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## **Burma's Desperate Hour of Food Security in an Era of Increased Demand**

### **Introduction**

While the food affordability crisis rippled through the world, Burma was faced with a catastrophe that tore across the country on May 2 and 3, killing tens of thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless (Time). According to the UN, up to 102,000 Burmese have perished; some 220,000 are missing; and close to 2.5 million are in dire need of clean water, shelter, food and medical treatment. Disastrously long before the storm, the people of Burma were enduring a humanitarian disaster brought about by political means. Months before the wake of Cyclone Nargis, the military junta that rules the country had ruthlessly gunned down dozens of monk-led demonstrators, bringing death, disease and destruction to the people it is entrusted to protect (Time). The unjust military junta that rules Burma has caused the country to become the world's neediest country. Some 30% of its 53 million people live below the poverty line (The Economist, 12). Its citizens subsist on an average annual income of less than \$200 US per capita, and the average household expenditure on food is nearly 70 percent. This is a significant indicator of food insecurity and poverty level of households compared with its neighbors: 59% in Indonesia, 57% in Bangladesh and 32% in Thailand (maetaoclinic.com). Burma's unjust military ruling is the cause of Burma's insecurity.

### **Families in Burma**

To understand the family structure in Burma today, one must consider the unjust military ruling that oppressed the nation. The military junta ruling Burma today is the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and is in government power ever since 1988. Control is maintained through intimidation, with strict censoring of information, repression of individual rights, and suppression of ethnic minority groups. The people of Burma live in fear of the heinous government, afraid that they will be punished for no reason. "Everything I do is restricted... where I go, what I do, who I see... The authorities even have to give permission if I want anyone to stay the night," commented a Burmese man (BBC). By the end of 2002, an estimated 600,000 Burmese were internally displaced, including people who were forcibly relocated by the military. At the same time, over a million Burmese, many of them ethnic minorities, have fled to Bangladesh, India, China, Malaysia, and Thailand to seek work and asylum. More than 150,000 Burmese now live in nine refugee camps in Thailand and roughly 30,000 live in two camps in Bangladesh. Roughly 30,000 Burmese (mostly Chin and Rohingya) have fled to Malaysia.

The government's socio-economic policies have not helped the people. Its mismanaged economy created a downward economic spiral for the people of Burma. The state remains heavily involved in most parts of the economy and infrastructure has deteriorated. Inflation, caused primarily by public sector deficit spending and the eroding value of the local currency (the kyat), has reduced living standards. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that inflation was running at 40% in March 2007, in contrast with official estimates of 10%. A farm worker in Burma was lucky if he earns 1,000 kyats (\$0.80) a day. Some days he earns half that. "I have enough to buy some poor-quality rice for my family, but not much else," he said (BBC). Many of Burma's poor are forced to send their children to work or sell their babies to child traffickers in exchange for food. The number of street children has also increased, and malnutrition among

children is widespread. Sanitary conditions are far from satisfactory. Malaria, diarrhea, dysentery, tuberculosis, and more recently HIV/AIDS (due to drugs and prostitution) are the major health hazards of the country. Despite the debilitating health problems, UNICEF estimates that the government only spends US \$0.40 on healthcare per capita. This meagerly amount is less than 3% of the national budget going towards healthcare, while 40% goes towards military expenses. The government also spends meagerly on education. "Education in Burma is a joke. The year after I graduated from high school, in 1996, another student demonstration broke out in the streets. The government beat up students and shut down the schools nationwide. The beautiful and historic Rangoon University, where all Rangoon students dreamed of attending, was closed for five years and has still not completely reopened," said Aung Moe Win, ex-resident of Burma (Frontline). The numbers of children who do not attend school or who have dropped out reportedly increased in the 1990s. According to World Bank estimates, only 46.9 percent of the secondary school-age children were enrolled in schools during 1995. Education beyond the primary age is not compulsory. Burmese authorities boast a literacy rate of 83 percent, though independent observers have suggested that the rate may be as low as 30 percent. Most universities have been closed since December 1996 (Nations Encyclopedia).

