

Logging, Mining and Trafficking: How Government Policies and Ethnic Relations Affect Development in Burma's Border Regions

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Ethnic tensions, which have existed throughout Burma's history, continue to impede development today. This paper explores the government's attempts at development in minority-inhabited border regions, finding that the stated objectives of the Burman-majority military regime often do not match with what is actually happening. So-called development programs fail to benefit the peoples living in these areas. The Program for Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development (Na Ta La), introduced by the junta in 1989, exemplifies this phenomenon. This paper analyzes the program and government practices associated with it. It concludes that government-sponsored development programs are ineffective, and recommends the use of regional pressure and transnational advocacy networks to help remedy the situation of Burma's border peoples.

Introduction

Modern Burma¹ exists as a union consisting of seven administrative divisions in the lowland central region of the country and seven states in the hilly border areas, all governed by a centralized military junta. While ethnic Burmans make up the majority in the administrative divisions, the upland states are chiefly populated by minority groups² (Thompson, 1995), which account for about 32% of Burma's total population, or approximately 15 million people (CIA, 2007). Economic indicators suggest that life is difficult for the average citizen in Burma, which exhibits the lowest GDP of all ASEAN nations³ with nearly 70% of the population engaged in the agriculture sector and about 23% living below the \$2 per day poverty line (ASEAN, 2006). Poverty and hardship are exaggerated among minority populations in the upland border areas, although few official figures exist.

Efforts to develop the border areas in Burma are complicated by tensions between ethnic minorities and the Burman majority, as well as conflict among minority groups themselves. Ethnic-based strife, which is evident throughout Burma's history and continues to this day, sets the stage for the current regime's stance on ethnic minority groups, its policies towards them and development of the regions in which they live.

Ethnic Burmans account for approximately 68% of Burma's population (CIA, 2007) and dominate both the government and armed forces. The ruling Junta's stance on ethnic minority populations stems from an ethnocentric view of the country's history and the concept that the Burmans acted as the consolidators of the union, having civilized the upland peoples (Steinberg, 1990). Since the factions that wield all the power in Burma are composed primarily of Burmans, minority opposition views government action as

reflecting "only the Burman cultural political, and nationalistic norms" (Steinberg, 1990, p. 75).

Burma's current government argues that British colonial policy interrupted the "Burmanisation"⁴ of peoples living within the country's borders (Lambrecht, 2004). Britain employed "divide and rule" tactics, separating the peoples living in the upland, border areas both physically and politically from the lowland Burman majority, thus blocking any intermingling that could have taken place among the groups. Under the British colonial system, the people living in the plains were ruled directly through a centralized government parallel to the one used in India, while hill dwelling minorities were governed "indirectly through local leaders, according to local traditions and rules" (Silverstein, 1997, p. 172).

Independent Burma's early leaders, Aung San and U Tin Tut, sought to create a federal system that fairly represented all peoples living in the union in the 1947 draft constitution (Silverstein, 1997). In practice however, this began to fall apart when post-independence parliamentary action in January 1948 sought to restrict citizenship requirements for resident Indians, Chinese and later, upland ethnic minority groups (Silverstein, 1997). Partially as a result of this, ethnic factions — starting with the Karen in 1949 — began revolting against the central government. Burma's leaders viewed these conflicts as a matter of survival, fearing the determination of ethnic enclaves to separate their lands from the Union (Silverstein, 1997).

In the 1960s, early in the Ne Win Era⁵, ceasefire negotiations broke down prematurely, leaving all but one insurgency, the Karen Revolutionary Council (KRC), intact. Following the failed peace parlay and attempts by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) to enlist minority groups for their cause, ethnic insurgencies were dealt with harshly. The new

government implemented the 'four cuts'⁶ strategy of forced relocation (Clarke, 2001). Under this tactic:

[V]illagers living in areas adjacent to hot spots of insurgency or guerilla action were ordered to move to new 'strategic villages' under military control on the plains or near the major garrison towns in the hills. Any villager who remained, they were warned, would be treated as an insurgent and ran the risk of being shot on sight. After the first visit, troops returned periodically to confiscate food, destroy crops and paddy and, villagers often alleged, shoot anyone suspected of supporting the insurgents (Smith, 1999, p. 259).

