

**Bearing Witness to the suffering of Burma: Buddhist  
Peace Fellowship Delegation to Rangoon, Burma and to Mae Sot, Thai Burma border from  
4 – 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2007<sup>1</sup>.**

A small Buddhist Peace Fellowship delegation went to Burma to bear witness to the suffering of the people following the brutal crackdown by the Burmese military at the end of September on monks and the people of Burma. We wanted to communicate the support and solidarity of the international community with the people of Burma, and to be a voice for the voiceless by sharing with our communities on return. Our communities had expressed their concerns and given generously, and we offered the donations to various groups to let them know that the rest of the world deeply cares about Burma. We wanted to explore channels for future further support inside Burma, as well as finding ways to support the monks in exile.

The participants included two people from Thailand including a socially engaged Buddhist monk, Hozan Alan Senauke, a Zen priest and from Buddhist Peace Fellowship USA, and Jill Jameson from Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Australia.

Inside Burma and on the Thai-Burma border we met with activists, monks, students, orphans, Western diplomats, and ordinary people in teashops and restaurants. We listened to their stories about events of the last several months, and how they are continuing to work both for the liberation of Burma as well as for their survival and that of their families. Wherever we went, people were very happy to meet with us, and welcomed the opportunity to share their stories.

The generals want the international community to believe that everything has returned to 'normal', that Burma is safe again for tourists, and that the disorder from the protests is over. But the 'normality' for Burma under the military regime is a state of fear and repression. This verbal whitewash from the regime was very different from what we learned from the people we met.

Neither army, police or beggars were evident in downtown Rangoon, but we heard from 'Aung Myint' that beggars and the homeless had been taken to detention centres, and that some of the army were dressed as monks at Shwedagon Pagoda, and others were in plain clothes. Our group was investigated on one of our visits to a monastic orphanage by plain clothes police and fortunately, giving out packets of noodle soup to the children had not been a crime.

People are suffering very deeply. They suffer the consequences of a failed state which spends according to IMF: 0.5% of GNP on health, 0.4% on education and 40% on defence...on controlling their own people. 'Dr. Win' told us that many people just outside of Rangoon can only afford one meal a day, and that with fuel increases some people cannot afford the bus fare to go to work. We visited several Buddhist monastic schools and orphanages. At one of these there were 500 students, and often there was not enough food, only a little rice. Large classes of children sat at cramped benches, and the large dormitories smelt of neglect. During our visit, a health worker was lifting shirts to reveal ulcers and extensive ring worm, which were dabbed with a sulphur cream. Malnutrition, over-crowding and limited staff to care for the children surely exacerbate the problem. The families of children at such an orphanage as this cannot even afford the low fees of a government school. In the Rangoon Division alone we heard there were 162 such Buddhist orphanages. There are also many run by Christian denominations. 'Betty' who visits orphanages in other states, said there could be 'be hundreds of thousands of orphans'. Often, she said, the child's father was a soldier who had been killed, and mother may have been injured by a landmine gathering food in a forest. We also heard these children referred to as the

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<sup>1</sup> The real names of people we met have not been used, nor the names of monasteries visited.

‘scrap children’ where many families are too poor to feed all their children. And their future? Many have no option but to join the army, or, to become a monk. And monks and soldiers are about equal in number. But many children are also forced conscripts to the army. Recent reports of child conscripts as young as 10 years have reached the international media. The regime’s response to this we heard from ‘Stephen’ was to fine either the child or its parents, anything to avoid responsibility being taken by the generals.

We had heard how one prominent monk responding to the food shortages had set up a food station to produce low cost boxed meals to distribute through downtown shops and in rural areas. The Venerable was very reluctant to talk about this and fear was palpable. We had hoped to be able to contribute to this program but suspect the program may have been suspended.

