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### **Burma: Developing Democracy, Helping a Nation in Need**

Burma is a highly rustic and densely forested nation. It is bordered by China in the northeast, Thailand on the east, Laos, Bangladesh on the west, India on the northwest and the Indian Ocean- which takes up about one third of the nations boarder, creating tremendous cultural and ethnic diversity, and many other problems as well. Conflict between the many different races along the boarders have spiraled and are a constant battle. Burma is one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia, and will continue to be so until the suppressant militaristic government is degraded and democracy- or another “people-based” government- is installed. The harsh government is not the only problem related to poverty and hunger in Burma, though. Extreme weather conditions, including cyclones and the annual monsoon season, have left hundreds of thousands homeless, jobless, or diseases ridden. Unhygienic living situations are also a problem, considering the scarcity of clean water and education relating to sanitary practices. Not to mention the many racial, ethnic and cultural conflicts within the country.

An average family in Burma would consist of about five or six people who live in small shelters. The huts are diminutive in size and are packed very close together in a village. Many of the families in these villages will have already been forcefully removed from other villages, camps or forests by the militaristic government. As many third world countries are, Burma’s poverty, malnutrition and hunger rates are unreasonably high. According to the CIA World Fact book, one in ten children under the age of five years old dies of malnutrition or starvation. On paper, it is said that Burma actually has a food surplus. Crops produced includes: peas, rice, garlic, beans, peanuts and sugar cane. However, most families don’t have the land to grow these foods, and transportation of food in counties like Burma is nearly impossible or unthought-of. But it doesn’t have to be. According to The Independent World “the generals who took over in 1988 prided themselves on being more technocratic than Ne Win, the dictator from 1962, but they ignore the rest of the economy. They don’t care whether rice gets to the people because they are earning two BN a year selling natural gas to Thailand. They don’t need to care about the economic distress in the rest of the country.”

Education in Burma is nearly nonexistent as well. The average amount of education in schools is about 2.8 years. That’s 10.2 years less than an average American! Literacy rate in this text is defined by how many people nationwide are fifteen and older and can read and write. Compared to an American literacy rate of 99 percent, Burmese is a low 85.3 percent, according to the CIA World Fact Book. Women are given less education than men in Burma, and for this reason the literacy rate in women is even lower. This is expected by the low amount of education obtained and the extremely low amount of urbanization there. Only 33 percent of the nation is considered to be an urban population. However the curve of urbanization is increasing by a steady 2.9 percent per year.

Burma is conducted by a military junta that currently calls itself the “State Peace and Development Council” (SPDC). Its harsh stratocracy annihilates all opposition towards the government by exercising complete and absolute power over its people. Generals of the Burmese army administrate the country, but are not in any way virtuous. In fact, many of the officials have been accused of human rights abuse. In 2008 the United States charged the Burmese military of “criminal neglect” after refusal of aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis. The cyclone hit on May 2, 2008, killing at least 78,000 people, 56,000 missing and over two million even more unfortunate than before. The United States mobilized US Navy ships on the Burmese coasts to assist aid – including food, clothing and shelter. According to United States defense secretary Robert Gates, it was “becoming pretty clear the regime is not going to let us

help.” Although the problems in Burma are not yet considered genocide, the government seems to be steadily moving in that direction. Hakan Tongval, the deputy director of the United Nations World Food Prize Programme in Burma quoted “We haven’t been able to get the whole mechanism going. Progress has been slow,” which is precisely the point in the eyes of many World Food Prize laureates. In many cases where tremendous weather conditions or protests occur, the Burmese individual rights are repressed or forgotten. Not only are civilians who speak out against this put to shame, they are thrown in jail – sometimes up to twenty years.

The broken nation is led by many executive bodies and military commanders. It consists of fourteen states and divisions that are all governed by means of intimidation, repression of individual rights and ethnic minority groups, and corruption. Burma’s central government and ruling comes from the State Peace and Development Council; an organization based on the military. Than Shwe, the country’s top military leader is head of the State Peace and Development Council (starting in April of 1992). Shwe leads twelve other senior generals in making all key decisions in the countries. Other leading bodies in the country include parliament, the Union of Solidarity and Development Association, and the National League for Democracy.

It appears that once families in Burma are forcefully removed from an area, some will be required to perform forced labor. They do these jobs for little to no money and obtain nearly no benefits, such as a portion of land or food. Since the transportation of food or productions in Burma is minimal, the food that is produced in Burma cannot be distributed. Consequently, the farmers of non-transportable crops are unable to attain an income and cannot live without a money source. Many of these farm families will be undernourished and living in poverty as well, but will be better off than most families who own no land. That means that about 30% of the countries urbanized population is better off than about 50-70%, because according to the CIA World Fact Book 50-70% of the nation’s population do not own land.

According to Oxford Journals, the reasons behind consistent disease and malnutrition are related, and clearly seen by scientist. Both are associated with “socioeconomic and behavioral risk factors” that were proven true in an investigation done in Burma. Sixty-seven children ages 1-59 months old who were hospitalized for constant disease and malnutrition were examined. The child’s home was inspected, living conditions were noted, appearances of mother and child were accounted for, and family practices were watched closely. For each child affected by disease or malnutrition, a healthy child who was the same age, sex, and from the same neighborhood was studied. The results showed that factors associated with malnutrition include low-income families, low education of mothers, unhygienic restrooms, insects-flies in particular- with access to the home and child, mothers not using soap and water to wash the child-their hands in particular, breast feeding on demand, fecal matter found on the floors of homes, children eating from the floor or not being provided food- or proper food while weaning. The mother’s education about what causes disease- especially chronic diarrhea- and malnutrition was almost nonexistent. Many of the practices in Burma are thought of as normal because they have been used for many generations through the poverty. The lack of education is truly a downfall in Burma, and needs to be enforced in order to reach a level of development and maintain a nation without poverty.

