



Confronting oppression in Burma

“Peace, stability, and unity cannot be bought or coerced; they have to be nurtured by prompting a sensitivity to human needs and respect for the rights and opinions of others.”

**- Aung San Suu Kyi
Nobel Peace Laureate, 1991**

For over 50 years, the Burmese people have endured isolation, totalitarian rule and civil war. The brunt of this tyranny has been borne by women, children and oppressed ethnic communities. Since the mid-1990s, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has turned its attention and program resources to this country and its people, supporting courageous program partners in their struggle for democracy and justice. UUSC members can be proud of the role they have played in shining a light on the human rights situation shrouded in darkness by the military junta that rules this country with fear and retribution.

A glimpse of history

In 1948, Burma gained independence from Great Britain. The new nation was plagued by internal conflict from the beginning. In 1962, democracy came to an abrupt end in Burma when a military junta seized power. The country has remained under military control since that time, but a constant,

well-organized democracy movement has remained as a vital force within the country.

In September 1988, the military junta responded to nonviolent pro-democracy demonstrations with a brutal military crackdown that led to more than 10,000 deaths. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the slain leader of the Burmese independence movement, General Aung San, helped found the National League for Democracy (NLD) around this time period.

In 1990, bending to international pressure, the junta agreed to hold elections. The NLD won over 82 percent of the legislative seats.

In 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her nonviolent resistance to Burma’s military regime. She has been under house arrest several times since 1988. Sadly, on May 30, 2003, while visiting northern Burma, Ms. Suu Kyi and her colleagues were again attacked and detained. All NLD offices were shut down and schools and universities were closed to quash dissent. Diplomatic sources concluded that the confrontation by the regime’s supporters were “premeditated” and aimed at “intimidating” Aung San Suu Kyi.



Unfortunately, the military ignored the results of the election and kept its hold on power. Since that time, the junta has ruled the country while consistently violating human rights.

Burma today

Entire Burmese villages are subjected to forced relocation by government troops. Villages are burned, and their livestock, food and land are confiscated by the army. Village people are forcibly recruited as unpaid laborers, army porters and human minesweepers. Burma is purported to have the largest number of child soldiers in the world and the number is growing. Three million Burmese currently are living as displaced people or refugees, many in camps along the Thai-Burma border.

According to the U.S. Department of State 2002 Country Reports on

Human Rights Practices, “The Burmese security forces continued to commit extrajudicial killings and rape, forcibly relocated persons, used forced labor, and conscripted child soldiers. Disappearances continued, and members of the security forces tortured, beat and otherwise abused prisoners and detainees.”

Violence against women and children

According to the ruling military regime, Burma’s army “safeguards national solidarity and peace.”

According to women from Burma’s ethnic minority groups, the army does just the opposite. These women do not look to the army for protection; rather they flee in fear.

In June 2002, the Shan Women’s Action Network released a report, *License to Rape*, documenting 625 cases of rape and sexual violence. Further reports by Refugees International confirmed the systemic nature of this sexual violence with an investigation of Karen, Karenni, Mon and Tavoyan ethnic groups. The international community has been outraged at the reports and the United Nations General Assembly had condemned the practice. To prevent the truth from getting out, the military junta has been intimidating women and their communities from seeking refuge in neighboring countries.

Burma has a deplorable human rights record, but its record on the use of child soldiers is one of the most extreme in the world. According to accounts of former soldiers interviewed by UUSC partners, the Karen Human Rights Group and the Grassroots Human Rights



Women in camps discuss next year’s program.

Take action to support democracy in Burma

UUSC has worked to build grassroots support for sanctions against Burma since 1995. We now applaud the efforts of the U.S. government in its support of the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003. We now urge the United States to go further and bring the issue of the crisis in Burma to the United Nations Security Council, where some of the most powerful countries in the world will address it. Here are some simple steps you can take to support democracy in Burma:

- Thank President Bush for his support of the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003. Ask him to bring the issue of Burma before the U.N. Security Council. Send an immediate, personal message to the president by e-mail or fax through our online Legislative Action Center at www.uusc.org.
- Become a human rights defender, and sign up for UUSC action alerts on Burma. Contact Mary Lania for additional information on UUSC’s Burma program at 617.868.6600, ext. 317, or e-mail hrdefenders@uusc.org.

Visit the www.uusc.org for current action alerts on Burma.

Burma or Myanmar?

In 1989, Burma was renamed “Myanmar” by the country’s ruling military regime. However, the democracy movement inside the country, the European Union, the United States, and most major media outlets continue to use the term “Burma” as a symbolic protest against the military regime.

