

THE WHITE SHIRTS:

HOW THE USDA WILL BECOME

THE NEW FACE OF

BURMA'S DICTATORSHIP

Network for Democracy and Development

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Preface

The Union Solidarity and Development Association recently announced its intention to become a political party and contest for seats in future elections. The USDA's new role must be evaluated by Governments assessing the situation in the country. A transfer of power to the USDA occupied parliament would signal little more than a nominal transition.

As this report states, the USDA is an organization whose patrons are all SPDC members. The Central Executive Committee is likewise comprised of government ministers and officers in local Peace and Development Councils (PDCs). The control of the SPDC over the USDA is such that the actions of the USDA can be said to be those of the SPDC. The USDA then must be regarded in the same light.

This report correctly notes the USDA's long history of oppression, beginning from its formation in 1993. Over the years, the degree of harassment, intimidation and outright violence the USDA has inflicted on the people of Burma has contributed to creating a climate of fear in the country. However, the Depayin Massacre in 2003 saw a worsening of the human rights violations being committed by the USDA, particularly against members of the opposition.

Currently, there are fears that the SPDC is preparing to take steps to officially outlaw the National League for Democracy. Such a move would signal a backward slide for the country. The role the USDA will take in the current situation and in the future must be evaluated by neighboring countries carefully.

The extent of the violations committed by the USDA is in need of clear documentation. Appropriate action must then be taken according to the extent and severity of the violations. This report rightfully challenges us to consider the violations of the USDA as those of the

state. Governments must consider carefully their policies towards members of the USDA traveling and working in their countries.

Governments must further decide on the appropriate stance to take when addressing the USDA. Whether other countries acknowledge the USDA as a political entity will be an important factor in the continuation of the organization as well as its strength and power. It must be ensured that the USDA is an organization freely joined and that its actions are independent of the current regime. Without this assurance a transfer of power to the USDA would be no transfer at all. It would merely allow the SPDC to maintain its grip on power and continue the oppression of the Burmese people.

The efforts to place Burma on the formal agenda of the United Nations Security Council are well founded. As this report shows, the regime is little interested at this time in genuine democratization, and has already developed an elaborate plan using the USDA to hold onto power. A binding resolution from the UN Security Council would ensure that democratization efforts are genuine and are guided under the Secretary General himself. The UN Security Council is needed to end the political deadlock in the country. The people of Burma should not have to wait any longer.



Surapong Jayanama
Former Ambassador, Thailand

Foreword

The political ascendancy of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and the blatant efforts of Burma's military regime to portray it as a legitimate and democratic force are matters for grave concern.

The USDA, formed in 1993 and recognized as the "political arm" of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, is notorious for its often-violent intimidation of pro-democracy groups in Burma.

The SPDC depends on the USDA as a civilian force to bully and oppress other civilians. Members of the USDA have been linked to the attack on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade in November 1996 and, more recently, to the brutal Depayin Massacre in May 2003. The latter was a failed attempt to assassinate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and destroy the National League for Democracy (NLD).

The USDA, disguised as a government-operated NGO, relies on extortion, coercion, and intimidation as a means of raising funds for its "benevolent" activities. This report documents the role of the USDA as an organization designed to infiltrate and co-opt every aspect of civil society in Burma. The USDA has worked to pervert international humanitarian efforts into public relations and foreign exchange fundraising opportunities for the SPDC.

During the last year, Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria and Medicins Sans Frontieres (France) ceased their activities in Burma because of undue interference in their work. In December, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to suspend its inspections of prisons in Burma because of the USDA's insistence on accompanying ICRC representatives. The interference in the ICRC prison inspections was clearly an attempt to conceal the plight of over 1,000 detained political prisoners who are routinely tortured, denied adequate medical treatment and who die in prison as a result.

The USDA forcibly recruits its members in a climate of fear and retribution. As the “political arm” of the military regime, it has been actively engaged in forcing people to attend political rallies intended to give credence to the regime-orchestrated National Convention. The involvement of the USDA in the political rallies represents the beginning stage for the transformation of the USDA into a political party.

It is apparent from recent developments that the USDA’s makeover into a “legitimate” political party is meant to ensure that the SPDC retains its control of a pseudo-democratic government with SPDC head Senior General Than Shwe as “President for Life.”

Despite the climate of fear perpetuated by the Burmese military regime and the USDA, it is a constant source of inspiration to me that pro-democracy activists and ordinary people alike remain committed and dedicated to freedom in Burma. My sister, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, remains a constant global beacon of graceful resistance, refusing to respond to violence or hatred in kind, even under greatest of pressures.

Adding urgency to the need for a genuine transition to democracy in Burma is the thousands of new internally displaced Karen villagers, under attack from the SPDC Army. We MUST NOT ignore our obligation to act decisively on Burma.

As my colleagues and I from the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) have advocated in the past, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) must take action in the case of Burma. The UN Secretary-General must be empowered in his efforts to facilitate national reconciliation and democratization in Burma. This also includes steps to ensure that the USDA does not compromise Burma’s transition to a civilian government.

Ms. Nursyahbani Katjasungkana
AIPMC Vice-President and Member of Parliament for Indonesia.

Executive Summary

After the 1990 elections in Burma were overwhelmingly won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), and results set aside by military power, the military regime in the country decided they must mobilize the masses in order to maintain their grip on power in the long term. From this decision, the Union Development and Solidarity Association (USDA) was formed. Though initially presented to the public as a benign social organization, the USDA has, in the past thirteen years since its formation, involved itself in the oppression of the Burmese people in several ways. An analysis of the current situation in Burma reveals that the USDA is destined to become a political party when future elections are held; elections that this time the military regime will ensure they win.

Formed in 1993, the USDA is patronized by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the current moniker for the ruling military regime. High ranking SPDC members are patrons, secretaries and members of the Central Executive Committee. At the township and village level, the local PDC's are involved as USDA leaders in the recruitment of USDA members. The SPDC's role in the USDA, in fact, the realization that the SPDC is the USDA, invalidates any legitimate role for the USDA either as a purely social organization or as a future political party. The USDA's role in human rights violations, and the general oppression of the people, must be seen then as crimes committed by the state, not merely a collection of individuals.

In writing this report, the Network for Democracy and Development (NDD) intends to expose the true nature of the USDA and reveal its history of oppression. In doing so, the significance of the USDA's evolving political role is seen more clearly. In order to better understand the USDA, interviews were conducted with twenty members of the USDA, nine with people still inside the country and eleven on the Thai-Burma border. The interviews revealed the nature of the USDA membership, the control that the USDA has gradually exerted over

civil society and the political violence which the USDA has carried out against the public. Overall, the USDA has undertaken a reign of terror in the country, solidifying the climate of fear that pervades daily life in Burma.

This report details the organizational structure of the USDA, and looks at the recruitment procedures. Recruitment generally focuses on four sectors of society, namely education, business, civil service and the opposition, and membership is often presented as a means of improving educational and professional opportunities. However, the offer of incentives also comes with the promise of harassment and hardship should one decide not to join the USDA. This can be seen most clearly in the efforts to recruit members of the political opposition.

The USDA has also eliminated or co-opted any form of civil society in Burma, and in doing so created its own civil society. The USDA is frequently presented as helping the people in various development projects, trainings and donations. In particular, the USDA has managed to insert itself into the distribution of aid and assistance by NGOs, causing many problems for those people in Burma who are part of the opposition or perceived to be a threat to military rule. The USDA further functions to provide high attendance levels at the mass rallies held in support of the SPDC's policies or in denunciation of the opposition or international community. This report looks at the USDA's control over civil society in Burma.

This report addresses the various acts of political violence that have been committed by the USDA. The USDA has created people's militias and involved itself in the security forces responsible for surveillance and arrest of opposition members. Further, a general culture of thuggish behavior has been encouraged in the youth by the USDA leaders, which has led to the incitement of religious conflict and several violent attacks. The worst political violence perpetrated by the USDA occurred during the Depayin Massacre in which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her convoy

was attacked and many NLD members and supporters killed, an event for which evidence exists to declare it a crime against humanity.

After examining the USDA's history of oppression, the report looks at the situation in Burma, which indicates that the USDA is likely to be transformed into a political party. Such a transformation will lead to the perpetuation of military rule, nominally disguised as a civilian government. The perpetuation of military rule only further ensures the continuation of human rights violations against the people of Burma.

With the exception of the Depayin Massacre, the USDA has generally managed to escape the condemnation of the international community, and even of the Burmese people. It is expected that this report will show the need to consider the crimes of the USDA to be crimes of the state, and to then address the human rights violations committed by the USDA in the same manner that violations by the SPDC are recorded and publicized. The increasing role that the USDA plays for the SPDC in Burma is of grave concern. Failure to recognize the USDA for its true nature and purpose will lead to the continued oppression of the people of Burma.

Recommendations

The Network for Democracy and Development (NDD) recommends that:

United Nations

- ◆ The United Nations Security Council pass a binding resolution to facilitate national reconciliation and democratization in Burma;
- ◆ The United Nations Human Rights Council establish an independent international commission to investigate crimes

against humanity in Burma, including the events surrounding the Depayin Massacre;

- ◆ The United Nations consider the human rights violations committed by the USDA to be those of the state, and appropriately record and denounce such violations.

State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)

- ◆ The SPDC give an honest account of its patronization of and responsibility for the USDA, its policies and actions;
- ◆ The SPDC cooperate with an independent international commission to investigate human rights violations committed by the USDA, particularly any violations amounting to a crime against humanity;
- ◆ The SPDC enter into dialogue with the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other ethnic parties immediately to find a resolution to the political and economic crises in the country.

Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)

- ◆ The USDA end its forced recruitment practices, including the offering of incentives that should be rights, the denial of rights as punishment for not joining, and the registration of members without their knowledge or consent;
- ◆ The USDA cease its interference in the distribution of aid and assistance, particularly as regards the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and ensure its public works are done voluntarily without coercion or extortion.
- ◆ The USDA stop its trainings and formation of people's militias and cease interference in intelligence and security matters;
- ◆ The USDA end its promotion of a culture of thuggish behavior which has resulted in the incitement of religious conflict and several violent attacks;
- ◆ The USDA identify those members responsible for extrajudicial killings, and especially those involved in the Depayin Massacre, and insure that they are brought to justice in accordance with international standards.

Governments

- ◆ Governments recognize the USDA as one in the same with the SPDC;
- ◆ Governments administering aid or assistance to the people of Burma verify the backgrounds of the people with whom they work, specifically as to whether they are members of the USDA, and regard working with the USDA as they would working with the SPDC;
- ◆ Governments demand a full and independent investigation into the human rights violations committed by the USDA, especially in cases where crimes against humanity may have been committed, namely the Depayin Massacre.
- ◆ Governments call on the UN Security Council to pass a binding resolution to facilitate national reconciliation and democratization in Burma.

Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

- ◆ ASEAN end its recognition of the USDA in its various regional initiatives.

NGOs, INGOs and International Organizations (IOs)

- ◆ NGOs, INGOs and IOs ensure and verify their work is not influenced by or limited by the USDA, and apply the same rules to the USDA as they would to the SPDC;
- ◆ NGOs, INGOs and IOs show resolve in demanding the USDA cease interference in their aid or development projects and allow for the impartial distribution of aid or assistance;
- ◆ NGOs, INGOs and IOs closely monitor and document the human rights violations committed by the USDA;

Burmese Citizens

- ◆ The Burmese people educate themselves and each other when possible of the true nature and intention of the USDA and resist joining against one's will, or participating in the USDA's activities without one's own desire.

Introduction

The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) was formed in Burma on September 15, 1993 under the Association Law (SLORC Law 6/88). In registering with the Ministry of Home Affairs, the organization was ostensibly intended to be “purely a social welfare organization.”¹ However, in recent years the organization clearly is being prepared to play a political role..

The USDA is set to become the new face of the military dictatorship in Burma. Already they exert a disconcerting level of control over all facets of life. They have a heavy influence in the educational system as well as in the economy, and have entirely reconstituted Burma's civil society. Additionally, they are involved in most cases of political violence in the country, and their culture of thuggish behavior is a key factor in the climate of fear pervasive in Burma today.

The USDA's role in the denial of the Burmese people's basic human rights is cause for concern, particularly when observing that the USDA acts as a proxy for the SPDC. The patronization of the USDA by the SPDC and the extent to which USDA authorities are either SPDC members or members of the military means the USDA in fact is the SPDC. As such, the human rights violations committed by the USDA must be considered and recorded as those violations committed by the state.

With a long history of oppression, the potential for the USDA to become a political party and run in future elections is troubling. Already, the USDA has begun to insert itself into political process. Rule of the country by the USDA would mean the perpetuation of military rule, and the continued control of the SPDC. A transition to a new, civilian government would be in name only.

¹ *Mobilization of the Masses: How Much of a Threat is the USDA?* L. Hancock. Burma Issues. 2003.

Organizational Structure

The USDA is organized into patron and members of patrons, Secretary General and Joint Secretary General, Central Executive Committee and regular members. The most apparent thing about the USDA organizational structure is that its patrons are members of the SPDC or local PDCs, and its Secretary General and Central Executive Committee are comprised of government ministers. Such a composition suggests that the USDA is not merely a wing of the SPDC, but rather it is the SPDC itself. This is relevant as it means any transfer of power to the USDA is in fact only in name, and it means that human rights violations committed by the USDA are in fact those committed by the state.

SPDC as USDA

The USDA is established at village tract, ward, township, district and division levels, and operates in a top-down structure. Top military officers hold the highest positions in the organization from the headquarters to the branch offices in villages. Local military commanders, police officers and militiamen have also been appointed executive committee members in charge of each township, state and district.² Further, military commanders act as patrons to local USDA branches.

