

A close-up, low-angle portrait of a young girl with dark hair, smiling broadly. She is wearing a light blue top and a small gold earring. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and white.

**PROMOTING
HUMAN RIGHTS IN
BURMA**

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.

AJWS advances the health and rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promotes recovery from conflict, disasters and oppression; and defends access to food, land and livelihoods. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by mobilizing our community in the U.S. to advocate for global justice. Working together, we strive to build a more just and equitable world.

IN BURMA, AJWS supports 33 social change organizations working to bring peace, democracy and justice to a country that has been plagued by conflict and oppression. Our grantees work inside the country and on both sides of the Thailand-Burma border, where hundreds of thousands fled to escape persecution by Burma's violent military regime.

AJWS has been supporting human rights efforts in Burma since 2002, and today we focus on two of the most pressing issues facing the country's most oppressed populations: 1) the lack of basic civil and political rights—particularly for ethnic minorities and women; and 2) the struggle for control over land, food and water resources critical to the survival of poor and marginalized communities. As Burma's grassroots groups push for peace, protection and respect for human rights, AJWS is by their side, providing financial support, technical assistance, solidarity and an unwavering commitment to change.



ABOVE Monks travel across Inle Lake in Burma. *Photograph by Jenna Capeci*

FRONT COVER A participant from a "girls circle" organized by AJWS grantee Girl Determined, which helps adolescent girls gain the skills and confidence needed to become leaders. *Photograph by David Rotbard*

WHERE OUR GRANTEEES WORK IN BURMA

AJWS has supported human rights efforts in Burma since 2002 and currently provides financial support to 33 grassroots organizations working in the country or along its border with Thailand.



Some AJWS grantee organizations in Burma prefer not to have their names and activities publicized because they fear government scrutiny and interference in their work. This map depicts the areas where grantees work, omitting the organizations' names to protect them from retribution or attack.

MAP KEY

BURMA

1. Karen
2. Karenni
3. Rangoon
4. Arakan
5. Shan
6. Kachin
7. Mon
8. Irrawaddy

THAILAND

9. Mae Hong Son
10. Chiang Mai
11. Tak

This map features state names from the British colonial period of Burma's history. After the 1989 coup, the military junta renamed many cities and states, and various factions in Burma disagree about whether the names introduced by the military should be used. The Burmese government's official names are: Kayin (Karen), Kayah (Karenni), Yangon (Rangoon), Rakhine (Arakan) and Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy).

BACKGROUND: WHY WE SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

Burma's modern history has been filled with turmoil. A civil war erupted in 1948, when the former British colony gained independence. Then a military junta seized control of Burma in 1962, launching a decades-long period of armed conflict, authoritarian rule and isolation from the rest of the world. The generals in power suppressed all dissent. The Burmese military forced children into serving as soldiers and carried out brutal attacks on ethnic and religious minorities, who faced rape, torture and murder at the hands of state security forces.

In recent years, however, the people of Burma have started to see signs of hope. The military regime has taken steps toward becoming a more just and democratic state. Since 2010, it has signed preliminary cease-fires, established a parliament and released hundreds of political prisoners, including the iconic leader of the pro-democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest for 15 years. In January 2012, the U.S. restored diplomatic ties with Burma for the first time since 1990, and President Obama made an historic trip to Burma in October 2012. Many of the changes in Burma were brought about thanks to the advocacy and activism of human rights groups, including AJWS grantees who have worked for decades to bring global attention to the atrocities they witnessed in Burma.

Despite these changes, Burma still faces severe injustice. The army has been accused of targeting and attacking civilians when conflicts break out in areas dominated by ethnic and religious minorities. Women and minorities typically hold no power in religious, political, educational and civil institutions. Violence against women is common, and soldiers have routinely used rape to harm and intimidate citizens living in conflict zones. Laws and institutions to protect people's rights are either weak or simply do not exist.

The majority of Burma's people make a living as farmers in rural areas, but Burmese laws do not protect their access to or control over the land. Burmese environmental regulation is so weak that foreign and national corporations launch development projects—including hydro-power dams, mining and huge agricultural projects—without any investigation into their impact on local people or consultation with affected communities. These projects displace people from their homes and strip away their means of survival.

