



BACKGROUND PAPER:

SOCHUM *Human Rights in Myanmar*

Introduction:

"I was only 15 yards into Burma when I learned that the Karen guide I'd arranged to meet had been shot dead. The soldiers came looking for me that night, and I hid in a hut. God knows how they didn't find me. I still remember the sound of the bayonets being fixed - a terrible sound."

-Guy Horton, author of "Dying Alive: A Legal Assessment of Human Rights Violations in Burma."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/18/world/asia/18iht-burma.html?pagewanted=1&sq=human%20rights%20burma&st=cse&scp=1>

On June 8, 2011, the 17th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council published the Universal Periodic Review of Myanmar--a report documenting the present human rights abuses and economic status of the country. According to the report, Myanmar "has accepted only 74 of the 190 recommendations made to it during the review." (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA16/004/2011/en/0a82e7ad-b0fd-4d2f-94a0-84f1cf28155e/asa160042011en.html>) Although Amnesty International's involvement in Myanmar has stretched since 1988, recently the Special Rapporteur has found evidence that the military continues to violate human rights recommendations. The issue of human rights abuses in Myanmar has been an ongoing battle.

Background & History:

Located in Southeast Asia, the country of Myanmar is bordered by India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Laos. The estimated population is 53,999,804 people, with numerous ethnic groups populating the country. Due to this diversity, Myanmar has a tumultuous history of tension and violence among different ethnic groups--especially between the Burmans (who make up the majority of the country's population and dominate political representation) and less powerful minority groups, such as the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Chinese, Indian, Mon, etc. The CIA World Factbook estimates that 68% of the population is Burman, but because the Myanmar government does not have a reliable census, the precise percentages of each ethnic group remain unknown.

Historically, Myanmar was known as Burma until 1962, when a military coup established the current government. Although many Western governments continue to recognize Myanmar as Burma, it is officially recognized by the UN as Myanmar.



At the beginning of the 20th century, Myanmar (then known as Burma) was a British colony until it won its independence in 1948. From 1948 to 1962, Myanmar mirrored Britain's democratic system, finding economic success within the region. But a military coup in 1962 established the Socialist Republic of Burma, with military commander Ne Win leading the country.

Yet another tumultuous turning point in Myanmar history occurred in 1988, a year of massive political uprisings and, more significantly, the military repression that followed. By August of that year, the notable humanitarian and political leader (not to mention Nobel Peace Prize laureate) Aung San Suu Kyi (pronounced awng san soo chi) first emerged as a figure in Myanmar politics. In September of that year, Suu Kyi founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) on a platform of civil disobedience and non-violence that echoed Gandhi's movement years before.¹ By 1989, one year later, the military junta became so threatened by Suu Kyi that she was placed under house arrest, where she would remain for nearly twenty years (with the exception of a brief period of sanctuary in 1995).

While confined to her home, Suu Kyi (by then a symbol of Myanmar oppression and resistance to the repressive government) and her political party NLD swept national elections in 1990, winning roughly 82% of parliamentary seats. The ruling political party, however, refused to validate the results.

Current Situation:

In 2007, tension in Myanmar was beginning to climb. Robed monks lined the streets in protest against the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi. Adding to their frustration was the rise of fuel prices. In fact, before the rise of fuel prices, inhabitants of Myanmar used 70% of their income to pay for food.

(<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=7072>) In response, authorities threw tear gas and arrested the men "in saffron robes." The Saffron Revolution, as it was then known, is believed to be an on-going revolution. Protests and demonstrations, against the military government, appear today.

Aung San Suu Kyi provides Myanmar with the will for change. She has been in house arrest for 15 years out of the past 22 years. In November of 2010, she was finally released. Her National League of Democracy has been protesting throughout the years of her arrest. The military government states that the demonstrations they are doing are unlawful, while the NLD refutes their statement. The distinction between what the government and "radicals" believe will be addressed during our time of debate.

Most recently, the government of Myanmar clashed with Kachin militia. In June 2011, the problem escalated, "prompting a number of civilians to flee from Burma (Myanmar) into China" (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1077.html). The countries bordering Myanmar have experienced occasional fighting between government forces and a number of rebel groups. In the past, Thailand and Myanmar have closed the border between the two nations. The militia danger threatens Myanmar's relationships with its neighbors.

