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TPP Economy on Decline but Sex Industry Thriving
Asohn Vi / Kaowao; April 23, 2008

Three Pagodas Pass, the border town around the closed Thai-Burma border trading checkpoint, is facing a descending economy. An anonymous source from the border town told Kaowao that despite this drop in general trade, one area of business that is steadily growing is the sex industry, including brothels and massage parlors, which brings illegal income with the approval of town authorities.
Parlor owners have to pay town authorities THB 12,000 in 'taxes' each month, in addition to a THB 100,000 'opening fee' each year, one owner of a massage parlor told Kaowao.

"For permission to operate for one year, we have to pay our money straight to the Ma Ya Ka (Township Peace and Development Council). We also have to pay around THB 12,000 to different departments each month," he added.

Town authorities and other ethnic ceasefire groups based in the town are heavily involved in the occupation of sex industries such as the Thel Htet Sue massage parlor, famous for young girls, which is owned by a major from Karen Peace Force (KPF) ceasefire group.

"If we open our business under the name of a significant ceasefire group, we don't have to pay a lot in taxes. We still pay, but not as much," he added.

Some famous parlors in Three Pagodas Pass town are the Thel Htet Sue, the Aung Pyi Soe and the newest addition named Kaday Kadar, which holds over 30 trafficked girls on the one premises.

"The girls get a small salary, with a percentage bonus from guests. For example, if a guest was to pay THB 400 for a night, the girl may get a percentage of up to THB 120," said a women's rights activist closely following the activities in the border town.

As well as affecting the economy, this industry has long-reaching effects across the community. A teacher from a school inside Burma contacted Kaowao to report that with the effects of the economic crisis really hitting parents in the area, many children were now leaving high school with only a basic education. "Their next step is to seek work in another country, like Thailand," he added. Another teacher told Kaowao that it is not only male children under 12 who leave, but increasingly female children who leave school early and try to find work in neighboring Thailand, especially when their own towns can no longer support them.

The declining economy in the border town is a result of many factors. According to a toll person from Three Pagodas Pass, the taxes from checkpoints often fail to reach higher or central authorities, and that is subsequently the reason for the border gate remaining closed to trade. "These taxes and the illegal income from border businessmen rarely make it to the central authorities. Hla Min, a former battalion commander of Light Infantry Battalion Number 18 received THB 360-380,000 after he visited this area. This type of transaction is common knowledge," he said.

He also added that with the gate closed, town authorities have an easy way to find money.

"They can do many things to earn money if the gate is closed, all illegal. For example, when the gate is opened to allow for legal tin transportation, a timber car can sneak through but must first spend over THB 30,000," he added. This Tin trade is still legal, in line with the agreement between the Thai and Burmese authorities which allows for a half hour opening of the gate daily for tin transportation. Monies received from illegal trade
are destined for people with high authority in the area.

Adding to the declining situation in Three Pagodas Pass is the news from Sangkhlaburi police station that drugs are once again spreading among the people in the border town; on average one person per day is found and arrested for transporting narcotics in the area.

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Public Service Personnel Threatened to Vote 'Yes'
Asohn Vi / Kaowao; April 22, 2008

In some divisions of Mon State, military officers have threatened public service personnel to vote 'Yes' on May 10th's constitutional referendum.

Trainees from nursing schools in Moulmein have been told to give a positive vote, and were made to attend the pre-referendum ceremony held on April 22nd in Moulmein. If they failed to attend, they may have either forfeited their chance to attend their school's next level, or their permits may have been cancelled; the ultimatum, delivered by their headmaster, mainly threatened to remove their opportunity to attend further education, including Bachelor Degrees. One trainee told Kaowao that all nursing school students knew a list of attendants and non-attendants at the pre-referendum ceremony would be drawn up and subsequently acted upon. Another senior trainee added, "It's our right to vote, and that right should not be restricted. This one basic right is being abused."