In many cases, village and township chairmen have been appointed by the USDA and are therefore more inclined to participate in or allow human rights violations. A village in Mon state was even designated a 'USDA village' based on the chairman's ability to raise money for the organization through bribes.³ When Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman of the military regime and USDA patron, visits villages and

² *Crime Against Humanity: Dirty Politics on the Hands of the Burmese Junta*. Banya Hongsar. 18 June 2003. Monland

³ *USDA: The Organization Strengthening the Military Rule in Burma (Myanmar)*. The Mon Forum. April 2005.)

townships in Burma, he generally calls on the USDA members in the area.⁴

The SPDC provides the USDA with various material benefits and economic opportunities in order to finance its activities.⁵ USDA offices are often constructed in collaboration with USDA patrons, who are usually regional commanders.⁶ Thus, the USDA is able to operate offices and carry out activities with economic support from the SPDC.

As demonstrated, the USDA is the SPDC by another name. Within weeks of its formation the General Secretary of the USDA stated that “the ruling SLORC [name of SPDC until 1997], the government and the USDA share the same objective.”⁷ Presumably, the objective is extension and perpetuation of military rule in Burma.

People's Desire

All members of the USDA must take an oath pledging loyalty to the ‘Union of Myanmar’ and her citizens, to endeavor for ‘Our Three Main National Causes,’ to constantly strive for the emergence of a prosperous, peaceful and modern Union, and to abide by the Code of Conduct of the Association.⁸ The ‘Three Main National Causes’ are the non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty. The USDA also promotes Twelve Objectives, divided into political, economic and social objectives.

⁴ *General Than Shwe Visits Western Town in Burma*. Kaladan Press Network. 18 April 2006

⁵ *Mobilization of the Masses: How Much of a Threat is the USDA?* L. Hancock. Burma Issues. 2003

⁶ *Management Report Submitted to the USDA Anniversary Meeting*. Inside Source. 30 September 2005

⁷ *Politics of Stability: Co-opting Burma's Civil Society Through the USDA*. V Coakley. Burma Issues Newsletter Vol. 8, No.10. October 1998.

⁸ *USDA Serving National Interests as it Represents the People*. Eint Dali. The Golden Land. 4 November 2005

The Twelve Objectives and Three Main National Causes espoused by the USDA generally amount to little more than meaningless propaganda. However, the USDA has also developed a ‘Four-Point People’s Desire,’ which directly threatens political parties and can be used to trigger violence. The four points are to: “oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges or holding negative views; oppose those trying to jeopardize the stability of the State and progress of the nation; oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State; and crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.”⁹

The foundation of the USDA is thus one of inherent violence and perpetuation of military rule. Any action taken by the USDA should be considered that of the SPDC. A transfer of power to the USDA would simply mean the SPDC has managed to hold onto power while nominally establishing a civilian government.

Recruitment Procedures

*“If two people stand on the corner of a street, I can say one is a USDA member.”*¹⁰

*“We used to joke about USDA membership, saying that everyone is born a member of the USDA in Burma today.”*¹¹

The USDA currently boasts a membership of 22.8 million people, nearly

⁹ *Exposing the Real USDA*. NCGUB Information Unit. NCGUB

¹⁰ *USDA: The Junta’s Partner in Crime*. Zin Linn. Mizzima News. 11 December 2005. Quote from Htay Oo, Secretary General of the USDA.

¹¹ NDD Interview, # 5 March 2005, on file with NDD

half the population of Burma.¹² The process by which people in Burma join the USDA explains the composition of the organization and the ability of the USDA to carry out many of its activities. The USDA aggressively recruits members, with membership frequently undesired but passively accepted by a cowed public. Incentives are offered to join with the explicit understanding that failure to join will result in harassment and decreased opportunities for educational and professional advancement.

Among the groups targeted, students are most heavily pressured to join and partake in the activities of the USDA. Joining the USDA is presented to the students as compulsory, and as a result the vast majority of students in Burma are members of the USDA. The same holds true for civil servants. Any person working for the government is required to be a member of the USDA. Those interested in owning businesses, however small, also find membership in the USDA to their advantage. Such people often cite daily survival as the deciding factor in their decision to align their business with the USDA. Additionally, the USDA has implemented various tactics to entice members of the opposition into quitting their party or organization and joining the USDA.

This section looks at the recruitment of USDA members from four sectors of society, namely education, business, civil service and the opposition.

Education

*"The teachers said that it [joining the USDA] was compulsory, and if I didn't join, they would not allow me to be a student anymore."*¹³

¹² *Entire National People to do their Bit in Unison to Achieve national Goal*
USDA Members are to Actively Take Part in the Drive for Success of Seven Point
Road Map. The New Light of Myanmar. 8 November 2005.

¹³ NDD Interview, #9 March 2005, on file with NDD

The education system in Burma today is heavily influenced by the USDA. The teachers in schools, being government employees, are members of the USDA, while students are told that membership is compulsory. The USDA states “the patriotic youth, who are members of the USDA, are self-reliant; they have their own initiative...Their strength which is growing year by year, is used for the state...the youth mass will join hands...to totally remove these destructive elements if they try to disturb, damage or destroy the state.”¹⁴ The manipulation of children into joining the USDA stands in violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which the military regime signed in 1991.¹⁵

In Burma, neighborhood offices double as recruitment centers, with membership offering protection and access to services.¹⁶ The USDA focuses its recruitment on the youth, offering membership in sports leagues and other extra-curricular activities.¹⁷ Additionally, student membership is presented as compulsory, and threats are made to expel a student or not give passing marks when a student declines to join the USDA.

Frequently, students are not consulted with about joining the USDA. In one case, high school students in Mandalay above twelve years old gave their teachers passport photos to give to the local authorities under the pretext of issuing national identity cards. The students realized upon receiving their cards that they had been registered as members of the USDA.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Mobilization of the Masses: How Much of a Threat is the USDA?* L. Hancock. Burma Issues. 2003

¹⁶ *The USDA Factor: The Thuggish Civilian Wing of the Military Junta Must Not Be Overlooked During Burma's Political Transition.* Min Zin. The Irrawaddy Vol.11, No.6. July 2003

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Mandalay Students Tricked into Joining USDA Members.* Democratic Voice of Burma. 2004

According to the USDA members interviewed, many students face the threat of expulsion if they refuse to join, meaning they would be unable to obtain an education. The USDA uses education, a right, as an incentive.

*"The teachers told me that it was compulsory to join the USDA, and that I would be expelled from the school or I would have to take exams outside the school if I didn't join."*¹⁹

*"If I didn't join the USDA, I couldn't attend school. And, if I had wanted to take an exam for my education, I would have had to take it outside the school. It is easy for USDA members to pass the exams."*²⁰

*"The government pressures the people who refused to become members of the USDA. The students who don't join the USDA face pressure from the teachers, and they lose opportunities. The teacher told one of the female students who didn't join the USDA to stop attending the school and to take her examination outside the school. They regard the people who refuse to join as politicians."*²¹

*"There is a big gap between the students who have joined the USDA and those who haven't joined it, inequality in opportunity. The students who don't join the USDA eventually have to join it because they are threatened and told they would lose even the opportunities they had then."*²²

Teachers in Burma's schools are USDA members themselves and encourage their students to apply for membership. They work with the USDA to monitor the activities of students and report on anything

¹⁹ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁰ NDD Interview, #9 March 2006, on file with NDD

²¹ Ibid.

²² NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

suspicious. They likewise provide the students who are USDA members with passing marks regardless of merit.

“The USDA came to our school and explained that if we joined the USDA, we would be provided extra marks, a good education, comfortable travel inside and so on. Our teachers also pushed us to join it, saying it was compulsory.”²³

“At school, the teacher asked me to join [the USDA]. Our teachers told us that if we joined, they would help give us marks on our exam. And, at home, it is compulsory, one per house had to join. Also, they said that we could travel inside the country with only USDA cards; we didn’t need ID cards.”²⁴

“Even during the school day, the teachers allowed us to go for USDA activities. If we did not follow our lessons, the marks we needed were provided at the end of the month.”²⁵

“If we [USDA members] had to go to a rally or to another event, we had to rehearse a month before. We had to practice reading a statement and playing music. We had many absences from our classes. At that time, we were provided extra marks or the marks we needed to pass the exam, even though we did not attend class regularly. If we did not join the USDA, we would have lost such opportunities.”²⁶

²³ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁴ NDD Interview, #B-6 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁵ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁶ Ibid.

Many students become USDA members for the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities, or partake in special activities at their school.

“I am not clear about why I joined the USDA. This is because when I was a student, I enjoyed singing and one year we provided entertainment in our school. During this time, the headmaster offered us some snacks and asked us to sign something. Then, I realized it [that I had joined].”²⁷

“I think I would have lost opportunities, such as observation trips, access to the library, physical exercise training and so forth [if I had not joined the USDA].”²⁸

Several students further want to participate in educational trainings offered by the USDA. Membership is generally expected on completion of the training.

“[I joined the USDA] because I wanted to attend English class over summer vacation.”²⁹

“When I attended the educational training, all the attendees had passport photos taken, and had to fill out the form. When we finished the training, we became members of the USDA. They issued membership cards.”³⁰

Students in Burma who are top in their classes are designated ‘outstanding youth’ and given prizes and other benefits from the USDA. When the USDA offers computer training or English language classes,

²⁷ NDD Interview, #B-5 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁸ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁹ NDD Interview, #B-8 March 2006, on file with NDD

³⁰ NDD Interview, #B-11 March 2006, on file with NDD

students are encouraged to join upon completion of the courses. Further, those who perform the best during the courses are offered prizes such as cash and TVs.³¹

Many teenagers out of school fall into membership, as they see the opportunity to go to foreign countries as offering them a better life. Malaysia, in particular, has a contractual agreement with the USDA.³² However, there is little potential for employment of unskilled workers, and so these workers often return to Burma worse off than when they left.³³ In Mon State, some students joined the USDA, but failed to obtain the special access to educational or technological programs promised.³⁴

Young people in the rural areas of Burma feel particularly inclined to join the USDA, as they are exempted from serving as frontline porters upon joining. Members of the USDA also receive low cost housing in rural areas.³⁵ In one township, a community leader spoke of the incentives for rural youth to join the USDA, “They [village USDA CEC members] openly told the villagers that if they joined the USDA, they could be free from the conscription of forced labor, free from many types of taxes. Many of our villagers do not support them, but as you know there are some opportunists in every community and those opportunists joined their organization. Yes, they are free from everything, and sometimes they show their power to the villagers. Sometimes, the village headmen also are afraid of them.”³⁶

³¹ *Politics of Stability: Co-opting Burma's Civil Society Through the USDA*. V Coakley. Burma Issues Newsletter Vol. 8, No.10. October 1998.

³² *Exposing the Real USDA*. NCGUB Information Unit. NCGUB

³³ *USDA: Act Locally and Lie Globally*. Banya Hongsar. KAO WAO News No. 30. November 1-13, 2002.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Exposing the Real USDA*. NCGUB Information Unit. NCGUB

³⁶ *USDA: The Organization Strengthening the Military Rule in Burma (Myanmar)*. The Mon Forum. April 2005.

One USDA member interviewed noted,

*"In the rural areas, the parents are illiterate and they think it is good to join [the USDA]."*³⁷

In an attempt to present itself as a multiethnic organization, inclusive of all Burma's numerous ethnic groups, the USDA has likewise targeted ethnic youth for recruitment. Despite this seeming appreciation for different ethnic groups, the USDA has been involved in many instances in which the cultural rights of particular groups were denied. Thus, ethnic youth have faced the challenges of trying to learn their language or culture with restrictions placed on them by the USDA. For example, in August 2004, a senior USDA official in Mon State stated, "Teaching the Mon language is a barrier to national development and solidarity. The SPDC will not achieve its objective of rural development in the area because of Mon language teaching."³⁸

Business

The USDA has carved out a role for itself in the economy of Burma, a role which allows the SPDC to control economic forces in a market oriented economy.³⁹

The USDA's main business is the Myangonmyint Company. It also controls businesses including the gem market and Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltds.⁴⁰ The USDA acquired the Panlong Yadana market and

³⁷ NDD Interview, #B-10 March 2006, on file with NDD

³⁸ *USDA Say Teaching Mon a Barrier for Reconciliation*. KAO WAO News No. 73. 9-27 August 2004.

³⁹ *The Union Solidarity and Development Association*. David Steinberg. Burma Debate. Vol. 4, No.1. Jan-Feb. 1997.

⁴⁰ *Mobilization of the Masses: How Much of a Threat is the USDA?* L. Hancock. Burma Issues. 2003

the Theingyi market in Rangoon in 1995. In Hlaing Township, the USDA obtained land and sought to lend it to local farmers. The USDA likewise has many business activities carried out with the support of the SPDC or the state's finances and materials. Among these activities are the control of bus and train lines, car rental, collecting taxes, giving visas, involvement in agriculture, fishing, paddy cultivation, lending land, lending shop rooms, transportation of cement, supply of water, and importing cars, motorcycles and tires into the country free of tariffs.⁴¹

The awarding of licenses and permits to set up a business, once controlled by the Military Intelligence (MI), is now controlled by the USDA, and thus many of the local businesses are run by USDA members.⁴² Many businesses face losing their licenses if they employ members of the opposition. In Rangoon, the USDA instructed car owners not to employ NLD members as drivers or bus fare collectors or they would face imprisonment and close of business.⁴³ When renewing their licenses, some trishaw drivers have been made to join.⁴⁴

Several times businesses face harassment and intimidation. In 2005, one township local USDA secretary frequently interfered with business activities and encouraged USDA members to threaten the lives of businessmen. The secretary regularly extorted money from businessmen under the guise of raising money for the USDA, while keeping the money for himself.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *USDA HQ's Business and Fundraising*. Inside Source. 2005

⁴² *USDA as Powerful as the Local Intelligence Services in Arakan*. BNI Weekly News. 24 November 2003

⁴³ *Oppression on NLD Members Continue in Rangone Thone Gwa*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 10 December 2005

⁴⁴ *Burmese People Forced to Join Junta's Organization in Rangoon Division*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 16 October 2005

⁴⁵ *Burma Pakokku USDA Secretary Uses Thugs to Cow People*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 5 November 2005

One former NLD member who joined the USDA for business reasons noted:

*"They will deny my permits to operate and I will have to shut down my stores and lose my business [if I quit the USDA]. [I plan to quit] as soon as an uprising takes place."*⁴⁶

Restrictions are further imposed on artists, writers and actors. Those who join the USDA have a greater chance for success in selling their works or simply having their work published. However, joining the USDA implies a willingness to censor their work.