To support significant and long-lasting change in Burma, AJWS focuses its work on two issues critical to advancing human rights in the country:

- Civil and political rights for all, particularly oppressed ethnic minorities and women
- Access to food, land and water resources for those who depend on them for survival

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

- Burma is the poorest country in Southeast Asia, with about 33 percent of citizens living below the international poverty line.¹
- During the military's reign of terror against ethnic and religious minorities, many fled their homes and sought refuge in Burma's forests and along both sides of the Thailand-Burma border. By late 2013, a projected 50,000 refugees will have returned to Burma.

However, 450,000 people remain displaced from their homes within the country, and 1.27 million people in Burma are considered "stateless"—not recognized as citizens by the government. At the end of 2012, Burma remained one of the major sources of refugees in the world, ranking 9th after countries like Afghanistan and Somalia.²

- The International Labor Organization has verified 770 cases of Burmese children recruited as soldiers during 2009-2012 alone.³ In 2001, a report from the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimated that Burma had one of the largest numbers of child soldiers in the world: up to 50,000 serving both the national army and opposition groups.

¹ "The World Factbook: Burma." World Factbook. Central Intelligence Agency. 2013.

² "Displacement – The new 21st century challenge." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2012.

³ "Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Myanmar." United Nations Security Council. 1 May 2013.



Karen Women's Empowerment Group organized this community meeting. *Photograph by David Rotbard*

BURMA OR MYANMAR?

You may have heard this country described as either Burma or Myanmar. Confused? There's a complex reason behind these dueling names. In 1989, Burma's military government, or "junta," changed the country's name to "Myanmar," a word taken from the language of Burma's majority ethnic group. Many of Burma's people, especially ethnic minorities, have rejected this name because they feel it represents the junta's decades-long campaign of cultural dominance, ethnic cleansing and political repression.

The Economist recently summarized the situation well: "The issue of what to call the country has been political. The junta's friends in Asia called it Myanmar. Supporters of the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, stuck with Burma. So

did the governments overseas that backed them."⁴ The U.S. government's official name for the country is still Burma. Many of our grantees working in northern and eastern Burma prefer to use the country's original name for the time being, while other grantees working in central Burma use the name Myanmar. This, like many things in Burma, could change as politics in the country continue to evolve.

Fun fact: In an episode of Seinfeld, Elaine's boss, J. Peterman, says: "I'm in Burma. You most likely know it as Myanmar—but it'll always be Burma to me."⁵

⁴ "Bye bye, Burma, Bye bye." The Economist. 21 May 2013.

⁵ "J. Peterman in Burma." Seinfeld. Youtube.com. Uploaded 5 February 2009.

OUR ISSUES

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AGAINST ETHNIC MINORITIES AND WOMEN

Burma is a deeply diverse country of varied ethnic groups and multiple languages. Tragically, the military junta has systematically excluded and discriminated against people from religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Kachin, the Karen and the Shan. People living in ethnic minority states of Burma have lived through conflict for decades. The government seized land and destroyed many communities in eastern Burma as violence continued between the national military and armed rebel groups.

Although the political situation appears to be improving, civil and political rights are still far from being a reality in Burma. The country's large military force has been accused of perpetrating deliberate and methodical violence against minorities even in the past few years, often targeting women and girls. As recently as 2010, the U.S. State Department has shared reports of widespread military rape of rural and displaced women in Burma. Ethnic tension and anti-Muslim sentiment in Burma turned to violence between Buddhist extremists and Rohingya Muslims in 2012, which Human Rights Watch described as "ethnic cleansing" sanctioned by state authorities. The government still denies Rohingya Muslims citizenship and considers them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though they have lived locally for centuries.⁶

Grantees Effecting Change

AJWS focuses its support on organizations that are demanding the rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities. Our grassroots grantees record and report human rights violations, provide legal aid and advocate for government accountability. These organizations are often led by youth, women and ethnic minorities, who develop and deploy nonviolent tactics as they push for peace and justice in Burmese society and government.