These practices worsened border peoples' dire living situation at a time when the country as a whole was struggling to regain pre-war levels of prosperity.

In 1988, the ascension of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), a new military-based junta, widened the chasm between ethnic minorities and the government, adversely affecting living conditions in border areas. SLORC intensified the 'four cuts' and succeeded in forcing fifteen insurgent groups to accept cease-fire agreements (Silverstein, 1997). Those who did not comply were dealt with harshly by brutal army assaults that did not distinguish between armed fighters and civilians, including women, children and the elderly (Venkateswaran, 1996).

Today the government, comprised primarily of Burmans, calls itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The harsh treatment of minority peoples living in the upland border areas continues despite the implementation of border development programs. Grave human rights violations, notably those related to development of the border areas under the auspices of the Program for the Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development (represented by the Burmese acronym 'Na Ta La') have prompted the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar (Burma) to present his observations and opinions to the UN Security Council, urging them to produce a resolution on Burma (Pinhero, 2006).

Socioeconomic Factors and Quality of Life in "Upland" Border Areas

The region commonly referred to as the uplands in Burma consist of seven states, Arakan (Rakhine), Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, and Shan, named for the predominant ethnic groups residing within their borders. These states are characterized geographically by hilly to mountainous terrain, forcing inhabitants to rely mostly on shifting, subsistence farming (Eberhardt, 2003). In contrast, the seven administrative divisions are located on flat, plains areas

and are mostly inhabited by ethnic Burmans, the dominant group in Burma.

The flow of official development assistance to Burma virtually ceased after the 1988 crackdown on student demonstrators⁷ and SLORC's refusal to recognize the results of the 1990 democratic elections⁸, leading to a fall in foreign direct investment (James, 2003). As a result, the state has had to rely heavily on its own resources to bolster the flagging economy. The hilly upland regions contain natural resources such as minerals, gemstones, gold and other metals, oil and natural gas, and forests with vast logging potential. Throughout the 1990s, SPDC has stepped up mining operations and allowed some foreign investments in the sector, but precious metals and gems are, for the most part, still mined and marketed solely by government-owned enterprise (Moody, 1999). The increase of large-scale mining has intensified environmental degradation in border areas through release of effluent and deforestation due to clear cutting around mining operations (Eberhardt, 2003).

Government policies on mining and logging, coupled with a drive to increase production of cash crops by domestic and Chinese agribusiness interests, have an adverse affect on border peoples with respect to the amount of land available to them for agricultural practices. This phenomenon is forcing changes in traditional systems of shifting cultivation, thus rendering them less productive and ultimately unsustainable (Eberhardt, 2003), which in turn threatens the livelihood and food security of rural populations.

These hardships, in conjunction with the scourge of armed conflict, are the root of many economic and social problems in the Border States. Other indicators often cited are "high military expenditures, low and declining revenues from legal taxes, low rates of savings and investment, extensive state involvement in the economy, poor financial performance of the large state enterprise sector, inadequate and deteriorating infrastructure, and declining expenditures on health and education" (Booth, 2003, p. 2).

As a direct result of government policies, the border regions suffer from higher rates of disease, including malaria and HIV infection, than the national average, higher infant and maternal mortality rates, below average literacy rates, and increasing numbers of people fleeing the country or becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs). In a statement before the US Congress, Ms. Naw Win Yee of the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) spoke on the phenomenon of Burma's refugees and IDPs:

People are...only fleeing because they fear for their life. If they could safely stay in Burma, they would. Worse than being a refugee is being an internally displaced person. Over half a

million people live inside Burma as internally displaced persons. It is too dangerous for many of them to flee as a refugee, so they hide out in the jungle and grow secret crops to sustain themselves or forage for food. The military regime often hunts them down like animals (CIRHR, 2006, p. 45).

This and countless other reports illustrate a harsh reality for hundreds of thousands of people living in Burma's border regions. They suggest that any government attempt at socioeconomic development would be received with skepticism from a populace living in fear of its military rulers.

