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Contested Regimes, Aid Flows, and Refugee Flows: The Case of Burma

Susan Banki

Abstract: There is a substantial literature that critiques the role that international aid plays in lending support to oppressive and contested regimes. But few investigators have asked the inverse question: what happens when aid is withdrawn? Following government oppression in 1988, international aid to Burma decreased significantly, providing a case study enabling this question to be addressed. Using Burma as an example, this article asks: if the presence of aid has been shown to support oppressive and contested regimes, what is the impact when aid is withdrawn? The article reviews critiques of development and humanitarian aid and identifies three specific regime-reinforcing phenomena. It demonstrates that these have not diminished following the overall decrease of aid to Burma. The paper then addresses the related relationship between aid flows and refugee flows, and concludes with implications of the research.

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Introduction

Called "Myanmar" by the ruling military junta and "Burma" by opposition leaders who contest the current seated government, the former British colony of Burma/ Myanmar has transformed itself from the most promising of post-colonial countries to a nation notorious for human rights violations and declining health and education standards.

Like many countries emerging from colonial rule, the post-independence era in Burma[1] has been characterized by conflict, corruption, and the existence of numerous groups contesting the government's legitimacy. In addition, Burma's leaders share with other autocratic regimes systematic and institutionalized methods for obtaining and maintaining power, such as a government-controlled media, patronage, and control of supposedly independent civil society groups. It is not surprising that the country's current state of crisis and contestation has made it a notable source of refugees, many of whom flee to Thailand, though others to China, India, and Bangladesh.

Following a violent crackdown by the military in 1988, the vast majority of aid to Burma was withdrawn. Official development assistance went from 435 million USD in 1988 to 175 million USD in 1989.[2] Since then, a debate has emerged about the role of humanitarian and development aid in Burma (see for example, Steinberg 1991; Smith 1994; Altsean-Burma 2002; Pedersen 2004; ICG 2006). This debate has intensified in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, a humanitarian crisis of enormous magnitude that has led to increasing calls for rethinking the role of aid not only for those affected by the cyclone, but across the country (see for example, ICG 2008; Kurtzer 2009).

On the other hand, many authors have elucidated the role international development and humanitarian aid has played in supporting and reinforcing the structures, economies, and institutions of oppressive and contested regimes (see for example Anderson 1999 and de Waal 1997). The literature demonstrates that the presence of aid can and does lend support to such regimes, but thus far it has failed to ask the follow-up question: what happens when aid is withdrawn?

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1 The author uses "Burma" in this article because it is the more colloquial name for the country.

2 See comparison statistics in "Official development assistance and official aid" for Myanmar, online: <http://www.worldbank.org> (May 7, 2009).

This article[3] makes a modest contribution to the current debate about the efficacy of international aid by examining the impact of the withdrawal of aid from Burma post-1988. The article asks: if the presence of aid has been shown to support oppressive and contested regimes, what is the impact when aid is withdrawn? The article begins with a history of the current regime in Burma, placed in the context of structures of violence and conflict. A review of critiques of development and humanitarian aid identifies three specific regime-reinforcing phenomena, and demonstrates that these have not diminished following the overall decrease of aid to Burma. The paper then addresses the related relationship between aid flows and refugee flows, and concludes with implications of the research, particularly in light of the very recent increase in aid in Burma following the devastating effects of Cyclone Nargis.

Burmese History in Brief

Burma's pre-colonial social structures, its conditions under colonialism, and its post-independence struggle have yielded a complex set of conflicts that defy dichotomous explanation, with not all the parties to the conflict falling easily into either the "pro-democracy" or "pro-military" side. Nor can one point only to ethnic independence resistance as the source of Burma's volatility. Ethnic minority groups have been fighting for varying degrees of self-determination since Burma's independence from Britain in 1948. At the same time, there has been a push for democratic reform since General Ne Win led a bloodless coup in 1962. The conflict's longevity and intractable nature can be attributed to the combination of ethnic minorities struggling for independence and the push for democracy from a movement dominated by the Burman ethnic majority.

Following more than 100 years of colonialism under British rule, Burma gained independence in 1948 in the wake of World War II. Fourteen years of fragile democratic rule – replete with separatist armed struggles and counterinsurgency operations – ended in 1962, when General Ne Win overthrew the elected government. Burma's inability to transition to a successful democracy has been alternatively attributed to a pre-colonial subsistence economy (Taylor 1998); Britain's divide and rule strategies (Fink 2001); a favouring of Indian elites over the Burmese (Steinberg 1981); and a legacy of divisive political categories reinforced by ethnic differences (Lang 2002).

3 The author is indebted to Toshi Yoshihara and Matthew Price for comments on an early version of this paper and to two anonymous reviewers for their excellent suggestions on a later version.

With few exceptions, Burma's failed attempt at democracy has been explained by the links between ethnicity and power. Many authors have catalogued the ways in which authoritarian rulers manipulate ethnic divisions to maintain their control. Asafa Jalata describes such processes at work in the Horn of Africa, where under the conditions of social exclusion of dominated classes "the state is an instrument of the ruling class because it denies the masses and subordinated ethnonations political representation in a decision making process" (Jalata 1995: 31). In Burma, the struggle for political representation that emerged post-independence, and the desire by several ethnonations to participate in decision-making processes, spurred separatist armed struggles and subsequent counterinsurgency operations. When General Ne Win overthrew the elected government in 1962, he did it with the promise to restore order, using the struggle of the dominated classes as a pretext for authoritarian action.

Throughout the next 25 years, Ne Win continued to exert nearly absolute power, as the country lurched from total nationalization of commerce and industry in 1962 under the aegis of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) – of which Ne Win was the chairman until 1988 – to the creation of a People's Assembly in 1974 that claimed to transfer power from the military to civilians. In actuality, Ne Win was installed as its new president, blurring the civil-military divide.