⁶ Bajoria, Jayshree. "Understanding Myanmar." Human Rights. Council on Foreign Relations. 21 June 2013.



A woman involved in the work of Karen Women's Empowerment Group. Read more on page 11. *Photograph by David Rotbard*

AJWS grantees like **Karen Human Rights Group** document rights abuses perpetrated against ethnic minorities. They bring rights violations to public attention and have started working with new government institutions, such as the National Human Rights Commission, which was established in 2011 to investigate reports of rights abuses throughout the country. **Burma Partnership** works to attract media attention to the armed conflict that continues in some regions where ethnic minorities live, despite the government's claims that such attacks have stopped. **Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization** and **New Generation School** are empowering Burma's youth to envision and create a more democratic society.

THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND, FOOD AND WATER

Now that Burma's government has taken steps toward reform and democracy, some Burmese people who have been living in exile have started to return to their native states, although many worry about how they will be received and where they will live. As this displaced population considers the challenges of coming home, the country also faces an increase in land grabs by powerful corporate and state interests. There is a global market for the natural resources in Burma: dense timber forests, precious stones like jade and rubies, and oil and gas deposits. As a result, more and more residents are getting shoved off their land in favor of major development projects. Their options for recourse are limited because Burmese laws do not protect most farmers' rights to access or control land.

While foreign and national corporations profit from major agricultural, mining and dam projects, most people in Burma eke out a modest living from farming. When major development projects pose a threat to that livelihood, there's little regulation or government oversight to ensure that average citizens are protected. Instead, they end up thrown off their land and into intense poverty—and a very uncertain future.

Grantees Effecting Change

AJWS grantees and their allies are organizing a national farmers' movement, with a focus on educating villagers about their rights and holding public protests against companies that have stolen community lands. AJWS grantee **Karen Environmental and Social Action Network** has succeeded in securing land titles for a number of villagers in eastern Burma, providing them with improved legal protections for the land they depend on. The advocacy of several other grantees has resulted in companies publicly agreeing to return land they have taken without communities' consent.

To help grantees make the most impact, AJWS focuses on building strong networks of activists. Our strategic allies are larger organizations that work with grassroots groups in ways that complement AJWS's priorities and approach to social change. In Burma, our strategic allies work with grassroots groups to shore up their ability to run powerful campaigns and conduct social and environmental impact assessments, which help communities figure out exactly how a proposed development project could harm or help them. Developing stronger connections and skills enables these organizations and activists to more effectively work together to protect land and resource rights in Burma. Some of our grantees have already begun working together to champion sustainable forestry policies at the national level.

In this community of Karen State, new cement factories have destroyed the land. *Photograph by Jenna Capeci*

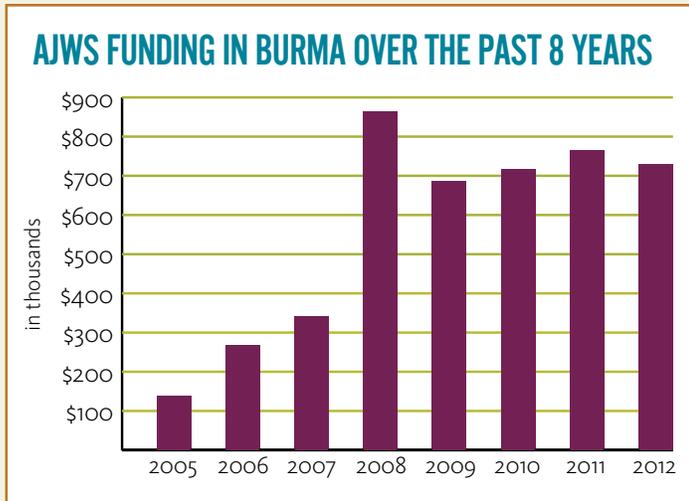


OUR COMMITMENT IN BURMA

AJWS is committed to helping Burma's oppressed people advocate for human rights and recover from violence and displacement.