These types of threats are far-reaching. An anonymous source from Mondemo told Kaowao, "There's no freedom, everything is bias and people who are voting don't even understand the draft. Their plan is to distribute very few copies to the public in a short time, and the military government's media groups push their 'Vote Yes' message heavily with near-constant propaganda. They arrest anyone who dares to bring attention to a weak point in the draft constitution, and they insist everybody approve the constitution. We are all very concerned."

At a public service agents meeting in Balu-gyun, a military agent threatened attendees to vote 'Yes' or face dire consequences.

According to an NMSP officer, in every village of Moulmein the SPDC, town authorities and the military are attempting to force the people to vote 'Yes' by threatening them with an alternative of 3 years imprisonment or a heavy fine. He went on, "All the people in our zone have had to deal with the same thing. They don't want to go and give their vote because they are afraid to vote the way they want to. They are afraid of major harm or danger to their families."

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Families of Suffocation Victims Face Inquiry
Asohn Vi / Kaowao; April 21, 2008

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Burmese police from Mon state have been inquiring about the names of victims who suffered horrific deaths while trying to enter southern Thailand, according to a source from southern Burma.

Special taskforce policemen from Lamine township have been asking for relatives of the deceased as well as survivors from the incident that occurred inside the locked seafood truck in Thailand.

"We don't know exactly why they ask for us, because they didn't say what they wanted us for. But I am sure that police want the names of victims for use in intimidating and extracting money from the families of victims," said a village leader from a Lamine township village.

"It is not uncommon for Burmese authorities to terrorize people who return from neighboring countries such as Thailand or Malaysia and demand money from them," he added.

A Mon monk from a village of Kyait Mayaw township told Kaowao that following the tragedy in Southern Thailand last week his cousin inside Burma had been approached by township authorities and questioned extensively. Although not directly involved in the human-trafficking she was made to pay a hefty fine to ensure no further action would be taken against her or her family. Two people from her village had died inside the truck.

Although the Thai court ruled last Friday that all survivors from the incident would be deported to junta-ruled Burma, Thai authorities later decided not to send them back. On April 18th all survivors had spent eight days in jail for entering the country illegally, and been fined 2000 Baht (~US$62); no one was able to pay the fine. Of the 67 survivors, 14 are under the age of 18.

According to a police officer from the Ranong district in Thailand, a Burmese police officer from the Kawthaung border town took pictures of the victims and rallied heavily for their deportation back to Burma.

Having paid between 10,000 and 13,000 Baht (~US$320-415) to brokers, 121 people mostly from Mon State were headed to Phuket in search of work. They were crammed into the back of a refrigerated seafood truck for several hours before it broke down and was abandoned. When 54 of those illegal migrants perished, the media's focus has shifted back to migrant labor and the plague of traffickers and smugglers in the region.

The driver of the truck surrendered after a six day manhunt and confessed to working for a human smuggling network. Others involved are still missing.

The Migrant Working Group documented 10 cases in which more than 100 people had died while trying to enter Thailand in the past year. Over two million migrants from across the region are working in restaurants, factories, at petrol pumps and as crew on
fishing trawlers or domestic helpers in Thailand. Having fled from Burma where the junta has crippled a once-promising economy and people are routinely denied access to such basic rights as education, medical care and freedom of movement.

A Labor Ministry official told Channel 9 Thai Television that 500,000 migrants are legally in Thailand.

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Three Villagers Wounded in Guerilla Attack
Asohn Vi / Kaowao: April 21, 2008

On April 15th at approximately 4pm three villagers were seriously wounded by a Mon guerilla group that shot a total of five shots and a small grenade from a hand-held missile launcher into a passing vehicle. The vehicle had transported Burmese soldiers, and was returning with civilians from the pagoda in southern Ye township, Mon state.

A car driver, who suffered minor head injuries, told Kaowao, "The guerrilla group shot at close-range to the ferry, which carried 21 people at the time. One of the passengers was a village headman. Three people were injured and taken to Moulmein hospital."