¹ For a comprehensive history of Myanmar politics, and Suu Kyi's life, consider reading the timeline of Suu Kyi's life found here: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/kyi-bio.html



The Problem:

As the title of our committee suggests, our debate centers on Myanmar's violation of human rights. The primary concern of this committee is the treatment of political prisoners--according to a June 2011 report by Amnesty International, Myanmar has over 2,200 political prisoners "held under vague laws frequently used by the government to criminalize peaceful political dissent." (Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA16/004/2011/en/1cc9d243-2691-4f43-861b-889be70d3ee1/asa160042011en.pdf>)

Along with questionable prison practices and conditions, an added problem of extrajudicial killings makes Myanmar's justice system unmanageable by international standards. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 10, stipulates: "Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him." (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>)

As mentioned earlier, Myanmar also has a history of discrimination among ethnic groups. This invariably leads to unfair treatment to some in the country. Another major issue stems from corruption within the armed forces of Myanmar, which has been accused of widespread rape, sexual violence, and use of child soldiers.

In other words, the problems stem from multiple sources, and a proper solution would address all these challenges.

Relevant Documents:

In regards to your research, there are many resources available both in print and online. Consider researching notable human rights documents--websites such as Amnesty International offer comprehensive human rights reports for Myanmar. The UN Human Rights Council may also serve as an invaluable resource, as it gives the most recent resolutions concerning Myanmar and special reports by the UN Rapporteur. Mainstream newspapers, especially the New York Times, often provide coverage of the country's continuing struggle. Please, take advantage of all the information and links we are providing.

Bloc Positions:

The situation within Myanmar is one of international concern. Countries tend to adopt two main positions concerning Myanmar's situation.

Most Western nations (including the US and notable European powers such as France and the UK) have disapproved of Myanmar's political injustice, and have expressed their disapproval through economic sanctions--this means that they refuse to trade with Myanmar in hopes of forcing a change of political behavior.

But while Western nations have historically held Myanmar accountable, the countries immediately surrounding it--including China, India, Thailand, etc.--have not denounced the government as strongly. Unlike Western nations, surrounding countries often have economic and geographic interests in Myanmar. For example, Myanmar's Strait of Malacca is considered the "key chokepoint in Asia" and over 80% of Chinese oil



imports use this strait. In fact, the Association of Southeastern Asian Nations (ASEAN) counts Myanmar as a member, fostering economic cooperation within the region.

The situation in Myanmar impacts every nation, regardless of geographic relation. To some degree, every member of the UN is impacted by human rights issues. For country-specific positions, consider reading the following report by the UN: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR%5CPAGES%5CMMSession10.aspx> (click on the main report under the outcome of the review in English, not the addendum).

Committee Mission:

As the Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian committee of the United Nations, we are concerned primarily with the human rights violations within Myanmar. A commitment to human rights has been a fundamental goal for the United Nations since its inception and the ratification of the Declaration of Human Rights (see here: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>). Although the UN has made recommendations to this country, as a General Assembly committee, we do not have the authority to authorize any type of military force.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.) Where is your country in relation to Myanmar?
- 2.) Has your country historically dealt with human rights issues? What has been your course of action?
- 3.) Does your country support economic sanctions for Myanmar? Why or why not?
- 4.) Considering your country's policies concerning human rights issues, are these same policies applicable to the situation in Myanmar?

Sources for Further Research:

- <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA16/004/2011/en/1cc9d243-2691-4f43-861b-889be70d3ee1/asa160042011en.pdf>
- [http://www.mofa.gov.mm/pressrelease/MOFA%20rejects%20US%20State%20Department%27s%20Human%20Right%20Report\(2008\).htm](http://www.mofa.gov.mm/pressrelease/MOFA%20rejects%20US%20State%20Department%27s%20Human%20Right%20Report(2008).htm)
- For specific countries' viewpoints on the issue:
 - <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/123/72/PDF/G1112372.pdf?OpenElement>
- <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR%5CPAGES%5CMMSession10.aspx> (click on outcome of the review)
- <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/172/58/PDF/G1017258.pdf?OpenElement>
- Condensed version of UN advice to Myanmar:
 - <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=11046&LangID=E>



- Progress report:
 - <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/119/15/PDF/G1011915.pdf?OpenElement>
- Background on Burma:
 - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>
- More Background on Burma:
 - <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/myanmar/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=myanmar&st=cse>
- Saffron Revolution of 2007:
 - <http://www.economist.com/node/9867036>
 - <http://www.economist.com/node/9868041>