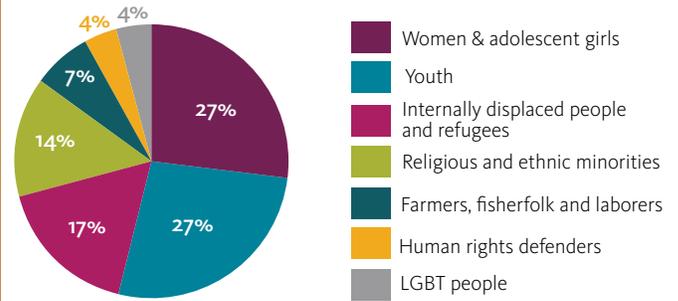
Our grantees are:

- Collecting evidence of human rights violations, particularly violence against religious and ethnic minorities, women and girls
- Providing legal aid and advocacy that will help communities seek justice and government accountability for violence and abuse
- Supporting organizations and initiatives led by youth to empower young people to usher in a new era of democracy and civil society
- Connecting AJWS grantees that are working separately within Burma and on the border, creating a more unified movement for democracy and human rights across the country



Note: In 2008, AJWS provided additional emergency funds to our grantees in Burma to respond to Cyclone Nargis. The cyclone was the worst natural disaster ever to strike Burma in recorded history, killing more than 100,000 people living along the Irrawaddy river delta.

2012 GRANTS BY POPULATIONS SERVED



AJWS is committed to building a strong movement to protect the land and resources that Burma's people depend on for survival.

Our grantees are:

- Documenting land grabs, land confiscation and industrial development that major corporations push forward at local people's expense and without consulting them
- Organizing communities to lobby for improved legal protections to prevent land rights abuse
- Building relationships between activists and local, national and international media to ensure that land rights violations are publicized

This young woman from AJWS grantee Karen Women's Empowerment Group wears *thanaka* on her cheeks. Burmese women and girls wear this bark paste as a traditional cosmetic. **Photograph by David Rotbard**



ON THE GROUND WITH AJWS GRANTEES



AJWS's grantees in Burma are making inspiring progress against tremendous odds. Each grantee's story shows how grassroots solutions are bringing about change in the country.

AJWS grantee Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization welcomed pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi to Mae Sot in 2012.
Photograph courtesy of Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization

KAREN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT GROUP

When violence and forced labor threaten women and children in Burma, Karen Women's Empowerment Group (KWEK) supports them—and pushes for policy changes to better protect them.

When Thiri* was 20, she got a job working as a maid for a wealthy family. But her new job quickly turned into a nightmare, as everyone in the family began to abuse her. The husband raped her. The wife and daughter beat and threatened her. Trapped in a home that was not her own, Thiri had no one on her side. Thiri's case is, unfortunately, not so rare in Burma. Women and girls with limited education and serious economic need sometimes get coerced or forced into jobs that promise support, but quickly result in violence and isolation.

Other Burmese women experience assault and sexual violence, sometimes at the hands of men they know—including partners or husbands. And members of the military have raped many rural and displaced women in Burma, particularly those who are ethnic and religious minorities.

In addition, the Burmese military has a record of forcing children into serving as soldiers. Especially in border areas, reports continue of children as young as 11 disappearing, forcibly “recruited” into the army. In regions where Burmese authorities still operate with such impunity, it's no surprise that there's little enforcement of the country's already limited legal protections for the rights of women and children.

Responding to crisis and forging a better future

AJWS grantees like KWEK are working to resolve these issues and advance women's rights in Burma. Women's rights activists from the Karen minority ethnic group founded KWEK in 2003, responding to the major problems that these leaders saw in their community: forced labor, violence and other violations of the rights of women and children.

When Thiri needed a way out of her violent situation, KWEK staff provided her with immediate support, including counseling and legal assistance. When families report missing children to the authorities and receive little or no response, KWEK steps in to help locate the kids—often working with groups like the International Labor Organization to locate them.

KWEK also seeks long-term solutions, creating real change around the issues they see affecting women and children in Burma. On a community level, staff and volunteers train community members on gender-based violence and child rights, sometimes raising awareness through educational theater performances. On a national level, KWEK draws media attention to key issues and lobbies members of the Burma parliament, asking them to strengthen laws against domestic violence and rape and to include women leaders in peace-building efforts.