*"The official [Army official] from the censorship board suggested (forced) I apply for USDA membership. He introduced me to some USDA officials and then applied for membership."*⁴⁷

*"My artistic products would be banned if I refused to join [the USDA]."*⁴⁸

Civil Service

*"If the number of civil servants is 200, the number of USDA members is also 200."*⁴⁹

Military and civil servants are not allowed to be members of political parties, but are able to join the USDA in its current state as a social organization.⁵⁰ To secure a government job, an individual has to have

⁴⁶ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁴⁷ NDD Interview, #5 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁵⁰ *The Union Solidarity and Development Association*. David Steinberg. Burma Debate. Vol. 4, No.1. Jan-Feb. 1997

recommendations from the township USDA president and secretary which costs at least 10,000 kyat. Without a recommendation, there is no opportunity to get a government job.⁵¹

Once an individual becomes a civil servant, they are not free to express their political affiliation without placing their job in jeopardy. In one case, civil servants who signed a petition organized by the NLD were sacked after USDA members reported the situation to the authorities.⁵²

The USDA members interviewed for this report reflected that civil servants were forced to join the USDA.

“All the government employees and their families...do not have the right to refuse to join. They are automatically USDA members.”⁵³

“Of course, all of us were forced to join against our will. One of my colleagues once resisted applying for membership, but the authorities used her other CV form for the USDA membership form, and so she became a member.”⁵⁴

“We can not get a government job if we refuse to join [the USDA]. In Burma, all universities and colleges are government controlled. I have many friends who didn't join, but they don't work for the government.”⁵⁵

Many civil servants are unaware of the date they joined the USDA, as they become members without their knowledge or consent.

⁵¹ *USDA as Powerful as the Local Intelligence Services in Arakan*. BNI Weekly News. 24 November 2003

⁵² *Burmese Civil Servants Sacked for Signing NLD Petition*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 17 August 2004.

⁵³ NDD Interview, #5 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁵⁴ NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁵⁵ Ibid.

*"I am not sure [when I joined the USDA] because when I arrived at the university, I was invited by the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation. I said that I was not a member of this organization, but they told me that I automatically became a member of the women's organization or the USDA without joining it officially because I am a civil servant. I have not received any evidence that I was an official member, and I never filled out a membership form."*⁵⁶

*"Usually, civil servants have to fill out three sets of forms twice a year, but later we had to fill out five sets. Three went to the Ministry of Education, but the rest went to organizations such as the women's association or other. So, the forms cause us to be USDA members. We cannot resign or refuse."*⁵⁷

*"Our names are already on the list even though we did not join officially. There was no official meeting organized for us to oppose being a member of the USDA."*⁵⁸

As with civil servants, the regime has developed a tactic in recent years of creating a list of the members of each household. This list is then used to establish USDA membership.

*"Sometimes my friends came and call me to go to the meeting or to organize people in the village. Regarding organizing people, for instance, later we did not need any official membership form to fill out to become new USDA members. We only checked how many people were living in a home, and made a list, allowing them to be members according to their age, at least 18. Later, membership cards were issued. If I had free time, I would do that kind of work."*⁵⁹

⁵⁶ NDD Interview, #B-8 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ NDD Interview, #B-2 March 2006, on file with NDD

One man reflected on this practice, stating

“I do not know why I became a USDA member because my village headman filled in the USDA member registration form. When USDA leaders came and asked the Village PDC to extend to 20 members this year in my village, my name was put down.”⁶⁰

When attempting to update the list of their family members, many villagers find themselves forced to fill out USDA forms. Further, in southern Burma, USDA members tricked local people into joining the USDA by pretending to be taking a census for the upcoming elections.⁶¹

Relevant to all Burmese is the issue of travel inside the country. Every person is expected to carry an ID card, which is frequently checked as individuals travel throughout the country. Those able to show a USDA membership card are able to travel without harassment, and occasionally without paying fare. Many of those interviewed noted this as a primary incentive in choosing to become a USDA member.

“I lost my ID card, and it was very difficult to get a new one. I could not afford to pay the bribe for it. Without ID, I could not travel. A local USDA member suggested that I join the USDA so I could easily get a new ID.”⁶²

“They came and explained that if we joined the USDA for a show of strength, we could travel inside without disturbance and for less money. That’s why I joined it.”⁶³

⁶⁰ *I Don’t Know Why I Became a USDA Member*. Independent Mon News Agency. 8 September 2004

⁶¹ *Mandalay Students Tricked into Joining USDA Members*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 2005

⁶² NDD Interview, #7 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁶³ NDD Interview, #B-3 March 2006, on file with NDD

*"I joined it [USDA] as it was said that it would be easy to travel with a USDA membership card. I didn't have a Burmese ID card yet."*⁶⁴

*"We would lose our social opportunities [if we did not join the USDA]. For example, we can travel freely and do not have to pay at the check point. In some places, we do not even have to pay the bus fare if we show a USDA card."*⁶⁵

Having a USDA membership card further relieves the burden that all Burmese have when spending the night at friends or family member's houses.

*"[If I hadn't joined the USDA], it would be difficult with the overnight guest list submitted to the local authorities when we visit and sleep at other places. If we have a USDA membership card, we are not interrogated by the local authorities."*⁶⁶

The Burmese Rohingya especially benefit from having USDA membership cards, as they are able to travel freely inside the country if they show their USDA cards. Travel freely inside Burma is often difficult for Muslims, particularly the Rohingya who have no Burmese citizenship identity cards, and so having a USDA card ensures their travel. One witness in Mon state noted, "I saw a Muslim woman being stopped by the Army on her way from Mon state to Myawaddy (Karen state). At a checkpoint, after she showed her USDA card she was allowed to pass."⁶⁷

⁶⁴ NDD Interview, #3 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁶⁵ NDD Interview, #B-7 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁶⁶ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁶⁷ *USDA Membership on the Increase*. KAO WAO News No. 76. 9-24 September 2004

Opposition

The members of opposition parties in Burma, particularly the NLD, must contend with the recruitment tactics of the USDA. The NLD is currently barred from expanding its membership and has been forced to close down most of its offices throughout the country. One NLD office was forcefully demolished.⁶⁸ Additionally, current members of the NLD face daily pressure to resign from the party. Many NLD members resign in the hopes of attaining better educational and economic opportunities. Membership in the USDA is sought in the hopes of reducing the chance of being seen and treated as a suspicious person.⁶⁹

The USDA has employed various tactics to intimidate people into resigning from and denouncing the NLD and calling for its dissolution. At the end of April 2006, nearly 130 members of the NLD were reported by the government controlled media to have resigned.⁷⁰ However, the NLD has only received resignations from four persons.⁷¹ This discrepancy indicates the other resignations reported were likely forced and the now former members of the NLD are now afraid or embarrassed to admit their action to the party.

In November 2005, USDA members went around to houses in Mandalay Division asking for people to quit the party, saying that they would be protected from any problems by the USDA.⁷² USDA

⁶⁸ *Rangoon Twante NLD Office Demolished by Burmese Authorities*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 15 September 2005.

⁶⁹ *Politics of Stability: Co-opting Burma's Civil Society Through the USDA*. V Coakley. Burma Issues Newsletter Vol. 8, No.10. October 1998

⁷⁰ *Opposition Resignations Cited in Myanmar*. The Associated Press. 6 May 2006.

⁷¹ *Inside Source*. 17 May 2006.

⁷² *Burma Junta's USDA Members Pressure NLD Members to Quit Party*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 4 November 2005

membership increased in Mon state in 2005 with many joining from the NLD.⁷³

In Shan State in 2004, USDA members went around to the homes of NLD members telling them to turn in their NLD membership cards and join the USDA under threat of violence. In some cases, the USDA reported resignations from the NLD by individuals known not to be NLD members.⁷⁴

Most often, continued membership in the NLD and refusal to join the USDA results in economic hardship and decreased educational opportunities. The USDA carried out orders barring NLD members from being teachers in Tenasserim Division in 2004.⁷⁵ When one NLD member in Mandalay refused to quit the party, his tuition school was shut down.⁷⁶

In other cases, villagers have been asked to sign documents in anticipation of elections in which they promise not to support the NLD. In 2000, USDA members and authorities went around shopping centers in town and forced people to sign papers declaring their loss of confidence in the NLD. When people protested, they were threatened with withdrawal of their shop license. Civil servants were told they would be dismissed, and others were brought to USDA offices and threatened and intimidated into signing.⁷⁷

The USDA has also sought to counter any action taken by the NLD and exploit any weakness. When the NLD was collecting signatures of

⁷⁴ *Regional NLD to Reorganize and Consolidate in Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 25 March 2005.

⁷⁵ *NLD Member Refused Teaching Job in Southern Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 20 August 2004.

⁷⁶ *NLD Member Pressured to Quit NLD in Mandalay Division, Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 24 August 2004.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

support for a petition, the USDA attempted to counter the campaign by gathering signatures calling for an end to the NLD's campaign.⁷⁸ When some NLD members were expelled from the party in February 2005, the USDA sought to have them denounce the NLD openly and produce anti-NLD propaganda.⁷⁹ They have further been invited to rallies with the intention of having them air their grievances with the NLD and read prepared tracts denouncing the NLD.⁸⁰

The plan to decrease and eventually all together eliminate the NLD is systematic, done with the expressed backing and encouragement of top level officials. The USDA likewise systematically recruits members according to detailed plans laid out by the military regime. Though in many cases harassment and intimidation are the favored tactic for recruitment, many of the USDA statements and plans reflect a more subtle approach to recruitment.

In a July 2002 meeting, members were told to watch out for the activities of the NLD and try to organize them to become members of the USDA. They were told to block the activities of the NLD without making it apparent their intention. Additionally, they were told to divide their area into three categories: areas where it is impossible to campaign [recruit members], areas where it is fairly possible to campaign, and areas where it is fully possible to campaign.⁸¹

In a 2003 meeting, Dr. Aung Kyaw Tun, a senior official from Moulmein, urged USDA members in attendance to "Observe anti-

⁷⁸ *NLD Members Forced to Join USDA in Eastern Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 2004

⁷⁹ *Burma USDA members Told to Entice Ex-NLD Members*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 20 April 2005.

⁸⁰ *Burma Junta Prepares to Renew Attacks on the NLD*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 21 March 2005.

⁸¹ *Special Report: The Dirty Politics of the USDA in Mon State*. Independent Mon News Agency. March 1, 2003.

government group's activities. Don't use confrontation tactics; convince them to be our members."⁸² Also in 2003, an official urged attendees at a USDA meeting to "Analyze all activities of opposition groups. You are urged to convince opposition members to participate with the USDA. You are obliged to help people for social welfare and make local people trust you. You are insisted not to confront other organizations and local people."⁸³

A secret document from the USDA was obtained in 2004 which laid out clearly the USDA's plan for gaining membership from the opposition. One of the stated objectives of the USDA is "narrowing and eliminating the activities of opposition forces." In order to accomplish this, the USDA has designed different approaches. Through organization activities, one idea is to approach those respected by the opposition and give them social assistance. The USDA further seeks to "diminish and ruin the opposition parties' capacity economically. This involves setting up similar and parallel businesses to compete and destroy with those owned by the opposition and lending money to ordinary opposition members to lure them away from the opposition.

Further, the "weaknesses that exist within family members of opposition parties must be studied and exploited" with the aim of preventing them from acting in way "socially or commercially" that pose a threat to the USDA or the state. The plan of the USDA is also one of "annihilation through greater strength," meaning the USDA seeks to directly counter any show of support the NLD receives from the people.⁸⁴

⁸² *Crime Against Humanity: Dirty Politics on the Hands of the Burmese Junta*. Banya Hongsar. 18 June 2003. Monland.

⁸³ *Special Report: The Dirty Politics of the USDA in Mon State*. Independent Mon News Agency. March 1, 2003.

⁸⁴ *Confidential: USDA South Okkalapa Township, Eastern District, Rangoon Division Organizational Plan*. Inside Source. February 2004

Those interviewed for this report reflected on the efforts to deter membership in the NLD in favor of membership in the USDA.

“Those who are involved in politics are organized to be USDA members. Any of them who refuse to join are restricted in their daily activities.”⁸⁵

“There is disturbance to the opposition. There is one person who changed from a political party to the USDA as he was given several opportunities.”⁸⁶

“They came and asked the NLD members to resign. They called my mother to the USDA section office and asked her to resign.”⁸⁷

“They told him that if he quit the NLD, he would be given a telephone, cord phone, GSM phone, a high-level position in the USDA and more than 100,000 kyat in cash.”⁸⁸

“I was an active member of the NLD and a supporter until July 2004. I owned two stores in my township. I have to ask for a permit from the local authorities to open these stores annually. My family and I were threatened and disturbed by the local authorities in many ways because of our involvement in and support of the NLD. The USDA secretary and two other township USDA officials came to my home and threatened not to issue the yearly permit to run my stores if I continued refusing to resign from the NLD and then join the USDA. I am a father of four and my eldest daughter is a university student, 20 years old. She was also a youth member of the NLD. Now, both of us resigned from the

⁸⁵ NDD Interview, #1 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁸⁶ NDD Interview, #2 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁸⁷ NDD Interview, #B-6 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁸⁸ *Burma Junta Tempting NLD Members to Quit Party*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 31 March 2005.

