
The Suffering of Burma / Myanmar

Note to the Reader: At the time of publication, Burma is still reeling from the devastating impact of tropical Cyclone Nargis, which made landfall in Burma's agricultural heartland, the Irrawaddy delta, on May 2, 2008. Precious days were lost to the recovery effort due to the military regime's initial unwillingness to allow in international humanitarian aid workers and even material emergency aid itself, stifling not only rapid reaction, but also relief assessments and the planning that would follow initial emergency efforts for long-term reconstruction and recovery. While the casualty figures remain unclear, they are already acknowledged by the junta to be in the scores of thousands, and are sure to reach higher. Many will have died due to political aid bottlenecks. An estimated 40% of Burma's rice crop is ruined. In the coming weeks, the extent of the damage, both human and material, will become clearer. The authors will update this case study accordingly, and as with the rest of the Handbook, the text will be available at www.diplomatshandbook.org

INTRODUCTION

Burma, a country of about 55 million at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, is a multiethnic nation with a long history as a state and an empire, though without a history of successful adaptation to a changing world. There has always been a strong social, cultural, and even political role for the dominant religion of Buddhism. As author Thant Myint-U points out, the Burmese military dictatorship is the longest-lasting military dictatorship in the world.

Brought incrementally under British colonial control in the early 19th Century, Burma became an independent state anew soon after the end of the Second World War, led by General Aung San and his Burma National Army, which turned on the occupying Japanese in 1943. He was assassinated by rivals in July 1947, but achieved his goal of ensuring Burmese independence, which was declared in January 1948. The armed forces – the *Tatmadaw* – had a position of central respect in independent Burma.

Though there were continuing insurgencies by ethnic minorities, it was hoped that a democratic Burma would be able to develop a peaceful *modus vivendi* for all its citizens. At that point, Burma was seen as having excellent prospects, being the largest rice exporter in the world, rich in minerals, rubber and timber, and possessing a larger educated managerial class than most other new states. The country held democratic elections, became an important founding member in the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s, and played an active role on the world stage. In 1960, the Burmese elected U Nu as prime minister, and the following year Burmese diplomat U Thant succeeded Dag Hammarskjöld as the Secretary-General of the United Nations

In 1962, a military coup by General Ne Win brought Burma's fledgling democracy and international engagement to a halt with his "Burmese path to socialism," an isolationist policy intended to be a blend of "Marxist economics, Buddhism, and autocratic, military-dominated political rule." All political parties, unions, and associations were outlawed, protests brutally suppressed, and the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) served as a civilian front for military rule. Military intelligence services became ubiquitous, "producing a sense of fear and foreboding that permeates society."

All aspects of governance were brought under the control of the *Tatmadaw*, including, most disastrously, the economy. Rice production began a long downward slide, and economic development began to increasingly lag behind neighboring Thailand and Malaysia, while physical plant decayed. An informal economy emerged to provide what the official economy could not, offering ample opportunity for corruption by the military. The country's professional class and academic institutions suffered greatly from the isolation and the militarization of society.

Not a strategic interest internationally, Burma effectively disappeared from international consciousness for two and a half decades, as the regime resisted all elements of external influence. The insurgencies which had plagued Burma from independence gained ground, exacerbated by the *Tatmadaw's* harsh tactics involving violence against civilians. These insurgent armies sometimes rely on the opium trade to finance their operations. An Ambassador in Rangoon in 1987-1990 speculated that these insurgencies were allowed to continue on a low boil by the regime because they provided a useful justification for the necessity of military rule and prerogatives.

Burma's relative advantage at independence of having an educated stratum of civil servants was squandered from

1962 on, with the stifling of educational exchanges and the chilling effect of dictatorship on the intellectual freedom. Well before the 1988 crackdown Burma's educational establishments were in sad decline, both physically and in terms of their ability to develop Burma's next generations. This deterioration has only increased since, stunting Burma's capabilities to adapt to higher-end global economic activity.

In 1987, in an attempt to rein-in the black market it had itself created, the regime declared currency in circulation to be worthless which naturally generated a public outcry, leading to demonstrations in Rangoon and elsewhere. Short-lived in themselves, they represented a crystallization of discontent, and tension with the regime simmered in the months that followed, erupting periodically through 1988, and leading to the resignation of Ne Win after 23 years as unelected ruler, handing over to handpicked senior officers to succeed him.

But his successor, General Sein Lwin, known as the "Butcher of Burma" for his brutal suppression of student demonstrations in 1962, was not acceptable to the Burmese street, which began to mobilize in what became known as the 8-8-88 movement.