The socialism and military junta in Burma is a huge problem. It is not the sole component of its deficiency of food, but it is the most recurrent and sufficient issue. The conflict between the government – caused by the junta – towards the people is horrific. As previously stated, it is so terrible other nations and international organizations have pressed charges against Burma because of human rights crimes or “criminal neglect” towards its people. The violence in Burma dates back to 1948, when they gained independence. Among the many problems lies the government’s decision to have Buddhism as the national religion. Many Christian people from the Karen, Chin and Kachin areas were stunned and angered by the verdict. These civilians, along with Rohingya residents and many other religiously divers

people, protested the government. The internal conflict rate rose drastically and these demonstrations were forcibly repressed by the government, resulting in the deaths of innocent people.

There was also an uprising in 1988, more commonly known as the 8888 Uprising. The protest was the largest uprising that has ever occurred in Burma. The people wanted – and still want—a democracy, and the demonstration demanded so. The protests were widespread, starting in Ragoon (now Yangon) and moving to other capitals as it became increasingly popular. The demand was for a restoration of a democratic government by following ten demands. In response, the military imposed martial law, giving complete power to the military. Thousands of civilians, Monks and students were killed in the demonstration. A series of small demonstrations followed soon after, they were also shut down by fatal shots.

However, since then many cease-fire agreements have been put into effect. Progress is being made in Burma, but the progression is sluggish and efforts are not exerted fully by the nations' leaders. After a new constitution was established in September of 2008, many new laws went into effect. A revision of the constitution has made a democratic government almost possible. A democratic election is scheduled for November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010, but many officials say the voting will not be a fair and uncorrupt system. They also say the National Convention “rigged” the last draft of the constitution. Many organizations combined to write the constitution, but pro-democracy groups were excluded from writing after the National League for Democracy called it undemocratic. The new constitution calls for a bicameral legislature consisting of a People's Assembly and a National Assembly. The military is guaranteed at least—but not limited to—110 seats of 440 in the People's Assembly and at least 56 of 224 in the National Assembly. While some progressions are being made, greed and digressions are plentiful as well, and corruption in Burma still exists. The Burmese people do not see this as a ‘road to democracy’ but rather a road paving the way to a strengthened militaristic government.

If the corruption in Burma was completely demolished, the conflict would disappear as well. If the people of Burma could vote fairly, in private polls, have private ballots, and not be afraid to vote righteously and feel secure in their decisions, the current leaders would not only be removed from office, but leaders with the same characteristics would never be admitted again. Democratic leaders are interested in the economic needs of the entire country. That is proven daily in many countries including the United States of America. Meaning that not only would the food supply in Burma increase significantly with democratic leaders in charge, but the transportation of rice and other mass produced foods would be distributed to all people of the country. The population of families with land would increase undoubtedly. The rates in Burma are as high as 50-70 percent of families without land or any way of growing their own food. If a virtuous leader could fill the role of Than Shwe, the government could create more jobs, increasing income to families, and then increasing wealth throughout the country. After the wealth of Burma is restored, they can begin to help the rest of the world by importing and exporting goods, business ideas, and trading many other things internationally.

I would recommend so many things to Burma. Most importantly I would recommend creating a democracy that works for the nation. Whether that means operating like the United States or not would be experimental, due to all of the organizations that assist in leading Burma. Personally, I think the deletion of all other forms of government would be beneficial to the country. The State Peace and Development Council is simply a tool for harsh rule and complete suppression of the Burmese people. The National League of Democracy needs to step up as a strong organization and help the people vote in democracy, and work towards an honorable and honest constitution that helps the people and does not guarantee seats to any one party or group.

Transportation, or a system of transporting goods is probably the second most important thing that needs to happen in Burma. There is no system of getting food to the Burmese people, which leads to a surplus of food in some areas and no food in other places. To be able to get food to all people of the nation is the first step, and moving to exportation would be the next step, in my opinion. According to the CIA World Fact Book Burma was the largest exporter of rice in the 1930's, to me there is no reason – other than the government—why they can not be the largest exporter of rice or teak again in the future. The efficient distribution of food is one of the attributes to obtaining a positive food surplus and wealth in this under developed nation.

Education is another important feature to turn this country into a more developed and prospering nation. The people of Burma need more schooling. They need to know about food and water borne illnesses, so that they can be avoided at all costs. The combination of extreme diarrhea and malnutrition is killing Burma. It is not only food borne and water borne illness however. Education about HIV/AIDS is greatly needed. The population in Burma is so great, it is said by the CIA World Fact Book to be the 26<sup>th</sup> most populated nation in the world. This country is in danger of becoming the world's next epicenter for HIV/AIDS, according to the CIA World Fact Book. The large amount of AIDS and other diseases is causing a very high mortality rate, 47.61 deaths per 1000 live births in Burma compares drastically to the United States 6.2 deaths per 1000 births. The difference is education about sanitary practices, disease and helpful processes in birthing and pregnancy. Burma could be a great and prosperous nation with the right guidance. Democracy needs to be elected in the upcoming election to begin the progression to a wealthy more developed nation.

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