2005]

**2004** The cease-fire between KNU rebels and the government resulted in few major incidences of conflict and less than 25 deaths this year.

**2003** Independent media reports indicated that as few as fifteen and as many as eighty-five people may have been killed in 2003. However, due to the secretive nature of Myanmar's government and to the limits placed upon media within the country, it is impossible to determine the number of deaths. Human rights abuses continued to occur with almost absolute impunity.

"As many as 70 people may have died in the violence [of May 30], according to exiled opposition groups, who blame the attack on the ruling military junta." [*BBC News*, June 16, 2003]

**2002** Independent media reports estimated that, by October, over 100 civilians, rebels, and soldiers were killed by fighting. Hundreds more were victims of human rights abuses committed by the government.

"Intense fighting in eastern Myanmar between government troops and ethnic guerillas has killed dozens and threatens to spill over into neighboring Thailand ..." [*Reuters.com*, June 8, 2002]

**2001** According to media reports, more than one hundred soldiers and rebels were killed, with unknown numbers of civilian casualties.

**2000** Hundreds of people, mostly civilians, were reported killed this year.

"Burma's military government has been accused of murder, torture and rape in a damning United Nations report. The report said some of the worst violence by the military was committed against

ethnic minorities, particularly the Shan, Karen, Karenni and Rohingya groups. UN special investigator Rajsoomer Lallah said he had received reports of massacres in which more than 100 minority people had been killed this year. He said the most frequent human rights violations involved extortion, rape, torture and forced labour, along with some summary executions and forced relocation of minorities. '[We] continue to receive information on incidents of willful killing, torture, trafficking and forced labour of children.'" [BBC News, 17 October 2000]

**1999** Beyond an unknown number of combatant deaths, dozens of farmers and villagers were killed by the military and several government officials were executed by insurgents.

**1998** There were reports of several villager and combatant deaths in skirmishes, ambushes and revenge attacks.

**1997** Reported combat-related deaths exceeded 300, many of whom were Shan villagers executed by SLORC troops in June and July.

"The Tatmadaw [Burmese Army] killed at least 300 people in a series of massacres between mid-June and mid-July last year." [Myanmar: Atrocities worsen in Shan, International Secretariat of Amnesty International, 15 April 1998]

**1996** Reported deaths due to combat exceeded 100. These included 20 deaths reported in a January retaliatory attack by the Karen National Union on the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization, and "heavy casualties" reported in a SLORC ambush of Karenni troops in May.

**1995** Reports of hundreds of troops killed during SLORC offensives with hundreds more civilians killed by widespread human rights violations.

### Political Developments:

**2008 On February 9, 2008, the government announced that a referendum would be held to consider a newly drafted Constitution. The Constitution promised a "leading political role" for the military, according to the military appointed chairman of its drafting committee. In May 10, only 8 days after Cyclone Nagris, the government went ahead with the referendum, reporting an incredible 99% voter turnout, with 92.4% support. In the regions highly affected by the Cyclone, where the referendum was postponed 2 weeks, an identical 92.4% supported the new Constitution. Meanwhile, humanitarian workers accused the government of being politically and ethnically discriminatory with its withholding of international relief aid, particularly towards ethnic Karens in the insurgency hotbed of the Irrawaddy Delta. Amnesty International accused the government of human rights abuses after reports indicated that survivors were being forcibly returned to their now inhabitable homes. Political repression by the government continued. Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest was extended for another year in May. On November 11, 2008, some 40 political dissidents were sentenced to prison terms up to 65 years. Among these dissidents were the "88 Generation Students" whose attempted campaign commemorated the anniversary of the August 8, 1988 uprising. Amnesty International estimated that 1850 political prisoners remain in poor conditions under government custody.**

**2007** Following the release of two human rights reports by Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Human Rights Commission, which detailed the use of excessive force, arrests and detainment during the suppression of the September protests, the government undertook several attempts to appease foreign criticism including the assignment of a liaison officer to meet with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. October 2, 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Council implemented Resolution S-5/1 which deplored the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations and made several recommendations concerning human rights. On November 9, 2007, Suu Kyi was allowed to hold talks with the other members of the NLD opposition for the first time in three years. Although representatives of Suu Kyi have released statements citing her optimism regarding future reconciliation dialogue with the Junta, the government is proceeding with its "Seven Step Road Map" plan for creating democracy, which excludes the NLD. Other attempts to deflect criticism included allowing Ibrahim Gambari, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to visit the country from the 11-15 of November, 2007. Gambari released a report following his visit which has strengthened widespread international condemnation of the junta. International pressure is continuing to mount which is calling on the traditional allies of Myanmar, such as Russia and China, to withdraw their veto from Security Council Resolutions and allow for action to be taken against the government in 2008.