A massacre of students, doctors, and nurses in front of Rangoon's main hospital on August 11 was a turning point. Disbelief that the army would shoot doctors and nurses caused the residual social stock of the *Tatmadaw* to fall precipitously. Protests broadened to include the professional classes and importantly Buddhist monks, and to other cities and towns, including the northern urban center of Mandalay. After street violence driven by the regime killed 112 people in Rangoon, Sein Lwin, in turn, was forced to step aside, and the first civilian leader since 1962, Attorney General U Maung Maung took the helm, but only in title. The *Tatmadaw* remained the power in Burma.

U Maung Maung declared in a national broadcast the need for economic reform and patience on the part of the Burmese, and raising the possibility of – but not committing to – multiparty elections.

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The opposition was not united. Former Prime Minister U Nu pressed for the interim return of the last elected government, overthrown in 1962, but democrats around scholar and UK resident Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of independence leader Aung San, disagreed, and asserted it was time for more thorough change. Discussions were ongoing to resolve this and announce a joint interim government on September 21. The announcement by U Maung Maung that elections would be held under supervision of the current, and not an interim government, as soon as late October were roundly rejected by all opposition leaders and the situation became increasingly militant. One student group approached the US embassy seeking weapons with which to fight, and Buddhist monks led an armed assault on an army position forcing the surrender of 100 troops. Opposition leaders issued a joint call for restraint.

The army launched a violent crackdown nationwide. Hundreds were killed by the army, including monks and students. Civilians armed themselves and fought pitched street battles with whatever weapons they had at hand – mostly knives and slingshots. Troops fired into the crowd outside the US Embassy, proving the expectations of many demonstrators and diplomats wrong that the location would protect them. Students put up posters calling for "appropriate action" against the army. Aung San Suu Kyi stated that the people "are not prepared to give in, because their resentment and bitterness has reached such proportions." By September 24, the army's control over Rangoon, Mandalay, and the other cities of the country appeared secure to diplomats and journalists. All opposition leaders were jailed or detained.

Estimates of the numbers killed ranged between three and four thousand. The *Tatmadaw's* new regime was called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which renamed the country Myanmar, and its capital Yangon. They mounted a campaign to resettle forcibly tens of thousands of presumed opposition supporters outside the main cities. Many students and others sought refuge in Thailand, where most languished in a stateless status for years, with little international attention to their plight or efforts to assist on the part of democratic governments.

At the end of May 1990, the SLORC organized elections in which the opposition could participate. Western diplomats, human rights activists and journalists made the logical assumption that the elections would be neither free nor fair, given the continued imprisonment of opposition leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, who now headed a unified opposition, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Campaigning was essentially nonexistent, there was no free media. "In a free election, the National League for Democracy would win. Even

under severe restrictions, it would do well if the votes are counted fairly,” said one diplomat. While voters were afraid, they turned out to cast their votes in a process that was indeed free, delivering a landslide NLD victory – 386 of the 495 seats in parliament. The SLORC apparently had been confident that its puppet party would perform well in the countryside and overwhelm the urban vote.

As soon as the gravity of its error sank in, the SLORC initiated a rear-guard action to deny the election results, stating that an NLD government would not be “strong” enough. “The military...came up with one regulation and restriction after another...trash(ing) the election results,” according to former US Ambassador Burton Levin. Levin noted the military self-justification was that intellectuals and businessmen could not be trusted – “we are the only ones with the requisite patriotism and selflessness to hold the country together.”

The National Convention was established by the SLORC in 1993 to develop a new constitution, but failed to do so. In 1997, the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC. But the change was only titular. The repressive apparatus of the regime was unchanged.

To call the *Tatmadaw* a state within a state is an understatement – as far as they are concerned, the generals *are* the state. The SPDC is theoretically a collegial body, but Senior General Than Shwe is the *primus inter pares* and has demoted, sidelined or imprisoned former senior officers who he considered insufficiently loyal.

The SLORC/SPDC needed foreign investment to fuel the *Tatmadaw*'s buildup, so the regime began to open up economically – but only to the benefit of the regime and its patronage system. There was considerable foreign investment in the 1990s, particularly in the petroleum and gas sectors, logging, mining, and fishing, but also in consumer goods. Few of the benefits trickle down to the general population. Furthermore, the extraction of these natural resources often entails major environmental degradation.

The opposition was outlawed and heavily restricted, with Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest with rare exception since 1988. The SPDC announced a “roadmap to disciplined democracy” in 2003, but this was derided as a sham by the NLD, which called for international sanctions and a boycott of tourism to Burma.

Fearing popular backlash despite the massive repressive apparatus to prevent resistance from coalescing, SPDC leader and *Tatmadaw* commander Senior General Than Shwe had a purpose-built capital city built in Burma's northern highlands to isolate the increasingly wealthy leadership further from the general population, and even from civilian members of the government. Reportedly, Than Shwe made the decision after consulting his court astrologer.