**Name changed to protect the subject's identity*



Women work together at a KWEK-organized community meeting.
Photograph by David Rotbard

BURMA PARTNERSHIP

Despite differences among Burma's ethnic and religious minorities, they are all struggling for a voice. Burma Partnership helps them stand up for their rights.

In 1988, Khin Ohmar was a young college student who quickly became part of a revolution. She was one of thousands of people who took to the streets of Rangoon to protest Burma's dictatorship—part of the historic 8/8/88 demonstrations that swept the entire nation that August.

A terrifying military crackdown ensued. Student protesters were slaughtered. In the end, more than 3,000 protesters were killed and thousands more imprisoned. The protests brought the world's attention to Burma and forged many future pro-democracy leaders, including Ohmar. But the crackdown ushered in an era of intense brutality in Burma, including persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. The military government carried out rape, torture and murder in parts of the country with scale and precision; human rights groups have accused the junta of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. Many ethnic minorities fled the violence, and some have been displaced from their homes for many years.



Khin Ohmar, coordinator of Burma Partnership, rallies activists at a public demonstration. *Photograph courtesy of Burma Partnership*

Ushering in a democratic Burma by listening to ethnic minorities

Now—after more than 25 years of struggle—signs of democracy are emerging. Ohmar's dream of a better Burma is starting to come true. The government has made major steps toward reform. Still, many more are needed. In fact, Human Rights Watch still continues to publicize reports of Burmese military abuse of ethnic minorities, including sexual violence, forced labor and murdering dissidents.

Ohmar currently coordinates Burma Partnership, an AJWS strategic ally. Burma Partnership is a network of grassroots organizations that was founded in 2006 to increase regional and international support for Burma's democracy and ethnic rights movement. Social and political tensions have sometimes divided activists in Burma who identify with different ethnic and religious minorities, despite their common goals. Burma Partnership's strength comes from its ability to organize a highly diverse, multi-ethnic network of advocacy organizations, both inside the country and in exile.

To bring these groups together, Burma Partnership holds workshops for partner organizations, sharing its expertise in national and international advocacy and reporting human rights violations. Staff members have also provided consultation to ethnic organizations that want to ensure their refugees will not be pressured by the international community to return to Burma. Many refugees worry that they will be forced to return to Burma, whether they feel safe or not. In response, Burma Partnership released an international advocacy film on the issue, "Nothing About Us Without Us," which captures refugees' concerns and highlights the need for the United Nations' refugee resettlement agency and the Burmese government to listen to them.⁸ After the film was shown to the United Nations and international nonprofit organizations, some major donors backed down from efforts to rapidly develop resettlement villages for Burmese refugees.

Website: burmapartnership.org

⁸ "Nothing About Us Without Us." Burma Partnership. 2013.

KAREN ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ACTION NETWORK

Threatened with displacement, Burma's rural farmers work together to defend their land and resources.

Although the majority of Burma's people live off the land, few Burmese laws give them any control over it. In most cases, the government owns the land, and it's not difficult for government officials and agencies to take it back—or let a major corporation step in to develop it for their own profit.

It's particularly tough to make a living as a Karen farmer. The Karen are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Burma, and most reside in Karen State—where armed conflict has been a routine reality in many areas. Fighting between Burma's military and the Karen National Union, an insurgent political organization and the governing authority in part of the state, continually displaced civilians, forcing them to migrate and disrupting any claims they had to local land and resources needed to grow food. Now, even in areas of Burma where conflict is no longer common, people continue to be displaced by development projects such as digging mines or building dams.

Cultivating sustainable farms and long-term land protections

Founded in 2001, Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) is trying to improve the ability of rural people to grow their own food and have some say over how local land should be used in Karen State and other regions where the Karen live. They work with village committees, providing training on sustainable farming practices and ways to efficiently maximize crops, in addition to educating farmers about land rights.

KESAN helps farmers organize, identifying the biggest challenges facing their local communities and then taking action. For example, KESAN worked with farmers and the Karen National Union to create more progressive laws on land registration. Now, KESAN staff members are offering land registration events, helping community members put the new law into practice and complete the official process needed to secure their land.

