

Burma: in urgent need of change

Douglas Alexander

Last September, world attention focused on Burma's 'Saffron Revolution' and its brutal crackdown by the country's military regime. The protests were sparked by ever-deepening poverty and people's frustration with years of political repression and economic failure.

Refugees who have fled Burma can testify to the brutality of the regime. In January, I visited the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, just five miles from Burma, and heard from dozens of the junta's victims. When the camp was first established in 1984 it sheltered 1,100 refugees; today it holds more than 40,000 people.



Marc van der Stouwe

Many spoke to me about having no community to return to because the army had burned down their villages. One father of three said he had to flee Burma because the military tried to force him to work for free carrying their equipment. The only choice open to him was either to agree or pay off the army. However, with no money, he tried to hide. But with the military raiding the homes of those who do not pay up, sometimes three or four times in one night, he was left with no option but to take his family and flee to Thailand. Sadly, similar stories of forced labour were a familiar theme during my visit.

One woman had organised an armed group of mothers to protect their villages from forced labour. A widow, she took her three daughters across the border when the military began to target them. Each family had a tale to tell about protection money being extorted from them by the military or, in some cases, by the ethnic militias. They talked of villages being destroyed, systematic rape, chronic poverty, a lack of work and no access to health care or education. Despite the cramped conditions and rationing of food, at least the children had schools to go to in the refugee camp, and the Camp Council gave people a degree of democracy which they were denied in Burma. In every refugee camp I have ever visited, including those in Darfur, the vast majority of the people wanted to go home. But in Mae La, fewer than half of the refugees I spoke to said they wanted to go back. Even those who hoped to return said there was no point until democracy had been established.

That is no surprise considering millions of people inside Burma lead a very harsh life indeed. Surrounded by some of the world's most dynamic economies, a third of Burma's people live on less than 30

cents a day. Ten per cent do not have enough to eat, half of the country's 20 million children do not complete primary school, and 70% of people are at risk from malaria. In October, I announced a doubling of the UK's aid to Burma, from £9 million in 2007-08 to £18 million a year by 2010. We will do this by expanding on our work which has already proved effective. That includes caring for refugees on Burma's borders and internally displaced people inside the country; increasing the number of children able to complete primary school; helping to fight the main killer diseases of malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS; improving income-earning opportunities for poor rural families; and strengthening civil society organisations. We will continue to work through UN agencies and NGOs, so that none of our aid is channelled through the Burmese central government.

Burma's absence from the headlines since October does not mean that anything has improved. At the time of writing this article in February, Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest. The opposition is denied a role in drafting Burma's new constitution, and detention of its activists continues. The regime has described the September protests as "trivial". Setting a timetable for a referendum and subsequent elections means nothing if all opposition is suppressed.

Dialogue with Ibrahim Gambari, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, has yet to make real progress. The international community, including China, India and the ASEAN countries, must back the UN's efforts as a matter of urgency. As the old guard clings to power, we must hope that younger elements within the Burmese regime realise that their rule will not stifle the need or demand for change.

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Refugee school, Thailand.

The number of refugees continues to grow, despite 7,000 of Mae La's inhabitants being relocated to other countries last year. Some of those who remain have been there since the beginning; others have risked their lives crossing the heavily mined border in recent weeks and months.