People are controlled not only by military force but also by fear. This is all pervasive. People often speak in code to avoid being overheard by unknown security people in plain clothes, or by informers so poor and desperate for basic survival that they will inform on anybody. We also touched this fear, with our antennas out on stalks, hyper-alert with our main concern for our friends not to suffer the consequences of talking with us. But there was also an increase in anger and urgency since last I was in Burma. San, a gentle elderly man confided he would like to get rid of the leaders somehow...for the greater good of all. Sitting at tea shops, people would approach us with a common theme; ‘life is so difficult now’, and ‘90% of the people are against this regime, and please do tell the international community’ and ‘do take our message to the Security Council’. All we could do was listen. And as Buddhists, this is a valuable practice. So many people had a deep need to talk and share, to tell the whole story so often in all its violent and brutal detail – interspersed with jokes. Impossible to understand other than in terms of fear and power, and possibly history. Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratically elected leader of Burma threw some light on this back in 1991.

“It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”<sup>2</sup>

Since September people are suffering deeply from the brutal onslaught on the highly revered monks in a country where 90% are Buddhist, and where respect for monks is deeply imbued in their culture and way of life. Many monks we heard had been forcibly disrobed so they could be tortured. And it was not 2% of the monks as claimed by the generals who marched, but nearer 30% were involved in the protests. They were compassionately drawing attention to the recent dramatic increases in rice and fuel costs. They knew intimately of the people’s plight – their begging bowls providing an indication. Despite their poverty people still however gave a little rice to the monks.

We heard from ‘Stephen’ that there were four categories of people in the protest There were those who were guilty by looking, those who clapped, those who offered water and those who marched. Only the first three categories were released after a month’s interrogation, and then only if they signed that they would never again protest. The fourth category are probably still in detention. ‘Stephen’ also shared with us that his college friend who was now a colonel, had revealed details of invasion of a monastery while drunk, and that he was under orders to beat up monks when questioning them. These are very concerning humanitarian aspects, and we need to keep asking where are the monks and the people detained? We further heard from ‘Stephen’ that soon after the protests ended, that the crematorium had been running at the unusual hour of 1-4am.

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<sup>2</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi in *Freedom from Fear*, Penguin, p180.

'Peter' a reliable source, indicated numbers killed were much higher than given by the regime, and would seem to be higher than in the report by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Paulo Pinheiro, 7 Dec. 2007. We heard that 30 monks were killed in Yangon and more than 70 people were killed in detention after the demonstrations had stopped. Piheiro reported that 31 monks had been killed and a further 74 listed as missing, and up to 1000 still detained - 106 of these were women, of whom six were Buddhist nuns. We heard on a visit to one monastery, that the nuns from nearby had left, and that they miss their chanting in the mornings. What has happened to other nuns in Burma?

An English teacher monk at a monastic school and orphanage for 500 children said there were now 15 monks, 35 novices, 12 teachers and 80 resident children. Prior to September, there were 200 monks and novices who have not been heard of since their participation in the 'revolution' and who had fled. They were to make contact but nothing has been heard. It is feared they are in detention or worse.

On the Thai-Burma border there are many local organisations, such as the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. There were photos of political prisoners around the walls and a prison model exhibition, depicting the forms of torture employed. And yet speaking with 'Myint,' a survivor of torture and 15 years of prison, including several years in solitary confinement, we were left in no doubt about the extraordinary courage and ardent commitment for democracy, freedom and dignity of many of the activists.

So how is the military crackdown impacting on Buddhism? On the one hand, many monks have gone from being revered to now being treated as criminals. On the other, meditation practice would seem to be strong. Some political prisoners we met, have survived long incarceration and torture and overcome deep depression through their meditation practice. Some monasteries such as Maggin in Rangoon have been closed and the HIV/Aids patients it cared for have been dispersed. There are 3,000 Buddhist monasteries throughout the country which provide accommodation, food, care and education for many children, and we could not get answers who is now taking responsibility for the children.

On the Thai Burma border we met with three different groups of monks who had managed to flee. Their number is surprisingly low given the 100, 000 monks who actively participated, leaving grave concerns for the safety of those still in Burma. We heard that some monks from Mandalay had fled in terror to the border, disrobed and are now working as migrant workers. Other monks who have fled are living in 3 safe-houses set up for 51 new arrivals from September. Despite being out of Burma, they have great difficulties. They have been forbidden refuge in Thai temples – 3 police cars were seen outside one temple keeping watch – they have no travel permits and if caught, may be very heavily fined or sent back to Burma. UNHCR is also no longer registering asylum seekers. On the other hand, resettlement of refugees in third countries such as Australia and the United states, is having a de-stabilising effect on border communities. Those people with some level of training, such as health workers and teachers are being given priority causing hardship for the local communities whose resources are already severely over-stretched.