**2006** The junta's relocation of the administrative capital to Pyinawman was completed early in the year. The detention order of Suu Kyi expired in May, but was extended indefinitely as the government vowed not to bow to international pressure to release her. Constitutional talks resumed in October and continued behind closed doors until December, though the process continues to be decried internationally for failing to include opposition parties like the NLD. Some action was taken by the UN this year, as UN human rights investigators called on the government to stop targeting members of the Karen minority, and Burma was added to the UN's list of countries that represent a threat to international peace and security. The UN under secretary-general for political affairs, Ibrahim Gambari, also visited the country after a 3-year absence and met with leaders of the government and opposition. In December, the US introduced a resolution to the Security Council that may signal the beginning of more punitive action, but China is expected to oppose the bill and little progress is expected in 2007 when Russia takes over the presidency of the Security Council.

**2005** A highly disputed process of constitutional reform continued under the strict control of the ruling military junta while the government extended Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest for another year. Several countries, including the US, called on the UN Security Council to take action on the military junta's continued human rights abuses and lack of democracy. Officials linked to the former Prime Minister, Khin Nyunt, were sentenced to long prison sentences following a 2004 internal government purge. In late December, the military junta unexpectedly began relocating the capital from Yangon to Pyinawman, 300 km north in the centre of the country.

"With hardly a skip in their beat, Burma's military rulers have extended the detention of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and continued to talk of political reform, through a new constitution, in the same breath. Over the weekend, the junta announced that Suu Kyi will not be freed from the house arrest she was placed in May 2003. The Nobel laureate, who heads the opposition National League of Democracy (NLD), has spent over 11 of the last 16 years in detention... When the first phase of the reconvened Convention began in May 2004, Rangoon's ideas about this political exercise were exposed. While the over 1,000 representatives picked for the event were ones the junta favoured, on the other hand, the SPDC also introduced a law severely restricting open debate to shape the future constitution. This law -- No 5/96 -- will be enforced when the constitutional convention opens next week, too. Under it, individual participants and political parties have been prohibited from criticising the Convention format shaped by the SPDC and it prevents participants from offering an alternative constitution to the one that the SPDC has already drafted. Those who break this law during the Convention could face a prison term ranging from five to 20 years." [*Inter Press Service*, December 16, 2005]

**2004** A surprise cease-fire between the military government and KNU rebels early in the year led to official talks. Although these failed to produce an agreement, both sides agreed to extend the cease-fire to undertake further negotiations. American and UN pressure on the government to make their "road map" for democracy more inclusive continued with few results. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy, remained under house arrest and out of the "road map" discussions even as the Burmese government released several thousand prisoners, including dozens of political prisoners and several high profile opposition members. In October, the military government arrested and replaced the country's Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, which was taken as a sign of the hard-line generals gaining power, and has jeopardized the implementation of the military's "roadmap to democracy" plan.

"Myanmar's military junta has pledged to stick by its 'roadmap to democracy,' but analysts said on Friday what little credibility the plan had has been chattered by the purge of its main promoter, Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. With junta strongman Senior General Than Shwe having brushed aside Khin Nyunt, seen as a relative reformer despite being head of military intelligence, the secretive regime in the former BURM looks even less likely to open up." [Ed Cropley, *Reuters*, October 22, 2004]

**2003** The May arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) ensured that no progress was made in bringing the government and the NLD closer to an agreement. International pressure in the form of sanctions and public condemnations continued on the government of Myanmar, largely due to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's ongoing detention and also to the government's continuing human rights abuses. General Khin Nyunt replaced General Than Shwe as Myanmar's Prime Minister in August.