Na Ta La and the Appearance of Development Policy

In response to international pressures, economic woes and the dire situation of Burma's people, SPDC introduced the Program for the Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development (Na Ta La) in 1989. The five objectives of Na Ta La are:

1. to develop the economic and social works, roads and communications of the national races at the border areas in accordance with the [Three Main National Causes⁹];
2. to cherish and preserve the culture, literature and customs of the national races;
3. to strengthen the amity among the national races;
4. to eradicate totally the cultivation of poppy plants by establishing economic enterprises;
5. to preserve and maintain the security, prevalence of law and order and regional peace and tranquility in the border areas (Lambrecht, 2004, p. 158-159).

Whereas these objectives are in line with promoting socioeconomic development of ethnic minority groups in border regions, government practices seem to blatantly contradict their stated intent. This phenomenon is best exemplified in the junta's action regarding objectives one and four, as demonstrated below.

Developing Economic and Social Works in the Border Regions

Focusing on the first objective of promoting economic and social works, government policies promote hardwood — mostly teak (*tectona grandis*) — logging projects, mining of precious stones and metals, and road construction. Notably absent are efforts to improve education and health care in border regions.

According to the US Embassy (1997), national spending on healthcare and education has dropped to 1.4% of recorded GDP in 1995/1996, from 3% in 1989/1990. The World Bank estimates that per capita expenditures on children aged 5 to 9 years have declined 90% in real terms (as cited in Lambrecht, 2004). These figures suggest that the government's actions go against the self-prescribed goal in the first of the Na Ta La objectives.

In terms of logging and mining projects, the government lacks foreign capital as described above, and thus has taken to exploiting the natural resources once abundant in the border regions. Unregulated exploitation of old-growth teak and other hardwood forests, illegal trade in wildlife and plants, gem and mineral mining, and dam construction all carried out with little control or accountability on the part of major actors (mostly government, military and armed groups) have severely degraded the environment (Eberhardt, 2003). Increased demand for hardwood in the region, mainly due to logging bans implemented in China, India and Thailand¹⁰, has pushed timber to the second largest source of export revenue, behind natural gas (EIU, 2006). Not accounting for illegal trade, teak and forest products make up 13.3% of Burma's total exports (DOS, 2007), representing about 179,200 cubic meters of teak alone (Pandey & Brown, 2000). Partnerships forged through recent cease-fire agreements between armed ethnic factions and the Burmese Government superseded existing Forest Department sustainable logging regulations, resulting in an alarming depletion of forest resources and biodiversity (Eberhardt, 2003), as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1
Change in Burma's forested land between 1990 and 2005

	1990	2000	2005
Total Forested Land (thousands of hectares)	39,219	34,554	32,222
		1990 - 2000	2000 - 2005
Annual Percent Change	-	-1.30%	-1.70%
Average Annual Change (thousands of hectares)	-	481	572

Note. Data are from ASEAN (2006).

Increased economic activity in the Border States has produced increased demand for transportation infrastructure, such as the construction of roads connecting remote areas to markets. Road construction and maintenance is the principal reported expenditure of Na Ta La, since the regime maintains that isolation is the reason for the underdevelopment of these regions (Lambrecht, 2004). However, road construction has had quite the opposite effect where it is employed. Roads are primarily used for transportation of materials and

products (mine lodes, teak logs, etc.) and are often closed to non-mechanized forms of transport, such as those used by peoples living in border regions (Lambrecht, 2004).

More alarming, however, is the use of forced conscription for government projects, including road construction and maintenance. Between 1992 and 1995, an estimated two million citizens, including children, pregnant women and the elderly were forced by government agents to work long hours, typically without compensation, enduring harsh conditions and brutal treatment (Venkateswaran, 1996). Personal accounts report atrocities such as frequent beatings, rape, and even murder of those too old or enfeebled to work, or those who try to escape (Venkateswaran, 1996).