Years of economic mismanagement, including arbitrary demonetization policies and the "excessive hand of the state" (Turnell 2006: 1) led to a financial crisis, spurring demonstrations in the early months of 1988. Brutal police responses and protests by angry activists and students culminated in the famous 8888 uprising on August 8, 1988, after which the military instigated a coup, instituted martial law, and established a new ruling council, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Thousands of protestors were killed during this period; the crackdown was acknowledged to be more dramatic and bloodier than Tiananmen Square a year later (Lintner 1998: 167). The results of multi-party elections were ignored two years later, and the victorious opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, placed under house arrest. Cosmetic reforms notwithstanding – the regime changed the name of the country from "Burma" to "Myanmar" in 1989 and renamed the government the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997 – the country's oppressive policies and active control by the military remained.

Whatever the name of the country or government, throughout the past 45 years, Burma's armed forces, the *Tatmadaw*, have firmly retained their power and resisted initiatives toward democracy. Since the 1960s the regime has responded to continuing insurgencies by ethnic minorities with the "Four Cuts" strategy, an attempt to isolate insurgents from their civilian

support and bases by cutting off food, intelligence, funding, and recruits from armed rebels.[4] Arbitrary arrest, forced labour, and torture have been similarly used to intimidate civilian populations in ethnic insurgent areas (HRDU 2007: Chapters 3 and 4), as well as forced relocation of entire villages (ibid.: Chapter 13).

These tactics are functional, rather than irrational (Keen 1998). That is, outright violence against ethnic minorities does not stem from illogical hatred, but from the desire of the governing powers to maintain control over resources and people through fear. Likewise, rape is used as a means of ethnic control. Evidence that rape has been used in Burma as an instrument to preserve power is supported by the fact that rape is not common in ethnic areas that support the military junta, but used primarily in opposition areas (Martin 2002).

In implementing the Four Cuts and associated violence, the military created the current refugee crisis by displacing civilian populations and forcing them into strategic areas under army control. Many civilians fled into the mountains as early as the 1950s, and in the 1970s began to seek refuge across Burma's borders. In 1978, the Muslim Rohingyas from Arakan State crossed into Bangladesh in the hundreds of thousands, only to be returned to Burma a year later. And continuing into the early 1980s, ethnic minorities (including the Shan, Lahu, Akha, and primarily Karen) crossed the border into Thailand, where their arrival "went largely unnoticed" (Smith 1997: 111).

In the wake of the 1988 uprising however, several thousand educated, urban and primarily Burman civilians fled across Burma's borders and joined their ethnic minority counterparts in a struggle against the *Tatmadaw*. Refugee flows from Burma into neighbouring countries have continued since then, fluctuating with changes in levels of political repression, localized violence, and seasonal factors relating to military attacks and the ability to travel in the rainy and dry seasons. The number of refugees varies depending on the definition, but the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants estimated in December 2007 that refugees and other persons of concern from Burma totalled 725,000: 400,000 in Thailand, nearly 180,000 in Bangladesh, 75,000 in India, 70,000 in Malaysia, with about 10,000 resettled to third countries (USCRI 2008: 30-31). In addition, there are an estimated 2 million migrants in Thailand (TBBC 2008) who have left Burma for reasons which are arguably regime-related (Caouette and Pack 2002) and another 500,000 who remained internally displaced in Burma (TBBC 2007).

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4 According to Hazel Lang, the Four Cuts strategy was an adaptation of the "base denial" strategy against guerilla warfare developed by Sir Robert Thompson in defeating the communist insurgency in Malaysia (Lang 2002: 38).

Two recent events have brought attention, but little change, to the country: the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis. In September 2007, Burma experienced the most significant outbreak of political unrest in almost two decades since the 1988 uprising, when tens of thousands of people – led by saffron-robed monks chanting the *metta sutta* (Buddhist discourse on loving-kindness) – took to the streets of cities and towns all around the country to protest against the regime. The protests were precipitated by sudden 100-500% fuel price rises that pushed an already impecunious population further into poverty. The protests, which included both monks and courageous political activists, were met with a heavily armed, brutal crackdown.

In May of 2008, Cyclone Nargis struck the Irrawaddy Delta and killed 140,000 and displaced as many as 2.5 million people. The government experienced widespread criticism in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, failing to permit aid workers and humanitarian aid to enter the country quickly (see for example, Belanger and Horsey 2008; Humphris 2008). A year later, access to the delta remained limited. More worrying, Nargis struck hard in the fertile rice-growing region of the country, destroying fields, tools, and seeds, and reducing rice output in cyclone-affected areas by one-third in 2008 (EIU 2009: 12). Housing and transport in the south were severely damaged as well. While Nargis did little to bring about reform in Burma, it did, as will be discussed in the following section, usher in unprecedented flows of humanitarian aid.

Aid Flows into Burma

Since its independence, Burma has been the recipient of varying types and levels of aid from different regions, including official development assistance and humanitarian assistance from UN institutions. In general, aid to Burma increased annually until the 1988 uprising and subsequent crackdown, when several countries reduced aid to Burma. In the aftermath of the 1988 crackdown, for example, the European Union suspended development cooperation projects and cancelled debt relief, among other punitive measures (GFFO 2009). In the mid-1990s, Burma witnessed a slight rise in both humanitarian and development aid, but both at lower levels than before the 1988 crackdown. This trend reversed itself in 2008.

