

Conference held on Nov 16, 1996 at Carleton University

The conference entitled "Burma: The South Africa of the 90s" was held on Saturday, Nov 16th at Carleton University, funded in part by the John Holmes Fund. Over 40 students attended, including many Burmese, representing university and high school groups from across Ontario, the Maritimes and British Columbia. The focus of the conference was to establish strategies for implementing selective purchasing legislation in educational institutions, compare student-led consumer activism campaigns in other countries and give the participants the basic analytic tools to allow them to launch an effective campaign.

A portion of the conference was allotted to discuss Canada's policy on Burma and to make recommendations. Some of the participants have worked on the Thai-Burma border, travelled within Burma and followed Burma issues extensively. The following items reflect what top recommendations were made:

1) Canada has to become more outspoken on Burma and put action to our words of condemnation. Though the reference to Burma is appearing more frequently in public speeches by the Minister, words will not help Burma gain democracy. Canada has a responsibility to follow the mandate of the elected democratic party within Burma. The National League for Democracy, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been repeatedly calling for an immediate and complete withdrawal of companies from Burma as foreign investment is merely entrenching the SLORC and providing them with a false sense of legitimacy. This call cannot be effectively answered unless the international community imposes trade sanctions on Burma. The hard currency gained from foreign investment is buoying the SLORC and allowing it to remain in power through force. The peoples of Burma are not benefitting from this trade but merely undergoing further oppression. This financial crutch needs to be removed immediately. The international community is being hypocritical if it repeatedly condemns the SLORC for its brutal form of rule and voices its support of Suu Kyi without respecting the wishes of her party, the NLD, and taking some form of concrete economic action. Words will not hurt the SLORC but the removal of hard currency will. SLORC will only react to harsh action and not merely by harsh words. It must be remembered that unlike other countries, a democratically-elected government exists in Burma and is ready to take over if SLORC can be removed. The existence of this elected body separates Burma from other countries where the international community feels helpless to do anything. The NLD needs to be supported in every way possible and their wishes abided by.

Constructive engagement does not work in Burma. Burma is being used as a clear example where trade does not encourage human rights. Canada, not having a large amount of investment in Burma coupled with its reputation for being a respected leader on human rights issues, is in a well-placed position to take a lead in international fora on Burma through the United Nations, G-7, Commonwealth and La Francophonie. Canada should begin serious dialogue with the Scandinavian countries and other like-minded nations and lead a coordinated group of countries to push for multinational sanctions. Someone needs to take the first step and if Canada was the first nation to take the lead, other countries would be measured up against Canada's position and the pressure would push the US and the EU, who are "sitting on the fence" to cross over and join forces.

2) Canada should immediately issue a strong command to Canadian importers not to buy products that are "Made in Myanmar". While Canada's exports to Burma remain minimal, Canada is closely linked to Burma through its imports of goods from that country. Canada has imported over \$7 million worth of garments from Burma in this year alone and the figures are rising. One-sixth of the profits from Burma's garment industry goes directly to SLORC's arms procurement agency. The imports and purchases of these clothes are directly linking Canadians to the regime. This link must be severed and the most effective way to do this is for DFAIT to issue a demand to all Canadian importers to stop sourcing from Burma's garment industry.