"The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar said today that when he compared the observations he made in March with those he noted in November, he saw "significant setbacks" in the country's human rights situation. ... He said he received reports that 109 of the 153 people arrested in connection with Depayin had been released, but then he was told that another 250 people has been arrested since. ... While Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was no longer being detained under "security legislation," her telephone was still cut off and the same security arrangements as before remained in place, Mr. Pinheiro said." [*UN News Centre*, November 12, 2003]

"The Association of Southeast Asian Nations urged Myanmar's military government Monday to free pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the first time the group made such a call in a rebuke to one of its own members. ... The ASEAN demand is unprecedented given its policy of not interfering in the internal affairs of its members. The ASEAN countries were apparently forced by growing international pressure on the grouping to use its influence with the generals in Myanmar." [*Associated Press*, June 16, 2003]

**2002** In May, the government released Aung San Suu Kyi from a 19-month house arrest in response to intense international pressure. However, the military regime demonstrated few other signs of reform and continued to violate human rights and repress freedom of expression. Tension between the Thai and Burmese governments remained high. The border between the two countries was closed in May after the Thai army fired shells into Burma during fighting between the Burmese army and ethnic Shan rebels along the Thai border.

**2001** Following renewed dialogue with the democratic opposition, including its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in February, the Burmese military leadership announced a program of "disciplined democracy" designed to achieve national reconciliation. By August, the military leadership had released 151 detained members of the opposition to show it was serious about progress. In the same month, a United Nations special envoy arrived in Burma to facilitate talks between the military regime and the democratic opposition.

**2000** Myanmar refused to bow to criticism by the UN and the international community over its human rights record, stating it would pursue its own path of development. National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest and was prevented from meeting with party members and diplomats. Nonetheless, in September the NLD announced it was drafting a new constitution for the country, calling on military authorities to convene a parliament and release all of Burma's political prisoners.

**1999** Political repression by the SPDC increased during 1999 as government troops imprisoned more National League of Democracy members and forced many others to renounce party membership.

**1998** In response to the decision of the National League of Democracy to establish an opposition parliament, the government arrested hundreds of party members, including nearly 200 representatives elected in 1990.

**1997** Despite economic sanctions announced by the European Union, the United States and Canada in early 1997, Burma was admitted into the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July. In anticipation of growing economic ties with Burma, the Thailand government began forced repatriation of Burmese refugees. SLORC maintained repression of internal political opposition groups and again was cited for severe human rights violations.

**1996** SLORC extended its oppression of ethnic minorities by forced relocation and forced labour, and of political opponents by detention and imprisonment. Beginning in March, tens of thousands of people in the Shan and Karenni States were forcibly relocated, and many, including women and children, were forced to labour on road and railway construction. In May and September, hundreds of National League for Democracy members were detained, and not all were released. Over three hundred students were arrested during December demonstrations, and by year end, at least fifty were unaccounted for. In January, "drug lord" Khun Sa signed an agreement to end hostilities with SLORC and to turn his Mong Tai Army into a government militia, although at least one breakaway faction continued attacks. Cease-fire talks between the Karen National Union and the government continued, but made no headway. Economic pressure on the SLORC-regime from US municipalities and states did not prevent additional investment in Burma by Singapore, Britain, Thailand and the US, among others, or approval of Burmese membership in ASEAN (although the date was left open). Nevertheless, the Burmese economy deteriorated, with inflation at 40 percent.

**1995** Bowing to international pressure, in July the Burmese military government unconditionally released Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from the house arrest under which she had been confined since 1989. Subsequent lack of dialogue between SLORC and the National League for Democracy led to the latter withdrawing from the national constitutional convention that began in November.

## Background:

In 1948, Burma was granted independence from Britain, but the autonomy promised to many of the country's ethnic minorities by the British was never realized. As early as 1949, ethnic minority groups began taking up arms to demand greater autonomy. In 1962, a military junta seized power and has since waged war on many of the country's ethnic minorities. In 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations were crushed in a bloody coup by the military-backed State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. SLORC later refused to acknowledge 1990 election results that favoured the National League for Democracy, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a subsequent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. The coup led to the exile of thousands of political opponents and to a united front of political and ethnic opposition groups. Cease-fire agreements with several ethnic groups, and a "constructive engagement" policy pursued by nations with trade interests, have not prevented regular SLORC offensives against opponents along Burma's borders, resulting in tens of thousands of external refugees and over one million displaced people within Burma. Economic sanctions were announced by the European Union, the United States, and Canada in 1996-97 but the military government continued violating human rights, including forcibly relocating and extracting labour from targeted ethnic communities. In November 1997 SLORC expunged some leaders, changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but maintained its despotic control of the country. This included the 1998 detention of hundreds of NLD party members, among them 200 representatives elected in 1990. The main political opposition, the NLD, has been further targeted by the government in recent years, with its leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, being detained on separate occasions in 2002 and 2003 and kept under house arrest. Although many of the ethnic groups opposed to the government initially fought for independence from Myanmar, their objectives have altered over the course of the conflict and now many opposition groups appear to be content with greater control over local areas and increased political representation.