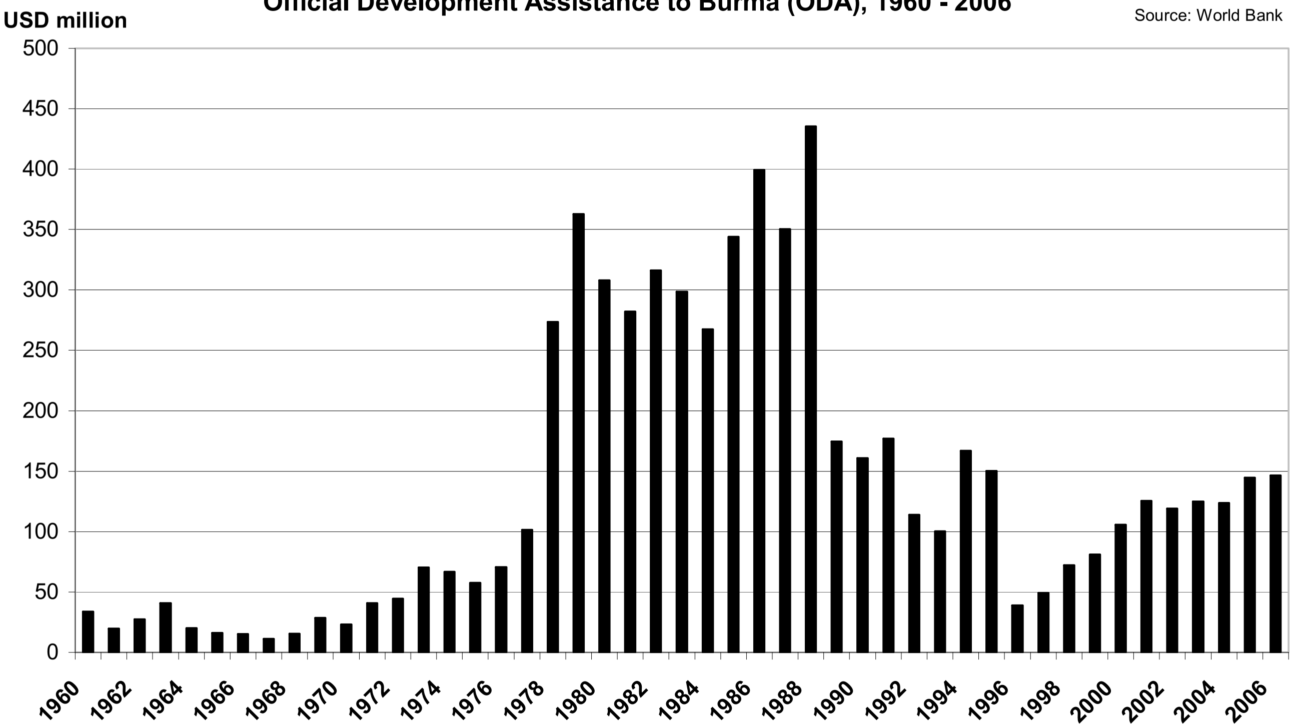
Official development aid (ODA), which includes aid undertaken by donor government agencies, gradually increased over the decades and then sharply decreased post-1988 (see table 1). ODA decreased from 435 million USD in 1988 to 175 million USD in 1989. In 2006, it stood at 146 million

USD.[5] Bilateral assistance (a portion of ODA), not surprisingly, mirrors this trend. In August of 1988, West Germany halted its 65 million DEM per year aid program to show its disapproval of the killing in Rangoon (Lintner 1990). Japan cut aid as well: from 1962 onward, Japan played a significant role in Burma's foreign aid and by 1987, accounted for 71.5% of all of Burma's foreign aid, and 20% of Burma's national budget (Oishi and Furuoka 2003: 898). As protests got underway in 1988, Japan froze its current assistance package to Burma. Unlike other industrialized countries, it recognized the SLORC regime and released the funds to Burma it had already committed, but from 1989 to 1991, gave no further assistance (Seekins 1992: 246). Although aid has remained "suspended in principle" (Strefford 2005: 109), small amounts of targeted aid have also gradually been re-introduced. In 1995, Japan released 10 million USD in agricultural assistance, attempting to nudge Burma toward democracy (Elliot et al. 2004).

There are data that humanitarian assistance has been on the increase, although historically at far lower levels than before 1988. In 1999, Australia attempted to establish a human rights commission on Burma that would, among other initiatives, provide training for the police in Burma. Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's criticism that this offer was like "asking the fox to look after the chicken" (Fink 2001: 240) in May of 2001, Australia renewed its human rights initiative at a cost of 140,000 AUD in 2002 (Altsean-Burma 2002: 7). In recent years, the German government has been providing 4 to 5 million EUR each year to fund poverty reduction, health care, and education projects (GFFO 2009). Further, UN humanitarian assistance has been on the increase, although data are only available since 2001. In 2001, Burma received 1.6 million USD in humanitarian aid, which increased to 33 million USD by 2007 (see FTS 2008).

5 See comparison statistics in "Official development assistance and official aid" for Myanmar, online: <http://www.worldbank.org> (May 7, 2009).

Table 1:
Official Development Assistance to Burma (ODA), 1960 - 2006



Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 changed the scope of humanitarian aid donations to Burma. The cyclone brought humanitarian aid pledges and donations to Burma in 2008 to a record-high of 477.5 million USD (ibid.). Thus, in 2008 there has finally been a stark reversal in the trend of aid to Burma. Because this paper examines the *withdrawal* of aid, rather than its reintroduction, the situation in post-Nargis Burma is only treated in the final sections of the paper.

The Value of Aid

A review of the literature that assesses development aid and humanitarian practices reveals the ambiguity with which the value of aid is perceived. While aid is often introduced to ease the suffering caused by countries in crisis, several authors have demonstrated that an international humanitarian presence actually facilitates behaviours and events that support oppressive and contested regimes. Even the harshest critics of aid rarely argue that aid *causes* oppression. However the literature suggests that both development and humanitarian aid can reinforce the structures, economies, and institutions of contested regimes.

This section of the article identifies three ways in which aid can reinforce oppressive regimes. The article examines each of these phenomena in turn and finds that in Burma, each phenomenon has either remained steady or increased despite the withdrawal of aid.

