

**Message of
Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Laureate
General Secretary, National League for Democracy, Burma
to the 56th Session of
the United Nations Commission on Human Rights
Geneva, March 2000**

It is now almost a decade since the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has been looking into the state of human rights in Burma. We are duly grateful for all that has been done over the years but of course much remains to be done. One of the main problems is that the present military regime tries to separate civil and political rights from economic, social and cultural rights. We would like to point out that this cannot be done.

Economic, social and cultural rights are inextricably linked to political and civil rights. If we look at the state of the Burmese economy today, it is clear that the main troubles are due to mismanagement - mismanagement by the administration. We have said again and again that the state of the Burmese economy is due largely to bad governance. Until there is good governance, our economy cannot be improved. The observations of trained economists and international financial institutions have pointed out that the main troubles of the Burmese economy are due to the lack of proper macroeconomic policies on the part of the military regime. It is due to such factors as an unreasonable and unrealistic rate of exchange. In a democratic country, such things would not be allowed to pass because there would be a democratic assembly representing the peoples' interest which would call the ruling government to order. So economic improvements cannot be brought about until there is a certain extent of political rights on the part of the people. [1]

As for cultural, social and economic matters, how can we separate them from politics? Our country is made up of many ethnic nationalities. Their rights have to be guarded by the government. The rights of ethnic nationalities include the right to develop their own culture, to develop their own kind of social system. In Burma today, although the military regime claims that it has achieved unity with the ethnic nationalities, the truth is that our ethnic nationalities are suffering greatly from repression of all kinds. For example in the Mon state, in recent years since this military regime came to power, the teaching of Mon language in schools has been prohibited. Now if this is not an infringement of the cultural rights of an ethnic people, what is. Language is very important. Language is one of the most important parts of any cultural package. If a people are not allowed to teach their own language how are they expected to pass on their cultural heritage. This is just an example of the kind of social and cultural injustice that exists in Burma today. [2]

In order to remove these injustices, the ethnic nationality peoples, like the rest of the people

of Burma must be given a voice. They must be given a right to express their opinions, to be able to work for their aspirations, to be able to enjoy the full rights of citizens of a free democratic nation. The Burmese people who constitute the majority in Burma also suffer from a grave lack of human rights. If we cannot remedy this situation soon, our country will get poorer and poorer. Our country will get poorer not just in material terms. We are not talking about foreign exchange reserves. We are not talking about gold reserves. What we are talking about is our people. We are going to get poorer in terms of human resources. This is mainly because this regime pays so very little attention to the education of our people.

For the military regime, the most important thing is to keep their hold on power, not to lose their grip on power. In order to keep their grip on power they are prepared to sacrifice the future of our young people. Universities in Burma have been shut over the last few years. Some universities, some faculties were opened, reopened for a short period. Some are opened at the moment. But in general the universities of Burma remain shut. There is also the dangerous development that members of the armed forces are educated separately. Medical colleges and engineering colleges are kept open for members of the armed forces while the civilian population is deprived of higher education. This does not augur well for the future of our country. We will become a house divided. We will become a nation made up of two classes, the military elite and the rest. This does not augur well either for the military or for the civilians. [3]

A nation can progress and prosper only when there is unity, and only when there is a general acceptance among the people that there is justice. In no country can justice be guaranteed a hundred percent. Even in established democracies a continuous effort has to be made to uphold justice, equality, and human rights. In a country like ours which is totally crushed by a military regime, justice is a dream. But it is a dream that we are determined to realize. This is why we are working for democracy in Burma. And this is why we ask the world to support our cause.

There are those who say that nothing works. There are those who claim that the help of the international community is not going to make democratization come any earlier to Burma. This is not so. The help of the international community does make a difference. This military regime understands, like all governments in all countries understand today, that no country can remain separate from the rest of the world. There are so many links - economic, cultural. Mainly economic and of course scientific [and] technological [links] between the nations of the world that whether we like it or not, we would not be able to undo those things, they will remain, and because of that the international community can help greatly to bring about the fast democratization of our country.

Our people are the most precious resource that we have. There are many people who talk about the natural resources of Burma. They keep on saying, particularly the military regime, keeps on harping on the rich natural resources of our country. For us the richest resource is the human one. It is our people who are precious to us. If a people are uncared for and uneducated, they will not be able to do anything about using the natural resources for the good of the nation. So our first care is our people. We want to make sure that our people

enjoy security, enjoy freedom and they enjoy the right to advance themselves. That is to say they enjoy the right to education.

Health and education for us are the two most important things. And we want to provide our people with good health care, good education. And to do that we need an accountable, transparent government. A government that is not there to oppress the people but to do the best that it can for the people. We want a system whereby the people are allowed to judge whether or not the government in power is actually working for the good of the nation or simply for the good of that government itself. [4]

For this right many people in Burma have made many sacrifices. In spite of the scrutiny of international community, violations of human rights in Burma continue. It continues at a disgraceful rate. Quite recently, a man in his 70s was sentenced to two years imprisonment because he had listened to the Voice of America on the radio. While he was under trial his wife, also elderly and unwell, died because she was so troubled by the pressure exerted on them by the authorities. In which country of the world are people so oppressed that listening to a radio service serves them with two years of imprisonment? [5]

So please understand that the situation of human rights in Burma is not getting better. It seems to be getting worse. The greater the people desire democracy, the more frantic the military regime becomes to oppress them, to try to dissuade them from working for democracy; which is why the greater our peoples' desire for democracy, the greater the need for help from the international community. Please do not forget that instability in one part of the world could spread very rapidly these days. I hope that the world would be able to take an example of what happened recently in East Timor and learn to help when help is needed and not only when help is overdue.