NLD, and the whole family- my wife, my daughter, my son and I- joined the USDA.”⁸⁹

Despite the seemingly vast numbers of people who join the USDA, there are many who adamantly refuse to join or take part in their activities. Those interviewed for this report seemed to have an understanding that they had failed to resist the regime in joining, and showed an appreciation for those who had resisted.

“At the same time, some USDA members seem to be afraid of being USDA members. They recall the BSPP cadres in the 1988 uprising.”⁹⁰

“I hardly ever see people refuse to join. They say it is compulsory. But, I did see one family from the network of the 88 student movement. They refused to join as their son was imprisoned during 88.”⁹¹

“Those who refuse to join have to pay various taxes, make labor contributions, or sentry duty. I witnessed one person who refused to join. He often opposed the USDA leaders. He refused and complained whenever the USDA leader asked him to [attend an event] for a show of strength. That’s why he was often sent to the prison or made to pay a fine.”⁹²

“Those who refuse to join the USDA are those with strong national spirit. They know the injustice of the military government, and they want to oppose such a government. They are eager to seek peace.”⁹³

⁸⁹ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁹² NDD Interview, #B-5 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁹³ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

Control of Civil Society

Burma is a country devoid of a civil society. Due to the rule of the military regime, all attempts to construct and maintain civil society organizations and institutions, and to create a culture of openness and independent thought, have been thwarted. Such organizations have largely faced elimination, or been co-opted and thus voided of any societal influence.⁹⁴ In their place, the military regime has managed to mobilize the masses to join the USDA and carry out carefully scripted functions designed to approximate civil society.

The USDA is frequently presenting itself as the benevolent benefactor of the people. Its members are often featured in the military controlled media for their involvement in various activities, including donating supplies to schools and hospitals, voluntarily helping on development projects and giving educational or technological trainings to its many members. The presentation of the organization as a benign social organization enables recruitment and ensures tolerance for the USDA among the people.

By lulling the people into regarding the USDA as an acceptable, harmless institution, the USDA has gradually taken over the role played by independent NGOs. The USDA has imposed restrictions on international aid agencies, and in doing so insured they have the final say in the distribution of aid. This is cause for great concern, as members of the opposition, or anyone deemed threatening to the regime, can be denied aid or assistance.

More overtly, the USDA has also taken responsibility for the mass rallies used to show support for the SPDC, especially as relates to the National Convention. Mass rallies have also been held to denounce the opposition, including rallies aimed at denouncing individual members of parliament, and to renounce any statement or reports

⁹⁴ *The Union Solidarity and Development Association*. David Steinberg. Burma Debate. Vol. 4, No.1. Jan-Feb. 1997.

issued about the political situation in Burma by international organizations. These rallies are elaborately staged, and involve the forced participation of at least one person per household in a village or township. Though people participate in these rallies, many have cited the disconnect between what they are doing and what they really believe, reflecting the fear that leads to mass participation in such events.

This section looks at the USDA's presentation of itself as the benefactor of the people, the harmful effect that its grip over the delivery of aid or assistance has on the most vulnerable, and the use of mass rallies to demonstrate the people's support for the actions of the military regime.

Benefactor of the People

The USDA has undertaken various so called development projects in an effort to present itself as benevolently helping the people of Burma. Along with other similarly constituted organizations, such as the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF), and the Myanmar Red Cross Society, the USDA has attempted to gain some level of acceptance from the people of Burma as a beneficial and desirable organization. However, the source of funding and labor for such development projects reveals the true nature of the projects.

Many of the individuals interviewed for this report were made to contribute large sums of money to the USDA as donations. In some cases, money was taken directly from an individual's salary without consent.

*"We had to collect donations 3 or 4 times per year, according to the quota system. Even though I myself do not donate any money, I have to ask organizers from the villages to collect donations by issuing official office letters."*⁹⁵

⁹⁵ NDD Interview, #1 March 2006, on file with NDD

“I had to attend organized ceremonies and donate money every time they asked. I was forced to donate 10,000 kyat upon applying for membership. And, I have been asked for donations whenever necessary, including for repairing the USDA office, buying furniture and utensils, and for hosting the USDA divisional leaders’ visits to our township.”⁹⁶

“[I gave] no direct money donation to the USDA, but some money was automatically cut from my salary for USDA uniforms and for donations to some social events organized by the USDA.”⁹⁷

Many interviewed were made to contribute labor in place of money. Those unable to contribute labor were made to find someone to work in their place or pay a fine.

“Some people joined [the USDA] against their will as it is compulsory. Some students have to work during the weekend or during vacation due to economic hardship. But, when the USDA calls them to do something, they have to leave their own work and work for the USDA. So, some of my friends have a grudge [against them].”⁹⁸

“It is compulsory for the people, one per house, to contribute labor for cleaning the roads and ditches. [If they didn’t send anyone] a fine had to be paid.”⁹⁹

“To raise funds for the USDA, we had to sell post cards and planners.”¹⁰⁰

“I have to implement the policy given by the high levels of the association. For instance, now I have to sow seeds of castor plants in my office because they instructed me to cultivate castor plants to make fences.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁹⁷ NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁹⁸ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

⁹⁹ NDD Interview, #B-5 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁰⁰ NDD Interview, #9 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁰¹ NDD Interview, #1 March 2006, on file with NDD

*"In some families without men, they have to hire someone outside [to contribute labor]."*¹⁰²

The USDA particularly carries out activities in rural areas purportedly for things such as rural education, health, transportation, irrigation and electricity. The activities of the USDA have further been divided into departments, including the education, social and cultural, economics and administrative departments. A 2002 meeting in Mon State addressed by the township secretary focused on obtaining support from farmers by providing them with 12 packages of rice and over 90 kilos of potatoes. Members were told to help with the development of the village, and encouraged to open a local library with assistance from the USDA township office.¹⁰³

However, the USDA has taken many actions to shut down or co-opt development projects not originating out of their organization. In rural areas, Mon communities have sought to teach the Mon language in monasteries, founding Mon Literature and Buddhist Cultural Associations, which conduct literacy training in Mon villages. Yet, in July 2004, SPDC General Maung Bo instructed local authorities in Mon State to close down all Mon National Schools in Ye Township. USDA members were called on to disturb Mon teachers and prevent continued schooling. One Mon teacher noted, "We heard news that if Mon teachers went to Ye Township for any purpose, we have to be careful of USDA members. They are in the coffee shops, in the bus stations, in railway stations, in the entrance of towns. If they know you are a Mon teacher, they will inform the police or military officers in town immediately and they must arrest you."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² NDD Interview, #B-11 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁰³ *Special Report: The Dirty Politics of the USDA in Mon State.*

Independent Mon News Agency. March 1, 2003

¹⁰⁴ *USDA: The Organization Strengthening the Military Rule in Burma (Myanmar).* The Mon Forum. April 2005

The USDA actively discourages and prevents the social works carried out by the NLD. For example, in the Tamu area, in April 2004, the NLD attempted to form a social support group in the area similar to ones formed throughout the country, which have supported political prisoners and their families. However, this attempt was disturbed by the Chairman of the Tamu district USDA claiming that those leaders who formed the social support group would face repercussions in their businesses.¹⁰⁵ When NLD members attempted to donate rice to flood victims in lower Burma in 2004, the USDA suggested they give the donations to them to “carry out the deeds on their behalf.”¹⁰⁶

Those interviewed noticed the USDA efforts to disturb the NLD efforts.

“Another example is when the students from the opposition groups request the people to organize and do community service. The USDA leaders ask them not to do it.”¹⁰⁷

“They disturb the opposition with loudspeakers, and when the opposition donates rice to the monks, the USDA interferes.”¹⁰⁸

In addition to the activities of the NLD, the USDA has sought to end the activities of foreign agencies. Efforts by the American and British Centers to provide libraries and trainings to the population have come under criticism, and face slandering in pamphlets distributed by the USDA.¹⁰⁹ Foreign delegations or representatives on educational,

¹⁰⁵ *USDA Disturbs Formation of NLD Social Support Group*. Burma News International. 26 April 2004

¹⁰⁶ *NLD Prohibited from Donating Rice to Flood-Hit Areas in Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 21 August 2004.

¹⁰⁷ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁰⁸ NDD Interview, #3 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁰⁹ *Mandalay Authorities Accuse US Center of Interfering with Burma Affairs*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 2 March 2006

economic, social and cultural observations coming to Burma must pay their respects first to the USDA Secretary General Htay Oo upon arrival. Such an action prevents any efforts at independently providing aid and assistance to the people of Burma.

Corruption in the USDA is rampant, which affects the authenticity of supposed development projects. For example, in 2002, the authorities in Tenasserim division gave funds to the USDA for border development activities including primary schools, health facilities, agriculture and water. Other funds were raised through selling poached fish which had been confiscated, as well as through the imposition 'illegal' border, traffic and visitor registration fines.¹¹⁰

Reports of fundraising efforts in Thandwe, Arakan state involved asking for 'donations' of 5,000 kyat and 10,00 kyat for small and large dry-fish transport boats respectively. Those refusing to pay were not registered, placing their activity at risk for being declared 'illegal.'¹¹¹ Further, land seized by the SPDC has then been sold by the USDA to raise funds.

In Sittwe, Arakan state, land valued at two million kyats was confiscated, and in its place MI offices were built. In 2002, the land was sold and the profit made was given to the USDA.¹¹² The better farm lands are often also bought by the USDA. And, in 2003, farmers were made to buy expensive and ineffective fertilizer through the USDA.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ *Report Card, Burma*. 1 December 2001-31 March 2002. ALTSEAN Burma. July 2002

¹¹¹ *The Burmese Military Intelligence Extorts Money from the Fish Boats for NGOs*. Narinjara News

¹¹² *People's Land Confiscated for Sale in USDA Fund Drive*. BNI Weekly News. 15 December 2003.

¹¹³ *Farmers Forced to Buy Useless Fertilizers in Central Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 30 December 2003

Frequently money raised is misappropriated. In one instance, a school in central Burma was unable to be rebuilt after the local USDA secretary used the money to build himself a home.¹¹⁴

Additionally, USDA members have been found involved in criminal activities, including illegal logging, gambling and illegally exporting rice and fish to neighboring countries. The purpose of such activities is to raise funds for the organization, benefiting mainly USDA leaders. Still, in an effort to appear concerned for local villagers, the USDA will use some of the funds to donate food, clothing and other materials to the villagers.¹¹⁵

In addition to development projects, the USDA offers educational and technological trainings targeted at the youth in the country. The USDA freely uses all the facilities of the SPDC for these trainings. One particularly disturbing training was conducted in which USDA members were instructed on what to say when organizations such as Amnesty International and other INGOS visit rural areas of Burma, where human rights violations are severe and widespread. In February 2003, over one hundred USDA members attended a training in which they were told explicitly how to keep such organizations from discovering the truth about violations in Mon state. A youth who attended the training reflected, “It’s a course on how to lie to people who ask questions.” While another youth, clearly led to participate against her will, stated, “I was so disgusted with the training which instructed us not to tell the truth about the abuses we have suffered for years.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ *Burmese Authority Misappropriates Money for Children’s Education.* Democratic Voice of Burma. 11 April 2005

¹¹⁵ *USDA as Powerful as the Local Intelligence Services in Arakan.* BNI Weekly News. 24 November 2003

¹¹⁶ *USDA Trains Villagers to Lie to International Institutions.* KAO WAO News No. 39. February 26- March 15, 2003

International Agencies

The USDA has undertaken a campaign to force international agencies operating in Burma to cooperate with them. Strict guidelines have been issued and a special ministerial committee has been put into place to implement these guidelines. Many international agencies, including the Global Fund and Medicins Sans Frontieres, have chosen to quit the country, refusing to compromise their operating principles.¹¹⁷

The regime has gone further in trying to have the United Nations take the USDA as its main local partner.¹¹⁸ UN officials have rejected this proposal. In October 2005, UN officials were asked to meet with the USDA to hear of its progress in social and infrastructure development.¹¹⁹

In September 2005, a directive was issued to regional USDA leaders to take control of educational, health and social activities throughout the country, beginning with a take over of all HIV/AIDS prevention projects in Rangoon Division.¹²⁰ The expelling and quitting of international agencies and the subsequent control the USDA asserts has troubling consequences as it politicizes the distribution of humanitarian aid and ensures certain sectors of society will be discriminated against.

A prime example of the fallout from the regime's decision to impose impossible requirements on international agencies is the situation for political prisoners since the International Committee of the Red Cross was forced to suspend prison visits in late 2005 due to the interference

¹¹⁷ *Red Cross Hopes to be Left Alone*. The Irrawaddy. 31 January 2006.

¹¹⁸ *Uneasy Lies the Crown in Myanmar*. Larry Jagan. Asia Times Online. 3 April 2006.

¹¹⁹ *UN Officials Concerned by USDA Briefing*. Clive Parker. The Irrawaddy. 10 October 2005.

