

The Situation of Human Rights for Students and Youth in Burma

Introduction

The situation of human rights for students and youth in Burma is grave. Violence, forced labor and forced recruitment into the armed forces are preventing the youth of Burma from reaching their potential. There is a lack of opportunities for education and meaningful work which has led a large number of Burma's young people to leave their homes and become migrant workers in other Asian countries where their precarious legal status often allows them to be exploited, working in harsh conditions for low wages. While many in the international community believe that the human rights situation in Burma has changed since the election, the reality is that human rights abuses against the people of Burma have continued unabated.

Background

The students of Burma have historically played a vital role in shaping the political landscape. The All Burma Federation of Students Union (ABFSU) was formed in 1936 and included General Aung San, Burma's independence hero and father of pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as one of the founders. The students and youth played an instrumental role in Burma gaining independence from Britain. ABFSU also took a leading role in organizing the massive 1988 uprising in which hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life and a range of ethnic groups took to the streets to demand freedom and democracy.

Students and youth have continued to advocate for a free and democratic Burma, despite the great personal risk that such activism brings. For example, in advance of the constitutional referendum which took place on 10 May 2008, student and youth democracy groups actively conducted campaigns against the military drafted 2008 Constitution. Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY), Youth from the National League for Democracy (NLD), Generation Wave and ABFSU along with a number of other youth organizations participated in the underground "Vote No" campaign. Similar campaigns were conducted in advance of the rigged 2010 election in which student and youth groups encouraged individuals not to vote in the fraudulent process. There were a number of youth activists involved in the campaign against the 2008 constitution and 2010 election who were arrested for their activities. In response to a call from the pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi the youths of Burma came together last year to found a nationwide youth movement known as the National Youth Network which is working towards national reconciliation, democracy and equitable development.

Current Human Rights Situation and Youth Activism

In the year since the 2010 elections, Burma's regime has intensified its military campaigns against ethnic nationalities in Burma. Armed conflict between Burma's military regime and ethnic armed groups has been ongoing in Eastern Burma for several decades and the regime launched a new offensive against the Kachin Independence Organization in June of 2011, breaking a 17 year ceasefire. As part of these armed conflicts, extensive violations of the laws of war have been committed with the Burma Army failing to recognize the principle of distinction and instead intentionally directing attacks against civilians. Rape and sexual assault, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and imprisonment are some of the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Burma army as part of their military campaigns. There is a long pattern of forcible displacement of civilians and destruction of villages by the army. This displacement unsurprisingly has significant detrimental effects on the ability of young people to obtain an education.

The military regime continues to fail to adequately investigate these violations, and has repeatedly denied the possibility that such crimes are taking place. In a September 2010 letter to UN Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana, the regime claimed, "Concerning allegations of committing crimes against humanity and war crimes, there is no occurrence of such crimes [...]." Military troops and government officials enjoy complete impunity for the human rights abuses they perpetrate against the people of Burma as the new constitution grants them immunity from prosecution for crimes committed while carrying out their duties. This is one of a number of reasons that students and youth campaigned for a no vote on the constitution.

Many in the international community have applauded the recent economic development projects in Burma but most of the development projects consist of the regime exploiting natural resources in ethnic areas. Grave concerns have been raised by a number of human rights and environmental advocacy groups about the damaging social and environmental impacts of a number of these projects including the Shwe gas pipeline and the Myitsone dam on the Irrawaddy River. In the past such development projects have meant the arrival of thousands of Burmese troops into the area around the project, forced relocation of populations, forced labor, the destruction of biodiversity, threats to the indigenous people, water shortages, and extensive laying of landmines. In fact it was the need to secure control of areas with lucrative Chinese hydropower projects that led to the recent resumption in hostilities against the KIO.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi issued a letter in August expressing her concerns about these projects and their impact on the Irrawaddy River, the lifeblood of Burma. Her letter appealed "to environmental experts, to conservationists and to lovers of nature, peace and harmony everywhere to join us in a campaign to create a worldwide awareness of the dangers threatening one of the most important rivers of Asia. Together we can find solutions to problems, ecological, economic, technical, and political, related to the Irrawaddy." The students and youth of Burma have responded to her call and launched a number of advocacy campaigns calling for a halt to the construction of projects such as the Myitsone dam until thorough impact assessments have been conducted and made public, precautions are in place to ensure that there will not be negative impacts on the environment and people's livelihoods, and local communities are able to participate in decision making processes. In one example

of such advocacy, as part of the “Save the Irrawaddy” campaign, an estimated 500 activists gathered in Rangoon on 10 September to express their concerns about the negative consequences of the recent hydropower projects along the Irrawaddy River. The event was aimed at raising awareness of the environmental damage caused by the damming of the river as well as the harm being visited upon local communities.

There are still extensive restrictions on political activity in Burma with 2,000 political prisoners currently behind bars, at least 200 of whom are students and youths. Just this week the regime stopped and harassed demonstrators marching on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the Saffron Revolution. There is also still no independent press with a number of journalists currently being held as political prisoners and newspapers required to submit articles to the regime for approval prior to publication. In this context, the work of activists in Burma is quite impressive and the dedicated students and youth who are risking their lives to bring about freedom and democracy in their country should be applauded. However, for the work of these brave individuals to succeed they require the support of, and similar efforts by, solidarity groups around the world. We thus call on the youth of ASEAN to join this struggle and work to bring peace, freedom and democracy to Burma.

Calls

If ASEAN remains silent in the face of the regime’s atrocities it is tacitly sanctioning these abuses. The youth of ASEAN must encourage their governments to support the establishment of a UN led commission of inquiry to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma. Additionally, there is a need to ensure that the international community is not misled by the regime’s public relations maneuvers but instead insists that the regime engage in genuine change. Therefore we call on the youth of ASEAN to encourage their governments to deny Burma the chairmanship of ASEAN unless it meets the following three benchmarks:

- The release of all of the nearly 2,000 political prisoners currently in custody;
- The end to armed conflict with the ethnic nationalities and the establishment of a nationwide ceasefire;
- The initiation of genuine dialogue with the National League for Democracy towards national reconciliation.