In the future, KESAN aims to expand on its success in Karen State. KESAN's supporters are working with partners across the country to build a national movement that will secure land rights for farmers and ensure that the government considers the social and environmental impact of future development projects.

Website: kesan.asia



A KESAN staff member talks with farmers about their land rights. *Photograph courtesy of KESAN*

TRAVEL AND ACTIVISM

AJWS sends groups of Jewish leaders, rabbis, activists, philanthropists and young professionals on delegations and activist trips to meet our grantees and support their work in action. After these powerful experiences in Burma and around the world, they return home to become ever stronger advocates for global justice and *tikkun olam*—the Hebrew phrase for “repairing the world.”

From 2002 to 2013, AJWS sent more than 50 volunteers to the Burma-Thailand border, where they worked closely with dozens of grantees. Whether contributing their skills to grassroots human rights organizations or learning how to become advocates for human rights themselves, these volunteers made a difference in many ways and in many lives.

Today, AJWS’s trips are designed to prepare leaders and activists to become strong advocates for U.S. policies that will benefit people living in developing countries. For more information about opportunities to travel with AJWS, visit www.ajws.org/travel.

READ MORE

The following articles—originally featured in AJWS’s magazine, AJWS Reports, and on our blog, Global Voices—provide a closer look at AJWS’s recent work in Burma.

The Hand Behind the Killing

Documenting ethnic violence against Burma’s fleeing refugees

By **Ilana Kramer**, AJWS volunteer
AJWS Reports Magazine, Fall 2008

I spent the summer of 2007 in Mae Sot, Thailand, as part of the AJWS Volunteer Corps. I was assigned to work in the human rights documentation office of Karen Women’s Organization (KWO), which advocates for women refugees from Burma who fled their country because of ethnic violence. When I arrived I knew very little about the human rights atrocities committed by the Burmese military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). I would soon learn why and how it was exploiting, torturing and killing members of the ethnic minority groups that live within Burma’s boundaries and in refugee camps along the border, but as a newcomer, I couldn’t fathom 60 years of gut-wrenching violence and how the rest of the world had let it go on this long.

My job at KWO was to archive confidential documents cataloguing the kinds of abuses committed against

the Karen people, an ethnic minority that represents approximately seven percent of Burma’s population of 47 million and has fought for self-determination for Karen State since 1949 with its army, the Karen National Union (KNU). I read story after story of Karen women who were raped, beaten and tortured; women who watched their farms ransacked, their husbands and children murdered, their villages burned to dirt. These abuses aren’t 10 years old; they were happening last week, yesterday, only an hour ago.

Out of sheer awe I clung to the women at KWO, who I saw as nothing less than heroic freedom fighters. They would frequently travel on foot back to their villages to collect the voices of truth and torture, then return and broadcast them to the world via our Mae Sot office, hoping that someone would listen and care. As these brave women would heave the metal office gate closed, leaving for another trip, I prayed that I would see their faces again, prayed that they would not be felled by land mines or the SPDC’s guns.

The following summer I returned to Mae Sot through AJWS to work at Palaung Women’s Organization (PWO), an advocacy group for the Palaung ethnic minority who live in northern Shan State. I was asked to write a report

on the destructive effects of opium on the community and to teach teen Palaung girls leadership and English language skills.

I thought that the suffering of the Palaung would be similar to what I had witnessed with the Karen, but I quickly learned that this ethnic group suffered differently under the regime. Though Palaung people are also tortured, raped and displaced by the SPDC, these physical attacks are not the primary form of abuse here. The Palaung are victims of a less specific, less bloody—yet still devastating enemy: the drug trade. Hiding behind a seemingly innocuous flower, the poppy, the regime has destroyed Palaung communities by forcing traditional tea farmers to cultivate opium.