"[The] insurgence irrupted 57 years ago, shortly after Myanmar, then known as Burma, gained independence from Great Britain. Other ethnic minorities later took up arms demanding autonomy from the central government." (*Washington Post*, January 31, 2006)

"The most fundamental grievance of ethnic minorities in Myanmar today is their lack of influence on the political process and thus on decisions that affect their lives. ... While many ethnic groups originally fought for independence, today almost all have accepted the Union of Myanmar as a fact and merely seek increased local authority and equality within a new federal state structure."  
[International Crisis Group - *Myanmar Backgrounder*, May 7, 2003]

"The human rights situation in Myanmar continues to deteriorate with the government suppressing all opposition political activity and engaging in 'inhuman treatment' of opposition members and ethnic minorities, a U.N. investigator said in a report released Monday." [*Associated Press*, 17 October 2000]

## Arms Sources:

China and Russia remain Burma's primary arms suppliers. In 2006, Myanmar's general Maung Aye visited Moscow, seeking help to upgrade air-defense systems, by procuring Russian-made Tor-M1 and BUK-M1-2 missile systems. In the same year, India's air force chief offered Burma a multi-million dollar assistance package, and plans to sell Burma British-made aircraft made the headlines. Other military suppliers include Ukraine, which began supplying a large number of infantry fighting vehicles and combat aircraft in 2003-2004. Singapore has supplied the military regime with weapons, and the military has a domestic source of small arms.

[Sources: *Associated Press*, December 7, 2006; Sergei Blagov, *Asia Times Online*, April 12, 2006; *Asian News Service*, January 30, 2006; *SIPRI Yearbook 2005*; *The Military Balance, 2001/2002 to 2004/2005*; *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1999-2002*; *The Irrawaddy*, August 1998]

In 2000, Russia and Myanmar "signed a joint declaration related to forging friendly relations. Economic and military ties have since strengthened and Myanmar appears to have become Russia's destination of choice for re-establishing a strategic foothold in the region." [Sergei Blagov, *Asia Times Online*, April 12, 2006]

"Burma's diplomatic supporters in the Security Council, China and Russia, are also its main arms suppliers... These countries sell weapons to Burma with scant regard for the impact on the civilian population" [Jo Becker, *Human Rights Watch*, December 5, 2007]

"Greater attention has to be given to the end-use agreements and the re-export of components from EU member states. Otherwise, these states could find themselves indirectly propping up a brutal regime which they themselves have condemned and whose violations have amounted to crimes against humanity." [BBC News, July 16, 2007]

"The EU embargo explicitly states that no military equipment should be supplied, either directly or indirectly, for use in Myanmar [Burma]" [Roy Isbister, Saferworld, *BBC News*, July 16, 2007]

"Russia's biggest arms trader, Rosoboronexport, is planning to open an office in Burma before the end of the year according to a company source...Burma has a long history of arms trading with Russian companies, buying fighter jets and hand-held weapons from a variety of Russian dealers." [Mizzima News, September 28, 2005]

"Myanmar's government, meanwhile, is manufacturing new landmines, thanks to the initial assistance from its closest ally, China. 'We believe the Chinese sold the machines and were involved in technical assistance,' starting around 1995, enabling Myanmar to make landmines." [Asia Times, September 16, 2003]

"Myanmar's regime has made plans to build an airbase in the southern district of Tenasserim, with support from China, opposition radio monitored in Bangkok reported Sunday. 'The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military government has planned to build an airbase in Tenasserim Division with fighters and helicopters from China,' the Democratic Voice of Burma said. China, the first country to recognize Myanmar's military regime after it seized power in a bloody coup in September 1988, is the junta's main arms supplier." [The Times of India, 2 October 2000]

### **Economic factors:**

Burma's gem mines are strictly controlled by military authorities through the Union of Myanmar Economic Holding Company (UMEH) which is militarily owned. It is estimated that the country accounts for more than 90% of the trade by value of rubies on the world market. In response to the violent actions of the military towards protestors during August and September 2007, many jewelers in both Europe and North America have voluntarily pledged to boycott Burmese jems, some in accordance with formal sanctions which block all imports from Burma. During 2006-2007 official trade in Burma's gems was valued at US \$297 million, which represented a 45% increase in gem earnings from previous years. Burma is also the leading global producer of jade. An auction of Burmese gems in November saw a decline in sales which could be linked the boycotts. It was reported that almost 90% of foreign buyers at the November auction were from China demonstrating the firm economic ties between the two nations.

