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## HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BURMA (MYANMAR)

### ISSUE

Despite the State Law and Order Restoration Council's (SLORC) negotiation of ceasefires with most ethnic insurgent groups and its willingness to talk with Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma has one of the worst human rights records in Asia. Arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions of civilians, arrest and detention of persons for ransom, rape and abuse of women, and forced labour occur on a wide scale. Widely and frequently condemned by the international community, Burma maintains a harsh military dictatorship.

### BACKGROUND

After civil unrest in 1988 resulting from 26 years of Burma Socialist Program Party rule of General Ne Win, the military re-established control over the country, creating the SLORC as the new ruling body. The National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won the elections in 1990 but SLORC refused to allow the parliament to convene. They claimed that a new Constitution must be passed before they could hand over power.

Since 1992, there have been a few developments including the convening of a National Convention on the drafting of a new constitution that will formalise the army's domination of Burmese politics. Two senior SLORC generals held talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, now in her sixth year under house arrest, in late September and again in late October, in a move probably designed to soften international criticism. No formal reports from these talks have been issued and Daw Suu Kyi's views are not known.

Some of Burma's dozen distinct ethnic groups have their own armies and have been fighting the central government for greater autonomy or independence for decades. SLORC has concluded ceasefire agreements with some of them in an effort to exploit their differences. There are approximately 70,000 refugees along the Thai-Burmese border. The Thai government has organized repatriation programs for some of them despite the concerns expressed by the UNHCR and NGOs regarding the safety of those returning.

In a reversal of its previous self-imposed isolation, Burma is actively wooing its neighbours, especially China. ASEAN countries are responding with a policy of "constructive engagement" in which bilateral visits and trade ties are increasing rapidly.

In 1993 and 1994, both UNGA and CHR passed consensus resolutions strongly urging SLORC to proceed with democratic reform and respect for human rights. Canada co-sponsored the resolutions. During his recent mandate, the UN Special Rapporteur was unable to visit Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In his report, he cited numerous examples of continued and systematic human rights violations in Burma.

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