



Inter Pares

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Building the Foundations of Peace in Burma

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. — Henry David Thoreau

In April 2012, a historic meeting took place. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's democracy leader and now a Member of Parliament, and Zipporah Sein, a women's rights activist and now the head of the Karen National Union (KNU), were able to meet for the first time. The Karen are the third-largest ethnic group in Burma, and the KNU, their largest political party, has led a decades-long struggle for self-determination. The lives of these two incredible women have been deeply affected by repressive politics and brutality in their country. This meeting was a significant moment in their aspirations for a peaceful and democratic nation – a dream which has at times seemed like a far-off castle in the air.

Since 1991, Inter Pares has been working with people from Burma, a country that has been in conflict since independence. Various forms of military-backed governments have wreaked havoc upon the country, entrenching systematic corruption, violence, and impunity. An election in late 2010, and subsequent gestures of reforms by the nominally civilian government, have inspired cautious hope that Burma is on the cusp of peace and democracy.

"All of us look at the changes that are beginning to happen in Burma with great hope and hesitation," the Karen Women Organization (KWO), an Inter Pares counterpart, recently wrote. "There have been so many false starts and shattered dreams ... KWO cannot predict the future ... but we also cannot wait until the change is certain."

Before being elected leader of the Karen National Union, Zipporah was head of KWO. KWO activities include providing training and support to women in Karen State and in refugee camps to promote women's leadership and political participation, and to prevent violence against women.

Inter Pares supports the work of over fifty community-based organizations from Burma. Like KWO, none of them are simply waiting for change. They are all building the foundation for the "castle in the air" – the castle of peace, democracy, and respect for human rights.

We support people from Burma working together to protect the environment and to provide food and health care to their own communities. We support people working to empower women, to document human rights abuse and to provide news and information in their own languages. These groups are incubators of democratic practice, applying principles of participation, gender equality, and accountability



A graduation ceremony at KWO's leadership school for young women.

to their constituencies. By collaborating among different ethnic nationalities, they overcome mistrust as they explore solutions to common problems. Informed by their stories and policy recommendations, Inter Pares raises awareness about the situation in Burma with the Canadian public and our government.

In 2002, KWO participated in an exchange coordinated by Inter Pares. Women from Burma and Guatemala learned about striking parallels in each other's struggles: ethnic discrimination, armed conflict, displacement, and violence against women. They shared not only powerful personal stories but also strategies for negotiating peace, raising difficult issues such as sexual violence and the challenge of promoting women's rights "post-conflict."

In 2007, KWO participated in a roundtable organized by Inter Pares in which counterparts from Latin America, Asia, and Africa strategized on addressing violence against women. More recently, we have been supporting KWO's efforts to ensure that women participate in any transition to peace and democracy in Karen State.

KWO's work on women's political participation and Zipporah's subsequent political leadership have had a dramatic impact on the 2012 KNU-led peace talks with Burma's military-backed government. The high level of women's participation in these talks and an extensive grassroots consultation process are evidence of KWO's long-term efforts to build a democratic society which values and respects women.

In this *Bulletin*, we describe other examples of our Burma work in which we are building the foundation for the "castle in the air" – for the dream of sustainable peace. ☪

The Difficult Trek to Healthcare

Trekking on slippery small paths and crossing swollen rivers, Hser Mu Na Htoo and her team of five health workers traveled for ten hours over strenuous terrain. Near their destination, the team kept in close walkie-talkie contact with the village leader, to make sure the Burma Army troops had not occupied the village since their last visit. The team arrived at sunset and slept that night in the homes of their aunts and uncles, friends and cousins.

The team awakened early to begin treating 26 patients for a variety of conditions, including diarrhea, malaria, and acute respiratory infection, and providing patients with counselling to ensure they understood their condition and treatment. In the afternoon, with the help of a village health volunteer, the team taught a nutrition and personal hygiene class at the school, and distributed vitamin A and de-worming medication. That evening, the community's traditional birth attendants and health volunteers shared records of health activities since the team's last visit. Hser Mu Na Htoo then slept, for she would need to wake at sunrise for another day of treatment, care, and education.

This was an average day at work, as described by Hser Mu Na Htoo. She and the health workers, volunteers, and traditional birth attendants form one of eighty-five Back Pack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT).

Government health services are virtually non-existent in rural Burma and international aid agencies have little to no access to most of these areas, particularly in the conflict zones. Preventable and treatable diseases continue to cause the majority of deaths. The BPHWT is one of several community-managed healthcare counterparts in our Burma program; together they provide healthcare to just over half a million people.

