

## MONS AND THE CURRENT SITUATION IN BURMA

After the Second World War, like other ethnic nationalities, Mon requested the Burmese Government in power to allow right of self-determination to the Mons. But the then government refused to accept the aspirations of the Mons and imposed its will through force. Thus there was no alternative for the Mons but to take up arms.

Lower Burma was a Mon kingdom for several centuries under the name of Hongsawatol or Pegu. U Aungzeya, the Burmese king annexed the Mon homeland and persecuted the Mons, by massacring over 3,000 learned Mon monks at Thingankyun near Rangoon; by burning holy scriptures and monasteries; by proscribing the Mon language and literature; and by genocidal mass execution whereby thousands of Mons were exterminated in several stockade-inferno holocausts. Racial discrimination was rife. Thousands of the Mons fled to Thailand to escape the onslaught of the Burmese. There are about three million Mons in Thailand who support the NMSF struggling for right of self-determination for the Mons. They also desire to regain the sovereign independent Mon homeland covering the whole of Lower Burma, which was annexed by the Burmese in 1757. Thus Mons were annihilated and reduced from a nation exercising full right of self-determination to a national minority in Burma and Thailand. They were stripped of all political power and ethnic freedom! But through the subtle resistance of the Mons in Burma and through the sympathy of the Thai monarchs and governments in Thailand, Mon survived to this day to reclaim back their old homeland.

Modern scholars in western countries who appreciated the richness of the Mon language and literature are preserving the Mon cultural inheritance in their archives with the help of their governments. Some of the literature has been translated into English, German and French. The American Fulbright Foundation's offer to revive the Mon language and literature during 1960s to the All Ramonnya Mon Cultural Association was forbidden by the military dictatorship. Presently, Japan is sponsoring the revival of the Mon language and literature in Kyoto International Languages Institute with the help of a Mon scholar. Although civilized nations treasure the Mon culture, it is unfortunately facing a sad predicament in its own native homeland.

Mons of the Mon-Khmer family migrated from Mongolia into Burma along the Salween and Irrawaddy valleys, into Thailand and Vietnam along the Mekong valley and into India along the Bramaputra valley during the first millennium B.C.

Languages spoken by the Mons of Lower Burma, the Was and Palaungs of the Shan Plateau and the Salon of the Mergui archipelago are of Mon-Khmer origin, belonging to a totally different family, the Austroasiatic.

To prove the authenticity of history a passage from the Encyclopaedia Americana on the history of Burma for the period of 849 to 1287 A.D is quoted here: "By that time the Mons had become supreme in Lower Burma. They had occupied the whole of the Irrawaddy Delta, building the port of Bassein in the West and founding the city of Pegu in the centre. They could have stepped in the vacuum caused by the destruction of the Pyu kingdom, but they were not politically ambitious and perhaps did not relish going up the river into arid country".

During the periods when Mons were masters of Lower Burma, the people were happy and prosperous. Those glorious periods were expressed by western historians as golden ages under wise Mon rulers. Relations with foreign countries and foreign nationals were peaceful, cordial and harmonious. That was how the Mon blended their native culture with Theravada Buddhism which elevated them as teachers of their neighbours throughout Southeast Asia. Only when Lower Burma came under the Burmese leadership all those splendid achievements were disrupted because of their arrogant and xenophobic mentality.

Internal and external public opinion put pressure to bear upon the ruling military dictatorship to concede to the creation of a nominal autonomous Mon State in 1974 controlled from Rangoon which was devoid of real political power for the Mons.

A statement entitled 'Answers to Questionnaire on Mon Freedom Movement' enclosed herewith will portray the current Mon activities in Burma up to 1985.

### POLITICAL SITUATION

#### Past Background

For the last thousand years history of Burma was a turmoil of struggles between the Burmans and all other ethnic nationalities. Only when it came under the British, racial discrimination was stopped and the country was united under one stable administration.

In 1945, when the World War II was over, independence from Britain was in the offing. Reminiscence of bitter life under the Burmese kings prompted the various ethnic nationalities to contend for their safeguards after independence.

