

1. *Thoughts on the General Political and Socio-economic Situation in Burma*

Professor Bruce Matthews from Acadia University noted that through his connections to the Church and academia he has ascertained that the SPDC is actually more dangerous than its predecessor the SLORC because it comprises young men who are being trained by the older guard. This younger government may prove even more obdurate than the previous one. Although some clique formation in the government is detectable, discipline remains strong. At the same time, there seems to be some fragmentation in the NLD ranks. Given this political climate we should not expect the Burmese people to be able to do much for democracy from inside of Burma. The political basis for an uprising is minimal at this stage.

Myint Swe countered Prof. Matthew's claim that the NLD is experiencing problems and argued that the splintering of the democratic movement is very minimal.

Micheline Levesque, International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, offered her views from travelling in Burma. She participated at some meetings organised by the democratic movement and listened to Suu Kyi's speeches. She talked about peoples' participation in these meetings and their involvement by written notes with questions addressed to Suu Kyi, to which she would respond. Her comments were a rare sign of optimism for democratisation in Burma. Others gave their impressions about the growing restlessness of the Burmese people and a shift in attitude from caution to a more explicit expression of discontent. These contributions led some to believe that the Burmese people have reached the tolerable limit and Burma is on a threshold of change

Though sceptical about politics as the engine of change, Prof. Matthews argued that the deterioration of the economic situation compounded by an agrarian emergency, just may be the catalyst for change. Rice stocks are very low and shortages of cooking oil and fuel oil seem to be intensifying. Moreover, others pointed out that deflation brought about by the Asian crisis makes the import of cooking oil from Malaysia -- Burma's main supplier of oil, too expensive. Dr. Win Myint Than added that during her last visit of Burma she noticed, to her great surprise, people selling rice water for nourishment.

Gary Rozema from the Burma Relief Centre pointed out that since the government is continuing to export rice, the shortage might not be as profound as Prof. Matthews suggested. From his own experience, a significant insecurity facing the Burmese people, besides food shortages, is the sale and leasing of land to foreign corporations.

Micheline Levesque, said that the physical infrastructure is only getting worse. Others added that social infrastructure is almost non-existent. There are few hospitals and few doctors, while the quality of medical care is very limited. People must often take great risks and cross borders to receive treatment. Meanwhile, according to Ingrid Hall, Director General, South and Southeast Asia Bureau, DFAIT, the civil service has been downsized to become a mere ghost of its former self. This lack of infrastructure poses serious problems for the maintenance of a modern state.

Once sustainability becomes threatened by the lack of core staples and the physical and social infrastructure collapses, upheaval is likely.