In September 2007, rising fuel costs sparked civil unrest anew in Rangoon and elsewhere in Burma. Resistance grew, drawing in thousands of Buddhist monks along with a cross-section of the broad population. The regime initially held off on cracking down, especially on the revered monks, no doubt hoping that the demonstrations would fizzle. But ultimately, the SPDC employed brute force in late September to suppress the peaceful demonstrations, and conducted invasive searches in monasteries in search of those involved. The government claims nine were killed, but the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur for Burma Paulo Sergio Pinheiro estimates the number at 31. Mr. Pinheiro also reported that protestors detained by the Burmese government were subjected to torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. He stated, “Since the crackdown there have been an increasing number of reports of deaths in custody as well as beatings, ill-treatment, lack of food, water, or medical treatment in overcrowded unsanitary detention facilities across the country.” Estimates of political prisoners range up to 1800, including a number of veterans of the 1988 student uprising.

The junta set the date for a national referendum on the new constitution for May 10, 2008, and increased its repressive measures in advance, cracking down on those members of the opposition and civil society apt to be working to generate a “no” vote. The new constitution would give the *Tatmadaw* an automatic 25 percent of seats in both houses of the legislature, grant blanket amnesty to all soldiers for any crimes, and effectively disqualify Aung San Suu Kyi from political office because she had been married to a foreigner.

On the night of May 2, tropical Cyclone Nargis hit the Irrawaddy Delta area southwest of the capital, inundating the country's most agriculturally productive land and killing tens of thousands, mostly due to the storm surge. The flooding damage was assessed by external observers to be massively exacerbated by the prior destruction of mangroves in coastal wetlands. British Ambassador Mark Canning said the scale of the relief effort needed was

roughly double that of the 2004 Acehese tsunami. At the time of writing, estimates vary widely on the total number of casualties, but the US charge d' affaires, Shari Villarosa, estimated the total might reach 100,000. The health threat placed 1 to 1.5 million in direct jeopardy. Access to disaster relief experts and those prepared to distribute aid remained severely constrained for more than a week after the cyclone.

The regime pushed ahead with the referendum for May 10. In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, the referendum results were hardly reported in the foreign press, but the “overwhelming support” for the measure was never really much in doubt given who counted the votes. The regime’s party of power, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, voted en masse for the new constitution, and coercion was widely reported. The “no” vote effort was expected to have been strongest in the areas most affected by the storm.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY RESPONSES

The international reaction to the government’s violence towards pro-democracy activists has been almost uniformly negative. Most democratic governments have called for a cessation of government violence against demonstrators and some countries have tightened previous economic sanctions. Global civil society has made Burma a perennial and evocative cause as well, keeping the issue on the agenda of democratic legislatures, and thereby governments.

In general, international policy responses fall into one of two very general categories:

1. Countries which unequivocally condemn the Burmese military government and have called for reinstatement of the 1990 election results and democratic transition.
2. Countries which have taken a more collaborative stance, calling for engagement with the Burmese military government rather than isolation.

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Western states, including mainly the US, European Union, and Australia, have since the 1990s increasingly pursued a policy of sanctions and have unambiguously called for a democratic transition. The effectiveness of sanctions in promoting beneficial change remains a subject of debate. Arms embargoes are the least controversial. But partisans of economic sanctions argue that the revenues from foreign investment essentially only redound to the benefit – and repressive capacity – of the *Tatmadaw* by giving it foreign exchange to buy arms. While the NLD leader Aung Sang Suu Kyi has called on tourists to not come to Burma, others argue that sustaining activity such as non-official tourism helps to develop Burmese civil society. The relative merits of isolating further an already insular and hence indifferent regime are also debated by the Burmese living outside the country. Some high-profile Burmese abroad advocate an effort to induce the regime to evolve and see a heavily censorious Western approach as counterproductive.

The **US government** applied economic sanctions to Burma immediately after the 1988 military coup and repression of the 8888 pro-democracy demonstrations. Initial economic sanctions included an arms embargo and restrictions on new investments by American companies in Burma. The US also downgraded its relations with Burma, never replacing Ambassador Burton Levin, but leaving the Embassy headed by a charge d' affaires. As a result of the government’s September 2007 crackdown, the US tightened economic sanctions, enabling the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) to deny entry to the US and freeze the assets of individuals “responsible for human rights abuses as well as public corruption” including “those who provide material and financial backing to these individuals or to the government of Burma.” However, California-based Chevron remains invested in a prior joint venture with Burma’s state-owned oil firm.