To satisfy the aspirations of the ethnic nationalities, Panglong Agreement, an alliance between the Interim Burmese Government and the leaders of Frontier Areas was signed in 1947. It acknowledged the right of self-determination, autonomy and economic, educational, political, legal, social, cultural and linguistic rights and opportunities for each of the ethnic nationalities of the Union of Burma. But when the Constitution of the Union of Burma was actually drawn up it turned out to be a unitary system of government under control from Rangoon. Right of secession after ten years, documented for the Karenni and Shan peoples in the Constitution was forbidden by the Burmese government when Karennis and Shans asserted this right. The Arakanese, Karens and Mons were not participants of the Panglong Agreement.

General Aung San, the Chief sponsor of the Panglong Agreement was assassinated on July 19, 1947. U Nu who took the reign of the government and accepted transfer of power from the British on January 4, 1948. Three months after independence a tussle in the Burmese leadership resulted in the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) breaking away from the government and went abush, starting the civil war. Later the Red Flag Communist Party and the People's Volunteer Organization also rose up in arms. The Karens and Mons who were refused their right of self-determination joined in the rebellion.

Mons and Karens were citizens of the bi-lingual independent sovereign country known in history as Hongsawatoi or Pegu, covering the whole of Lower Burma.

At the Regional Autonomy Enquiry Commission for the Arakanese, the Karens and the Mons set up by U Nu's government in 1948, two Mon Commission members, Nai Hla Maung (deceased) and Mon U Po Cho (deceased) put up their representation stating in one part: "It is the desire of the Mons, represented by the undersigned, that an independent Mon State, enjoying full sovereign status be formed, comprising the Tenasserim Division, the Pegu Division and the Irrawaddy Division." These areas cover the territory of former Hongsawatoi which fell to the Burmese in 1757.

The Karens demanded areas where they were in the majority in Lower Burma too. The areas overlapped, but Mon and Karen leaders were in complete understanding.

The Arakanese demanded the area covering Arakan Division which was their old kingdom before it was annexed by the Burmese.

U Nu's government survived the protracted civil war until March 1962, with exception of two years period from 1958 to 1961, when General Ne Win launched a coup d'etat and arrested all the constitutionally elected ministers. Some of the detained non-Burman leaders were never heard of again. General Ne Win set up a one-party military dictatorship and centralised his rule from Rangoon. All the business enterprises were nationalized under the wrong political and economic policies of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party which stagnated the economic progress and turned a country rich in natural resources to a pauper least developed country (LDC). His xenophobic and sentimental mentality isolated the country politically and intellectually from the rest of the world.

An attempt to legalize his administration was made in 1974 by setting up a new socialist oriented constitution. But in actual fact Burma came under the control of the ruling clique of the Burma Army. The heavy hand of army rule during the years encouraged the Shans, Arakanese, Pa-ohs, Kachins, Chins, Was, Nagas, Palaungs and other ethnic groups to join hands with their brethren the Karens, Karennis and Mons who were some of the first to revolt against the Burmese government.

#### Current Situation

In order to unite and form a common front against the common enemy, some of the ethnic opposition groups joined hands and formed the National Democratic Front (NDF) in 1976. Because of the effectiveness of its movements against the military dictatorship the members of the ethnic nationalities have now increased to 11.

The economic deterioration, the demonetization of currency and the popular discontentment on abuse of human rights culminated in the world renown demonstrations of the students, monks and civilian masses in 1988, demanding democracy, free election and an end to single-party rule. State power changed hands three times and just when the general will could no longer be contained, troops were called in and thousands of demonstrators were massacred and thousands arrested. A counter-coup was engineered by the military clique whereby General Saw Maung became head of the military junta under the name of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The military regime has sold timber concessions to Thai logging companies, and had also made deals with foreign companies for fishing rights, on shore and off shore oil and gas drilling and gem sales. Experts say Burma has the third highest rate of deforestation in the world. The destruction of tropical rainforest threatens not only to Burma's environment but also links to droughts in some regions. Foreign investment only helps the repressive junta cling to power and prolongs the suffering of the peoples of Burma.