Conditions are similar in the mining industry. In addition to the environmental degradation caused by the industry through clear cutting and unregulated dumping of effluent into waterways, mining in Burma contributes to many other social ills. Like road construction, forced labor is common in the industry, and people are often displaced by the creation and expansion of mines. Mine workers also suffer from high rates of heroin addiction and HIV infection (Eberhardt, 2003), owing to the fact that mining districts often fall under the control of armed groups engaged in opium poppy growing and drug trafficking, such as the Wa and Kokang in the northern states (Moody, 1999). Cease-fire agreements forged between these groups and the SPDC in 1989 allow for expanded freedom in drug trafficking within the mining districts, leading to high addiction rates among workers and high rates of HIV infection caused by needle-sharing.¹¹

These examples demonstrate how projects in accord with Na Ta La's first objective serve not to increase the social and economic well-being of the people living in the border areas, but rather towards the furtherance of the national economy, and in turn, the ruling elite. By exploiting the natural resources and peoples living in the vicinity of road-building, logging, and mining, as well as other operations, government policies actually have the opposite of the intended or stated effect.

Illustrated above are some of the hardships faced by minority peoples living in border regions, including displacement, loss of lands, a degraded natural environment and deteriorating health, education and social conditions. Additionally, government health spending is declining in real terms at a time when expanding health care is needed more than ever. In 2004, public health expenditures represented approximately 0.3% of GDP, or \$4.50 per capita (World Bank, 2007). The estimated ratio of doctors to patients in rural areas was 1:20,000 in 1998 (Oo, 1998), or about six times worse than the national average of about 1:3,300 (James, 2003). Furthermore, health services are

of poor quality and are often prohibitively expensive in the border areas (Lambrecht, 2004).

In 2004 an estimated 1.3% of the government budget was allocated for education spending (DOS, 2005). Though education is provided free of charge until the age of sixteen, substandard facilities and low teacher wages (7,000 Kyat or less than \$7 per month) force many teachers to demand payments from their students or else leave the profession (DOS, 2005). Educational conditions were further aggravated by such phenomena as malnutrition, morbidity, and decreased school enrollment due to forced displacement and squalid living conditions in relocation centers.

Eradication of Opium Poppy Cultivation

Government corruption is widespread in relation to opium poppy cultivation. The government has arranged cease-fire agreements with opium trafficking groups, striking deals to profit from the trade through undocumented taxes and bribes, and even enticing traffickers to invest drug revenues into public works projects- essentially laundering drug money for a fee (Lambrecht, 2004; US Embassy, 1997). Because the drug trade has proven to be more lucrative than foreign aid in drug prevention, food crops have been sidelined to increase opium poppy production, but few of the profits go to the farmers (Smith, 1999). As a result of expanding production, refined heroin addiction rates among opium farming communities are on the rise, especially in the border region between the Shan State and China (Eberhardt, 2003). Associated with higher rates of addiction are rising incidence of theft, discord, and increasing rates of HIV-related illness and death.

It is not difficult to see why the government has chosen to allow the drug trade to flourish in Burma. As the country's economy continues its sluggish course, experiencing growth far below that of neighboring states (EIU, 2006), the drug trade is booming. In 1997, it was estimated that 65% of opiates worldwide came from the Golden Triangle¹², 90% of which originated in the hills of the Shan State (Dupont, 1998). This figure equates to roughly \$145 billion in heroin and opium revenues, using a conservative estimate (Dupont, 1998).

Because the SPDC supports this lucrative trade in the border areas, opium and heroin production exacerbates the issue of land access by minority populations. Living for years under the shadow of armed conflict and drug lords, communities must now conform to a new alliance of SPDC officials, *tatmadaw* (the Burmese term for all of the Nation's armed forces) and armed drug trafficking groups. Insurgency activity in poppy-growing border regions has kept people from productive land on which 'customary rights' would have allowed them to cultivate food crops. While the signing of cease-fire agreements should signify increased access to these lands by the rightful owners, conversion to

poppy and other cash-crop production have forestalled this process (Eberhardt, 2003).