He went on, "It was a very close shot. They (Mon guerillas) had shot three villagers who were seated in the back of the car when I managed to steer away from the scene. All of the injuries were shots to the back, with one female victim suffering a shot from her back through her stomach. One of the injured men was unable to remove the bullet from his back; all were sent to Moulmein hospital." He then added that all victims were committee members for the pagoda festival, and living in Han Gan and Sin Gu villages. The shots were fired two miles from Han Gan village, which is a base for the pagoda festival.

The driver was concerned the reason for the guerilla attack may have been his previous passengers; earlier that day he had transported Burmese soldiers. In total five shots had been fired at the car.

Because of the guerilla attack the famous pagoda festival, Kyait-Tae-Meh-Kaloaw that is usually held on the first and last days of the new year water (Songkran) festival was abandoned, in line with orders given by well-known Mon Abbot Pohpha Rama (Htapow Dot). The Abbot had previously arranged the festival but this year released a statement damning the perpetrators and condemning the shootings.

According to a group of motorcyclists who had been forced off the road and made to hide just prior to the incident, the Mon guerrilla group consisted of eight soldiers and was led by Eain Dha.

Nai Chan Dein, a Mon guerrilla group leader from that area told the Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA) that his men only shot at the ferry car that carried enemies.
In recent years New Years celebrations have often turned sour. During the New Years Water Festival in 2005, a Mon guerrilla group led by Nai Chan Dein killed 11 people at Pagoda festival, and stole jewelry.

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Songkran Graffiti Campaign Continues Through Mon State
Asohn Vi / Kaowao: April 21, 2008

An anti-referendum graffiti campaign began in the heart of Mon State during the New Year Water Festival Songkran, and has since spread throughout Mon State.

According to a graffiti campaigner from southern Burma, they used red and white paint to cover pro-SPDC billboards positioned along the main roads, either rewriting their message altogether or simply writing the word 'No' over the SPDC's 'Yes'. They also sprayed walls, roads and bus stops with their powerful message.

"Beginning in the early hours of April 14th, we sprayed our message in public places as well as places of worship and at selected viewpoints along the mountain road, where we used white paint across the seats. The authorities repainted our white colored seats with red paint by about at 9' clock," a campaign leader told Kaowao.

The Burmese junta had been broadcasting their 'Vote Yes' campaign daily across official media outlets including television and newspaper. Opposition groups on the other hand have been less successful in transmitting their message, and have faced multiple arrests; this week alone, purely on suspicion of campaigning against the constitutional referendum, over two dozen activists including a famous singer were detained indefinitely.

This graffiti campaign led by youths from Mon state successfully demonstrated opposition to the referendum, and reached a wide audience by using the many SPDC 'Vote Yes' billboards placed along the main road connecting Moulmein with many other towns.

"We mainly targeted signs from Moulmein to Kyait Mayaw, and Kyait Khami where there were many points of heavy traffic during the water festival. We erased and sprayed the SPDC 'Yes' signs in many places. Our first priority is to tell the people to vote "No". Our second priority is to destroy or deface the SPDC 'Yes' billboards," said a campaigner.

Authorities outside Sattoi village, Mudon township noticed their signs at the entrance to the village had been defaced. With no one to blame, they forced the village headmen to erase the graffiti and clean the signs.

Having reported seeing graffiti in public places and on bridge signboards along the road from Moulmein to Kaw Bain village on the final day of Songkran festivities, a Moulmein University student told Kaowao the 'Vote No' campaign was not confined to graffiti.
During the water festival, many youths wore new t-shirts with 'N' and 'X' emblazoned across the front and back. These shirts were an original design, and were worn by people from inside and outside of Burma. Although all students were checked and some interrogated, no significant action was taken against those wearing the t-shirts.

He said, "If they (checkpoint authorities) found anyone wearing t-shirts with the 'X' and 'N' design, they questioned them, but the design of the t-shirt is not definitely anti-referendum, or directly in response to their 'Yes' shirts. It is an original one, that's why they couldn't take any action. For example, they allowed me to pass through, even though I wore a t-shirt with a big red 'X' inside a circle on it!"