¹²⁰ *USDA Members Told to Take Control of Local Activities*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 9 September 2005.

of the USDA. The ICRC's protocol of independent and unsupervised prison visits was threatened when the USDA insisted it accompany the ICRC on a visit to Tharawaddy prison.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), an organization monitoring Burma's prisons, the prospects for the ICRC being allowed to restart its prison visits remain dim. The Secretary of the AAPP has stated, "All along in 2005, the SPDC used many means to hamper these people so that they could not inspect prisons. In 2006, I believe that similar conditions, bans and interferences will occur again."¹²¹

The consequence of not allowing the ICRC to visit has meant an increase in the torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners. A former political prisoner with contacts inside the prisons noted that "Beatings of prisoners in Rangoon's notorious Insein prison have increased since the Red Cross stopped visiting."¹²² The health of political prisoners has further deteriorated since the ICRC stopped its visits, as the ICRC has been unable to supply prisons with needed medicines, leaving many prisons out of stock of the most basic medicines.¹²³

Mass Rallies

The regime has used its mobilization of the masses most prominently to conduct mass rallies. These rallies are used to demonstrate the supposed support that the regime has for various initiatives and activities. Numerous mass rallies have been held in support of the National Convention, to denounce the NLD, and to oppose the actions

¹²¹ *ICRC Might Be Allowed to Inspect Burmese Prisons Freely Again.* Democratic Voice of Burma. 10 January 2006.

¹²² *Uneasy Lies the Crown in Myanmar.* Larry Jagan. Asia Times Online. 3 April 2006.

¹²³ *Medicines Run Out in Burma's Prisons.* Aung Lwin Oo. The Irrawaddy. 4 May 2006.

of foreign countries. The rallies are organized by the USDA with careful precision, and responsibilities divided among members.¹²⁴

In 2006, mass rallies were held in support of the National Convention beginning on 7 January at Rangoon Thuwunna Stadium and continuing to Karen and Kachin states and Pegu and Mandalay Divisions.¹²⁵ One man noted, "It was a forced gathering, of course. If it were of their own accord, no one would have been there."¹²⁶ All of the mass rallies are forced gatherings with one person expected to attend from each household.

Those households unable to attend the rallies are expected to hire someone to take their place. They further face an exorbitant fine for not attending. Participation in the rallies is often the result of fear, though occasionally incentives have been offered to participate in rallies, including free rice, cooking oil, sugar and soap.¹²⁷ In many cases, villagers from surrounding areas are bused in to attend the rally.

The participants are responsible for their own welfare at the rallies.¹²⁸ Often they are forcibly kept at rally sites, creating poor sanitary conditions and occasionally leading to violence. The poor conditions and violence at mass rallies have sometimes led to the death of participants.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ *Working Plan for the Ceremony of National Convention Supporting Mass Rally*. Obtained from Inside Source. 2006.

¹²⁵ *Sieg Heil, SPDC: Burma Junta Thugs Hold Mass Rallies for Military Rule*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 12 January 2006.

¹²⁶ *Rallies Staged to Support National Convention*. Shah Paung. The Irrawaddy. 16 January 2006.

¹²⁷ *Politics of Stability: Co-opting Burma's Civil Society Through the USDA*. V Coakley. Burma Issues Newsletter Vol. 8, No.10. October 1998.

¹²⁸ *Burma Human Rights Yearbook*. Human Rights Documentation Unit. NCGUB. 1994

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

An early rally in support of the SPDC in 1994 saw the forced attendance of thousands of people. These individuals were gathered in a compound the night before the rally, with people denied permission to use the toilet and with several people subsequently trying to escape. Their attempts were met with guards beating them “with pieces of bamboo and sticks.” A riot ensued in which “two men were trampled to death. Twenty people were wounded...two women had their back broken.” The rally still was carried out the next day.¹³⁰

Nearly ten years later, in October 2003, a rally in Haka, Chin State was held in support of the ‘seven point roadmap to democracy’ in which government employees and students were forced to attend under threat of losing their job or being expelled from school. All the major towns were forced to send representatives, and in Haka each household was made to send at least one person. Failure to send anyone resulted in a 1,000 kyat fine. All participants were divided into three columns, with each column made to wear traditional Burmese dress.¹³¹

When the USDA is unable to attain the numbers expected, they will often greatly exaggerate the number of people in attendance, reporting this number on government owned television and radio.¹³²

Several of the individuals interviewed for this report were made to attend mass rallies. Many reflected that they would attend the rally, but felt no connection between what they believe and what they said and did. They viewed their attendance as a performance, a way of avoiding harassment or intimidation from the regime.

¹³⁰ *Mobilization of the Masses: How Much of a Threat is the USDA?* L. Hancock. Burma Issues. 2003

¹³¹ *The Burmese Generals are Lying to the World.* Rhododendron News. Volume VI. No. V. September-October 2003. Chin Human Rights Organization. 20 October 2003.

¹³² *Burma Human Rights Yearbook.* Human Rights Documentation Unit. NCGUB. 1994

*"I was asked to join a rally to denounce the opposition, NLD, the ILO, Western countries, and the Vaclav Havel and Desmond Tutu report. We went to the ceremony site in four buses from our township. During the event, the assigned persons had to read out the ready made papers one after the other- the first to make a proposal and then three persons to support the proposal- just like in the BSPP [Burma Socialist Programme Party] days."*¹³³

*"In most of the events [USDA rallies], we have to attend as the audience, clapping after each speaker. But, I had to perform once as a speaker, just reading out a ready made paper."*¹³⁴

*"To attend the rallies, we had to get up at about 4 am and go to the [rally site]. They sent us there by cars. I did not understand what they were shouting. We were just showing force. If the top leaders came our way, we had to stand in a line beside the road, holding small flags in our hands."*¹³⁵

*"Before I left Burma, I had to participate in welcoming special guests, opening football games, and opening USDA offices. I had to attend a rally to show strength for the SPDC. I can never forget that for the rest of my life. I got many experiences, as well as many negative feelings."*¹³⁶

Most of the rallies attended were held to denounce the NLD.

*"I attended an anti-NLD party rally. We had to wait under the sun in an open field until they [USDA leader] came. They asked us to support what they said and to raise our arms. Then, they allowed us to go back."*¹³⁷

¹³³ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹³⁴ NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹³⁵ NDD Interview, #B-1 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹³⁶ NDD Interview, #B-5 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹³⁷ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

“In 2004, the USDA condemned the NLD for destroying the country and the youth, and for handing the country over to others outside. At that time, we had to shout, “Object the NLD, Daw Suu and U Tin Oo.”¹³⁸

“At the rallies, they persuaded the people to oppose the NLD, saying that they have deserted their own country and are traitors. They said the military was the only one who could rule the country to be stable.”¹³⁹

No concern is shown for the health and safety of rally participants. Further, those forced to attend the rallies face economic hardship, as they often must take the day off from work and arrange for their own transportation and needs at the rally. Those who can not attend are made to pay a fine or find another person to take their place.

“I had to march in the rally, listen to them and clap. We had to get up at 4 am and gather at the school, and then they came and picked us up in cars. We had to sit under the boiling hot sun before returning at 3 or 4 pm.”¹⁴⁰

“We had to go [to the rally] for a show of strength. When the commanders of the military came, we had to put on USDA uniforms and welcome them. If we could not go by ourselves, we had to hire another person to replace us.”¹⁴¹

“People from the other regions arrived [to the rally site] at 8am. They were given accommodations. They were responsible for their own food. Those without money did not have any food. I talked to them, and they

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ NDD Interview, #B-10 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁴⁰ NDD Interview, #B-7 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁴¹ NDD Interview, #B-10 March 2006, on file with NDD

said the USDA leaders did not take any responsibility for them. They had to come with their own stuff.”¹⁴²

Political Violence

The more insidious nature of the USDA can be seen in their involvement in various acts of political violence. The USDA has trained members of its organization in weaponry and defense tactics, and in so doing created small pockets in the country of people's militias. Further, the USDA has involved itself in maintaining security in villages and townships without having legal authority, and thus have inserted themselves into the surveillance of opposition groups, and often even in the arrest procedures for democracy activists.

In addition to the formal organization of individuals to commit political violence, the USDA leaders have created a culture of thuggish behavior among its members, particularly the easily encouraged youth wing. As a result, members are free to roam the country, terrorizing opposition members and the common people. Most severely it has led to incidents intended to incite religious conflict and several violent attacks.

The most notorious incident of political violence perpetrated by the USDA happened on May 30, 2003 when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and several NLD members were attacked, brutally beaten and in many cases killed. The significance of this incident, termed the Depayin Massacre, is that evidence suggests that what occurred can be labeled a crime against humanity, and therefore this case could be brought before the International Criminal Court. It is the clearest reflection of the USDA's purpose and intention.

¹⁴² NDD Interview, #B-11 March 2006, on file with NDD

This section looks at the formation of people's militias via the USDA, the role the USDA has taken in the security forces, the incitement of religious conflict by USDA members, the many violent attacks involving USDA members and the Depayin Massacre, an event which defines the USDA.

People's Militias

*"There are those who echo foreign claims about a lack of democracy and human rights violations in Myanmar [Burma]...the USDA was formed specifically with the objective to fill the role of strengthening national unity...acts of anarchy prevailed during the events of 1988 and that the USDA was formed to prevent similar events in the future and to promote the observance of law and order among the general public."*¹⁴³

*"The trainees constitute not only the hard core force of the USDA, but also the sole national force which will always join hands with the Tatmadaw to serve national and public interests. They should be morally and physically strong with sharp national defense qualities. The trainees will be taught military parade, military tactics and the use of weapons."*¹⁴⁴

The USDA has taken on the role of giving basic military training to its members. Air force and naval military trainings have also been conducted.¹⁴⁵ The reasoning behind this training is believed to arise from the SPDC's fear of either a foreign invasion or internal unrest. It is thought that by arming USDA members, and allowing them to form their own militias, any disturbance could be easily put down through direct violent force. Such a development has led to increasing incidents of political violence.

¹⁴³ Senior Gen. Than Shwe. Myanmar TV. 7 March 1994.

¹⁴⁴ *The Union Solidarity and Development Association*. David Steinberg. Burma Debate. Vol. 4, No.1. Jan-Feb. 1997. Quote from Senior Gen. Than Shwe, 1996.

¹⁴⁵ *Burma Junta Giving Military Training to Thugs*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 31 May 2004.

The composition of the militias is believed to be similar to that found in Mon state. In Mon State in 2004, the USDA was ordered to form a battalion consisting of one commander (from USDA), one leader (from the Village PDC chairmen), two leaders (USDA public relations officers), and ten section commanders with ten soldiers per section. All trainees were required to fill out a 22 point form with biographical information. The area in which the battalion was formed was chosen as the NLD was perceived to be weak in the area.¹⁴⁶

The USDA has also formed Youth Affairs organizations consisting of only 15 members under the age of 35. All members were required to have degrees from university. The organizations act as one component of larger militias.¹⁴⁷

The people's militias have taken on various names, such as the 'Anti-Foreign Invasion Force,' 'State Defense Force,' and the 'Peoples Vigorous Association.'¹⁴⁸ In 2005, the 'People's Strength Organization' was formed to provide 'strength in a time of emergency.'¹⁴⁹ As early as July 1997, General Maung Aye officially referred to the USDA as an "auxiliary national defense force" thus acknowledging its security role in the country.¹⁵⁰

The SPDC's Ministry of Defense published a manual in 2000 under the instruction of Than Shwe entitled the "Manual for Application of

¹⁴⁶ *Mon State PDC Ordered Chaungzon USDA to form USDA Battalion in Town.* Burma News International. 15 October 2004.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *USDA: The Organization Strengthening the Military Rule in Burma (Myanmar).* The Mon Forum. April 2005.

¹⁴⁹ Burma Human Rights Yearbook. Human Rights Documentation Unit. NCGUB. 2005.

¹⁵⁰ *The USDA Factor: The Thuggish Civilian Wing of the Military Junta Must Not Be Overlooked During Burma's Political Transition.* Min Zin. The Irrawaddy Vol.11, No.6. July 2003

People's War Strategy" which noted that should any foreign intervention take place members of the USDA, among others, would "be trained and organized as people's militias."¹⁵¹ Since 2000, military training courses have been given to USDA members, members of the fire brigades and the National Red Cross. Trainees are armed and regarded as a reserve force.¹⁵² A March 2001 article in the New Light Myanmar noted that "reserve units with 400 members each had been formed in four townships in Tavoy District, Tenasserim Division."¹⁵³

In 2003, a report told of the Army providing basic military training to the USDA in Mon state. Men aged 18 to 40 were recruited by Township PDC members to attend the trainings. A man interviewed about the training stated, "The authorities did not explain to us [the villagers] why we would have to attend the short day training. They said we cannot refuse."¹⁵⁴ Nearly 1000 men were made to partake in military training in one village alone. Many stated they had no desire to attend, and were looking for ways to escape such trainings. However, those failing to attend the training were required to pay 10,000 to 20,000 kyat to the authorities.¹⁵⁵

Security Forces

The USDA often participates in combined task forces with the Military Intelligence (MI), police, firefighters and border security forces to conduct intelligence operations and arrest individuals, particularly members of the opposition. Many members are trained in intelligence and information gathering techniques. Even when not acting as a separate USDA group, the MI, police, firefighters and border security forces are often members of the USDA. Any role for the USDA in

¹⁵¹ *Exposing the Real USDA*. NCGUB Information Unit. NCGUB.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ *Recruiting Civilians in Village Communities to Attend Short-Term Basic Military Training*. Independent Mon News Agency. 18 June 2003

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

intelligence or security matters is outside of international standards for law enforcement, and poses a threat to the fair implementation of laws.

With the sacking of Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, the former Chief of Military Intelligence (MI), and purging of all MI loyal to him, the USDA has been used increasingly in the new Intelligence apparatus. The SPDC has met with USDA CEC members and other loyal members to train them as Intelligence officers, forming Intelligence teams in each Township. One Intelligence team in Mon State adopted responsibilities which included watching the NLD as well as other members of the opposition. All information collected was expected to be reported directly to the USDA General Headquarters.¹⁵⁶

Published by the chief of the township police force in Paung Township, Mon State, a document entitled "Subject of Combat for Propaganda" dated December 2000 included details on psychological warfare and methods of confronting democratic forces.¹⁵⁷ In 2000, the Vice Chief of the Police Force at the time, Kyin Thein, made USDA members attend a training in which young members were recruited to be informers for the military and local campaigners, with an emphasis on psychological warfare.¹⁵⁸ In a meeting in Mon State in 2002, Major General Ohn Myint told USDA members in attendance, "You are urged to closely monitor the moves of the NLD, but say nothing about it to anyone. You are to block developments."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *USDA: The Organization Strengthening the Military Rule in Burma (Myanmar)*. The Mon Forum. April 2005.