Like implementing economic and social development policies, the government's action in the case of opium cultivation has adverse effects on border communities. In this specific example, the actions of the SPDC are directly opposed to the fourth Na Ta La objective. By officially stating that it is gaining ground in the war on opium and heroin trafficking, the junta seeks to appease neighboring countries- like Thailand- that are affected by the influx of drugs as well as the international community, even while it profits from the trade.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Centuries of tension between the ethnic majority and minority groups over independence and land claims have set the stage for the current situation in Burma's border regions, in which minority populations face dire social and economic conditions, as compared with the Burman majority dominating the country's central lowlands. That is not to suggest that the conditions are ideal in the rest of Burma: on the contrary, all of Burma suffers from a sluggish economy, double digit inflation, much lower living standards than its neighbors, and some of the harshest human rights violations of any ruling regime currently in power (Pinhero, 2006).

Conditions are exacerbated by government policies towards upland communities and the scourge of war. Resulting mostly from armed conflict and the 'four cuts' policy, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are over 230,000 'stateless persons'¹³ in Burma today (UNHCR, 2006). Government programs under the auspices of Na Ta La aggravate the situation, rather than improving socioeconomic conditions.

One cannot deny that the SPDC appears to be more interested in consolidating its power and tightening its grip over rebellious border regions than in developing them. Despite claims that the junta is transitioning towards a more democratic form of governance, several National Conventions have yet to produce a constitution (EIU, 2006), political prisoners remain incarcerated and human rights violations continue virtually unabated. This begs the question, how can effective development projects reach Burma's border regions?

The key to initiating effective development programs lies in the daunting task of shifting the government's policies to focus on the welfare of the peoples of the nation rather than that of the regime. International pressure seems the most viable option for achieving social transition in Burma, but current efforts have yet to yield favorable results. The United States' recent renewal of import sanctions (CIRHR, 2006) will

prolong the shortage of hard currency, forcing the junta to continue its current practices in an attempt to achieve economic stability. Despite political pressure from fellow ASEAN countries, Burma's government shows no sign of shifting away from military oligarchy, perpetuating the situation in which the people, most notably ethnic minorities, lack any representation. In order to expedite the process of transition, pressure should be directed not towards the SPDC itself, but its foreign supporters, like Thailand, India and China, who together account for almost all of Burma's foreign direct investment and nearly 60% of all exports (EIU, 2006).

In conjunction with cutting off foreign investment to promote faster change in governance, restricting the drug trade into China and Thailand will cut the regime's most lucrative financial lifeline. In this matter, hope lies with the military regime currently heading Thailand's government after a September 2006 coup. Since General Surayud Chulanont, Thailand's interim Prime Minister, is known for taking a hard-lined stance on the SPDC and its involvement in the drug trade, it is speculated that more action will be taken to stem the flow of heroin and opium over the Thai-Burmese border (EIU, 2006).

The above-mentioned tactics are meant to cut the increasingly dependent SPDC off from drug trade profits, while increasing political pressure both from the region and abroad, in an attempt to force drastic reform. These actions alone, however, will not alleviate the situation of Burma's most destitute populations, since less money coming into the country means a smaller amount of resources channeled towards development. A gap that will undoubtedly exist before any sweeping social change takes effect will need to be filled by transnational advocacy networks consisting of humanitarian aid organizations and other international actors.¹⁴

Non-profit development groups face constant limitations to their work by government agents, including restrictions on travel and access to affected populations, usually in border areas engaged in conflict or illegal drug production. This has forced some agencies to cease operations in Burma in the past year, including The Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which terminated a \$98 million program, and MSF, which plans to withdraw in the near future (CIRHR, 2006). This indicates that there is a growing gap in direct humanitarian and development assistance in Burma's border regions. Government attitudes and actions towards NGOs must shift in a positive direction in order to encourage aid organizations to reenter the country. Through the concerted efforts of transnational advocacy networks, actors aim to change institutions and principles rather than policies (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In this manner, aid and development organizations as well as the many Burmese refugee

groups living outside of the country could pool their efforts to stimulate a movement for change within the country.