Despite the fear, the poverty and with little hope of change, people we met demonstrate huge generosity, a great sense of humour and deep caring for their country, which was once the rice bowl of Asia, and with many highly educated people. Many have found ways to survive, of finding opportunities in the cracks between conflict and possibility, of taking one step at a time. There is a refusal to give up – people rising up again and again in full awareness of the consequences and risks to their lives and those of their families. Their message is very clear – and urgent – enough is enough, and it is time for freedom.

Before leaving for Burma, with the help of friends and a range of Buddhist sanghas, we raised almost \$3,000, which we offered in response to need, and to let people know that the outside world cared about them. Due to the climate of fear and the possible repercussions of giving to organisations, we found trusted friends who would be able to share the funds with sensitivity and extensive local connections. Donations were shared with the following in Rangoon:

- for fruit and noodle soup for 500 children at a Buddhist monastic orphanage;
- for rice for children at another monastic school and orphanage for 500 children;
- for orphanages in Karen and Mon states distributed by a trusted friend;
- for medicines and food to villages in outlying Yangon, via an old friend;
- to provide transportation to a clinic for HIV/Aids patients and for food;
- for people living with HIV/Aids (the infected and affected,) and with no access to international organisations, through a friend who works with many local self-help groups in rural Burma around health and education. These groups also have an emergency fund for food, medicine, clothing and funeral services for those most in need.

On the Thai Burma border:

- for former political prisoners and their families being supported by a couple of local organisations;
- for support for monks who have fled from Burma and for 'safe' houses'. We are now exploring plans for establishing a dharma centre on the border for the monks.

There is a growing movement with resonances of pre-independence India led by Gandhi. This mostly underground democracy movement inside Burma has strong links with a developing civil society and local organisations on the borders, linked with increased awareness and strength of an environmental movement. But it would seem that unless international community intervenes little will change for the people of Burma. Now is the time.

So, I feel a deep responsibility to speak out, to share as widely as possible, that life in Burma is 'not back to normal'. People have been disappeared. Far too many. Where are they, and what has happened to them? The intense and pervasive fear and gross human rights abuse contravene international conventions. Even those not in official detention are in effect in detention in a place called Burma. There were pleas from many we met not to allow our Asian neighbours to accept this 'normality', and a warning not to accept what the generals say will change. It is not evident that they care one scrap about the people they control. We in Australia should support the broad based democracy movement and the people inside Burma with a passion for freedom, on the need for dialogue and reconciliation. There are no easy solutions and the wounding has been long and deep but the question now that we have all seen the pictures and heard the cries for help, how can we continue to respond? I feel we must prioritise the freeing of political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi, and encourage dialogue and reconciliation. There is also a great need for healing and humanitarian support.

Jill Jameson 18 December, 2007.

Jill has worked with people from Burma since 1994, facilitating grassroots leadership training, peace building and conflict transformation.

## **Buddhist Peace Fellowship Melbourne: Actions for Burma, following Buddhist delegation to Burma in December 2007.**

The dramatic 500% fuel price rise imposed overnight by the generals last August triggered a significant show of resistance by large crowds which included more than 100,000 monks and nuns throughout Burma. The subsequent brutal crackdown and communications shut down have intensified the suffering. Food, transport and costs of other basic needs have risen. We heard from a doctor that many people can only afford one meal a day and many cannot afford the 65cents/ per person / per day needed for basic needs. Forty per cent of people have never been to school and yet the government of Burma is denying the people are poor. There are probably hundreds of thousands of children in Buddhist and Christian orphanages. Arising out of the Buddhist delegation to Burma and the border at Mae Sot in Thailand, many contacts have been made, organisations visited, and channels for ongoing support have been found. The following are a range of projects for possible ongoing support from our awareness/ fund-raising activities.

### **Projects responding to humanitarian needs in Burma:**

#### **1. Humanitarian support for the political prisoners and their families:**

Through the Association Assistance for Political Prisoners based in Mae Sot: for health care, scholarships for children and skills training for ex-prisoners.