¹⁵⁷ *Crime Against Humanity: Dirty Politics on Hands of Burmese Junta*. Banya Hongsar. 18 June 2003. Monland.

¹⁵⁸ *USDA: Act Locally and Lie Globally*. Banya Hongsar. KAO WAO News No. 30. November 1-13, 2002.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

In December 2005, a meeting was held for USDA members in which they were told to “watch all army and police forces including staffs from the various departments within the township” and report to the headquarters.¹⁶⁰ Thus, USDA members are being used not only to monitor the opposition, but to keep watch over the actions of the regime’s other institutions. News of what is happening in the country is further closely guarded by the USDA.

A directive in June 2005 warned USDA members to guard against the leakage of inside news to the outside world. This was to be accomplished by forming news and information teams to systematically counter foreign news reports and distribute propaganda.¹⁶¹

A report out of Arakan state reported the growing strength of the USDA from 2003, as one villager stated, “The members of local branches of the USDA are behaving like they are the military intelligence and the local authorities.”¹⁶² In some cases, the USDA members were more powerful than the new intelligence forces.¹⁶³ Further, the recent spate of bomb blasts throughout Burma has seen the USDA, along with the police and fire brigades, carry out the arrests of innocent people without any plausible suspicion.¹⁶⁴

Many USDA members interviewed for this report noted the extent of the USDA’s involvement and power within the security forces. One member states:

¹⁶⁰ *Confidential News of the USDA*. Inside Source. 15 January 2005.

¹⁶¹ *Moles on Moles: Burma USDA Warns Members against News Leak*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 29 June 2005

¹⁶² *USDA as Powerful as the Local Intelligence Services in Arakan*. BNI Weekly News. 24 November 2003

¹⁶³ *Burma’s New Intelligence Agents and the NLD*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 8 November 2004.

¹⁶⁴ *Innocent Civilians Arrested in the Aftermath of Blasts in Rangoon*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 24 April 2006.

*"The leaders of the USDA have more power than even the township PDC."*¹⁶⁵

Some of the USDA members are asked to work as sentries, responsible for guarding a certain number of houses.

*"I worked for the USDA once a week. The leaders liked me, and appointed me a youth leader to rule 10 houses in our section. For the whole night, I had to look around in our section for security."*¹⁶⁶

Fearing any unrest or organizing among students, teachers who are member of the USDA are encouraged to watch their students and report any noteworthy activities.

*"We, most of the lecturers, are assigned to keep close surveillance on the students' activities on our campuses. If there is something unusual among the students- distributing illegal materials such as leaflets, statements, poem books, stickers; writing slogans or symbols against the authorities on campus; organizing events on significant days- we have to report to the headmaster or the authorities. I never report to them even though I see some students' activities."*¹⁶⁷

Perhaps the most serious function that the USDA has taken on is its role in watching the opposition, and attempting to disturb any activities through harassment and intimidation. One man noted:

"Once I saw some USDA members and local authorities take down the NLD signboard, right after the Depayin massacre. They always inspect the opposition's houses at midnight for guests who stay over night, even

¹⁶⁵ NDD Interview, #B-11 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁶⁶ NDD Interview, #B-4 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁶⁷ NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

if they know there are no guests. The USDA is antagonistic to the opposition all the time; they always try to disturb them.”¹⁶⁸

Another USDA member concurs:

“The USDA usually denounces and intimidates the opposition at the National Convention, shouting slogans. Those who are involved in politics are also intimidated. For instance, those who talk about Gen. Aung San and those who speak the truth are intimidated and arrested. They always create problems for the opposition and those they think oppose them.”¹⁶⁹

Yet another USDA member states:

“I don’t know much about the township. Generally, the people don’t like the USDA leaders, even their own members. I think some of the USDA leaders are overacting. It seems they are overactive, more than the other authorities such as the police and the local Peace and Development Council officials.”¹⁷⁰

A former NLD member who felt pressured to join the USDA noted:

“The joint secretary is the worst. He always bullies others, especially the NLD and the students. He only passed seventh grade and worked as a broker. He became rich by exploiting everything he could. He doesn’t trust me, and always tries to undermine me in public. He always says proudly in front of people, “Look at [my name]. Even the followers of ‘Ka-la-oak-ma’ [derogatory term used for Aung San Suu Kyi in reference to her marriage to a foreigner] dare not defy us.” I think the people,

¹⁶⁸ NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁶⁹ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁷⁰ NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

even members of the USDA and his relatives, hate him, but dare not speak out at the moment. After the Military Intelligence, the USDA seems more powerful than the police and other authorities in the same area.”¹⁷¹

The USDA interferes even in none threatening activities that the opposition may undertake, such as when making donations to monasteries.

“The secretary told me he has many guys to watch the Khamauks [NLD]. He always says he can arrest anyone at anytime. They always try to disturb the opposition. Whatever events the NLD organizes, even social and religious events, they don't allow it, giving various reasons. The USDA and other authorities also order the monasteries, and the monks, not to accept donations from the NLD and not to allow them to organize any events there.”¹⁷²

The local villagers are aware of this behavior, and express their dislike of the USDA due to their functioning as security forces without any legal authority.

“I think the people don't like them. In the eyes of the people, the USDA, the local PDCs, the police and the MI are all the same.”¹⁷³

“The secretary is the worst. He is not only crazy like the MI, but also very manipulative in many ways. He is a drunkard. He always boasts about how clever and powerful he is. He has his own thugs to bully anyone he dislikes.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁷² NDD Interview, #7 March 2006, on file with NDD

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Incitement of Religious Conflict

In Burma, religious freedom is severely restricted. The USDA has increasingly played a role in the harassment and intimidation of religious groups in the country, particularly Christians and Muslims. The potential animosity between Buddhists and those who practice other religions is frequently exploited by members of the USDA with the intention of sparking religious conflict and providing the regime with an excuse to retain power as they ostensibly can restore stability in the country. Muslims are the primary group targeted to incite violence.

In 2005, the USDA began to implement a strategy of harassing the NLD through targeting its Muslim members. The plan was to distribute literature appearing to be from the NLD which called for the resignation of Muslim members, the vandalizing and destruction of property when members resisted, and the creation of riots if needed to destabilize the situation and place blame on the NLD.¹⁷⁵

Curfew laws were put in place in Mon state for a period in 2003 supposedly to prevent rioting between Buddhist monks and Muslim communities. With the implementation of the curfew, SPDC authorities, police, firemen and USDA members were on hand to patrol the streets, yet no riots occurred, nor was there any sign of tension between the two communities.¹⁷⁶ The laws were thought to have been an effort to place fear and mistrust in the minds of the local community.

USDA members were responsible for setting fires in a Muslim village and abducting 32 Muslim students in Sagaing in January 2003. Forty

¹⁷⁵ "New" Strategies Dreamt Up by the Burma Junta to Destroy the NLD. Democratic Voice of Burma. 22 June 2005.

¹⁷⁶ *Curfew Law in the Capitol of Mon State*. Independent Mon News Agency. 10 November 2003.

two houses, a mosque and a madarasa were all burnt down.¹⁷⁷ The destruction of religious sites is a common tactic used in the hopes of bringing about violence.

In June 2005, under the direction of the USDA, a Hindu Temple in Mandalay Division was burnt down. The USDA paid money to villagers to destroy the temple, which had been built by the local villagers with their own money and effort.¹⁷⁸

The USDA has also taken a role in the persecution of Christian groups. Through out the years, they have set about arresting clergy, destroying churches and prohibiting religious services.¹⁷⁹

Violent Attacks

Through the use of local villagers and USDA members, the USDA has carried out violent attacks on several individuals, targeting members of the NLD. In some cases, these attacks occur according to preconceived plans given from the top USDA authorities to local USDA members. However, in many cases it appears the violence is a result of the general culture of thuggish behavior accepted and encouraged among USDA members, particularly the youth. As such, young USDA member feel a sense of superiority to the local villagers and are assured their actions will be met with impunity. Increasingly, the regime seems intent not so much to arrest and imprison the opposition, but rather to eliminate them all together through violent means.

The most recent and severe act of brutality occurred in the murder of Thet Naing Oo. On March 17, 2006, Thet Naing Oo, a former political

¹⁷⁷ *USDA Sets Village on Fire and Kidnaps 32 Muslim Students in Burma.* Muslim Information Center of Burma. News Story 097. February 4, 2003.

¹⁷⁸ *Hindu Temple Burnt Down in Central Burma by Junta Thugs.* Democratic Voice of Burma. 2 July 2005

¹⁷⁹ *Religious Freedom Report.* US State Department. 2005.

prisoner, was attacked by members of the USDA and fire brigade in Kemmendin Township, Rangoon. Thet Naing Oo was continuously beaten while those responsible shouted out that he was a thief, causing the local people to avoid involvement. Even as he was placed in a trishaw to be taken to the hospital, he was being beaten.¹⁸⁰ Individuals in the township have suggested that the attack was preconceived and carefully planned among the members of the USDA.¹⁸¹

Other cases of attacks and brutal beating have occurred recently. Thant Zin Myo, an NLD member, had long been harassed by the USDA and members of the fire brigades. When he captured a stranger loitering around his home in August 2005, he brought him to a local police station only to learn the man was a firefighter and informer. A local authority and firefighter then began beating Thant Zin Myo. He later brought the two individuals who beat him to court.¹⁸²

In Sanchaung Township, another NLD member, Kyaw Soe, was beaten in August 2005 by three members of the USDA using sticks. He was seriously wounded to the point of one of his ear drums tearing, leaving him unable to hear in that ear. Though the three attackers were caught and brought to the police station, a USDA leader and government informer paid a bribe to have them released without charges.¹⁸³

Rashid Duhal, a 22 year old Muslim university student from Arakan State, was beaten by a group of thugs in August 2005. An eyewitness stated that the thugs were believed to be members of the USDA, and

¹⁸⁰ *Murdered Ex-Political Prisoner Thet Naing Oo Buried*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 20 March 2006.

¹⁸¹ *Inside Source*. 1 May 2006.

¹⁸² *Burmese Local Authority on Trial in Rangoon Hlain Thaya*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 30 August 2005.

¹⁸³ *Rangoon Sanchaung NLD Youth Attacked by Junta Thugs*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 21 August 2005

that the student was attacked to cause unrest between Buddhists and Muslims. Duhai died three days after the attack from his injuries.¹⁸⁴

A student in Pegu Division, Maung Ye Naing, was beaten by members of the USDA when returning to his hostel in August 2004, causing him to have to be rushed to a local hospital.¹⁸⁵ Also in 2004, two students from Prome University were hospitalized after being attacked by a group of thugs, members of the USDA.¹⁸⁶

In addition to violent attacks, members of the USDA are able to avoid punishment or prosecution for various incidents in which they are involved. Bribes and influence over the legal system allows for USDA members to be careless and unaffected when their actions harm others. In one case, a victim of car accident left severely wounded was intimidated out of suing the local USDA secretary responsible for the accident.¹⁸⁷

The USDA is not able to commit political violence without the consent of the SPDC, as many of its members were coerced into joining, and likely even disapprove of the USDA's involvement in such activities. Only the most brutish elements are willing to carry out violence for the military.¹⁸⁸ However, it is apparent these elements in the USDA are gaining in numbers and strength.

¹⁸⁴ *Burma Arakan Muslim Student Killed by 'Unknown' Thugs*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 4 September 2005

¹⁸⁵ *USDA Members Attack Burmese Student*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 1 September 2004.

¹⁸⁶ *Prome University Students Beaten Up By Free-Range Thugs*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 15 March 2004.

¹⁸⁷ *Car Victim Told to Drop Charge Against Burma Junta Official*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 17 July 2004.

¹⁸⁸ *The USDA Factor: The Thuggish Civilian Wing of the Military Junta Must Not Be Overlooked During Burma's Political Transition*. Min Zin. The Irrawaddy Vol.11, No.6. July 2003

Depayin Massacre

The military regime has sought to harass, intimidate and violently attack the NLD, and particularly Aung San Suu Kyi, the General Secretary of the party. Since 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party have faced pressure to resign or altogether dissolve the party. However, with the formation of the USDA, the military regime has slowly faded from being the ones to directly attack the NLD. While the SPDC is still responsible for planning and ordering attacks, the USDA acts as the regime's proxy, committing numerous acts of violence upon the NLD, NLD supporters and Aung San Suu Kyi herself. The purpose of the violence is to provoke a violent response from the NLD. Such a response would allow the regime to annihilate the NLD with the excuse of protecting the country.