Most people in Burma live in the 40,000-odd villages of the country, while the majority of the urban population resides in the capital city of Rangoon. Among the population engaged in agriculture, 37% of the people do not have any land or livestock. Problems with transportation and communication are widespread for the Burmese, and even those who live in large cities such as Rangoon experience frequent power outages. The average Burmese family has two or three children, however, in the Burmese culture, first cousins are typically thought of as brothers and sisters. In the countryside, families usually live with their extended family members. Their houses are huts made of bamboo without running water or toilets. One portion is used for cooking and the other for sleeping. In the major towns and cities, houses are made of brick and concrete and are usually small and overcrowded. Although the husband may be considered the "head" of the family, a sense of equality is encouraged between husband and wife. Traditionally, the family unit is matriarchal in Burmese society and women are considered to have primary responsibility for running the household and raising the children.

### **Unjust Government**

Burma is a resource-rich country with a strong agricultural base. It has vast timber, natural gas, and fishery reserves, and is the leading source of gems and jade. Once, before decades of military rule that stifled the economy, Burma was the world's leading exporter of rice (Frontline). To understand the unjust government that restricts the progression of the economy, one must understand the debacle of the policy framework established by General Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Program Party. This policy had three pillars that smother the rights of the farmers. The first pillar strips away the farmers' rights of land. All farmland were belonged to the state and farmers were only given tillage rights. They did not have the official right to exchange, transfer, and lease; inherit, or mortgage their land. Land was also unequally distributed and only those households that were given tillage rights were officially registered as farm households. Members of non-arm households that work as agricultural laborers had to depend on these farm households. The second pillar creates a state monopoly of agricultural marketing, which bans private trade of surplus produce, both domestically and internationally, and procures the entire surplus from farmers at fixed prices. The third pillar is crop planning where government orders farmers which crop to grow on which parcel of land. Farmers who did not follow government's directions will have their tillage rights revoked (Kurosaki et. al.)

In September 1988, General Ne Win was forced to step down and a new military junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council was established. Still in power today, the SLORC brought a number of changes in the agricultural policy; however, the system of state ownership of the land still remained and little change in the unequal distribution of tillage rights has been made. As for agricultural marketing, private trade is now allowed. Farmers are now allowed to sell any surplus in private markets once they have supplied their required quota to the state. The third pillar of agricultural policy was officially abandoned in 1987; however, farmers continued to face the threat of having their tillage rights revoked if they diverged away from crop plans that were formulated by the government.

Despite the change in the military regime, the economy of Burma still has not improved. According to the UN special reporter on Burma, it was documented that the Burmese military still continues to unlawfully confiscate land, displace villagers, demand forced labor, and use violence (including rape, torture, and murder) against those who protest such brutality. Many people fall foul of policies of the government that seem to change at whim. "One minute farmers are told to grow potatoes to export to India," said a local NGO worker. "The next minute the authorities won't allow it, and all that investment has been wasted." The latest government campaign is an initiative to grow nut trees, not only as a source of bio fuel but also because government fortune-tellers believe they will shore up the military's power (BBC). Growth continues to be constrained by government mismanagement and minimal investment. In the absence of a functioning open economy, corruption has flourished. It's estimated that the income from the black-market and unofficial border trade matches that of the official economy. This climate of semi-official corruption has become so entrenched that whole swathes of the population earn their living from it. There is a two-tier pricing system that affects the livelihoods of the families of Burma. People had to know someone influential to get goods at the government price, or they will have to resort to the black market, which is at least twice as expensive. One of the hottest properties at the moment is a telephone. The black market price is about \$3,000 - way beyond most people's means. "We're being robbed," one Burmese man said (BBC).