Three ways (suggested by the literature) in which aid lends support to oppressive and contested regimes:

1. External legitimization;
2. Creating or aggravating group divisions in society;
3. Monetary and resource reinforcement (asset transfer).

External Legitimization of Current Regime

Much has been said about the derivation of political legitimacy in Southeast Asia (Alagappa 1995) and in Burma in particular (Steinberg 2006). Unlike the Lockean social contract, which relies on the consent of the governed, political legitimacy in Burma may come from support of Buddhist and monarchic traditions (McCarthy 2008) or from factors like family lineage or even natural occurrences, such as a good crop year.[6] *External* legitimacy,

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6 While Cyclone Nargis might, at first blush, appear to present a case for natural events that could undermine the junta's internal legitimacy, the government's decision in 2005 to move the capital from Rangoon in the Irrawaddy Delta to remote

however, is that which comes from the recognition of outside states and institutions.

The literature suggests that both development aid and humanitarian programs require the consent of the government in control. Aid organizations and authoritative governments thus require from one another mutual stamps of approval to function, and in the process, the former legitimates the latter (Slim 1997). While this is particularly true of official aid which is channelled through government bodies, it is also so of small NGOs who attempt to maintain as little contact as possible with the governing regime. Whether they distance themselves or not, members of the aid enterprise require the consent of the regime to obtain visas, purchase supplies, and set up offices.

Recognition of a current regime can occur on several levels – diplomatic, strategic, and press-related – and in Burma the withdrawal of aid has done little to diminish that recognition. First, the purpose of visits by American congressmen intending to criticize the regime is undermined by their very presence there. UN rapporteurs who meet with military generals on Burma's soil reinforce the junta's proclivity for self-importance. Even US State delegations that meet with both government personnel and opposition leadership are highly orchestrated to maximize the SPDC's positive image. The Burmese government exploits such visits for photo opportunities to use in the Burmese press and to negate the criticism it receives (Gray 1994).

Second, Burma's rulers have shrewdly capitalized on fears about China to obtain and maintain powerful regional legitimacy. Following Burma's nearly complete isolation in 1988, it turned to China, from which it received badly needed trade agreements and technical expertise. "The aid freeze by the West and Japan after 1988 gave China the opportunity to assume the role of Burma's largest donor of official development assistance" (Seekins 1997: 531).

Eager to gain access to Burma's natural resources and pipelines to the Bay of Bengal, China was a willing trading partner. Over the years, China's eagerness to strengthen its toehold in Southeast Asia through trade, oil, and a strategically-placed port has led to increasingly improved relations between the two countries. Commercial ties are improving, and it has even been suggested that Burma may begin trading in the CNY, the Chinese currency (*Economist* 2008). Further, economic interests have spilled over into the political realm, as evidenced by China's veto of UN Security Council resolu-

Naypidaw means that government buildings and structures were not affected by the cyclone, which could be construed as an argument for increased legitimization.

tions critical of Burma in 2007, just three days before it secured exploration rights to certain oil sites (ibid.).

Recognizing the strategic implications of a strong Sino-Burmese relationship and eager to diminish Burma's connection to China, Southeast Asian nations adopted the policy of "constructive engagement" whose most important manifestation has been Burma's acceptance in 1997 into ASEAN, Southeast Asia's regional political and economic bloc. Among other factors, ASEAN was also motivated by a desire to increase its economic position; Burma's natural resources in teak, rubber, oil and gas have sparked ASEAN's interest for purposes of trade and investment.[7]

ASEAN's acceptance of Burma into its political and economic fold sends a stronger message than aid's withdrawal, and the junta's use of ASEAN to generate economic and political gains has been noted by many authors (Selth 1998; McCarthy 2006). In fact, ASEAN nations admitted Burma despite the threat of the European Union (EU) to suspend dialogue with ASEAN due to Burma's dismal human rights record – a threat it carried out. From the junta's perspective, ASEAN was willing to sacrifice its relationship with the EU in order to include Burma as a member country. Further legitimacy was bestowed on the junta when, in 2000, the EU renewed its dialogue with ASEAN, without requiring any concessions from Burma.

Despite the withdrawal of aid post-1988, a combination of regional, strategic, and economic factors suggests that the legitimacy of Burma's regime was sustained, and, with its acceptance into ASEAN, even strengthened. Because the Burmese government requires recognition from nearby nations in order to preserve power, generate financial resources, and manage the civic affairs of the country with near omnipotence, the military rulers value their relationships with their neighbouring countries more than with the West. The regime's ability to find pliable foreign partners has provided them with defenders when attacked in international fora. Thus, the withdrawal of aid had little effect on the external legitimacy of the regime.

Creating or Aggravating Group Divisions in Society

Good intentions notwithstanding, the literature proposes that provision of aid may deepen the fault lines in a nation's cultural and political topography. Uvin's (1998) account of the way in which the provision of aid facilitated the systems that increased structural violence in post-colonial Rwanda makes a

7 Marvin Ott notes that if the impetus for constructive engagement stems from the idea that there is great economic potential in Burma, it is a notable irony in light of the fact that Burma's economic staying power is highly questionable (1998: 74).

strong case against the blind application of development strategies. In Rwanda the development enterprise interacted with internal processes of exclusion and division (among the ethnic Hutu and Tutsi, and high-living Bazungu) to increase inequality, institutionalize discrimination, and disregard state policies of violence before the genocide (Uvin 1996). Many states capitalize on such division to maintain or increase power.

In addition, aid has a tendency to result in dependency, ignoring local decision-making capacities and undercutting coping strategies (see, for example, Duffield 1994). When humanitarian aid addresses the symptoms of crisis, and not the causes, fault lines in society may be aggravated, and one manifestation is the creation and sustenance of privileged groups, whether these are along ethnic, regional or religious lines (Anderson 1999).