The USDA began its more violent attacks on the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in 1996. There are several examples. At the first anniversary of U Nu's (the first democratically elected Prime Minister) death in February 1996, members of the USDA wearing red arm bands infiltrated the crowd and, using MI vehicles, were told to throw tomatoes at Aung San Suu Kyi when she began her speech. Yet, many members left the crowd upon learning what they were expected to do.¹⁸⁹

When Aung San Suu Kyi was rumored to be attending a famous temple in Pegu in 1996, USDA members were sent to physically harm Aung San Suu Kyi, but were unable to when Aung San Suu Kyi failed to show.¹⁹⁰

On New Years Day in April 1996, the roads to Aung San Suu Kyi's house were barricaded and USDA members threatened to beat any NLD members attempting to pass the barricades.¹⁹¹ In November 1996,

¹⁸⁹ *Burma Human Rights Yearbook*. Human Rights Documentation Unit. NCGUB. 1996

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

USDA members were paid 5,000 kyat each to attack a motorcade carrying Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD members using iron bars and bricks. Prior to the attack, Win Sein, a government minister told members at a USDA meeting that Aung San Suu Kyi should be killed, stating “We must get rid of Aung San Suu Kyi who is creating political unrest. Do you understand what it means to ‘get rid of’? It means we have to kill her. Have you got the guts to kill her?”¹⁹²

Throughout 1997, statements were made during USDA meetings by USDA leaders regarding the need to rid the country of Aung San Suu Kyi. The rhetoric adopted was aggressive and clearly intended to inspire violence. At a rally in Taunggyi, one USDA leader stated, “...the USDA has the strength to get rid of opposition members. Therefore, let’s fight against those people immediately.”¹⁹³ Another CEC member of the USDA at the time noted, “Bogadaw [derogatory name used for Aung San Suu Kyi] doesn’t want a peaceful country when we are trying for it. Therefore, she will be punished seriously by the USDA.”¹⁹⁴

Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD members also faced serious incidents of violence in 1988 and 2000. Though not definitively documented, the trend suggests that when acts of violence occur against the NLD, it is perpetrated by the USDA or by individuals hired by the USDA to carry out an attack.

The most heinous act of violence committed against the NLD was the Depayin Massacre which occurred May 30, 2003. Prior to the Massacre, Aung San Suu Kyi had been traveling the country to give speeches and open NLD offices. Before her trip to each state, USDA leaders and

¹⁹² *The Second Preliminary Report of the Ad hoc Commission on Depayin Massacre (Burma)*. The Ad hoc Commission on Depayin Massacre (Burma). May 2003. p.20.

¹⁹³ *Inside Source*. May 1997.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*.

CEC members would go in advance and hold secret meetings with the permission of local commanders, themselves USDA patrons, to lay down plans to disturb the NLD. During her traveling, and particularly in the days leading up to the Massacre, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD faced disturbances and harassment in the form of mobs gathered on the side of the roads shouting slogans and hold placards denouncing the NLD.¹⁹⁵

On May 30, while in Depayin, several state authorities and USDA members attacked a convoy carrying Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters. Several NLD members were brutally beaten, leaving many wounded and killed. The USDA had a direct role in the violence, and likewise provided money and training for villagers to participate in the attack. After the attack, Aung San Suu Kyi was briefly held in prison before being placed under house arrest which she remains under to date. Those witnesses to the attacks were detained and tortured.

After the Depayin Massacre, a commission was formed among Burmese organizations to investigate the crime. It was found to have been a premeditated attack for the reasons that: militia training sessions were given by the USDA prior to the massacre; weapons were carefully selected to conceal premeditation; there was careful selection of the time and place to carry out the attack; some 5,000 people were mobilized systematically to commit the crime; the wounded and witnesses were detained afterwards; the crime scene was rearranged and evidence destroyed; the attacks were supervised by an army major and police chief near the scene of the crime.¹⁹⁶

The commission concluded that the Depayin Massacre was a crime against humanity due to the fact that: the premeditated violence was

¹⁹⁵ *The Second Preliminary Report of the Ad hoc Commission on Depayin Massacre (Burma)*. The Ad hoc Commission on Depayin Massacre (Burma). May 2003. p. 29.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p.144.

unnecessary and a gross violation of human rights; it was committed in a planned and systematic manner against a specific civilian population; the victims were targeted for their political affiliation; the incident was carried out to intimidate the entire civilian population.¹⁹⁷

The Depayin Massacre received significant international attention. At the time, many world leaders spoke of the need for the truth surrounding the event to come out. However, despite evidence to suggest that what took place was a crime against humanity, no independent commission has been formed by the UN to investigate the Massacre. After three years, those responsible for the crime, USDA members and the military regime alike, retain complete impunity.

Evolution into a Political Party

The USDA's history of oppression and its clear connection to the SPDC is important to consider when noting that the USDA is being groomed to be the successor of the SPDC. Though initially registered as a social organization with the Ministry of Home Affairs, the intent of the SPDC to transform the USDA into a political party is apparent. The current state of the constitution at the National Convention gives the Tatmadaw (Army) one fourth of the seats in parliament, while allowing the remaining seats to be contested in elections. When future elections are held, the USDA will contest for the remaining seats, and as their past actions indicate, will likely win the seats through harassment, intimidation and outright violence. Such an occurrence would give the SPDC the opportunity to hand over power to a nominally civilian government.

This section looks at the USDA's plan for politics, the current state of their support from other countries, the National Convention's role in determining the future of the SPDC and the potential for elections in

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. p.145.

Burma. It also looks at the USDA members own reflections as to the viability of the USDA in the future.

Plans for Politics

When the coup occurred in 1962, Burma was ruled by a Revolutionary Council before the military regime established a political wing, the Burma Socialist Party Programme (BSPP) in 1974. The establishment of the BSPP signaled an attempt to rule the country according to the rules and principles of an ideological doctrine, namely the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism.’ When elections were held in 1990, a party, the National Unity Party (NUP), was formed, using the masses cultivated from the BSPP, to contest for seats in parliament.

When the elections were won decisively by the National League for Democracy (NLD), the military regime regrouped into the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), currently named the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and concerned itself with holding onto power, setting aside the NUP. After consolidating power, the regime realized the benefit in mobilizing the masses and thus established the USDA. Yet, the USDA in its initial stages was free of any political ideology. However, recently the SPDC has begun to profess an ideology termed “disciplined democracy,” which includes a political role for the USDA in its implementation.

The General Secretary of the USDA, Htay Oo, in a December 2005 press conference alluded to the USDA being reconstituted as a political party, indicating that members of the USDA should be prepared to take the remaining seats not reserved for the Army in future elections.¹⁹⁸ It was not the only time that the possibility of transforming the USDA into a political party has been mentioned. In 2003, the General Secretary

¹⁹⁸ *The Game Plan of the Nazi Generals in Burma*. Weekly Inside News Commentary No. 227. NDD. 9 December 2005

of the Mon State USDA declared the USDA was ready to be formed as a legal political party.¹⁹⁹

Further, in 2002, General Maung Bo, the Minister of Defense, stated “when the government has faced enormous economic crisis in the country, we solved it with the strength of the USDA. Therefore, you must work hard at winning against other groups in a political match.”²⁰⁰ The SPDC’s Ministry of Defense published a manual in 2000 under the instruction of Than Shwe entitled the “Manual for Application of People’s War Strategy” which noted that should any foreign intervention take place “the Myanmar Defense Services, guided by the political leadership of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) will safeguard and defend the country.”²⁰¹

Outside Support

The USDA has gained political support from other countries, particularly those in the region. China has actively sought to establish party to party ties between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the USDA, sending and receiving delegations to and from the country.

The CCP in 2000 invited General Win Myint to Beijing not in his role as one of the SPDC’s top generals, but in his capacity as the Vice President of the USDA. There was speculation that an initial agreement to establish party to party relations was signed at the time.²⁰² In September 2004, the CCP invited eighty-four political parties, including the USDA, from thirty five countries to the Third All Asian Parties

¹⁹⁹ *USDA is Ready to be a Legal Political Party. Independent Mon News Agency. 6 October 2003.*

²⁰⁰ *Crime Against Humanity: Dirty Politics on the Hands of the Burmese Junta.* Banya Hongsar. 18 June 2003. Monland.

²⁰¹ *Exposing the Real USDA.* NCGUB Information Unit. NCGUB

²⁰² *The USDA Factor: The Thuggish Civilian Wing of the Military Junta Must Not Be Overlooked During Burma’s Political Transition.* Min Zin. The Irrawaddy Vol.11, No.6. July 2003

Forum held in Beijing. The General Secretary of the USDA, Htay Oo, led the delegation, with Chinese television stations and radio broadcasting his visit. Such a meeting allowed not only the establishment of party to party ties with the CCP, but with the other parties in attendance as well.²⁰³

A Chinese goodwill delegation led by a member of the CCP and the Vice-Chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, Wang Zhaoguo, called on the Secretary General of the USDA Htay Oo in Burma in November 2005. In addition to explaining the activities of the USDA, Htay Oo also spoke of the need to develop a friendly relationship between the youth of China and Burma.²⁰⁴ In April 2006, a USDA delegation led by USDA CEC member Nyan Tun Aung met with the Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Burma at which time they were briefed about the National People's Congress, the CPPCC and China's economic blueprint for the next five years.²⁰⁵

In addition to seeking support from regional countries, the USDA has looked to emulate communist party structures. The USDA has studied the CCP, as well as the Vietnamese Communist Party. The current Prime Minister, Soe Win, a member of the USDA's Panel of Patrons and the believed mastermind of the Depayin Massacre, went with Senior General Than Shwe on a visit to Vietnam in 2003 for the purpose of studying the Vietnam Communist Party's structure.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ *The Game Plan of the Nazi Generals in Burma*. Weekly Inside News Commentary No. 227. NDD. 9 December 2005

²⁰⁴ *USDA Secretary General Receives Chinese Goodwill Delegation*. The New Light of Myanmar. 16 November 2005

²⁰⁵ *CPPCC Vice-Chairman Meets Myanmar USDA Delegation*. Xinhua. 7 April 2006.

²⁰⁶ *The USDA Factor: The Thuggish Civilian Wing of the Military Junta Must Not Be Overlooked During Burma's Political Transition*. Min Zin. The Irrawaddy Vol.11, No.6. July 2003

In looking at the structure and development of the USDA, it is apparent it has likewise been modeled after the Golkar party in Indonesia under the rule of Suharto. The Golkar party was initially touted as a social welfare group, but in the 1971 elections in Indonesia, Golkar won the majority of the seats, and would be the winning party in five subsequent undemocratic elections.²⁰⁷ Citing the need for stability, the military regime has frequently looked to Indonesia during the Suharto reign as a model for its own attempt to perpetuate military rule.

Outside support for the USDA has also come in the form of friendship and study tours to many Asian and ASEAN countries for low level USDA members.²⁰⁸ Members of the USDA participated in an International Youth Development Exchange Programme in Tokyo, Japan, and in January 2006 representatives of the USDA attended the Third Asia Pacific Regional Cuba Solidarity Conference in India.²⁰⁹

Recently, the USDA has begun to actively court UN organizations and foreign diplomats, seeking a role for the USDA in the country's diplomacy. New protocols issued suggest that UN organizations and foreign diplomats are made to pay courtesy calls with the USDA before meeting with the SPDC.²¹⁰ In September 2005, the USDA held meetings with foreign embassies in Rangoon, first with ASEAN countries and then with the others.²¹¹ When Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid

²⁰⁷ *Mobilization of the Masses: How Much of a Threat is the USDA?* L.

Hancock. Burma Issues. 2003

²⁰⁸ *The Game Plan of the Nazi Generals in Burma*. Weekly Inside News Commentary No. 227. NDD. 9 December 2005

²⁰⁹ *USDA Members Attend Cuban Solidarity Meeting*. Mizzima News. 25 January 2006.

²¹⁰ *The Game Plan of the Nazi Generals in Burma*. Weekly Inside News Commentary No. 227. NDD. 9 December 2005

²¹¹ *UN Officials Concerned by USDA Briefing*. Clive Parker. The Irrawaddy. 10 October 2005.

Albar visited Burma in March 2006 as ASEAN's envoy, he met with the USDA, while failing to meet with the opposition.²¹²

National Convention

The National Convention was convened in 1993 in a bid by the regime to create a constitution and stall a transfer of power. Two weeks after the regime decided to convene the National Convention, the USDA was formed, suggesting the regime anticipated a political future for the organization.²¹³ The USDA though already has inserted itself into the political process with many of its members acting as delegates to the Convention.

When the National Convention was in session in 2005, 633 delegates in the 'national races' category were members of the USDA, comprising 58 % of the total number of delegates.²¹⁴ In one township in Magwe Division, two out of three of the delegates to the National Convention were members of the USDA, though neither were legal experts or elected representatives.²¹⁵ Similarly, in Arakan state, each township's representatives were USDA members. The leader of the USDA even admitted, "There are not any representatives from Arakan state that were chosen by the people, all were selected by the SPDC authorities."²¹⁶

The SPDC has further provided delegates to the National Convention with money with priority given to USDA members.²¹⁷ The money was

²¹² *NLD Expresses Dismay over ASEAN Envoy's Burma Visit*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 25 March 2006.

²¹³ *The Union Solidarity and Development Association*. David Steinberg. Burma Debate. Vol. 4, No.1. Jan-Feb. 1997.

²¹⁴ *Interim Report Card: July 2004-February 2005*. Altsean Burma. March 2005.

²¹⁵ *USDA Members Attend the National Convention*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 10 May 2004.

²¹⁶ *SPDC Picked USDA Members to Represent Arakan State at the National Convention*. Narinjara News. 11 February 2003

²¹⁷ *Money for National Convention Delegates Families*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 17 June 2004.

levied from each household in Burma.²¹⁸ In giving money to delegates, the SPDC shows its inability to inspire action from USDA members without incentive.

The National Convention has dragged on for thirteen years, and will ostensibly continue until the regime feels the USDA is prepared to contest elections. The constitution being drafted currently gives the Tatmadaw twenty-five percent of the seats in parliament, while leaving the remaining seats open to election winners. The worry of the regime currently is that despite the mass membership, very few in the organization are politically motivated to undertake and win elections.²¹⁹

Future Elections

When the SPDC announced its 'seven-point roadmap to democracy' in August 2003, the USDA was directed to begin preparation for new elections by compiling voter lists, estimating the votes the opposition would likely get and from whom, and consolidating membership.²²⁰ USDA leaders at the township, district and state level were told to open local offices and consider which candidates to run in the next election.²²¹ Special note was taken of those eighteen and over.²²² In monthly USDA meetings, USDA leaders constantly remind the members to prepare for new elections.²²³

²¹⁸ *Compulsory Collections for Convention Families*. Democratic Voice of Burma. 4 June 2004.

