



# Burma Overview



Photo by Joe Levy, M.D.

## NUMBERS AT-A-GLANCE\*

Total population in Burma	50 million
Internally displaced people within eastern Burma	500,000
Total forced migration (internal and refugee) in past decade	3 million
Burmese refugees in Thailand	1.5 million
Estimated child soldiers	70,000

\*Sources: The Burma Campaign UK, burmacampaign.org.uk; BBC News, bbc.co.uk/news; Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, internal-displacement.org

## Background

- Burma became independent from British colonial rule in 1948. In 1962, a brutal military junta took power, crushing personal freedoms through torture, political imprisonment and censorship. This army regime, now known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), currently controls the country.
- The name Myanmar was given to the country by the SPDC in 1989. However, pro-democracy activists still use the old name, Burma, to vocalize their objection to military rule.
- The people of Burma face some of the most egregious human rights violations in the world. The military government uses forced recruitment of child soldiers, forced labor and starvation to control its citizens. Females are particularly targeted with violence, and civilian women and girls are often raped or used as sex slaves. Despite having no external enemies, the government maintains a standing army of up to 500,000, one of the largest in Asia.
- Political dissent is prohibited in Burma. Mass public demonstrations, most notably those led by student activists and Burmese monks on August 8, 1988 (known as 8-8-88) and in the fall of 2007, have been met with widespread and violent suppression by the military regime. Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi—whose National League for Democracy Party received the vast majority of the votes in a 1990 election—has been under house arrest for 12 out of the last 18 years.
- With a severe lack of health education and support, malaria and malnutrition rates in Burma are among the worst in the world. With a population constantly on the run, children cannot access education. This is particularly true of ethnic minorities, particularly the Karen, Shan and Karenni, who are denied freedom to speak their languages and practice their religious and cultural beliefs.
- The U.S. government, European Union and other Western nations have enforced economic sanctions against Burma. By contrast, China, India, and Thailand are the largest trading partners and economic supporters of the junta.
- On May 2, 2008 Cyclone Nargis caused catastrophic destruction in Burma leaving up to one million people homeless, contaminating water supplies, cutting off electricity and destroying much of the country's already-poor infrastructure. Given the latest reports this may be the world's deadliest natural disaster since the tsunami of 2004.



# The AJWS Response

## Empowering Burmese Refugees on the Thai-Burma Border

AJWS has supported women, human rights and development work with Burmese refugee and migrant populations in Thailand and along Burma's borders since 2002. AJWS currently provides grants to 19 community-based organizations addressing diverse issues, including primary education and teacher training, women's leadership, community organizing, reproductive health education and HIV/AIDS prevention. Examples of this work includes:

- Karen Women's Organization, a collective of Karen minority women working along the Thai-Burma border, provides social welfare for refugees as well as promoting women's rights.
- Borderline Women's Collective works to create livelihoods for refugee and ethnic minority women living along the Thai-Burma border.
- Social Action for Women and Shan Women's Action Network address HIV/AIDS prevention and care in the Burmese refugee population.
- Young Chi Oo Workers Association provides a safe place for migrant workers from Burma to learn about labor laws, while safeguarding workers who file labor rights claims against harassment and intimidation.

## AJWS In Action

- **Donate to AJWS Rapid Relief Fund:** Please consider a generous contribution to enable communities in Burma to respond, recover and rebuild in the wake of the cyclone's disaster.
- **Call the White House:** President Bush has supported strong sanctions against the military regime in Burma, but he can do more now. AJWS is already calling on the president not to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing due to the Chinese government's involvement with the Sudanese government; encourage him to do the same unless China takes concrete steps to end its support for the military government in Burma. Call the White House comment line at 202.456.1111. You can also send an e-mail to President Bush from the AJWS Web site at: <http://action.ajws.org/campaign/olympicsburma>
- **Contact your senators and representative:** Tell them to pass strong legislation for Burma. The Burma Democracy Promotion Act of 2007 and the Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2007 have already passed in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Now Congress needs to reconcile the two versions of the bill and send a final version to President Bush for signature without delay. This legislation will dramatically strengthen U.S. sanctions against the military government in Burma. Take action by sending an e-mail from the AJWS Web site: <http://action.ajws.org/campaign/burmabill>



For more information about efforts to end the crisis in Burma and to learn more about AJWS' other advocacy efforts:

[www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)

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