The **European Union** adopted the EU Common Position on Burma in 1996, and also progressively strengthened measures since, extending EU sanctions to include an arms embargo, freeze of assets, visa bans for government officials and their families, and prohibition of financial loans to Burmese state-owned enterprises. In October 2007, a ban on investment in or export of equipment for the timber, mining, and gems industries was added. The EU continues, however, to provide humanitarian and development assistance to Burma.

There is variance among EU members in terms of their assertiveness on democracy issues. The Dutch and Czechs, operating from Bangkok, and British in Rangoon, have developed a reputation as the most proactive.

Norway is the main backer of the exiled opposition, and also hosts the Democratic Voice of Burma television and radio.

Australia expanded its personal sanctions of restrictions on arms sales, travel restrictions on senior figures and associates of the regime, and targeted financial sanctions to include 418 “Burmese regime figures and their supporters” in the wake of the September 2007 crackdown, but explicitly excluded “Australians with commercial dealings with regime members in the oil, gas or publishing industries.”

Japan has, in contrast, pursued a softer-line position regarding Burma, asserting that a policy of economic and political engagement can be more productive. During the 1988 military coup and repression of the 8888 demonstrations, Japan, along with Western states, condemned the human rights violations perpetrated by the Burmese military, but was also the first OECD country to officially recognize the new military government. A senior representative from the Japanese Foreign Ministry stated that Japan’s position is for “pressure and dialogue. [The Japanese government tries to] keep a working relationship with the government while maintaining pressure.”

Consequently, Japan has become Burma’s largest official development assistance donor, contributing approximately three-quarters of Burma’s entire foreign aid. Japan argues that its closer economic engagement give the Japanese Foreign Ministry greater influence with the Burmese government, though the results are unclear.

However, as a result of the September 2007 protests and the killing of Japanese photojournalist Kenji Nagai by the Burmese military, Japan imposed economic sanctions on the Burmese government, including halting \$4.7 million in funding for Rangoon University.

China emerged over the 1990s as Burma’s most important regional ally, investor, trading partner, arms supplier, and consumer of Burma’s resources. China has supported the Burmese status quo, and is also Burma’s main defender in international forums such the UN, vetoing non-punitive, multilateral UN Security resolutions that would have condemned the Burmese government. The Chinese position in favor of the principle of non-interference in Burmese domestic affairs has been supported by Russia and others, such as South Africa. This support has extended to preventing humanitarian access from being placed on the agenda of the UN Security Council in the wake of Cyclone Nargis.

In the aftermath of the September 2007 protests, however, China has used its influence with the Burmese government to negotiate a visit to Burma by UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari. Though China failed to directly condemn the Burmese government’s crackdown against democracy activists, Chinese officials have explicitly stated that Burma should “push forward a democracy process that is appropriate for the country.” Premier Wen Jaibao has also urged the Burmese government to “achieve democracy and development.” On October 11, 2007, China supported a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Burmese government’s violence against protestors and calling for the release of political prisoners.

India, despite its being the largest democracy in the region, also pursues a policy of economic and diplomatic engagement with Burma. India is a major consumer of Burmese oil and gas, as well as a major investor in Burma’s economy. Like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (see below), India asserts that dialogue, rather than sanctions, is the most effective way to persuade the Burmese government to improve the political and human rights situation in the country, though some observers see India’s interest focused as well on access to strategic resources, and the ability to counter growing Chinese influence in Burma. In March 2008, India made a \$120 million deal with the junta to “build, operate and use” the port of Sittwe in the Bay of Bengal as part of a growing regional rivalry. UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari called on India to employ its growing influence on the Burmese generals. But India backed China and Russia in resisting broader international sanctions against the regime.

ASEAN, which allowed Burma to join in 1997, has many member states which have close relationships with the regime and are strong trading partners. Following the violent crackdown on the Saffron Revolution in 2007, ASEAN did condemn the government’s violent repression. But ASEAN rejected calls from the US Senate to suspend Burma. “Our approach is not to take such a confrontational, drastic action, especially when it doesn’t yield good results,” said ASEAN’s Secretary General Ong Keng Yong.

Thailand, perhaps the most closely linked, is to take the chair of ASEAN in July 2008. Thailand helped keep

the Burmese junta afloat financially immediately after the 1988 crackdown by signing business deals that gave the country foreign exchange. There had been hope that as it returns to democratic rule, it will be more assertive on behalf of Burma's democrats, as the Philippines and Indonesia have been. ASEAN's parliamentarians have also been more supportive of Burmese democrats than their governments.