**2. Phaung Daw Oo Integrated Monastic Education high School for children in Mandalay.** Asia Peace and Education Foundation is a registered charitable organisation in Melbourne – and offers tax deductibility through their relationship with Global Development Group. Funds are sent directly to Burma to enable poor children to go to school and for further education for teachers and in service training. The program is regularly monitored by staff from a Melbourne based NGO.

**3. Phaung Daw Oo:** training in ‘reading and writing for critical thinking’ for teachers at Chiang Mae, supported by Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), through whom I have offered training in grassroots leadership over the last 8 years. UNESCO has found that the critical thinking approach to teaching and learning is best for promoting peace. Our Buddhist delegation met one of the monks, and heard about the 7,000 children at the school. They accept children from a range of religions. Some teachers have been sent to Chiang Mae University for 3 months training in critical thinking. We could possibly support the translation, training manual and documentation of this project (US\$1,500 for year 1).

**4. Support for training manual** for Karen Women’s Organisation through International Women’s Development Association, in developing the Capacity, Development and Leadership Manual.

**5. Karen Traditional Medicine:** A booklet has been developed by Gerry Bodeker, and international authority on traditional medicine - who recently gave a workshop at

Foundation House through the Complementary Therapist Jenny Adams. This work was in conjunction with a local Karen organization –KESAN (Karen Environment and Social Action Network) on the Thai Burma border at Mae Sot. The booklet is in Karen with descriptions of plants and pictures and information on family health care and offers healing potential in a situation of dislocation and loss, where traditional medicine can provide ‘a thin thread of continuity’, as well as being medicine for a wide range of basic health problems. We are exploring costs for reprinting copies of this booklet for distribution to refugee communities and for the back-packer medics to take into Burma.

**6. One Dream One World Care Centre:** a small school for children living off a nearby garbage dump on the Thai Burma border has been recently set up by E, a young Thai woman whom our delegation met at Mae Sot. The 12 children with a waiting list of 30, are mostly Muslim and there is a Christian teacher. They have come from the Internally Displaced People’s camp of 40,000 people inside Burma in Mae Hong Son province, having escaped from the conflict area of the Burmese military. They lack food and clothes. Funds are needed for rent, a teacher’s salary and equipment.

**7. NagaRa Trust:** To provide scholarships for Naga Burmese refugees now living on the Indian border, aiming towards transformed leadership and collective responsibility for their people. An environment of collective learning and personal development will be created and will start with the establishment of a hostel in Kohima for Eastern Naga.

For more details contact C.J Foster: [c\\_jfoster@hotmail.com](mailto:c_jfoster@hotmail.com) or mobile 0402641626

**Call for an arms embargo on Burma:** by Chairperson International Burmese Monks Organisation, Venerable Sayadaw U Pannavasma, visiting Australia March/ April 2008.

*Without meaningful pressure generated by a united international community, Burma’s military rulers will have little reason to initiate any genuine reform.<sup>1</sup>*

- The UN Security Council must adopt a binding resolution imposing a comprehensive arms embargo against Burma’s military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) that includes a ban on transfers of both weapons and military manufacturing technologies.
  
- The resolution must also require that the junta:
  - end hostilities against its own people through an immediate and unconditional ceasefire;
  - allow for the free flow of humanitarian aid to all parts of Burma;
  - release all political prisoners; and
  - establish a framework for dialogue between the junta and Burma’s democratically elected representatives to achieve a time-bound process on

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<sup>1</sup> This briefing document has been prepared by Altsean-Burma, available on the AltSEAN website: [www.altsean.org](http://www.altsean.org).

national reconciliation and the establishment of a democratically elected government through free and fair elections.