PWO staff described horrendous community problems in Palaung State as a result of the military's drug trafficking: widespread addiction in the villages has led to crime and violence. The regime's laws against teaching Palaung language in schools or celebrating Palaung holidays and cultural practices have left people without the support and prevention that a strong cultural identity provides. The SPDC is reaping the riches of the opium drug on the backs of Palaung communities that are losing their unique identity and falling apart. Palaung women at PWO agree that this is a "slow killing" of the very fabric of their communities. This contrasts with the devastation in Karen State, which continues to be quick and bloody.

For both communities, there is a lack of awareness that what people are experiencing is human rights abuse. Many Palaung grow up thinking that drug use, starvation and poor healthcare, lack of education and a weakened family unit are 'normal.' Karen are born into villages in war zones. They move frequently on the run and anticipate rape and murder as the grim realities of life.

Even as people in both communities begin to recognize that they are victims of abuse, there remains a disparity of blame. The Karen witness the soldiers' brutality daily and have a clear target for both the army and community protests. The Palaung also fear the physical attacks by the military, but have a harder time identifying the source of their slow killing: the societal decline, drug addiction and disintegration of their culture. It's easy to mark a crime— 'rape,' 'torture,' 'murder.' But harder to link the red flowering fields of opium to the starving, uneducated child in the Palaung home without medical care, without food, without education, without a future; to link them to the Palaung family units destroyed, and the children who won't know their culture of tea farming or Palaung language, but who will only know opium and Burmese language.

Thankfully, this veil is slowly lifting. The people of Burma—Karen, Palaung and other ethnic nationalities—are increasingly able to identify and mark the perpetrator of their broken lives and stand up for their rights.



These displaced Karen villagers fled to Thailand because of oppression from the Burmese military. *Photograph courtesy of Karen Human Rights Group*



Children of Burmese refugees living in Thailand. *Photograph by Dorcus Moo*

From activists in the villages to leaders of the democracy movement, an end to the oppression is being sought through education, protest and civil-society building. In 1990 the National League for Democracy in Burma, led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming majority in elections but has been prevented from assuming power. Yet Aung San Suu Kyi*, who has been under house arrest for thirteen years by the SPDC, remains optimistic that the people of Burma have the tools to overcome the oppression. “There will be change,” she says, “because all the military have are guns.”

The summers of 2007 and 2008 changed my world view, fueled my human rights passion and pulled on my heartstrings in reflective and provocative ways. We can’t quantify and order human rights abuses, nor would we ever want to, but we must identify them and hold the perpetrators accountable. The ethnic minority groups of Burma need peace and justice, education and fresh water, international concern and action. Identifying the hand behind the killing, both quick and slow, is the first step toward making peace, security and human rights ‘normal’ for all of the people of Burma.

*Suu Kyi has been released since this article was first published.



A typical Burmese classroom. *Photograph by Stringer/Reuters*

Burma Celebrates Its First International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia

By Myo Min, director of Human Rights Education Institute of Burma, an AJWS grantee
Global Voices blog, May 21, 2012

The ballroom at the Excel tower in Rangoon, Burma was filled with people. Youth wearing colorful outfits mingled with older men and women in traditional Burmese dress. Everyone was looking around, eager and excited. They had all come to take part in Burma's very first celebration of International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO), which happened last week on May 17. The celebration marked tremendous progress in a country that is often conservative and repressive.

Local and international media followed the event with a watchful eye, many voicing the same concern: Would it be possible to pull it off without any problems from the authorities? The organizers pushed forward and, as a result, the turnout was impressive. Over 400 people were crowded in the ballroom—members of the LGBT community, NGO workers, UN officials, local activists and media representatives.

Local and international media followed the event with a watchful eye, many voicing the same concern: Would it be possible to pull it off without any problems from the authorities?

“Homosexuality is not a sickness” was the unifying theme for all of the speeches and performances. A well-known Burmese make-up artist, Ko Mar, shared his story as a gay man in Burma who has struggled for acceptance within traditional society. He encouraged LGBT youth to maintain a strong sense of self-worth and to continue the fight for equality.

Burmese author, Att Kyaw, spoke about homophobia in Burmese society and explained that LGBT stereotypes imposed by the media often reinforce dangerous misperceptions. He reminded people that the movie industry in Burma uses gay men as comedic caricatures, rather than multidimensional characters.