I would like to thank you very much on behalf of the peoples of Burma and on behalf of the democratic forces who are struggling that not just our country but the world may be a safer, freer place for all peoples of the world.

NOTES

[1] Examination of budget allocations makes clear the SPDC's priority for military spending and the lack of concern for the well being of the general population. According to the World Bank, use of public hospitals and dispensaries has fallen by 80% in the last 10 years due to an extraordinarily low budgetary outlay of 0.2%. Current government spending for education as a share of national income "is among the lowest in the world." For schoolchildren between the ages of 5-9, the government spent 1,200 kyat (about 3.5 US dollars) per child in 1990/91. This has fallen to 100 kyat (0.30 US dollars) in 1999/2000. Rather than improve this situation, the military regime has announced a supplementary budget to cover this year's deficit, and it includes more spending for construction and defense. Additional expenditure is as follows:

- a) Construction: 12.69 billion kyat (\$39.05 million)
- b) Defense: 6.27 billion kyat (\$19.29 million)
- c) Education 1.357 billion kyat (\$4.17 million)

d) Health 1.085 billion kyat (\$4.38 million)

Diplomats have commented that much defense spending is not included in official figures, indicating that actual spending for the military is much higher. If looking at official figures alone, defense spending equals 16 times the amount spent on health.

INFORMATION FROM:

- Myanmar: An Economic and Social Assessment, Talking points for Burma Roundtable at Human Rights Watch. Bradley Babson, Senior Advisor, World Bank. 16 December 1999.
- “Extra Burmese budget big on army spending,” The Nation. 21 March 2000. P A7.

[2] In order to maintain and develop Mon culture, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) established approximately 250 schools before signing a cease-fire agreement with the SLORC in 1995. After signing the agreement, Mon communities assumed that they would be able to continue building more schools, and the NMSP officially requested the SLORC to allow the teaching of Mon language in government schools. The SLORC denied this request, but said Mon schools could be built. As the Mon education improved, many students from government schools moved to attend Mon schools, prompting the regime to begin closing the Mon schools. For example, in October 1999, an order was sent to close a Mon school operating out of a monastery in Kwan-tar village, Mudon Township, Mon State. The order came from Military Intelligence, and the Chairman of the local Peace and Development Council was responsible for carrying out the order. The day after the order was issued, the village headman called a meeting with all students’ parents and explained that the school had to close because it was an illegal institution and teaching of Mon language was also illegal.

INFORMATION FROM:

- The Mon Forum, issue no 11/99, November 30, 1999.

[3] Between 1988 and 1996, universities were open for a total of only 30 months. After December of 1996, they were completely closed until recently. In December 1999, some campuses were opened, but were moved to locations outside the cities. Such conditions made it difficult, if not impossible, for many students to attend. Much depends on their financial capacity to pay for transportation from their homes or for accommodations near the university. At some universities, students were made to sign papers promising not to engage in any political activity. They were warned that if there were any demonstrations, campuses would be closed again.

Indeed, some campuses have already closed. Some universities were restructured to become “Government Technical Colleges” (GTC) which reduced the university degrees from university to college level. Students in Thanlyin and Hmaw Bi (Rangoon Division) staged protests, calling for cancellation of the new system and improved teaching environments. As a result, those GTCs were closed.

INFORMATION FROM:

- ABSDF Media Release, “The ABSDF calls for the reopening of all universities and for

better education” 6 February 2000.

- NCUB: Letter to UNESCO-Reopen the Universities, National Council of the Union of Burma Foreign Affairs Committee. 17 January 2000.

[4] As mentioned in Note [1], there is a clear lack of commitment by the military regime in Burma to taking care of the health and educational needs of the general population, and the repercussions are severe. Approximately 35% of the population has no access to public primary health care services of any kind. There is an HIV/AIDS crisis in Burma. While the regime claims that only 25,000 people have tested positive for HIV in Burma, the UN AIDS program has cited 440,000 as a more realistic figure. Official SPDC statistics say the maternal mortality rate is 1.00 urban and 1.7 rural per 1000 live births. Other sources, however, have indicated much higher, at 517 per 100,000 live births. The under-5 mortality rate in 1997 was 114, and Burma has the 3rd highest mortality rate in Asia, behind Cambodia and Laos.

INFORMATION FROM:

- Alternative Perspectives, Other Voices: Assessing Gender Equality in Burma. Submission to the 23rd session of the Committee of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Images Asia. December 1999.
- Report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, The Union of Myanmar. March 1999.
- State of the World’s Children 1999 UNICEF.

[5] On 18 December 1999, U Than Chaun, the 70-year old proprietor of a coffee shop in Shwe-goo township, Kachin State, was arrested and his radio which was tuned to the Voice of America (Burmese broadcast) was seized. On 19 January 2000, he was charged and sentenced to 2 years imprisonment under Section 505 (b) of the Penal Code. U Than Chaun’s wife was suffering from heart ailment and high blood pressure, and she passed away while he was in prison. He himself suffers medical problems which have now become life threatening.

INFORMATION FROM:

- NLD Statement 21 (2/00) (translation).

