

by mobs. Captured Burmese soldiers report a similar fear-suppressing drug being used in suicide attacks against entrenched insurgent armies.

Perhaps most frightening to the Burmese public is her association with Military Intelligence, which has a well-documented reputation for torturing students and opposition politicians. According to Amnesty International some ten thousand people have "disappeared," and thousands more languish in prisons. While it is a bit romantic to see Sanda Win as the Queen of Darkness – a demonic reincarnation from a classic Ramayana tale – it is nonetheless a powerful incentive among followers of Aung San Suu Kyi who see her pitted against Sanda Win in an epic contest.

Complicating this struggle between good and evil by the daughters of modern Burma's founding fathers, is the reality of a society of forty-one million people, where over a hundred ethnic dialects are spoken, and where ethnic Burmans constitute two-thirds of the population, Karens another ten percent, the Shans and Arakanese some one and a half to two million each, and all the other minorities totalling under a million.

ALTHOUGH BURMA IS A SHANGRI-LA TOURIST destination, a land of meditation centres and serene beauty, it shares with all societies a lively connection between money and politics. While the vast majority of people live barely above subsistence level, the national economy is dominated by a few hundred families, military officers and civilian collaborators who award import-export licenses, regulate investment ventures, connive with smugglers, and surreptitiously trade heroin and opium. Ne Win has been especially adept in protecting loyal officers, who "triple-dip" with high salaries as members of the military, as civilian administrators, and through pensions of land, businesses, and access to scarce foreign goods denied even most middle class Burmese.

Like a giant pyramid scheme, a generation of Burmese have tolerated increasing corruption and abuse of human rights with the hope that they too would come out ahead; but tragedy is now upon them. The government has passed into the hands of Orwellian criminals who govern by using every form of double-speak and intimidation. The good people who struggled to make the system just and workable, now despair for their children.

For decades after independence a tacit arms embargo by the international community kept warfare in Burma at a low intensity. Limited amounts of Chinese weapons flowed to the Burma Communist Party (BCP), Western countries and private corporations supplied



Rangoon's military, while the ethnic insurgents traded teak, jade, opium, and cattle for arms and ammunition from China and Thailand. Few modern weapons were introduced into the savage little battles that characterized Burmese warfare. However, Beijing's decision to stop aiding the BCP reflected a change in their political judgement as to how China's interests could best be served. Recurrent animosity with India and the ongoing struggle with Vietnam through the 1980s prompted a desire for a stable southeastern frontier. The Chinese sought allies with the military in both Bangkok and Rangoon, and large weapons sales to Thailand in the mid-1980s were followed by a US \$1.2 billion deal with Burma in 1990.

Aircraft, helicopters, large field guns, medical and logistic supplies, and vast amounts of ammunition boosted Burma's military almost overnight. In the fall of 1991 the Karens successfully reopened their insurgency in the Irrawaddy delta, and set battles against entrenched positions have become more frequent as Rangoon's armies have grown (from 160,000 to 280,000 in five years), and the numbers of casualties have increased accordingly.

A major irony is the financial gain SLORC has received from Western petroleum companies, which have poured millions into Burma since 1988, even while their governments have condemned the human rights abuses. Engaging in the hunt for oil and gas contributes hard currency vital to keeping the regime afloat, and despite recent widespread condemnation by the world's democracies, an unprecedented unanimous resolution by the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly demanding the release of all political prisoners and recognition of the 1990 election results – the situation remains unchanged.

IT IS ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT INSIDE THE country and the greed of the leadership that is likely to prove the regime's undoing. Although goods are plentiful, inflation has driven the prices of imports and even basic foods beyond the reach of many people. Even the families of

soldiers, protected in the past from such hardships, are now suffering. Anyone not linked to SLORC struggles for survival. It is also true that the opposition that briefly coalesced around the NLD in the 1990 elections seems shattered; the multiple fractures of ethnicity, competing economic interests, and the corruption endemic in Burma's massive narcotics trade (over half the heroin on the world market now comes from the Golden Triangle in the Shan States) gives little hope that any well-managed regime can pull itself quickly out of the ruins when SLORC finally collapses.

The international community must be prepared to move quickly in helping Aung San Suu Kyi reform the NLD and carry out the mandate given by the population in the 1990 election. Time will be needed to form a new constitution responsive at last to minority interests, and to recruit the thousands of Burmese, abroad and at home, who are competent to manage government. New textbooks must be written, the universities and education system restructured, the courts reformed, and private corporations given a chance to grow apart from the machinations of public officials. A United Nations presence will very probably be called for, and substantial economic assistance required.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI IS A NOVICE POLITICIAN and an inexperienced administrator, although her UN work on administrative and budget questions engaged her in large policy issues. Assuming she survives incarceration, she will have rough sailing ahead indeed, given the fractious divisions within Burma, and the enormous problems left by Ne Win and SLORC.

Burma's neighbours will play a decisive role in shaping a successor government. The ASEAN countries, China, and India have common interests in stability. With the manoeuvring necessary to survive the Cold War a waning habit, abetting a neighbour's corruption and state terror is not in the interest of adjacent governments who are themselves seeking foreign investment, millions of tourists, and leadership roles in the region.

Burma's immediate future is bleak, but the longer run could well be brighter. Japan and the other Western democracies will be important sources of finance, as they are in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, but their roles will be most crucial in helping the country re-enter the world after nearly thirty years of isolation. The abuse of its citizens by Ne Win and the regimes he fostered has cost an entire generation its birthright. Until very recently, no foreign government condemned his policies – a contradiction it has taken far too long to correct. □