In October 2010, the BPHWT and several other counterparts released a joint report on the living conditions in conflict-affected areas. Based on surveys of nearly 28,000



people, *Diagnosis: Critical* presented a disturbing picture, with health indicators among the worst in the world. At the time of the survey, one in 14 women were infected with the most dangerous form of malaria and 60 percent of deaths of children under five were from preventable and treatable diseases.

Diagnosis: Critical presented compelling evidence linking health conditions with the absence of government healthcare, the protracted conflict, and the widespread abuse of civilians. In a country where national data collection and research is officially prohibited, the report's vast collection of data is essential to any planning for future healthcare.

Our counterparts, and the health workers trained by them, continue to provide the most qualified, trusted, and effective healthcare available to many villagers. In the future, these groups will be the most appropriate advisors and collaborators to help establish Burma's first national public health care system. ☞

For Refugees, by Refugees



We came because of oppression from the Burmese soldiers. We walked for twelve days, just sleeping by the side of the trails, under tents made of leaves. My wife was sick for two days, she couldn't climb the mountain." This is how 41-year-old Aung Htoo and his

family joined 140,000 refugees from Burma sheltering in camps in Thailand. There are also refugees outside the camps, living among the estimated 2 million Burmese migrant labourers in Thailand. Several hundred thousand refugees from Burma can be found in India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and China. Some have been refugees for over 20 years, others have arrived very recently. An estimated half-million internally displaced people are still in southeastern Burma – and if military abuses don't stop, they might soon cross the border to become refugees too.

These daunting numbers are nothing new to staff of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), who have delivered all food and shelter aid to refugee camps in Thailand for the last 28 years. For much of that time, Inter Pares has contributed toward this massive task. During a recent visit

Investing in Conflict

“Despite development projects during ceasefire time, the people of Kachin State did not develop; in reality, they were losing their human rights day by day.” Tsa Ji from the Kachin Development Network Group (KDNG) wrote this statement in the group’s May 2012 newsletter. At the time, war raged on in Burma’s Kachin State while many other ethnic states had entered into peace talks. Kachin State had lived under a ceasefire agreement for 17 years – but during that time unemployment soared, the drug trade flourished, the presence of government troops increased dramatically, human rights abuses were committed with impunity, efforts for meaningful political participation were blocked, and huge resource extraction projects gouged the state’s natural resources. Inter Pares counterpart KDNG articulately described the connection between large development projects and the resumption of armed conflict in Kachin State in 2011, warning other ethnic groups and the international community about the Kachin ceasefire experience.

Burma is a wealthy nation, rich in natural resources. Natural gas exports alone amount to approximately US\$2.5 billion in annual revenues, and as production increases, revenues are expected to increase by 60 percent in 2013. But Burma’s management of the economy, often characterized as “crony capitalism,” involves most of the benefits flowing to a few individuals loyal to the army. Burma’s military absorbs over a quarter of all government spending, despite the absence of external threats. The abundance of corruption and militarization, and the lack of human rights and environmental protection mechanisms, perpetuate conflict and poverty in Burma.

Within this context, our counterparts are exposing the environmental and human rights impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects. In March of 2012, Arakan Oil Watch produced *Burma’s Resource Curse*. This report warns that the lack of revenue transparency and accountability in Burma

is set to be exacerbated by a flood of new investments with the suspension of sanctions. The report calls for the establishment of laws and institutions to manage oil and gas revenues transparently before further extraction of natural resources by foreign investors. Copies of the report have been widely distributed in Burma, with plans for raising awareness among new and future parliamentarians.

Any transition towards democracy, no matter how contested, is going to see a rapid increase in foreign investment, including Canadian, and large-scale development projects extracting Burma’s natural resources. Current practices of corruption and militarization are thoroughly entrenched, creating a high-risk environment for international investment and fuel for further conflict and poverty in Burma. Inter Pares is proud to be working with community-based organizations that are informing the international community about the context in Burma, while also providing local people with the tools to identify and address the risks that accompany such projects. ☞



Arakan Oil Watch Director, Jockai Khaing, being interviewed by journalists including our media partners. (Note that faces have been altered).

to Ottawa, TBBC Executive Director Jack Dunford thanked Canada for its consistent support at a time when reductions in European funding, exchange rate fluctuations, and rising commodity prices are forcing cutbacks in the food and shelter provided to already vulnerable people.

Almost unique among refugee camps worldwide, the camps in Thailand are built and run by refugees themselves through elected camp committees, supported and monitored by TBBC. A 2009 CIDA evaluation found that “the model of refugee camp management adopted by TBBC is one that promote[s] the self-reliance of displaced people through the utilization and development of their own resources, this with a view to preparing refugees for longer term solutions.”