Despite the withdrawal of aid to Burma post-1988, group divisions continue unabated, and the regime has exploited these effectively to maintain its grip on power. As in Rwanda, there is a clear favouring of one ethnic group (the majority Burmans) over others, which has been an important element in exacerbating ethnic struggle in the country.[8] In addition, Burma's ability to divide and rule the varying ethnic groups has further aggravated group tensions. Ironically, ceasefire agreements reveal the extent to which the junta has manipulated ethnicity and religion to sow discord. Although 14 of the approximately 25 ethnic opposition groups in existence in 1989 have signed official ceasefires with the SPDC, pockets of resistance are strong and reveal the extent to which divisions occur not only *between* the majority Burmans and ethnic minorities, but also *among* ethnic minority groups (see *Irrawaddy* 2005).

The most consequential rift within an ethnic group is that of the divide among the Karen. In 1994, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) lost many of its members to the formation of the junta-supported Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Only a month later, the DKBA helped the *Tatmadaw* find and destroy the ethnic insurgent headquarters at Manerplaw on the Thai-Burmese border in December of 1995, leading to a significant influx of refugees across the border into Thailand.

It has been effectively argued that Burma's ceasefires do not, in fact, meet the technical definition of actual ceasefires because of re-armings and a lack of bilateralism (Moser-Puangsuwan 2000). But all of these "agreements" underscore the difficulty of unifying the positions, actions, and goals of various ethnic groups, since the groups made their pacts with the ruling regime only to protect their own territories, and to the exclusion of greater

8 It is also true that ethnicity was used by the Burman-dominated democratic regime of U Nu in the 1950s, well before an active presence of aid, or its withdrawal.

autonomy and freedom. In addition, the junta has taken advantage of regional and skill differences to build its forces. By offering better living standards to the uneducated, to those from rural areas, and to ethnic minority populations, Burma's rulers have been successful in recruiting security units and soldiers (Maung 1992: 26).

Ananda Rajah argues that in addition to ideological and pragmatic considerations, ethnic groups have been motivated by social, economic, and political conditions that led to contradicting modes of thought (Rajah 1998: 18). Numerous cases of the legitimization and validation of ethnic drug armies whose present connections with the military regime allow them to get rich and stay rich have been documented (Lintner 1998: 171-178). Political conditions among neighbouring states have also contributed to the divisions. During the Cold War, the Thai military quietly supported armed ethnic groups as a way to thwart Burma's Communist Party. As the threat of communism faded, the Thai military began to work more closely with the Burmese military and pressured armed ethnic groups to sign ceasefires (Fink 2001: 235).

There is no question that Burma's divide-and-rule tactics have been reinforced by the fact that different ethnic groups are resource-starved and struggling to survive. It is less clear, however, if the withdrawal of aid to the entire country has specifically affected these ethnic groups, and thus reinforced the power of the junta. Furthermore, the various ethnic groups in Burma defy easy categorization and their political movements have a polyethnic character. "The safest interpretation, then, would be that perceptions of race are just one determinant in political-social behavior" (Smith 1999: 35). Just as one cannot point to race as the origin for all of Burma's woes, neither can one point to the aid or its withdrawal as the continuation of those difficulties.

Monetary and Resource Reinforcement (Asset Transfer)

Both development and humanitarian aid play a role in monetary and resource reinforcement. Many authors have noted that aid in the form of food, shelter, or development offers the ruling party the opportunity to exploit resources that enter the country. Such resources can then be utilized to manipulate citizens and increase the governing authorities hold on power (Anderson 1999).

Resource reinforcement occurs in many ways. First, aid is often coopted by the military or corrupt local officials, who divert large amounts of aid for their own purposes. Similarly, development schemes such as infrastructure projects help the regime to utilize resources – roads and bridges – to strengthen their own power structure. Second, aid is fungible.

That is, the introduction of medical supplies, teachers, nutritional food packets, etc., frees up resources that governing authorities might have spent on serving some of the population's needs. This phenomenon of asset transfer (Duffield 1993) allows the ruling body to take credit for providing aid to its citizens while at the same time beefing up its ability to use force on insurgents and the general population.

In addition, sovereign authorities who control the economy take advantage of even the most careful NGOs. Generally forced to use the currency of the country in question, NGOs must exchange their hard (usually Western) currencies at official and often highly overvalued exchange rates that provide implicit taxes to the government.

In spite of the withdrawal of aid from Burma post-1988, resource reinforcement has continued unabated, as can be seen from military spending and other economic activities that support Burma's generals.

Clearly, one powerful indicator of resource reinforcement is the ability of the ruling regime to garner resources to strengthen its military. Burma has spent billions of dollars in arms and military goods, uses child soldiers, and has tripled its light infantry division (HRW 2007a). Despite the withdrawal of aid since 1988, the military has increased its forces by more than 100%, from 200,000 in 1988 (Jannuzi 1998) to 428,000 in 2006 (Cordesman and Kleiber 2007). In 1988, the government spent an estimated 1.6 billion MMK on its military, rising to 22.3 billion MMK in 1995 and 73.1 billion MMK in 2002 (SIPRI 2009).

A comparison between military and other government spending also reveals the priorities of the government. In the absence of aid, its focus on strengthening the armed forces has taken precedence: in 1990, the government allocated 15.6% of public investment to its defense budget while spending 26.2% on social services and administration (including all health and education). By 1999, military spending had increased to 22.9% of the budget while social services had decreased to half that: 11.8% (Thein 2004: 134).

Instead of manipulating aid money, the military funds its defense and offense exercises by granting concessions and licenses to mine, fish and explore for oil and gas, and log and export its hardwood timber. Germany, for example, which suspended its aid program post-1988, continued to work privately with the junta to access Burma's resources, signing joint ventures to provide military training, installation of sensitive communications equipment, and the manufacture of explosives and weapons (Lwin 1994).