The United Nations' level of engagement has varied. At the outbreak of the September 2007 protest and the government's violent reaction, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, singled out Burma for criticism. But in general, China (and to some extent Russia) has proven itself willing to protect the junta's interests by vetoing resolutions in the Security Council. In contrast, the veto-free General Assembly has issued repeated statements on the violation of human, civil and political rights by the SLORC/SPDC. On September 26, 2007, the Security Council did give the Secretary-General unanimous support to send Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to Burma, though his visits since have achieved little from a seemingly indifferent military.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS OF DIPLOMATS IN BURMA

The international diplomatic community's isolation from government decision makers which dates from the Ne Win regime has deepened in the SLORC/SPDC era, especially after the migration of the capital to the closed garrison city of Naypyidaw north of Rangoon, where civilian ministries are cordoned-off from those of the *Tatmadaw*. But in the absence of countervailing interests and even day-to-day contact with authorities, embassies can concentrate their local missions on supporting civil society's efforts on behalf of human rights and democracy.

Despite the regime's violation of diplomatic premises repeatedly since 1988, rarely if ever does the regime take direct action against diplomatic personnel (as opposed to domestic staff). Diplomats can and do avail themselves of their *immunity* to meet with opposition and make public statements. According to an international NGO worker, "there is theoretically the risk of being expelled, but this never happens." The UN head of mission, Charles Petrie, was however made to withdraw in late 2007 for underlining the cruel effects on the population of the regime's destructive economic policies.

Diplomats accredited to Burma can count on the *support of home authorities* as most democratic national governments have been very vocal about the repression in Burma, with US Secretary of State naming it an "outpost of tyranny" in 2005. EU governments have represented the concern of their publics. Former Czech President Václav Havel, has mobilized several Nobel Peace Prize winners in favor of concerted action, including in the UN.

Without much access to SPDC officials, diplomats have limited *influence* on the regime. Japan claims somewhat more influence than either the US or the EU have, but has less that it had, and less than China and India have now, given their economic engagement. A senior Japanese diplomat working on Burma policy stated that "Our position is for dialogue. We try to keep a working relationship with the government while maintaining pressure. This position is similar to the ASEAN approach, so I believe we can coordinate with them."

Embassies *fund* civil society development, training programs, and activities to promote open and democratic discussion in Burma. Embassy funds are also available for international exchange programs to connect Burmese activists with politicians and activists in other countries. Most aid is now humanitarian – mainly to the health sector, delivered through embassies, development agencies, and multilaterals – and therefore coordinated with the government. Due to poor government policies and transport restrictions, Burma now imports rice, "perversely," according to a UN World Food Program official.

The *solidarity* of the western democratic world has been apparent since 1988. There was already near total disdain for the Ne Win regime, including the ambassadors of the USSR and China in Rangoon. During and after the 1988 crackdown, the EU ambassadors – from France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands and West Germany, delivered a joint demarche on behalf of the EU to the regime in protest. After the 1988 crackdown the American and German ambassadors worked to persuade their Japanese colleague to mirror their cut off development aid, and ultimately succeeded. This solidarity continues, with the US, the EU, Australia, and Japan raising democracy and human rights in their (few) meetings with Burmese officials.

The democratic world's diplomats can refer back to UN General Assembly, Security Council and other UN bodies' statements on the human rights situation in Burma for *legitimacy*. This unfortunately cuts little ice with the regime. But the UN has deep reservoirs of legitimacy with the Burmese people. In addition, countries have specific resources to draw upon – Burmese demonstrators in 1988 believed that the US and France, as symbols of democracy and leaders of the “free world,” would rally to their side.

WAYS DIPLOMATIC ASSETS WERE APPLIED IN BURMA

The Golden Rules

Diplomats assigned to Burma operate within an extremely constrained public and diplomatic space but several, especially the Norwegian embassy, operating from Bangkok, have earned plaudits for *listening* to a wide range of groups and individuals involved in the democracy movement. Glen Hill, the former Executive Director of SwissAid, asserted that the Norwegians “gave the impression that they were there to learn.”

While Embassies, and especially the Australian today, have tried to be approachable, all are under regular surveillance by the regime, and fear of questioning or worse inhibits the civil population from coming, especially to the US Embassy. One Burmese activist noted that embassies lack “good human intelligence” on the situation in the country, and rarely speak the language(s), limiting their *understanding*. Making an effort to recognize a country's best value added is another important element of understanding the situation. The Czech Ambassador, Jiri Sitler, operating from Bangkok, noted that the Czechs' experience of having lived under a repressive regime was something that his democratic colleagues did not have, and centered his country's approach to the Burmese around that core.

But the situation in Burma has been beneficial in promoting *sharing* among Missions, both of information and of tasks, in a way which avoids competition and promotes comparative advantage, as detailed on pp. 15 and 18 of Chapter 3. The US, EU, Australian and Japanese embassies in Rangoon meet regularly to coordinate strategy in pursuit of supporting peaceful democratic change.