Although the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) is still pushing its 'Yes' campaign, demanding approval of the constitution in the upcoming May 10th referendum, so too are the activists who began their 'No' campaign during the Songkran Water Festival, who have vowed to continue their uphill battle.

Referendum; Crisis Continues?
Lawi Weng: April 17, 2008

Burma and Thailand are different in the way they hold their referendums. Previously when a referendum was held in Thailand, the Thai government allowed the people to read for the proposed new constitution for three months before asking for their vote. Burma has not followed suit, instead only recently allowing some political organizations in Rangoon to review the latest draft constitution.

Some Burmese people wanted to read the new constitution, and tried to buy it from the market in Rangoon. But they were unable to find it. The state government has attempted for many decades to blind the people's eyes, not allowing or encouraging knowledge of their political movements. Further, the junta has allowed only one percent of the country's development budget towards education and health care.

According to one local source, many people did not know what the junta was going to do with their new family list, which they were forced to pay 10,000 Kyat for. Some people did not know why the junta stamped house numbers, which cost each family 500 Kyat. At no stage did the junta explain to the people why the new list or house stamp was required.

Burma is one of the poorest countries in the world. The country has widespread corruption amongst Burmese officers who abuse their power. The people always have to think how to survive daily, with little time spared for political thought. Some Burmese political analysts said this is the junta policy to make people's lives so filled with trouble they are slaves to the economy and subsequently do not involve themselves with politics.

Unlike the 1990 election the Burmese junta may believe this time they will not lose the
election said a political analyst from inside. The junta refused to handover power to the NLD after the last, failed, election; the political crisis continued to worsen and grow more unstable until last September when monks protested across the country.

The NLD proposed to the people to vote no against the junta's referendum recently. In some places, Burmese activists used spray to write, 'no for vote' on the wall in order to encourage the people. In other places the people distributed pamphlet declaring, 'vote no'. This is what the people can do to oppose the junta's referendum next month.

Most recently a man who arrived on the Thai-Burma border said every day four to six trucks filled with Mon people leave for work to Thailand from Kalawthut village, Mudon township. According to this source, the people were not interested in the new constitution and referendum. They wanted a better life and were able to find this living in other countries.

Teenagers who are able to work tend to leave Burma to seek out a better life, and earn money in neighboring countries. Millions of Burmese people migrated to other countries where they work illegally, receiving low pay and working hard under bad conditions.

Burma's political competition will be similar to Zimbabwe in Africa. The Burma opposition groups believe that they will win in the referendum, but so too for the ruling Junta believe they will hold power. Each group uses campaign tools throughout the country in different ways.

Recently Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe lost the election in his country and wanted to hold another. The country's political situation was complicated, and many people including those in the international community, became worried that political conflict would start soon. Some of the political observers in Zimbabwe urged the international community to get involved in the political crisis in the country.

The Burmese junta's ideas may be similar to Mugabe's. Some Burmese political analysts said Zimbabwe's situation will become a good example for Burma. The junta will cancel their referendum or election if they lose. Or, like in 1990, they may refuse to handle power to the rightful winner.

Most recently, the SPDC ran a field campaign urging people to vote for them in Burma. They did not allow people to shoot photo, nor did they document the campaigns with photographs. In the campaign, they talked about their constitution and they encouraged people to vote yes for them. They did not allow the people to ask questions or give feedback to them. They simply told the people to vote for them in order to improve the country's political situation, or face another fifteen years of political crisis in Burma.

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MRO: Low Mon Refugee Registrations
Kaowao: April 16 , 2008
Over a hundred Mon refugees have been registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mobile team, according to the Mon Refugee Organization (MRO) based in Kuala Lumpur.

Nai Roy Mon, a social worker from the MRO said that 147 Mon refugees from the Subang area were registered by the UNHCR office on April 11.

He went on to quote a UNHCR representative, Ms. Ceceile, who explained that the UNHCR office register refugees by cooperating with local communities and local authorities. "It is much more convenient for refugees not to come to the office, and we've found that local communities understand their plight so try to help them by working together," she said. She also explained that the office tries to register refugees from the many different ethnic backgrounds of Burma; with a broad cross-section of refugees the UNHCR has now collected a diverse range of data.

