

BURMA (MYANMAR)

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Burma continued to deteriorate in 1998. The prospects for any improvements in 1999 are bleak.

BACKGROUND

Burma's military regime continues to show no commitment to negotiate with Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) which won the 1990 elections with an overwhelming majority. Since the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in 1995 from 6 years of house arrest, the military regime has remained intent on marginalizing her while pursuing its plans for a constitution entrenching the role of the military. Aung San Suu Kyi has reacted by pulling the NLD out of the national constitutional convention and continues to urge the international community to freeze foreign investment and increase diplomatic pressure on the military regime. Her threat, in August 1998, to convene the parliament elected in 1990 prompted a major crackdown against the NLD.

The Burmese economy is deteriorating, in large measure because of the regional economic crisis. The foreign investment anticipated from Burma's Southeast Asian neighbours has not materialized. Poverty in the countryside is increasing and the Burmese regime is hard pressed to cover basic human needs.

Although the Burmese military has negotiated **cease fires** with fifteen ethnic groups that were fighting for greater autonomy, some of these cease fires have become fragile as pressure mounts for a more comprehensive political settlement. In January 1997, the Burmese army launched a military offensive against the Karen National Union forcing tens of thousands of Karen refugees into Thailand and creating an ongoing humanitarian emergency on the Thai-Burmese border. In three separate incidents, during 1998, pro-Rangoon forces staged cross-border raids on refugee camps in Thailand.

Despite some limited progress by the military regime in **narcotics eradication**, opium production is continuing in the ethnic areas. There have been reports suggesting that individual government officials are directly involved in opium production and trafficking. Burma remains the largest source of illegal heroin entering North America.

Violations of human rights continue on a wide scale including extrajudicial and arbitrary killing, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, deaths in custody, absence of due process of law, severe restrictions on freedoms of opinion, expression, assembly and association, violations of freedom of movement and forced relocation. An International Labour Organization (ILO) Commission of Inquiry reported, in August 1998, that there was abundant evidence of the pervasive use of forced labour throughout Burma.