²¹⁹ *Length of Convention Rests on the USDA*. No17-02/2006. 23 February 2006.

²²⁰ *The Game Plan of the Nazi Generals in Burma*. Weekly Inside News Commentary No. 227. NDD. 9 December 2005

²²¹ *USDA Plans for Upcoming Election*. KAO WAO News No. 87. 5-21 April 2005

²²² *Special Report: The Dirty Politics of the USDA in Mon State*. Independent Mon News Agency. March 1, 2003.

²²³ *Township USDA Monthly Meeting*. Inside Source. 11 January 2005.

The concern of many people is that an election contested and presumably won by the USDA would signal a return to a one party system. One political commentator noted, “what we are worried for in the long run is- the transformation might bring back Burma to the era of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP).”²²⁴ There is a further possibility that Senior General Than Shwe will transition to U Than Shwe, from patron of the USDA into party chairman.²²⁵

In returning to a one party system, the regime is pursuing a dual strategy of promoting the USDA while actively seeking to annihilate the main opposition party NLD. Since the end of April 2006, the government controlled newspaper, The New Light of Myanmar, has reported on the en mass resignations of members of the NLD.²²⁶ The USDA was cited as a location where the NLD members resigned.²²⁷

The pressure resulted in the resignation of nearly 130 NLD members as reported by the military regime, including a senior member in Mandalay.

Information Minister, Brigadier-General Kyaw Hsan, further declared the regime had collected evidence of the NLD’s ties to “terrorist” organizations and therefore could “outlaw” the NLD. The NLD has questioned this evidence, though, and as of yet the regime has made no formal steps to outlaw the party, preferring instead to keep it

²²⁴ *Thuggish USDA Hints of Becoming a Political Party of Burma*. Democratic Voice of Burma.

7 December 2005.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Opposition Resignations Cited in Myanmar*. The Associated Press. 6 May 2006.

²²⁷ *Another NLD Leader Forced to Resign by Pressure from Burma Junta*. Democratic Voice of Burma.

27 April 2006.

marginalized and impotent. One senior NLD official stated, "We expect worse to follow as the military authorities go all out to eliminate us by the end of the year."²²⁸

Despite the appearance of the USDA being reconfigured into a political party, there remains the question of whether election will be called. The regime is unlikely to allow a repeat of the 1990 elections, in which a regime backed party is defeated. Knowing USDA membership is forced, the SPDC could be hesitant to hold elections in which its members are unlikely to vote to legitimize the USDA. The USDA's role as a militia like organization then would be used to create a climate of fear in which the people of Burma vote against their interests.²²⁹ Any violence could be exploited and cited as a reason for the military to hold onto power without regard for elections.

There is a question as to whether the people of Burma have internalized the rhetoric of the USDA, and whether they would vote for the USDA in new elections. It is clear that mobilization of the masses in Burma is in fact nominal, and that any elections would not be won without rigging or violent intimidation. The interviews conducted for this report reveal the thinking of USDA members about their organization and its future. All the individuals interviewed reflected that the future of the USDA was dependent on the future of the SPDC.

"I think the fate of the USDA is the fate of the SPDC generals. I see no future for the USDA. I don't think the people believe in its aims or objectives, nor do they trust the USDA leaders. Though the people hate the current armed forces, the army has its role in the country (in every country), but this is not so for such a hybrid organization."²³⁰

²²⁸ *Myanmar's Junta Goes for the Kill*. Larry Jagan. Asia Times. 5 May 2006.)

²²⁹ *The USDA Factor: The Thuggish Civilian Wing of the Military Junta Must Not Be Overlooked During Burma's Political Transition*. Min Zin. The Irrawaddy Vol.11, No.6. July 2003

²³⁰ NDD Interview, #5 March 2006, on file with NDD

“For the time being, it [USDA] is an association that owns a great number of people. It may be damaged depending on government change in the future. This association is their baton. Currently, nobody can oppose them.”²³¹

“I don’t know much. If the government changes, it will be broken up. But, until now, it is the biggest group in Burma, bigger than the Army.”²³²

“I think they are trying to strengthen and make the people their own. They will change the strength of the USDA into the strength of the SPDC.”²³³

“[The USDA was formed] to organize the people and show strength. Then, they [USDA] will rule the country for the Generals.”²³⁴

“I think the role of the USDA will disappear when Burma gets democracy. As long as the military government continues to exist, the USDA will continue to visibly exist; I think the role of the USDA will continue as a group of strength in the country, and they will continue to carry out public agitation, denouncing the opposition and so on.”²³⁵

“It can not exist for a long time as it is opposing the will of the people.”²³⁶

Many interviewed reflected on the nature of the USDA members preventing the continuation of the organization.

²³¹ NDD Interview, #1 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³² NDD Interview, #6 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³³ NDD Interview, #B-7 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³⁴ NDD Interview, #B-2 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³⁵ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³⁶ NDD Interview, #B-8 March 2006, on file with NDD

*"I think it will be spoiled in the very near future as there are many people who are working for their self-interest."*²³⁷

*"They won't continue to exist in the future. The members are getting depressed even though there are a great number of people in the USDA."*²³⁸

Several of those interviewed noted the behavior of the USDA members in power would bring about the end of the USDA.

*"I know the people hate them; they are disgusted with them. The people have been murmuring that the USDA will face the same fate as the BSPP or MI when the time comes (if an uprising occurs). The people think that they are opportunists, including me. Sometimes, I hate myself for doing this [joining the USDA]."*²³⁹

*"The USDA leaders in our township behave as if they are kings or are in power. They are bossy, and treat people unpleasantly. People are disgusted with them, and hate them. They don't want to be concerned with them, and do not even speak to them. They avoid them everywhere."*²⁴⁰

*"The opinion of the people toward the USDA in my township and in Burma is that the people do not trust the USDA. The public are not optimistic towards the USDA because some government people are also members of the USDA. The public doesn't like the unjust policy of the government. The public always have questions; what are they going to do? What problems will they create for the people?"*²⁴¹

²³⁷ NDD Interview, #2 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³⁸ NDD Interview, #B-6 March 2006, on file with NDD

²³⁹ NDD Interview, #4 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁴⁰ NDD Interview, #8 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁴¹ NDD Interview, #9 March 2006, on file with NDD

Some USDA members interviewed were unaware and indifferent to the purpose of the USDA.

“I don’t know [why the USDA was formed]. I am only interested in our daily survival.”²⁴²

“The people are extremely poor. They are not interested in anything except daily survival. The people are afraid of them [USDA] because if they do not contribute labor, they will be arrested or fined. They have to struggle for their survival, and so they are blind and deaf to what is happening in the country.”²⁴³

Based on the interviews conducted for this report, it can be concluded that the average USDA member in Burma is aware of the USDA and its connection to the SPDC, but that despite the awareness of the connection, continues to refrain from declining to join or quitting the organization. There is then the potential that the SPDC can cow these individuals to vote against their interests and beliefs should elections be held in the near future. Yet, there remains the possibility that such people will vote according to the opinions they expressed in their interviews.

Conclusion

This report has sought to demonstrate the long history of oppression of the USDA, and the future of the USDA as the new face of Burma’s dictatorship. The USDA is an instrument of the SPDC, used to harass

²⁴² NDD Interview, #B-3 March 2006, on file with NDD

²⁴³ NDD Interview, #B-11 March 2006, on file with NDD

and intimidate the people of Burma, maintaining the climate of fear pervasive in Burma today.

After interviews with twenty members of the USDA, membership in the organization was found to be forced or brought about only through the offer of incentives that should be rights. Members of the organization are made to take part in various so called development activities despite the hardship that this places on them and their families. Further, the USDA has managed to reconstitute civil society in Burma, expelling international agencies and co-opting local NGOs.

The USDA has been involved in various acts of political violence. With the formation of people's militias and an increasingly prominent role in the security forces of the country, the USDA has managed to create a culture of lawlessness and thuggish behavior. The USDA has taken part in the incitement of religious conflict, extrajudicial killings, the harassment of the opposition and most notoriously, the Depayin Massacre. The Depayin Massacre is an incident which requires independent investigation as evidence suggests that the event could possibly qualify as a crime against humanity.

When the USDA was formed, it was initially touted solely as a social organization. However, the USDA has slowly taken on a political role in the country and soon will likely be reconstituted as a political party to contest future elections. The use of harassment, intimidation and outright violence raise concerns as to how the USDA will function as a political party. It is clear that any future elections would have to be rigged or the people so cowed in order for the USDA to win. The SPDC is looking to extend and perpetuate its rule by nominally transferring power to a civilian government. The people of Burma and the international community must take note of this fact in order to successfully end the oppression of the Burmese people and begin a transfer to a free and democratic government.

Appendix A: Table of Interviews

Interview	Age	Occupation	Date Joined USDA	Date Left USDA
Inside-1	38	USDA Office Director	July 3, 1995	N/A
Inside-2	21	Typist	March 10, 2001	N/A
Inside-3	19	Student	2003	N/A
Inside-4	48	Business (Grocery Store Owner)/Former NLD Member	December 2004	N/A
Inside-5	48	Artist	January 2005	N/A
Inside-6	36	Assistant Lecturer	1999	N/A
Inside-7	25	Street Vendor	February 2005	N/A
Inside-8	24	Textile Factory Worker	January 1, 2001	N/A
Inside-9	21	Waiter	June 5, 2000	N/A
Border-1	25	Tailor	July 15, 1995	No Official Resignation
Border-2	26	Factory Worker	October 5, 1997	No Official Resignation
Border-3	40	Tailor	July 15, 2004	No Official Resignation
Border-4	20	Tailor	October 15, 2000	No Official Resignation
Border-5	28	Wool Factory Worker	October 6, 1994	No Official Resignation
Border-6	23	Tailor	July 1997	No Official Resignation
Border-7	22	Tailor	August 20, 1997	No Official Resignation
Border-8	40	Lecturer	N/A	No Official Resignation
Border-9	24	Factory Worker	March 9, 1999	No Official Resignation
Border-10	21	Monk	June 20, 2001	No Official Resignation
Border-11	33	School Teacher	December 1995	1998

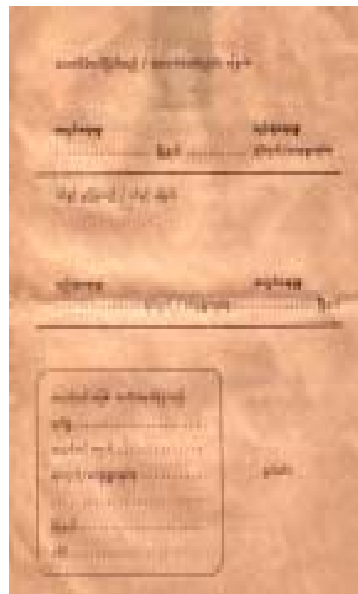
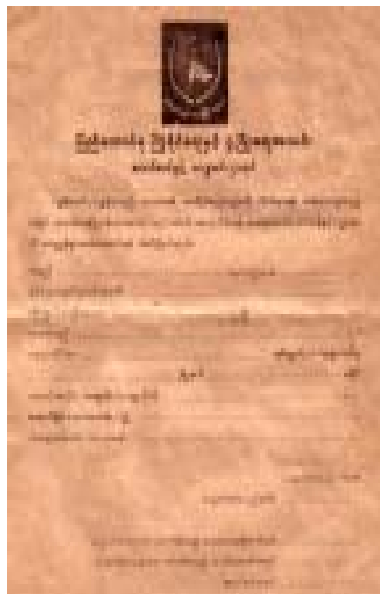
Appendix B: USDA Pictures



USDA: Flag



USDA: Logo



USDA: Application Form, Front and Back



USDA: ID Card



USDA: Uniform



USDA: Pin



USDA Members



Mass Rally in Karen State, July 2005



Receiving Application Forms, Karen State



Mass Rally in Support of National Convention in Rangoon, 2005



Mass Rally, Shan State



Mass Rally, Rangoon



Magwe Division Youth Meeting, May 2005

The White Shirts: How the USDA Will Become the New Face of Burma's Dictatorship



USDA Members Marching to Rally, Shan State



Shan State USDA Members in Ethnic Dress Shouting Slogans



Mass Meeting: Chanting Slogans Against 'Destructionists,' August 2005



Magwe Members Marching on Union Day, February 2006



Member Receiving Award at Annual Meeting, October 2004



USDA Meeting, July 2005

The White Shirts: How the USDA Will Become the New Face of Burma's Dictatorship



Computer Training Course for USDA Members,



USDA Meeting, Rangoon



Depayin: Denouncing Opposition, May 2003



Depayin: Holding Sign Denouncing Opposition, May 2003



Depayin: Using Loud Speaker to Intimidate Opposition, May 2003



Depayin: Harrassing Opposition, May 2003

Network for Democracy and Development

Mission:

Mission of NDD is two-fold; to provide the democracy movement with the requisite skills and capacities to achieve a return to democratic government and to lay the groundwork for the re-building of Burma's institutions and body politic to reflect the democratic ideal.

Vision:

NDD recognizes that democracy is both an ideal and an process, and aspires to a better Burma that is characterized by a return to democratic and a genuine federal constitutional government, a state that is democratic in form and practice, thereby inclusive of all ethnic people and women and a state institutional framework that is underpinned by transparency and the rule of law.

Aims:

To restore-

- (a) Democracy
- (b) Human rights
- (c) Internal peace
- (d) Ethnic equality and self determination

Programs of the NDD:

Four working programs and departments are being implemented by the NDD.

- Public Empowerment Program (PEP)
 - Inland Network Program (INP)
 - Documentation and Research Department (DRD)
 - Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC)
-