Nai Plone, who recently registered for UNHCR interview, said this mobile team has been great so far in allowing a greater number of Mon access to the interview process. Having fled Yes Township, Mon State, to avoid human rights violations by the Burma Army, Nai Plone went on to say, "It is worthwhile waiting. I am very excited that I have now been scheduled for an interview with the UNHCR office on April 22."

According to Nai Lawi Mon, Chairman of the MRO, there are over twenty thousand Mon refugees near Kuala Lumpur and the Penang area, with over four thousand Mon refugees now registered with the MRO. Before the mobile office, only about 500, or just 2.5% of these have registered with the UNHCR in the past five years.

Although their chances are minimal and the wait time is very long, many asylum seekers look for help in applying for refugee status through the MRO.

"We have to thank the MRO for helping Mon refugees. Our social workers work hard for us and we rely heavily on them. Our communication skills are lacking and it is very difficult to gain assistance from any other organizations. Our cases are very complex, and what makes it even more complicated is that we don't know how to speak English or Malay, so we struggle to communicate with the interviewing officers," said Ms. Mi Sukhaing who registered with the UNHCR office and is scheduled for an interview soon, which, if successful, will see her resettled in Denmark.

On hearing this Piung Chan, another social worker from MRO agreed, stating, "There is only one Mon interpreter in the UNHCR office. We need at least one more to get through the many Mon cases."

Nai Thy Wonna, the General Secretary of the MRO said, "Compared to other ethnic groups, in recent times few Mons have been able to resettle in third countries. Only 26 Mon people successfully resettled to third countries; 16 to Denmark, three to Norway, two to US, two to Australia, two to New Zealand and one to Canada. It is important that international organizations help us as much as other refugees from Burma. Our situation
back home is no better than that of other ethnic groups, however the Mon lack attention. Overseas or former Mon refugees need to talk with their new governments, and ask for this situation to be considered."

With the help of local NGO 'A Call to Serve' (ACTS), the MRO offices in Kuala Lumpur work to address the problem of Mon refugees in need of medical care. While the MRO is unable to secure refugee status, they are able to provide assistance in looking for work and medical care to both men and women, as well as provide shelter, food, and clothing.

Since human rights violations continue in southern Burma, many Mon have fled to Malaysia as illegal immigrants and live in appalling conditions.

Local sources reported that many refugees live in rural areas, with some moving into the jungle to escape arrest and detention by Volunteers of Malaysian People (also known by its Malay acronym 'RELA') and immigration authorities. Hundreds of refugees, including women and children, face the risk of disease, a lack of food and other associated problems borne out of living in very poor conditions.

During the last few weeks, the Malaysian government stepped up intensive raids, especially in areas which have a high density of refugees and asylum seekers.

Many NGOs have requested Malaysian authorities and the UNHCR provide protection to the refugees to ensure they are recognized and able to secure their fundamental rights.

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Suffocation Deaths Shock Worldwide Migrant Community
Kaowao: April 12, 2008

News of fifty-four job seekers from Burma suffocating in the sweltering heat in the back of a seafood truck has shocked not only the community of Burmese migrant workers around Thailand but also the international community, with photographs of the victims now published and the intentions of the brokers now widely known.

As migrant communities learned of the news many people feared that such a high toll may include their friends or family, and waited to hear of further developments. Thai television footage showed police and social workers lifting bodies out of the storage truck and placing them on the floor of a local charity storage facility. Many victims were wearing little more than t-shirts, shorts and sandals, and the pain and anguish of their final moments remained on their faces. These same images have since been published on online news websites worldwide, with grief and anger being expressed on online forums globally.

"I was asked many times yesterday about the suffocated deceased Burmese people. So many people want to know where the victims came from, who died and who had survived. I think mostly this interest was sparked after the Thai media showed graphic
footage on the morning news yesterday," said Lawi Sohn, a Mon social worker from Mahachai, the biggest community of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. "Unfortunately I couldn't help them because we're still not 100% sure where these victims came from originally."