Commercial ties between the Thai defense minister and the Burmese army further reinforce the junta's hold on power (Ott 1998: 74). Thai logging companies have constructed roads in Burma with the approval of the

Burmese military, permitting the army to penetrate formerly inaccessible mountain areas controlled by ethnic separatists (Battersby 1998: 485). Burma has also buttressed its economic strength from gas revenues; in 2006, gas exports brought in 2.16 billion USD from its main buyer, Thailand (HRW 2007b).

Foreign direct investment from countries such as Singapore and military and industrial assistance from China has also increased, alongside the withdrawal of aid. China has provided as much as 3 billion USD in military equipment to the regime (Fink 2001: 90-97), because of its aforementioned desire to establish a presence in the sea region between India and Southeast Asia (Ott 1998: 70). China provides some measure of development aid as well:

> If anything, the construction of a transport infrastructure between Burma and Yunnan province has […] greatly facilitat(ed) the drug and illicit goods trade, along with the burgeoning official trade between the two countries (Selth 1998: 122).

Indeed, black market activities are rampant in Burma. The manufacture and trade in prohibited drugs helps to finance the SPDC, and the military allows pro-Rangoon groups along its border to function with impunity in order to take advantage of their illegal economies. Burma is the world's second-largest source of opium, producing 410 tons of opium in 2008 with a potential value of 123 million USD (UNODC 2008). Although ethnic ceasefire groups operate narcotic operations largely unhindered, the government has, in essence, delegated its illegal activities to ethnic lackeys, and continues to collect money from the trade.

The above indicates that withdrawal of aid has done nothing to diminish the strength of Burma's military regime. This is partly because aid, even at its height, was only a small fraction of the Burmese economy. The presence of aid, and its subsequent withdrawal, is a small part of the larger and more complex dynamics at work in Burma.

The Relationship between Aid and Refugee Flows

That the withdrawal of aid has had little impact on Burma's political legitimacy, ethnic divisions, or resource reinforcement reflects the larger truth that Burma has not moved toward reforming itself into a democracy. As a result, its significant refugee and internally displaced populations have increased in size, fleeing the abuses and neglect of a contested government. There have been several attempts by the international community to force refugees living in the border areas of Bangladesh and Thailand to return to

Burma. These have largely failed because of continued repression in Burma (Holliday 2009; HRW 2005).

The previous three phenomena discuss the ways in which aid can support contested governments and fuel conflict, which may then generate refugee flows. This section discusses a related phenomenon: the direct relationship (or lack thereof) between aid and refugee flows.

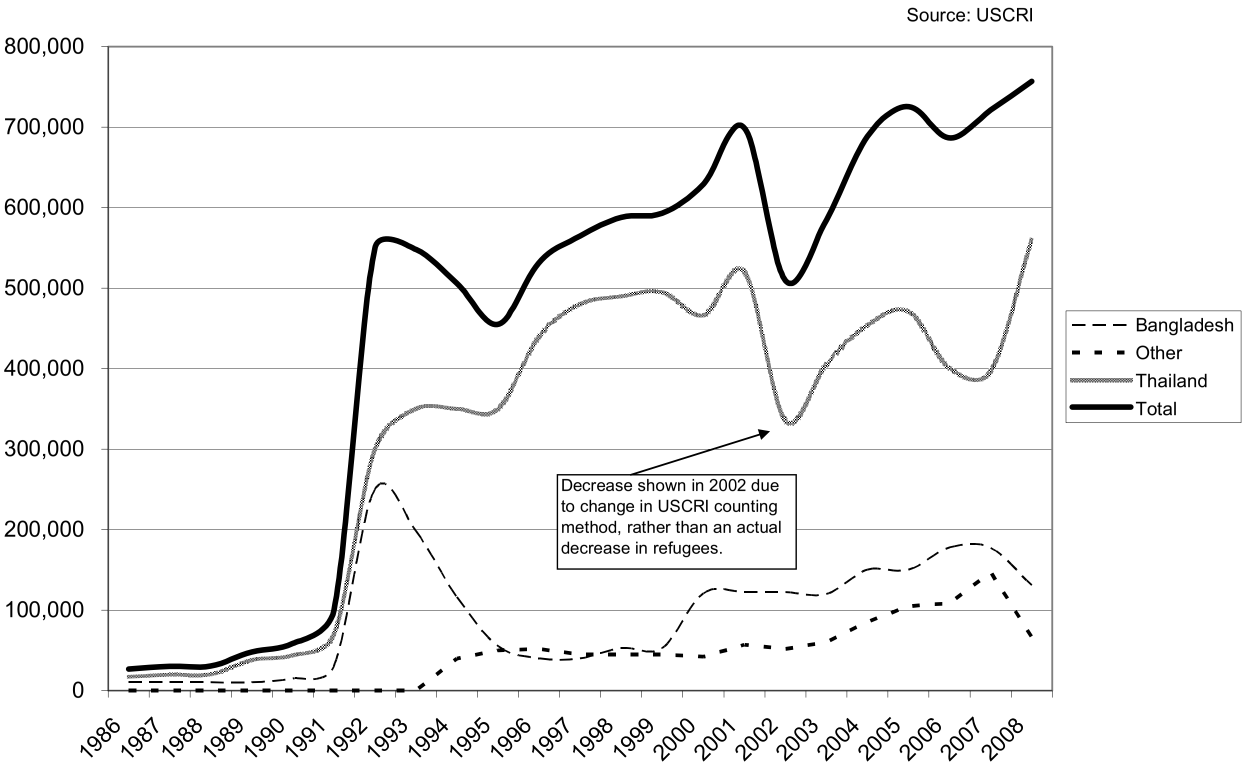
There are documented cases where improper humanitarian responses have abetted and led to increased flows of refugees and migrants (Omaar and de Waal 1994: 4). For governments interested in controlling their populations, forcing people to flee their homes is one of the most egregious methods of suppressing dissent. For example, ruling authorities have encouraged aid organizations to implement large-scale relief operations, which are in fact forced relocation schemes designed to support the ruling regime's counter-insurgency campaigns (ibid.).