A collaborative effort by the international community would help shift the current norms and policies in Burma to potentially open the door to democratic change and increased opportunities for aid workers to access the border regions. Though the situation is grave today, and drastic change far off, hope comes in the form of new government actors in the region and attention on the international stage, since the UN Security Council has recently added Burma to its official agenda for the first time. It appears to be a long, arduous path to change, but with the commitment of international actors, shifting of established norms and a re-opening of national dialogue- including talks with the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the government in exile- conditions can be improved for ethnic minorities living in Burma's upland border states.

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Endnotes

¹ In 1989, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the ruling military regime, officially renamed the country The Union of Myanmar, changing many city and place names as well. As it is common practice for those who oppose the current government and its policies not to use the new names, I use the pre-1989 names throughout this paper.

² “Ethnic minorities” are defined as the 135 groups officially recognized by SPDC as “national races.” This number does not apply to “non-national races,” such as ethnic Muslim Rohingya.

³ According to the latest ASEAN statistics, Burma’s per capita GDP is \$106, which is nearly \$300 below that of Cambodia, the next lowest of ASEAN nations, and a mere fraction of the average per capita GDP for all of Southeast Asia of \$1,569 (ASEAN, 2006).

⁴ The SPDC does not use the term “Burmanisation”, rather the term is used by Gerard Clarke in *From Ethnocide to Ethnodelvelopment? Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia* to imply the assimilation of minorities into Burman society (Clarke, 2001). The government describes the process in *Our Three Main National Causes* as an assimilation of racial groups, from which a single group was about to emerge before Burma fell under colonial rule (Lambrecht, 2004).

⁵ General Ne Win seized control of the government in a coup in 1962 and ruled as the head of the military regime until stepping down in 1988.

⁶ “Four cuts” comes from the Burmese term *Pya Ley Pya*. The strategy involves separating civilians and armed insurgents from four main links: food, finance, intelligence and recruits (Smith, 1999).

⁷ In 1987, students rioted briefly against a government decree that invalidated 25, 35 and 75 Kyat notes, making 60 to 80 per cent of all circulating currency worthless (Lintner, 1999). Over the next few months, tensions grew between the government and citizenry, until thousands took to the streets of Rangoon in protest on 18 March 1988, and were met with brutal force by the military. After Ne Win stepped down in July 1988, student groups organized another protest, on the auspicious date 8 August 1988, or 8-8-88, in which thousands of citizens took to the street in Rangoon, only to be met by gunfire. After five days, the killings ended, after hundreds had been murdered and thousands more were injured.

⁸ In the first free elections in over three decades, 27 May 1990 saw a slew of victories for the National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Independent Burma’s founding father, Aung San. After the results showed that the NLD won more than 80% of seats in government, the SLORC declared the results invalid and imprisoned many of the NLD’s prominent leaders.

⁹ The “Three National Causes” as defined by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) are: the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity, and the perpetuation of national sovereignty (Lambrecht, 2004).

¹⁰ China, India and Thailand represent the three largest markets for Burma’s exports, accounting for nearly 60% of all export products (EIU, 2006). The Government of China implemented logging restrictions in state-owned forests in 1998 after mass floods attributed to deforestation (Zhao and Shao, 2002). India implemented a ban on clear felling of teak in most teak-growing provinces in 1986 and placed further restrictions on logging in any natural forest in 1997 (Pandey and Brown, 2000). Once a major exporter of unprocessed hardwood, Thailand implemented a total ban on commercial logging in natural forests in 1989 (Lakanavichian, 2001).

¹¹ Needle sharing is common among heroin users in Burma due to short supply of syringes and strict laws that criminalize the possession of a needle without a medical license (Moody, 1999).

¹² Golden Triangle refers to a geographic area including eastern Burma (Shan State), northern Thailand, southern China (Yunnan Province), and portions of northern Laos and Vietnam.

¹³ Stateless persons are defined by UNHCR as “Persons who are not considered nationals by any country under the operation of its laws” (UNHCR, 2006).

¹⁴ For more on transnational advocacy networks see Keck and Sikkink (1998), *Activists Beyond Borders*.