According to the Burmese media in exile the victims mostly came from Mon state, southern Burma. Around 20 people came from Mudon, 17 from Bee Lu Gyunt, and others from Lamaing township. Some victims' names have been released through The Democratic Voice of Burma.

Thai authorities have already buried all 54 bodies, including 37 women, at the Buddhist Temple of Ranong after first registering whatever details they could. The incident took place on the road side of Petchkasem Road in Ranong's Suksamran district after midnight on Wednesday.

Police investigation has revealed that the workers crossed into Ranong province on Wednesday evening and were then hoping to be transported to the town of Phuket via a cold storage truck normally used to carry seafood. Phuket is located over 300 miles south of Bangkok, and is a region widely known for work in fishing and construction industries or as maids and servants.

A total of 121 people had been crammed into the truck, with the doors then locked from the outside. Inside, with a space just six metres long and 2.2 metres wide (7 feet high and 20 feet long) all passengers were forced to ride standing up. Of the 121 people who started the journey only 67 survived, with 21 of these requiring hospital treatment to deal with dehydration and a lack of oxygen. At the time of writing two people remained in hospital, both in stable conditions. Aside from those in hospital, survivors were detained at Ranong police station.

The London-based human rights group Amnesty International has published research stating that illegal workers in Thailand were routinely paid well below the Thai minimum wage, work long hours in unhealthy conditions and were at risk of arbitrary arrest and deportation, leaving them with little if any job security or livelihood assurance. Similarly, The U.S. State Department said many migrant workers in Thailand are forced into, "... involuntary servitude in agricultural work, construction, commercial fisheries, factories, domestic work and also begging."

For a better job and life, Burmese people including women and children flee into neighboring countries. "We have to pay only for the cost of registration with the (Thai) authorities and we can save much more than if we were working in Burma as well. In Burma, we have to pay many kinds of taxes to the authorities," said Nai Kun Par who worked in Thailand for six years with his family in a fish industry at Samut Sukhkon Province.

One the same day as the suffocation tragedy, April 10, Thai authorities in the border town
of Sangkhlaburi border found 165 Burmese people hiding in a nearby forest. These potential migrant workers had gone without food for three or four days after their brokers abandoned them. They had entered Thailand illegally from the Three Pagoda Pass border town where Burmese authorities have closed the checkpoint border for over 12 months.

These migrants were also from Mon state as well as from Kyait Mayaw township, but refused to disclose their real names and villages. All 165 people were detained and later deported back to Burma.

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Joint Statement of The Mon Women's Association of America and Mon Women's Organization (Canada) On The Mon Women's Day
March 23, 2008

Mon Women's Day commemorates the birthday of Mon Queen Banya Thou on 12th Waxing day of the 12th month, 755 Mon lunar year (March 23, 1394). Queen Banya Thou, also known as Mi Joa Bu or Shin Saw Bu, was the only ruling queen in the history of Burma and was famous for her effective governance. A historian B. R. Pearn, in his book of The History of Rangoon (1939), observed the queen that, "Two claims to fame are hers: one that she ruled the country well, no fair thing to say of Queen Victoria than to call her Shin Saw Bu reincarnate, and the other: that she embellished the Shwe Dagon Pagoda." Mon women's day is celebrated on the birth date of the queen in order for empowering Mon women to actively participate and take leadership roles in social, economic, and political processes.

Under the rule of Burmese military dictators, women are not assured of even their basic rights. Several local and international human rights organizations have documented the grave abuses against women inflicted by the Burmese Army in the non-Burman ethnic territories. Ethnic women in conflict zones are regarded as ethnic insurgent sympathizers and are very often displaced, forced into labor, raped, and/or killed by the Burmese military. While the civilized world is moving forward to protect women against violence, the Burmese government is using violence against women as a weapon of war against ethnic nationalities in Burma.