### **Government Status**

Nearly a month after Cyclone Nargis hits Burma, the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization says hundreds of thousands of people in remote regions of the Irrawaddy Delta have yet to receive food aid and up to 75 percent of the population most in need is not receiving regular food assistance. The cyclone destroyed crops just before the main rice harvest and the loss is compounded by the deaths of 150,000 water buffalo, needed to plow paddies. This destruction cause rice prices in Rangoon to double in the month of May while prices of staples such as eggs rose sharply. The FAO says food shortages along with escalating prices "posed a risk to national security". Despite the need of aid, the government is refusing any outside help in fear of being overthrown by Western powers and treats all offers of outside help with suspicion. The authorities are trying to ensure that the outside world, and its own citizens, does not see what has happened to the country. Journalists are refused entry visas and foreign aid workers are barred from relief camps. Police at checkpoints around Rangoon are sending foreigners back to the city, after their names and passport details are noted. (Rex)

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations to combat food security and poverty begin with the change of governance. The picture of indifference and incompetence of the regime's response to the cyclone emerged as relief agencies have accused the Burmese military authorities of keeping the best-

quality supplies donated for victims of Cyclone Nargis and handing out rotten and low-grade food. The UN reports that because of bottle-necks and obstructions, perhaps only 20 percent of food aid was reaching the people in the cyclone-hit delta. This corruption of the government drains the vital resources of humanitarian aid related to poverty reduction. A Burmese man strongly states, "The solution for Burma is very obvious but not simple. The government needs to be removed. This government is a totalitarian government run by uneducated military men," (Frontline World). The vote of 1990 should be honored where the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Ky won easily but the army ignored the result and carried on ruling. With the change of the regime, Burma's poverty will be alleviated.

In addition to the change of governance, the resolution to improve food security in Burma is to expand employment opportunities in the agricultural sector through resettlement programs. Certain places in the country, such as the Kabaw Valley in the northern Sagaing Division, have tens of thousands of sparsely populated acres where the soil is fertile and the climate conditions are conducive to the cultivation of a rice-based cropping system. Resettlement programs should be introduced and established in such places with a strong workforce led by agricultural graduates from Agriculture High Schools, Diploma Colleges, the Institute of Agriculture and the Institute of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Science, as well as unemployed and idle manpower. The new government should provide the necessary infrastructure, input facilities and credit. This will create job incentives for the people of Burma and they won't have to migrate to neighboring countries in search for work. Also, this will improve the quantity and quality of food available in Burma.

## **Conclusion**

"The situation is getting much worse," reported a Burmese. "If you don't have a job in the city, it is not possible to survive. Higher taxes, higher cost of living and more government oppression. People are not innocent as before. They only care how to make money to survive. They have no time to think about politics and social issues" (Frontline) This statement is true for Burma today. The consequences of food insecurity extend far beyond the borders of communities and nations. People unable to escape the cycle of extreme poverty in nations such as Burma often make desperate choices. Children might be sold to child traffickers in order to feed themselves.

Burma is in need of desperate help. It needs the help to get back on its feet and a new beginning. "Even before Cyclone Nargis struck last year Burma experienced an inflation rate of 50 percent," Debbie Stothardt, the spokeswoman for rights group the Alternative ASEAN Network noted (Corbin). "If this disaster is not addressed comprehensively and quickly and effectively you are going to send millions of people from Burma out into the rest of the region as migrants simply because they can no longer survive in their own country, which ironically used to be considered "the rice bowl of Asia".

Addressing the crisis of food insecurity in Burma will require solutions on many levels: the change in government and the resolution of agricultural improvements. The solution will also require the participation of the people so that they will be actively involved in the overall process of the agricultural improvements. The people of Burma will need to work together to plan for the future while providing the means to meet the needs of the present. Solving the crisis of food insecurity in Burma will require more than a change in government and resolving improvements of agriculture. It will require the political and financial will to ensure that the change of the government on multiple levels is carried out and sustained.

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