Truth in Communications

Reporting on the situation in Burma by diplomats has long been a crucial source of information, given the lack of international media access and independent media within Burma. Yet freedom of movement for diplomats is restricted and the *Tatmadaw's* pervasive police state deters many Burmese from actively providing information. Diplomats in embassies can be misled if their only sources of information are from Rangoon circles. But even under constraints, embassies do provide crucial information on the situation and their reports are read at increasingly high levels, including in the US White House, for example. The UN Development Program office in Rangoon was well-situated to witness the demonstrations of the 2007 Saffron Revolution and the subsequent crackdown, and had an independent satellite communications system that allowed for internet access as well, so provided an important information conduit.

In the absence of objective news gathering – the regime has expelled most foreign journalists and blacked out web sites – diplomats have a long history of informing media outlets of the internal situation. In 1988, Dutch Ambassador Peter van Walsum, based out of Bangkok, gave extensive interviews to the press reporting on the nature of the crackdown and its brutality. US Ambassador Burton Levin released reports that the embassy had received “credible, first hand reports” of beatings, torture and executions of pro-democracy activists and others, thousands of whom were arrested.

Burma's government has long controlled public access to information, and to the means of communication. Cell phone costs are prohibitive. Land lines are primitive. Internet servers are frequently jammed. In such a closed society, rumors are rife and travel quickly.

Embassies play a key role in *informing* the Burmese public and the international community about activities and events occurring in Burma. Embassies have committed resources to support media and journalism trainings for young Burmese journalists. While independent media sources are starting to develop in Burma, training is not readily available and the quality of reporting tends to be varied. Embassies support training programs, both

in Rangoon and in Thailand, to help Burmese journalists learn how to write, develop, edit, and market pieces for a wide-range of audiences. The Czech Embassy provided a basic video and journalism course in Burma: how to use a camera, how to edit, and how to produce a story. This was not explicitly political, but proved extremely useful in providing imagery of the 2007 crackdown.

Embassies also support the actual dissemination of information to the Burmese public. Both the American Center and the British Council provide important access to information to Burmese citizens, such as English-medium newspapers and materials published by exile-groups. The information available at the centers provide Burmese users a vital link to the outside world as well as a better understanding of what exactly is occurring in Burma itself. The centers also invite speakers from outside to present – and some have spoken both about the international policy toward Burma and the situation with the insurgencies and in refugee areas in Thailand. The Japanese Embassy, which enjoys greater access to the regime than other embassies, has often conveyed information between the SPDC and the NLD. “I think the NLD appreciates our activities. We can give them information. Unfortunately, the NLD has no contact with the government.”

Diplomats and politicians remain active today in getting information about pro-democracy events and human rights violations out to the international community. The UK and Australian Ambassadors and the US charge d’ affaires are very present in international media, discussing Burma’s political situation and abuses in the country. These reports are beamed back into Burma by Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, the BBC, the Democratic Voice of Burma, and exile information organs in Thailand.

In the wake of tropical Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, diplomats were among the most quoted information sources in Burma on the scale of the devastation, the shocking inactivity of the Burmese military to the humanitarian need, and the scale of the aid effort required. In the aftermath of both the cyclone disaster and earlier, during the protests in September 2007, British Ambassador Canning and American charge’ Villarosa were oft quoted in the media, both setting baselines for international response.

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Working with the Government

Given the insular nature of the regime, it is a challenge for diplomats to *dialogue* with government on a regular basis, especially with the move of the capital to the purpose-built garrison city of Naypyidaw. A representative in the US Embassy in Rangoon stated that officials from the US, European, Australian, and Japanese embassies regularly raise issues of democracy and human rights when they have opportunity to meet with Burmese officials. However, human rights and democracy concerns raised by western diplomats are dismissed by government officials; they, instead, prefer to focus on their roadmap to democracy plan.

Diplomats have on occasion tried to *advise* the Burmese government, but to no discernable effect. In 1989, Ambassador Levin met with SLORC intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt in an attempt to see if the regime could be convinced to enter into an effort for national reconciliation and to bring in Burmese expatriate technocrats to return vibrancy to the economy. His effort elicited an earful of invective about “communists” and “traitors” straight out of the regime phrasebook. He determined such efforts were useless at that point.

Civil society in Burma has survived suppression and is a beneficiary of advice by diplomats: Ambassador Sitler determined early on in his tenure that his approach should be to concentrate on transferring applicable know-how to Burmese. “We discovered that our experience from transformation to democracy was exactly what they (the Burmese dissidents) needed and wanted. The old EU members who were heavily engaged (the Dutch, Danes, British and the US) could give more money, but just didn’t have this experience.” Discussions between Czech diplomats and Burmese dissidents in refugee communities in Thailand include:

- The role of returned exiles in the society after democratic transition
- How to obtain justice for crimes committed by the regime.
- How to promote economic reforms.