Despite continued pressure from the international community the Burmese military regime has demonstrated an absolute lack of interest for a transformation to democracy and has only pursued finding means to continue to stay in power. The regime has refused to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the democratically elected representatives. Furthermore, the regime continues to brutally crack down on democratic forces and arrest, prosecute, and imprison political activists. Currently, the Burmese regime announced to it's decision to proceed with a referendum on a proposed constitution drafted by hand-picked delegates in a closed process. The regime subordinates are using terror tactics to intimidate the public and no UN representatives are allowed to observe the referendum. We strongly object to the provisions adopted in the sham national convention that counter the democratization and national reconciliation. We also oppose
the referendum being held under such nontransparent and undemocratic conditions.

On this special occasion, we urge all Mon women in our Monland, overseas and everywhere in the world to be united; No matter where we are and what organization we are affiliated with, we should disregard the differences that exist among us and come together for our common goal of peace, freedom, and national dignity.

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Exile Mon Democratic urges the SPDC to rethink referendum
Kaowao: March 19, 2008

The Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF – LA) urges the Burmese military junta to seize the window of opportunity to comply with the United Nations Security Council statement to enter into a tripartite dialogue with the opposition and the ethnic nationalities. MNDF believes that dialogue is the only way forward to satisfy the desires of the Mon people for a responsible government and to avoid a long-term civil war.

Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF – LA) urges the military junta to end its exclusive demands on power and include the other ethnic voices in the political process. To ratify the referendum without representatives who won the 1990 general election would only bring about more suffering and impede economic development.

The statement highlighted the fact that the military junta is intolerant and insecure of the slightest criticisms or comments on its draft constitution. Forcing the people to vote "Yes" in the referendum is a complete fallacy in order to avoid genuine democratic participation of the people to vote for their own government.

The sudden announcement by the military junta on 9 February to hold a referendum in May is the fourth step in its declared road map to democracy to approve the constitution sponsored by the junta followed by a general election in 2010.

The joint statement of Mon National Democratic Front (LA) from Demark, Malaysia, Japan and Nai Thaung Shein urge all Mon people to censure the referendum as their national responsibility in not approving the draft constitution which would only reinforce the legitimate power of the military to rule the country indefinitely.

Similarly, Mon National Council based in Australia stated that the constitutional referendum is just another ploy for the military to remain in power by tricking the people into accepting its rule whilst pushing aside people who hold different views on how to govern the country. They urge the military to engage in a meaningful tripartite immediately and respect the will of the Burmese people.
The views of the New Mon State Party on the constitutional referendum planned by the SPDC are that it will only mute the voices of the people for good and through away any chance of reconciliation. They feel that the political crisis of Burma will only continue and problems will not be solved unless there is a tripartite dialogue.

The thirteen exile based Burmese' ethnic groups in Japan demand the Burmese junta comply to the decision made by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for a tripartite dialogue and further requested the UNSC to ensure that the demands of the Burmese people for a responsible and inclusive government are met.

Mon youths campaign for 'No' vote in referendum
Kaowao: March 18, 2008

Mon Youths from inside Burma and along the borders gathered for discussions about the constitution and made plans for the ensuing referendum if Mon people are forced to vote 'Yes' by the authorities.

The plans involve many kinds of campaigns including retaliatory voting if will the military junta uses force to make people vote 'Yes' in favour of the referendum, said a Mon youth leader inside Burma.

Despite the regime intercepting travelers in a heightened security environment in towns as well as through the network of transportation along Southern Burma, Mon youths have started distribution of pamphlets, posters, stamps and T-shirts to make people aware about the SPDC’s referendum to approve the constitution which will perpetuate military rule.

A youth from inside Burma said, "They (people) are afraid of voting 'No'. That's why we have to explain to them that this is our last chance to remove the junta from Burma and tell them about the disadvantages of the referendum and the draft constitution. Our people have to vote "No" without fear this time".

The pamphlets have details about the national convention, the process of the constitution that the junta delineated for 14 years and explains the ensuing referendum in May.