The presence of humanitarian aid – not within the contested government, but in bordering countries – also gives rise to migratory "push" and "pull" factors (Cornelius, Martin, and Hollifield 1994). Refugees are pushed from their homes when they flee persecution or have limited survival options, as when aid is withdrawn. Similarly, the provision of aid across the border can "pull" refugees into refugee camps with the promise of safety, shelter and food.[9]

In the case of Burma, there is a clear correlation between the withdrawal of aid in Burma and increased refugee populations. As table 2 indicates, refugees began fleeing in large numbers from Burma in the early 1990s.

9 Since 2006, the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, has been registering refugee camp residents for third country resettlement, wherein refugees move to industrialized countries and eventually receive citizenship (Banki and Lang 2008a). It would be easy to supplement this "push factor" argument with a "pull factor" explanation, in light of resettlement. Because motivation is difficult to measure, it is difficult to ascertain why specific refugees flee. Thus, the assertion that the prospect of resettlement is pulling some refugees across the border cannot be contested. However, there are also significant internally displaced populations (IDPs) within Burma who have no chance to resettle. These IDPs indicate a population that is being pushed by conflict, but not pulled by resettlement. IDPs demonstrate that, at present, it is increased militarization in northern Karen state – including the burning of villages, policing of roads, and continued forced labor – that is creating refugee flows (HRDU 2007).

Table 2: ODA and Refugees, 1986 - 2008



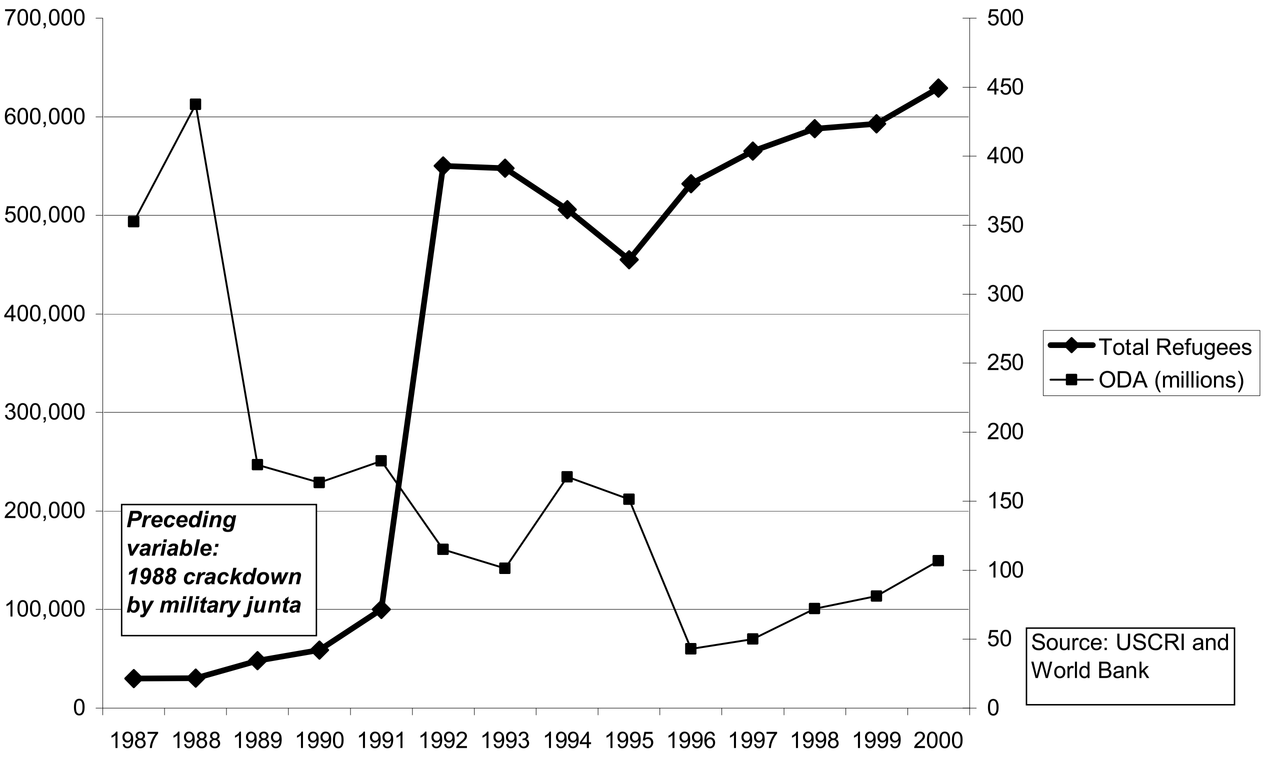
(These figures only count those who registered with UNHCR, and exclude migrant workers, the ethnic Shan, and many other groups who have been displaced from Burma. Thus, in 2008, depending on how "displacement" is defined, the total displaced population from Burma was likely between 500,000 and 3 million (Banki and Lang 2008b; USCRI 2008), with another 500,000 internally displaced in Burma (TBBC 2007).)

An overlay of aid and refugee data (table 3) indicates that withdrawal of aid and increased refugee flows occurred from 1986 to 2000, thus demonstrating correlation but not causality. Indeed, it is not the withdrawal of aid that has led to increased refugee flows from Burma, but the preceding variable of the presence of crisis within the context of a contested government in Burma.

Unlike the previous three phenomena, refugee flows are not inherently negative in and of themselves. In Burma, refugee flows represent the best possible solution for some ethnic groups, who, in the absence of refuge, would perish by sickness, disease, or at the hands of the military.