Both government and insurgent forces rely on heroin and opium production as a source of income for war operations. In 2006, the Golden Triangle (the opium trade between Thailand, Laos and Burma), remained the greatest source of income for guerilla forces. The government suppresses rebellion by undermining the ability of ethnic groups to farm and sustain local economies. Renewed sanctions by the United States and the European Union, and a lack of funds have not prevented the government from spending more than one third of the national budget on the military. According to a report by the Asian Human Rights Commission in Hong Kong, there is an unmistakable connection between militarization and food scarcity in Burma.

In recent years, Russia, China and India have increased their investment in Burma's gas and oil sector (for example, in 2005-2006, India invested 30.6 million USD in this sector). A recent oil deal with Russian company Zarubezhneft is seen by analysts as a trade-off for Russia's continued military aid. As China continues to rely on Burma as a major outpost for securing oil supplies from the Middle East (via the Strait of Malacca) and some Chinese leaders fear the US might block this straight to cut off Chinese energy sources, Russia and China's

continued military support of Burma indirectly aids Chinese energy security. Connections can thus be drawn between Russian and Chinese energy interest, their continued supply of arms to Burma, and continued objection to UN action against the military junta. As China's influence in Burma continues to grow, analysts have seen India's recent military gifts to Burma as a way to balance out the power of influence in the region. On August 15, 2007 the SPDC announced a sudden rise in fuel prices, which were increased by as much as 500 percent and led to an immediate rise in basic goods. This dramatic increase sparked civilian protests in August which continued into September. During the height of the protests India's oil minister traveled to Burma and signed a deal with the government granting India the right to explore for offshore gas. India's involvement with the government during this critical time highlights that sanctions imposed against the junta have been undermined by investment, made by countries neighboring Burma, in the interest of gaining access to its energy sources and raw materials as well as its identification as a strategic route to the Indian Ocean.

[Sources: *Reuters Foundation Alert Net*, January 28 2006; *Associated Press*, December 7, 2006; Sergei Blagov, *Asia Times Online*, April 12, 2006; *Christian Science Monitor*, June 17, 2002; *Guardian Weekly*, 25 January 2000; *InterPress Service*, 6 January 2000]

In 2008, the US increased its sanctions against Burma in both February and July, specifically targeting military control over gems and other resources. Likewise, in April the EU extended its sanctions and arms embargo against Burma for another year. [*Aljazeera News*; *Crisis Watch*]

"Sales of rubies and jade help bankroll Burma's repressive military...Consumers should insist that their jewelry is not made with Burmese gems." [Arvind Ganesan, director of the Business and Human Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights News*, January 12, 2008]

"Burma's generals act as if they are immune from worldwide condemnation because they're still getting cash from foreign-financed oil and gas projects," [Arvind Ganesan, director of the Business and Human Rights Program, Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights News*, November 19, 2007]

"Burma's generals have used the promise of oil and gas supplies to buy the silence of energy-hungry countries, including China and India," [Arvind Ganesan, director of the Business and Human Rights Program, Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights News*, November 19, 2007]

"Russia's Zarubezhneft oil company inked a memorandum of understanding with Myanmar's Energy Ministry, paving the way for the energy concern to bid on future oil and gas exploration and production concessions. The oil deal was understood to be Myanmar's trade-off in exchange for Moscow's readiness to supply more arms to the increasingly isolated regime... By arming Myanmar's regime, Moscow would in effect be serving Beijing's interests. Myanmar has become one of China's major outposts for securing its maritime oil supplies from the Middle East, which must pass through the narrow Strait of Malacca. Chinese leaders have voiced their concern that in a potential future conflict, the US might aim to blockade the strait and starve the Chinese economy of fuel sources. Russia's help in arming and improving Myanmar's military-oriented installations, then, indirectly helps to shore up China's energy security." [Sergei Blagov, *Asia Times Online*, April 12, 2006]

"According to the annual report of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in 2002, Myanmar is the world's largest opium producer, and its output accounts for 50-60 percent of the global total." [*Asia Times Online*, November 25, 2003]

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