A short drama called “World without Hatred” was also presented at the celebration. The film depicted the story of a gay man and the struggles he faces: ignorance from his family, isolation at school and marginalization by society.



Activists in Burma celebrate the country's first International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. *Photograph by Myo Min*

One of the highlights of the event was a segment called “Paying Respect to Seniors,” featuring elderly LGBT people in Burma. One of the participants, a 106-year-old transgender woman living in Rangoon, was brought to the event by local youth. Almost in tears, she told the audience how pleased she was to see this event take place in Rangoon and how thankful she is.

Toward the end of the day, a music group performed “We Are All Equal,” a hit song from the first LGBT album produced by Colors Rainbow in 2009.

The rainbow, an international symbol of LGBT pride, tied the event to others happening around the world, establishing the voice of the Burmese LGBT movement as one that will not be silenced.

What Does Obama's Visit to Burma Mean for Burmese People?

By AJWS Burma Country Representative*
Global Voices blog, December 18, 2012

The night before President Obama's historic visit to Burma last month, Nge Nge—a Burmese woman from Rangoon—was so excited that she couldn't sleep. In the morning, she was the first person to arrive at the University of Rangoon where Obama was scheduled to deliver his speech. Nge Nge had graduated from the University of Rangoon in 1988. Upon returning to her old stomping ground, she recalled, “This university used to be vibrant and warm with students who had close relationships with professors and

continues

*Many Burmese NGO staff prefer to keep their identities private, which protects them from any possible government retribution.

had an enjoyable learning atmosphere. Students could ask professors if they did not understand something. Now, those times have gone.”

People in Burma had been eagerly anticipating a visit from Obama. Paintings with the words “Welcome Obama” adorned downtown Rangoon. On the morning of his arrival, Burmese people in different ethnic costumes arrived on foot, sweating and looking anxious. The event brought together a diverse cross-section of Burma’s population—people from different ethnic groups, academics, political leaders, people with disabilities, grassroots activists, journalists and even human rights violators involved with land grabbing. Prominent people such as democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the well-known economist U Myint, comedian and activist Zar Ganar, and two-time Myanmar Academy Award-winning actor and film director Kyaw Thu came, too.

For many people, Obama’s arrival was an unprecedented symbol of hope. Obama is the first American president to visit Burma—a diverse country wedged between India and China, ripe with ethnic conflicts and ruled by a dictatorial government for more than five decades.

But Obama’s visit also drew criticisms. Some believe it is too premature to support Burma’s new government. Others believe Obama has ulterior motives for American

business interests or that he wishes to assert American power in order to balance Chinese influence in the region.

In his 30-minute speech, Obama covered many topics, including good governance, the importance of having a checks and balances system, Franklin Roosevelt’s four points on freedom and the value of leveraging diversity to build a strong nation. He also pledged that the U.S. will work with Burma on the long road to democracy and prosperity. Acknowledging the reform undertaken by the Thein Sein government, Obama praised Suu Kyi’s incomparable courage and emphasized that “no process of reform will succeed without national reconciliation.”

Obama also recognized the oppression of Burma’s ethnic minorities, namely the Rohingya people in the Rakhine (Arakan) region of Burma. “For too long, the people of this state, including ethnic Rakhine, have faced crushing poverty and persecution,” he remarked. “But there is no excuse for violence against innocent people [the Rohingya]. The Rohingya hold themselves—and hold within themselves—the same dignity as you do, and I do.”

Burmese people seem to agree that Burma has a long way to go to make freedom and democracy a reality. Nonetheless, people here in Rangoon are optimistic that progress is on the horizon, and Obama’s historic visit is cause for celebration.



On Nov. 19, 2012, protesters gathered in Rangoon before President Obama’s speech, calling for Obama to help stop ongoing conflict in Burma. Photograph courtesy of Burma Partnership



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ABOVE Government propaganda is common in Burma. Tatmadaw is another name for the Burmese military. *Photograph by Jenna Capeci*

BACK COVER Teenagers from Shan Youth Power, an AJWS grantee that helps youth develop leadership skills and advocate for human rights. *Photograph by Robert James Fuller*



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