

ROUNDTABLE ON BURMA

May 27, 1999

Ottawa

On May 27, 1999, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development organised a roundtable on Burma in Ottawa. The main objectives of the roundtable were to continue the evolution and thinking about Canadian foreign policy towards Burma (including a continued discussion from the 1997 Vancouver roundtable); to share past experience and the expertise of the diverse participants, including NGOs, government officials, academics, church and labour representatives, as well as Burmese students; and to test new ideas and approaches. The following is a summary of the discussion.

I. The Political and Socio-Economic Background in Burma -- Some Canadian Assessments

The current situation in Burma and the general direction of Canadian foreign policy was described by the **Honourable Raymond Chan**, M.P., Secretary of State, Asia-Pacific, who pointed out that besides North Korea, Burma is one of the most difficult countries to work with and to influence. While one may see movement towards democracy even in Communist China, it has become increasingly difficult to "crack the shell" in Burma. Minister Chan emphasised that the situation is getting worse. This development poses difficulties for policy makers in Canada. Despite the fact that Minister Axworthy toughened up Canada's stand toward Burma two years ago, there has been no positive development there.

Minister Chan then invited the roundtable to generate thoughts and new ideas to help make headway in Burma.

The Canada's Ambassador in Bangkok, **Bernard Giroux**, shared his experience from working in Burma. After a prolonged period of waiting for accreditation to Burma, he began to travel around the country to establish contacts and learn more about the general situation. His assessment was rather bleak. He said that there has not been a change in four years despite measures implemented by the international community. In 1998, the situation worsened when detentions and imprisonment increased. There is no political will from the government to negotiate. Perhaps the only positive signs detectable are the verbal agreement to let the International Red Cross Committee to return and to allow the visit of a UN Commission. Another escalating problem the Ambassador addressed was the high Burmese drug production and trade, which saw a very slight decrease in 1998.

Burma has been hit by the Asian crisis as much as any other country in the region. While