- The junta is already clearly and deeply in breach of UN Security Council resolution 1674 on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, and resolution 1261 on children and armed conflict.
- Burma has no external enemies. The military junta uses its armed forces to oppress its own people and to wage a war of aggression on Burma's ethnic and religious nationalities. Burma is the home of the world's longest running war. Most recently, the junta's forces attacked non-violent monks and civilians who were peacefully asking for change in the "saffron revolution".
- The enormous amount of money that the junta spends for arms procurement and its military — 40% of the country's annual budget — has crippled Burma's economy. Most of Burma's people today live in abject poverty. Neglected social and health care infrastructure is crumbling. Burma's education system is in collapse.
- The cash-strapped junta relies on opium poppy cultivation (heroin) and amphetamine production for much needed revenue. The shocking rise of amphetamine production and export is causing serious harm to Burma's neighbors. Heroin production is again growing, increasing addiction and contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS within Burma and beyond its borders.
- Burma's military suppliers include China, Russia, India, North Korea, South Korea, Singapore, Israel, Serbia, Ukraine and Japan. Neighboring China and India, both hungry for natural resources, offer military aid to convince the SPDC to grant them access to Burma's natural gas and oil, and to maintain strategic influence in Burma.
- As well as supplying the junta's army, Burma's military partners are providing them with expertise to develop a sophisticated arms industry that will further drain the country's scarce resources and provide weapons that will increase violent domestic repression.

## **For further information on Burma**

**1. The Australia Burma Network (ABN)** is a network of Australians, including people from Burma, who are committed to working towards a peaceful transition to democracy and the achievement of human rights in Burma. ABN members are volunteers working and studying across development, artistic, corporate, government, community, legal and academic areas, and welcomes your participation.

Australia Burma Network Info [info@australiaburmanetwork.org](mailto:info@australiaburmanetwork.org)

**Jessica Krummel** <[jessica@australiaburmanetwork.org](mailto:jessica@australiaburmanetwork.org)>

**Burma Campaign Australia** is committed to peace, democracy and human rights in Burma. BCA is a national network that is part of a global movement campaigning for peace, democracy and human rights in Burma. Burma Campaign Australia comprises human rights advocates, academics, aid agencies and a broad range of Australia-based pro-democracy groups from Burma including elected members of parliament living in exile. Burma Campaign Australia has close links to people inside Burma, on its borders and involved in the international campaign.

**2. BurmaNet news:** <http://www.burmanet.org/news/>

A collection of assorted newspaper articles on **Burma**

**3. Buddhist Peace Fellowship Burma projects and updates**

[http://www.bpf.org/html/whats\\_now/2007/burma\\_main.html](http://www.bpf.org/html/whats_now/2007/burma_main.html)

**3. EarthRights International – Burma project**

Linking human rights and environmental protection. ERI works to document and eliminate human and environmental abuses by building the capacity of indigenous peoples. <http://www.earthrights.org/burma/>

**What you can do.**

- Learn more about the situation in Burma.
- Become actively involved with organizations that advocate on behalf of Burma's people.
- Write a letter to the UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon, your President, Prime Minister, and/or your elected representative in Parliament/Congress demanding an arms embargo on Burma.
- If you are from a country currently represented at the UNSC, write a letter to your UN Permanent Representative urging that s/he draft a resolution for an arms embargo on Burma.
- Write a letter to your elected representative urging your government to use its diplomatic weight to work with UNSC members to build support for an arms embargo on Burma, and to make public statements in support of UNSC action.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper demanding an arms embargo on Burma.
- Sign/create petitions addressed to UN General Secretary, Kofi Annan, your UN Permanent Representative, your President, Prime Minister, and/or your elected representative in Parliament/Congress demanding UNSC action.
- Organize coffee hours/informational meetings or community dinners to educate the general public about the situation in Burma.
- Form a caucus of likeminded colleagues that will advocate for an arms embargo on Burma and to engage in continued advocacy actions on behalf of Burma's people.
- Advocate for local government bodies (eg City Councils) adopt resolutions calling for an arms embargo on Burma

**For more information** on the above projects, contact Jill Jameson  
[jamesonjg@bigpond.com](mailto:jamesonjg@bigpond.com) or phone 03 9844 2289.

**For donations**, send to Jill Jameson, 6, Hamilton Road, Warrandyte 3113. Funds will be sent directly to Burma to a range of projects above, and we will report back on their use. Accountability and transparency are important to us.  
Bendigo Bank BSB and Account No. 633 000 115 836 124 in the name of Jill Jameson (Burma account).

Jill Jameson 3 April 2008.