TBBC also provides food across the border into Burma to displaced people living in hiding who, not wanting to

become refugees, are trying to grow food while evading forced labour and violent abuse by the military. TBBC rice is delivered by community-based organizations from these areas, who are known and trusted by the displaced villagers. TBBC helped these groups to develop innovative monitoring systems that have been studied as models for aid delivery in conflict situations worldwide.

Recent events in central Burma have led some observers to predict the imminent repatriation of refugees, but for most refugees the situation in their home villages has not actually improved. Human rights abuses and landmine contamination are still causing people to flee. The work of TBBC is crucial toward ensuring that refugees can decide their own future, and that any who choose to repatriate can do so in dignity and safety. ☞

Why is the “Ethnic Issue” Important?

In 1947, just before independence from Britain, a conference was held at Panglong, Burma. General Aung San (Aung San Suu Kyi’s father) had realized that Burma could survive only if the non-Burman ethnic groups comprising 40 percent or more of the population agreed to be part of it. A federal structure was agreed upon – but within months, Aung San was assassinated by rivals who, among other motivations, opposed this agreement. Burma was thus born as a centralized state dominated by the Burman ethnicity. State-sanctioned discrimination against non-Burmans led to ethnic tensions and armed resistance. The state militarized, and in 1962 became a military dictatorship that lasted almost fifty years, only recently replaced by a military-dominated parliament.

Burma was cobbled together by the British from a diverse territory larger than Alberta, shared among the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Wa, Mon, Karenni, Arakan, Burman, and other peoples – all with entirely distinct cultures and languages. No one has ever fully controlled all of its forested mountains and fertile valleys. Some people in the hills have never seen government employees other than soldiers. Burma’s ethnic “periphery” covers 60 percent of its geography, where the minorities are the majority.

Unlike General Aung San, Burma’s post-independence regimes justified military rule as the only way to hold the country together. They used brutal scorched-earth campaigns for decades in an attempt to extend sovereignty all the way to the borders. Ethnic villages were to be conquered and controlled, their populations subjugated and ‘Burmanized’ – made to speak Burmese, and preferably made Buddhist. The Burmese-language name “Myanmar” imposed on the country in 1989 was seen as linguistic Burmanization, and is rejected by pro-democracy activists.

Military campaigns faced both non-violent and armed resistance. As military offensives became more brutal, the resistance only became more determined. Villagers hid in the hills rather than submit to military control, while ethnic groups carved out large territories and ran their own regional governments.

As militarization led to increased repression in the urban centres of central Burma, the regime faced massive non-violent protests in 1975, 1988, 1996, and 2007. In every case it responded with live ammunition, massacres, widespread arrests, and torture. Urban dissidents, mostly Burman, fled to ethnic territories where they joined in alliances with up to a dozen already-allied ethnic resistance groups. Together they negotiated and drafted federal constitutions that could bring peace to Burma. In response, the Burma Army destroyed over 3,600 villages, mounted offensives against ethnic territories, and undermined alliances by offering business concessions to armed group leaders to obtain ceasefires without addressing political grievances.

Without a political resolution, most of those ceasefires eventually failed. Yet new ceasefire negotiations since 2011 have all followed the same model, leaving political talks for

an unspecified later date in order to prioritize extractive “development projects.” Under the cover of new ceasefires, the army sends in more troops and heavy weaponry. The current constitution places the military beyond government control, and the military still rules with impunity in the countryside. In April 2012 a Chin refugee told Inter Pares, “I didn’t flee from Aung San Suu Kyi, I didn’t flee from this government – I fled for my life from the army. And the army has not changed. They are still in my village.”

Many of our program counterparts work to empower people and communities in the “ethnic” regions. We also support coalitions like the Women’s League of Burma, formed by thirteen organizations representing women of most ethnicities, and Burma News International, which disseminates news from eleven local media groups in ten languages. Multi-ethnic coalitions can overcome prejudice, build trust, and enable groups to share experiences and strategies toward a diverse yet peaceful Burma.

In February 2012, Inter Pares collaborated with Canadian Friends of Burma to organize an Ottawa teleconference with Aung San Suu Kyi. “We have to respect the aspirations of the ethnic nationalities and try to build up a genuine union based on the Panglong agreement,” she said. “They simply want autonomy and self-determination as laid down by a constitution that will be acceptable to all ... and this is what we have to work towards.” Without that, sustainable peace and democracy in Burma will be virtually impossible to achieve. ✂

Funding for our Burma program over the past twenty years has come from Canadians across the country, various foundations, and from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Most of our current Burma work is part of a five-year CIDA-funded program: *Building Social Capital*. Inter Pares is grateful to the Government of Canada for its generous support. The 2009 CIDA evaluation of this program noted that “*Canada’s support is an affirmation that it believes in the legitimate aspirations of all the people and groups who, on a daily basis, risk their lives in pursuit of a more just and democratic society.*”

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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