In demonstrating the impact of aid flows on refugee movements, it is crucial to note that refugee flows cannot be considered in a vacuum. In the context of Burma, aid's effect on refugee flows is less important than its impact on the refugees *themselves*. In this instance, the provision of humanitarian aid in Thailand improves a protracted and distressing refugee situation. The impact of withdrawing humanitarian aid in Burma is more difficult to gauge. On the one hand, aid that keeps individuals in an unsafe community may be harmful in the long run. On the other, withdrawing aid as a means of encouraging population movements can be seen as colluding with the regime.

Table 3: Refugees and Aid, 1987 to 2000



Aid in Burma Today?

The devastating effects of Nargis brought such suffering that it has forced some groups, advocates, and agencies to rethink their opposition to the allocation of aid funds to Burma. Prior to Cyclone Nargis, the International Crisis Group (ICG) pointed out that some exiled pro-democracy groups who previously opposed aid funds being allocated to organizations operating inside Burma are relaxing their opposition to the provision of aid inside Burma (ICG 2006). Others, including exiled parliamentarians and some advocacy groups, continue to be opposed to the delivery of aid inside Burma. In its most recent evaluation of aid to Burma, the ICG asserts that

> twenty years of aid restrictions – which see Myanmar receiving twenty times less assistance per capita than other least-developed countries – have weakened, not strengthened, the forces for change (ICG 2008: 2).

The recommendations that follow advise, among other things, a significant increase in humanitarian aid and a commitment to follow up humanitarian responses with development assistance, including improving education, income levels, and participation in civil society (ibid.).

The ICG's most recent report on Burma argues for the need for sensitive and sensible assistance in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. And it supports the findings of this article that show that when aid was withdrawn, regime reinforcement remained consistently present in Burma. But just as there was a need to study the effects of the withdrawal of aid on some of the variables that enforce the regime's hold on power, there is also a need to evaluate how the re-introduction of large amounts of aid will in turn influence the external legitimacy of the regime, ethnic divisions, and resource reinforcement.

Such analysis will be particularly important as aid agencies move to more permanent operations on what is known as the "relief-to-development continuum" (see, for example, Demusz 1998). Aid organizations who are establishing their aid infrastructure within Burma have already begun to be pressured by the regime to shift their operations from humanitarian assistance to large-scale development projects that have the potential to enrich the junta, as the regime insists that the humanitarian phase of the response to Nargis is over (Tun 2008).

Finally, in the context of Burma, the question of asset transfer takes on a new light when considering aid's reintroduction. Just as there is concern that money pouring into Burma could be allocated to undesirable ends, there is also the danger that it could be allocated *from* important programs. Specifically, the Thai-Burmese border has relied on humanitarian aid to assist the refugee and migrant populations; one of the more concerning

aspects of Cyclone Nargis and subsequent aid packages to Burma is the potential shift of aid away from the border regions as aid agencies re-target their Burma funding to rebuild from within. The impact of aid flows to the border, and related refugee flows, are also crucial elements of any post-Nargis aid evaluations.

Conclusion

Detractors of aid point to its detrimental effects in prolonging war and harming victims more than helping them. Improperly administered aid can aggravate conflict and do more harm than good. An international humanitarian presence can be exploited for political legitimacy by the ruling regime. Small-scale aid projects can be siphoned off from suffering civilians and used by military authorities. Large-scale development projects can further ethnic conflict when the locations of projects are poorly selected. And forced migration can occur as a result of all three preceding phenomena. In contrast, those who promote aid note that, when given sensitively, it can assist suffering populations and strengthen those who contest governments in need of reform.

Much of the growing literature on the impact of aid appears to presuppose that its withdrawal will lead contested regimes to mitigate or moderate their structures of oppression. The results of withdrawing such aid in one given country, Burma, challenge that assumption. The withdrawal of aid has not detracted from the junta's external legitimacy, nor has it alleviated ethnic divisions, nor has it diminished the regime's resources. In some instances, these phenomena increased following the withdrawal of aid.

This article does not attempt to establish direct causal links between the withdrawal of aid and the increase in regime-reinforcing phenomena in Burma, but it does argue that in the presence of larger political and economic factors, the withdrawal of aid had little effect on the strength of the Burmese regime. The article also demonstrated that refugee flows were little affected by the withdrawal of aid, but increased due to the crackdown that preceded the withdrawal of large amounts of aid.

The implications of such research point to the conclusion that for states, institutions, or organizations that desire reform in Burma, the withdrawal of aid is not, in and of itself, an effective lever for change. Given the fact that the withdrawal of aid is likely to have deleterious effects for some members of the population, withdrawal as a strategy should be considered carefully, and only in conjunction with other strategies that fight the root causes of crises and contestation in Burma.

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Umkämpfte Regime, Hilfsgelder und Flüchtlingsströme: Der Fall Burma

Zusammenfassung: Es gibt mittlerweile eine ganze Reihe von Literatur, in der die Rolle von internationaler Hilfe zur Unterstützung von Unrechtsregimen kritisch diskutiert wird. Es gibt bislang aber nur wenige Untersuchungen, in denen die Frage anders herum gestellt wird. Was passiert, wenn Hilfsgelder zurückgehalten werden? Seit der Unterdrückung im Jahr 1988 ist die internationale Hilfe an Burma/ Myanmar deutlich zurückgegangen. Dieser Artikel fragt für das Fallbeispiel Burma: Welche Wirkungen hat es, wenn Hilfsgelder zurückgehalten werden? Der Artikel beleuchtet die Debatten zur humanitären Hilfe und Entwicklung und identifiziert drei besondere Regime stützende Effekte. Der Artikel zeigt, dass diese im Fall Burma nicht eingetreten sind, als Hilfe zurückgezogen wurde. Der Artikel diskutiert außerdem die Beziehung zwischen Hilfsgeldern und Flüchtlingsströmen und versucht, Folgerungen aus der Forschung zu entwickeln.

Schlagwörter: Burma, Humanitäre Hilfe, Entwicklungshilfe, Flüchtlinge