As a result of the military junta's violent repression, thousands of students, monks, intelligentsia, political leaders, military personnel and ordinary citizens fled to the liberated areas controlled by the members of the NDF. With the initiative of the NDF a wider representative organization in the name of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) comprising 21 opposition groups was formed including the ethnic Burman opposition groups such as the

All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF), the All Burma Young Monks Union (ABYMU), the Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB), the Overseas Burmese Liberation Front (OBLF), the German-Burma Association (GBA), the Overseas Karen Organization (OKO) and other overseas Burmese organizations spread out in several countries. For the first time since the civil war started in 1948, Burman and non-Burman ethnic nationalities reached a common consensus on the need for a free and democratic Burma. This is a milestone in the long struggle for national unity.

Giving in to international pressure, the May 1990 general election held by SLORC demonstrated the overwhelming support of the masses of Burma for democratic reform. Despite the landslide victory by the opposition parties, the military junta refused to step down and instead stepped by its efforts to suppress and intimidate the dissidents.

Hindsight makes it ever clearer that the announcement of the decision to hold elections was made with cynical disdain for international opinion and without any intention of a meaningful sharing of power. Indeed the fact that voting on election day was free and unhindered is now seen as a 'Hundred Flowers' ploy to smoke out the second echelon of National League for Democracy (NLD) activities who were then marked for retribution: in the words of Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, in announcing a wide-ranging international challenge to the Burmese regime on May 16, 1991, "It is now increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that, as much as we hoped and believed otherwise at the time, that election was a fraud designed by the military only to flush out the next layer of dissident democratic leaders, making it easier to move against all significant opposition groups, using increasingly intimidatory measures".

Some of the members of parliament of the NLD which won 80% of the seats took desperate steps by fleeing to safe havens under the control of the DAB. Since they have been given a mandate by majority of their colleagues to form a government before they came over, the DAB helped them form the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) at Manerplaw on December 18, 1990, led by Dr. Sein Win.

The four NCGUB primary aims are: 1) to bring an end to the current civil war; 2) to call for a National Convention with people's representatives elected in May 1990, members of the DAB and representatives of all ethnic nationalities; 3) to promote full regional autonomy in the Federal Union of States; and 4) to cooperate closely and cordially with democratic countries.

Burma today is under one of the most oppressive military regime the world has ever seen. United Nations Human Rights Commission has voted unanimously in Geneva condemning the military regime for human rights violations. Amnesty International reports widespread arrests, disappearance, shootings and brutal torture in the troubled period since 1988. Only when they started shooting down their own kind in cold blood on the streets of Rangoon and other big cities, world public opinion began to wonder how atrocious they would have been against the non-Burman nationalities during their stay in power.

Burma's military dictators still continue to ignore the United Nations resolution to allow all citizens to participate freely in the political process in accordance with the principles of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The pseudo liberalization recently announced by the junta is but a ploy to deceive the general public and improve its international image.

A constitution void of federal structure and right of self-determination to all nationalities would not guarantee genuine peace in Burma although flowery language on democracy might be written in it.

SITUATION ON THE BORDERS

For years, there have been increasing numbers of Naga, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Wa refugees spilling over into the neighbouring countries. The numbers could be counted in several thousands.

At present hundreds of thousands of Burmese Muslims have been forced to take refuge in Bangladesh as a direct result of Burmese military aggression. This has caused an acute refugee crisis which needs urgent international attention.

During the last week of January, 1992, hundreds of Nagas and other ethnic groups inhabiting along the India-Burma border areas were driven out of their villages in Sagaing Division by the Burmese Army preparatory to exploration of oil by foreign companies.

ACTUAL PROBLEMS

The problems the Mons in Burma have been facing under SLORC are genocide, racial discrimination, assimilation and non-recognition of Mon ethnic human rights - the right of self-determination - as indicated in previous pages.

Efforts to regain ethnic national identity by the Mons were rejected by the ultra-nationalistic leadership of Burmese since pre-independence days. In spite of drastic oppression and suppression by the successive Burmese governments for over four decades, the Mons are now more organized and determined to struggle on for the ultimate attainment of their aspirations.

FOREIGN RELATION DEPARTMENT  
NEW MON STATE PARTY