Education and Development Committee, 20 percent or more of its active duty soldiers may be children under the age of 18. It is estimated that there may be as many as 70,000 soldiers under the age of 18 in Burma's armies, and the vast majority of new recruits are forcibly conscripted. The use of children as weapons of war is — like the use of landmines or chemical and biological weapons — unacceptable in any circumstances. Even when the fighting stops, youth continue to bear the physical and psychological scars and suffer the long-term consequences of displacement, family dislocation, poor health and interrupted education.

Our partners in Burma

UUSC creates long-term solutions to human rights challenges through advocacy, education and partnership. We believe that the best way to bring about and sustain social change is by supporting local leaders and ideas rather than imposing external solutions. With our help, our partners in Burma are struggling to bring peace, democracy and justice to their country.

The **Karen Women's Organization** supports and organizes ethnic Karen women in refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border and internally displaced within Burma to participate in the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality in Burma. With a membership of 30,000, the organization seeks to empower women in all spheres of life, including education and general living standards. It also develops women's knowledge, ability and skills in politics and leadership by providing programs on leadership, income generation and human rights, as



A Karen Women's Organization meeting in a refugee camp.

“The villagers in Burma only think about two things, how to get enough food to eat and how to escape the Burmese army. We try to build their hope and give them encouragement, so they will be able to build their own society. We have begun to see change from people that have experienced our training.

— A Burma Issues organizer
from the Shan ethnic group

well as to maintain and promote Karen culture and traditions.

The **Mae Tao Clinic** on the Thai/Burma border has grown from a small house serving Burmese pro-democracy students fleeing the 1988 government crackdown to a multi-specialty center providing free health care for Burmese refugees. The clinic's staff of five physicians, 80 health care workers, 40 trainees and 40 support staff provided comprehensive health services to more than 30,000 Burmese refugees

in 2002. The clinic's reach extends far beyond its base in Thailand. It supports mobile clinics serving internally displaced persons and has 60 teams of backpack health workers. The clinic's programs include a home for unaccompanied children at a refugee camp and under the auspices of the clinic, groups such as the Karen Refugee Women's Group, Shan Women's Action Network and the Karen Women's Group have flourished.

Burma Issues is committed to building a nonviolent movement of marginalized people that is capable of carrying out the long-term struggle necessary to bring a true and lasting peace with justice to Burma. This UUSC partner accomplishes its work through grassroots organizing, providing human rights training, education, and monitoring and documentation. UUSC has supported human rights trainings and *Illustrated People's Stories*, cartoon books of true stories of villagers who have found creative and courageous ways of confronting



Newly elected leaders of the Karen Women's Organization

oppression. The books are used by adult literacy facilitators, community organizers, human rights educators and school teachers.

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) systematically reports human rights abuses in ethnic

Karen other areas. It also trains and equips Karen and other volunteers to gather and process human rights violations. And it helps Karen and other people in Burma increase their awareness of human rights issues and become involved in documenting the situation of their people. The organization shares this information worldwide with United Nations organizations, the International Labor Organization (ILO), various governments and journalists to increase international awareness of the situation in Burma and to put pressure on the government to return to democracy. Testimonies provided by KHRG helped the ILO produce a report condemning the use of forced labor in Burma.

“The peoples of Burma are today struggling to reclaim their rights and their country from one of the world’s cruelest and longest-lasting dictatorships. The cost is high. Thousands of peaceful democracy activists have been killed. Many have been tortured and imprisoned. Yet even as individuals fall prey to repression, the democratic spirit of Burma’s peoples refuses to die.”

—The Most Reverend
Desmond M. Tutu
Archbishop Emeritus of
Cape Town, South Africa

Successes

UUSC members and supporters can feel proud that they are part of a broad effort to spotlight glaring human rights abuses since the mid-1990s when UUSC began the current program of partnership, education and action and legislative advocacy.

- Activists across the country — UUSC members and supporters among them — cajoled, nudged and pushed the U.S. government toward a stronger policy towards Burma with success as economic sanctions were adopted after an intense Senate debate and finally signed into law by President Clinton in 1997.
- UUSC spearheaded work with Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., as she developed a congressional resolution against trafficking of Burmese women.
- UUSC sponsored a tour of Burmese women activists around the country to educate and mobilize U.S. citizens to work for a peaceful transition to democracy in Burma.
- UUSC was one of the groups that sponsored an amici curiae brief with the Supreme Court on the case, *Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. the National Foreign Trade Council*. The case addressed the Massachusetts selective purchasing law which effectively barred companies that do business in Burma from receiving government procurement contracts.

UUSC and its members and supporters have done their part to stop forced labor in Burma by boycotting companies that import Burmese goods. Forty major companies have now joined the boycott in the past three years.



Unitarian Universalist Service Committee