The tightening of security in Southern Burma started this week not only in the town by the USDA but also in villages by the military as well as along the highways connecting Karen and Mon states and the Tennasserim division.

The armed ceasefire Mon ethnic group, the New Mon State Party early in March criticized the referendum and repeated its demand to the junta to hold a tripartite dialogue that can resolve the political impasse in Burma.
Mon Youths from the border also held a meeting for voting 'No' in the referendum and distributed T-shirts. They carried out a survey among the migrants along the border and internally displaced persons to campaign for the 'No' vote.

"The main goal of this campaign is to destroy or to shift the time of the referendum. Our second goal is vote to 'No', a youth leader from the border said.

Mon youths are into widespread campaign against the referendum targeting the four days -- the last days of the tenth grade examinations and the religious examination for monks, during Thin Gyan festival.

According to a Mon youth from Mae Sot border town, Mon youths held a meeting among themselves in the town and discussed the process of the referendum. They discussed ways they can be of help to the people inside Burma. He told Kaowao that this was a big challenge for the people to vote 'No' which they should do without fear.

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Opinion/Analysis

Don't blame the underdog UN envoy Gambari!
Nehginpao Kipgen: March 15, 2008

A seasoned Nigerian diplomat, who is tasked a mission to the Union of Burma as the UN special envoy, wrapped up his latest visit on March 10. The mission's outcome was not lesser than the expectation. In the absence of a UN Security Council's mandate, UN missions are thinning in the air.

Gambari's third visit since the September 2007 uprising was by and large a foregone conclusion. The UN Security Council's refusal to pass a resolution on January 12th of this year was a precedent to the futility of UN missions.

Prior to his visit to Burma, the UN special envoy was headed to wooing neighboring countries as anticipated by many, including Burmese opposition groups and members of the United Nations.

Gambari was reportedly encouraged by the whimsy lip services of the nations he visited. What he could best make out of it was just words without concrete commitments. China is expanding her influence in the region, while India is countering it.

The game played by China and India toward Burma is more of economic interest than national security. The confrontation is also of neither spreading communism nor democracy.

With cautious reservation, the office of the Secretary General deserves acknowledgement despite its failed engagements. Although substantive results have yet to be borne, the first
meeting of 14 nations "Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar" was convened on December 19, 2007.

Intervention and Popular Uprising (supported by disgruntled military personnel) remain to be the two probable solutions to Burma's conflicts. Although it is a naïve prediction, military intervention either by the United States or by the United Nations would be the swiftest action to bring change should that be pursued.

Intervention in the absence of concerted efforts continues to provide the military a conduit to survive the tepid international pressure. A change from within the country is also unlikely to emerge without elements in the military that runs the country since 1962.

Any politically conscious mind acquiesces that the basic constitution drafted by the military has flaws and is undemocratic – 25% seats reserved for the military which would also have the ultimate power to declare emergency at will.

Gambari's role becomes more of a negotiator than a mediator. The two basic demands he put forward during his latest visit – allowing independent observers in monitoring and assisting with technical expertise during the May referendum were out-rightly rejected by the military regime. This indicates that the military is not prepared to accept the role of the United Nations.

If independent observers are allowed into the country, this could subside the volley of criticisms. More importantly, it would enhance the credibility of the international community.

The flip side of the story is: the marginalization of opposition groups. First, the result of the 1990 general elections will officially be nullified; and second, it will attempt to legitimize the military's drafted constitution.

If free and fair country-wide referendum can be held, this would in no uncertain terms reject the constitution. The military's plan is to deliberately legitimize its power. If that comes to pass, this would mean "a repeat of history" in Burma's elections.

Gambari gave his best shot with no bullets. Even if Secretary General himself, as wished by many observers, personally visits the country, it is unlikely to have a significant difference. The Burmese military has guns and the resources, but Gambari and Ban Ki-moon have only rhetoric and no enforcement power from the UN Security Council.

Don't blame Gambari for not achieving much, but rather blame China and Russia for exercising their veto powers from passing a resolution on Burma!

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Our motto is working together for change and lasting peace.