The American Center “pushed the limits” by providing journalism, human rights and democracy training. The Australian Embassy rather controversially provided human rights training to *Tatmadaw* officers.

The Chinese and Indian embassies have frequent contact with the Burmese government. While it is uncertain

to what extent human rights or democracy issues are part of the agenda, Mr. Ichiro Maruyama stated that the Japanese embassy, in meetings with Indian diplomats, have asked the Indian and Chinese embassies to convey the Japanese embassy's interests and concerns to the Burmese government.

Reaching Out

While easier to do in refugee communities outside Burma, efforts to link Burmese with the outside world and with each other need to be undertaken within Burma. Diplomatic immunity gives diplomats in Rangoon the ability to do what local and foreign NGOs would normally be doing, but cannot, given the pervasive repressive apparatus of the state.

Diplomats can play a role in *connecting* Burmese activists to other democracy players outside of Burma, including Burmese activists in exile as well as activists in the diplomat's home country.

In coordination with an ongoing Dutch foreign policy training program aimed at promising young refugees, the Czech embassy organizes a three-month study segment in the Czech Republic; during the visit, participants attended three months of trainings and meetings.

The Norwegian embassy transmitted information from exiled groups residing in Thailand to groups within Burma, with the objective of promoting linkages and common ground.

The American Center, located in Rangoon, helped Burmese activists establish a peer network for those who had been imprisoned and tortured by the Burmese government. One of the goals of the peer network was to decrease the isolation of those who had experienced torture and are likely suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and to connect them with other survivors and activists.

Embassies and cultural centers have provided essential space for Burmese activists and others to *convene* and exchange information, sometimes with government officials included, and other times without them. The Australian, Japanese, EU, US and UN missions in Rangoon all engage in this sort of activity.

Given the heavy regime surveillance of the embassies, Alliance Francaise, the British Council, and the American Center all have played a critical role in providing space for Burmese to meet and discuss a wide array of social and political issues, particularly for youth. While these were not packaged as "democracy courses," they offered young people an opportunity to explore issues of human rights, democracy, and globalization in a safe space and without drawing undue attention from the Burmese government. However, most of those attending knowingly assume a certain amount of risk.

The US embassy has been one of the most vocal advocates for a democratic transition, *showcasing* democracy in practice through the programs offered by the American Center. Programs include lectures covering many sensitive topics, including the situation in the ethnic minority areas, United Nations Security Council discussions, sanctions, and genocide. SwissAid's Glen Hill asserted, "The American Center...didn't shy away from difficult subjects." France's Alliance Francaise, in collaboration with the Czech Embassy, projected films of interest that otherwise would not be seen by Burmese activists.

The American Center is also a prime example of how embassies can *facilitate* discussion among Burmese civic and opposition members. The American Center not only offered resources not readily available in Rangoon, the Center offered a safe space where democracy activists could participate in trainings and workshops that would strengthen their ability to participate and direct the pro-democracy movement. It is certainly easier to facilitate dialogue among Burmese opposition and minority groups outside the restrictions in Burma itself, either among refugee communities or further afield, and a number of embassies in Thailand work on this front.

Embassies finance assistance projects for Burmese civil society, though the restrictions by the regime make doing so complex. Embassy support for the democracy movement in Burma ranges from funding training (both short and long-term) to financing civil society projects. Some of the funding comes directly from embassy operating budgets, while funding is also available from development funding agencies, including the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

Japan's embassy coordinates its humanitarian assistance. Czech Ambassador Sitler notes that small, well-targeted grants for projects can evade regime strictures and accomplish a great deal. Some NGOs which received embassy funding managed to find ways through the bureaucratic morass by cultivating relationships with officials who helped them navigate the regulatory maze.

A variety of training programs have been provided to democracy activists, including:

- Film and media training funded by the Czech Republic
- Foreign policy training seminar funded by the Netherlands
- English language and other educational courses funded by the British Council
- English language courses; journalism and media training; human rights training; transitional justice workshop; and organizational and communication trainings funded by the American Center

Embassies also financed library resources, increasing access to books and magazines either difficult or illegal to obtain in Burma. The Czech embassy had Czech authors' books translated to Burmese as well as collecting and translating volumes of articles on the Czech democratic transformation. The American Center and the British Council offered extensive library resources to Burmese members, including extensive offerings on democracy and Burma.

The US, UK, and Czech embassies have also provided direct support to local Burmese NGOs to fund environmental, social, and education projects to assist community development.

Defending Democrats

Diplomats regularly *demonstrate* their support for democracy and human rights in Burma, and have done so for two decades. In 1988, US Ambassador Levin made a point of driving to observe demonstrations with his car's flag flying. British and American diplomats regularly meet with NLD officials, and when the British Ambassador Canning visits the NLD office he arrives in his official car flying the British flag. Embassies as a matter of course declare public support for Burmese demands that fundamental human rights and freedoms be respected.

There are reports that diplomats have on occasion *protected* individuals who feared imprisonment or other retaliation from the Burmese government. Assistance has included financial and logistical support for these individuals to reach the Thai-Burmese border. In 1989 and 1990, embassies of the democracies protested in solidarity against aggressive interrogation and other repressive measures against their local staff, including one member of the British Embassy staff who was sentenced to three years in prison by the regime. In 1988, Ambassador Levin agreed with Aung San Suu Kyi to limit their contact so as to reduce the potential for the regime to paint her as an American stooge.

Diplomatic protection has also been given in other, less obvious, ways. By disseminating information about human and political rights violations by the Burmese government, diplomats have been able to direct international scrutiny and criticism on the government. The Burmese government's reluctance to draw negative international attention constrains its actions, at least as regards the internationally known face of Burmese opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi. But the junta does not appear to feel such constraints regarding other opposition figures.

It was also reported that during the September 2007 protests, the UNDP allowed demonstrators to seek refuge within its building as well preventing the Burmese security officers from forcibly entering the premises.

Even when diplomats are not able to directly protect activists, by *witnessing and verifying* anti-democratic activities and human rights violations committed by the Burmese government, diplomats play an integral part in collecting and disseminating information (See "Getting to the Truth").

By publicly witnessing and verifying abuses by the government, key embassies are also able to send a message to the Burmese government, by regularly sending officers to witness demonstrations and court trials, and by supportively attending prayer services, various holiday celebrations, and commemorations.

CONCLUSION

Despite the unprecedented national emergency presented by Cyclone Nargis, the Burmese junta went ahead with its referendum on its “roadmap to democracy” on May 10, 2008 in most of the country. Most of the population in the Irrawaddy delta and the former capital Rangoon had their sheer survival as a priority on polling day, however. The referendum aimed at codifying the *Tatmadaw’s* concept of a “disciplined democracy” and “legitimizing” its rule. The plan disqualifies democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party won overwhelmingly in 1990’s unexpectedly free election, from standing for office on the grounds that her late husband was a foreigner. The referendum, not surprisingly, was reported by the junta to have overwhelmingly approved the new constitution, virtually without opposition. Yet a number of Burmese proudly, if not openly, voted “no” in the referendum. Those in the cyclone devastated area have openly declared anger at the regime to foreign journalists at the lack of assistance, and some say they expect their areas to vote “no” as a result when they are polled.

Many democratic embassies in Rangoon and Bangkok remain engaged in assisting Burmese civil society and opposition within and outside the country, and will no doubt continue to develop new innovative avenues to assist and circumvent regime restrictions. When asked what more could be done, a seasoned NGO activist dealing with Burma and its border areas said “more of the same: providing space, enabling visitors to meet dissidents.” Additional funding for these activities would also help. So would greater language ability on the part of diplomats posted to deal with Burma. Given the harsh repressive nature of the regime and the pervasive fear of informers, citizens are more likely to trust a foreigner who speaks their language than his or her interpreter.

Yet the ability to influence the inward-directed and wholly self-interested military regime remains a massive hurdle for most democracies, especially now with new revenue streams coming to the military from natural gas, along with the continued destructive clear-cutting of old growth forests and trade in gemstones, and diversion of agricultural land to cultivate *jatropha* for biofuels. The extent of damage to Burmese agricultural production has yet to be calculated, but it is likely that the country will have to import rice and other foodstuffs for years. The storm could not have hit at a worse time, given the already skyrocketing price of rice on international markets.

Burma’s major trading partners, its fellow members of ASEAN, China, and India, have still not exerted serious pressure on the SPDC to allow greater civic space and to make a genuine turn toward establishing democracy.

Ultimately, the key will be with the Burmese population and the diaspora of exiles, who have been developing their capacities to reclaim the rights denied them by successive generations of self-serving military officers. If Burma’s commercial partners can persuade the regime of the inevitability of change, it may arrive sooner rather than later. It will arrive in a country whose institutions have atrophied under a military which lives apart from the people, and it will be up to supporters of democratic transition to support the people in their efforts to re-build the country. Some encouraging signs can be discerned in the wake of the cyclone disaster, however tentative. The regime was prevailed upon by ASEAN neighbors and the UN Secretary-General to admit outside humanitarian aid workers essential to any recovery effort. Most hopefully, networks of ordinary Burmese citizens themselves formed volunteer relief teams to try to compensate for the inability of the regime to safeguard its own citizens. Civil society will emerge strengthened and determined.