
Burma: The politics of conservation - Wildlife Conservation Society

Burma's State Peace and Development Council is one of the most brutal military dictatorships in the world. The UN's International Labour Organisation describes forced labour in Burma as a "crime against humanity". Around one million people have been forced from their homes and land. The Burmese army, the Tatmadaw, uses rape as a weapon against indigenous women and children. It recruits child soldiers. On 6 July 2005, Burma's junta released more than 240 prisoners, many of them political prisoners, but about 1,400 political prisoners are still imprisoned. Torture of prisoners is routine. Half the national budget goes to the military. Burma is not at war with any other nation. The junta is at war with its own people.

In 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won more than 80 per cent of the parliamentary seats. The junta did not allow the NLD to assume power and since 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi has spent a total of almost 10 years in detention.

Since 1988, member states of the European Union have conducted US\$4 billion of trade and investment with Burma. The largest foreign investor in Burma is Total Oil Company, which is partly owned by the French government.

To build the Yadana gas pipeline Total and US oil company Unocal contracted the Burmese army to provide security for the project. EarthRights International has documented forced eviction of villages to clear the route of the pipeline and to provide forced labourers to build the pipeline.

The companies deny the allegations. Total's 2004 Corporate Social Responsibility report defends its investment in Burma: "We believe that our presence has positive, lasting benefits for Myanmar [Burma] and is helping to advance human rights in the region where we operate."

Part of the income that the junta receives from gas goes on weapons. John Jackson of the UK-based NGO Burma Campaign recently told journalist John Pilger that he'd never met an EU official who denied that foreign investment and military spending are closely linked. "In the week the regime received its first payment for gas due to be piped to Thailand from a gas field operated by Total Oil, it made a US\$130 million down-payment on ten MiG-29 jet fighters," said Jackson.

Of course, Total's Corporate Social Responsibility report ignores any awkward details such as the brutal Burmese military.

The survival of the Burmese junta depends on the continued exploitation of the country's environment. The regime's income comes largely from logging, fishing and mineral concessions. As a result vast areas of forests have been clearcut.

In a recent article in *Nature*, journalist Duncan Graham-Rowe discusses some of the ethical issues faced by conservation organisations working in Burma. He interviewed Alan Rabinowitz, the director of science and exploration at the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), an NGO based at the Bronx Zoo in New York. Rabinowitz has been working in Burma for more than ten years and has helped set

up the Hukaung Valley Tiger Reserve, the world's largest tiger reserve covering more than 20,000 square kilometres.

WCS's work in Burma would not be possible without the approval of senior officials in the regime. Perhaps not surprisingly, Rabinowitz is reluctant to criticise Burma's junta. "I think it's been blown out of proportion", he told Graham-Rowe about the regime's appalling human rights record. "The displaced people from Burma are a very intelligent, educated group who have maintained a hugely strong lobby," explained Rabinowitz.

Rabinowitz is happy to acknowledge that wildlife is a bigger concern to him than politics. "The world of people is not that attractive to me," he told *The Irrawaddy*, a magazine published by exiled Burmese. "To me, politics, whatever government's in power, is just a little speck of time. We're not doing this for you or me or now, but for way into the future," he said.

To the people on the receiving end of the Burmese junta's terror, politics must seem more than just a little speck of time. A recent report by Human Rights Watch, titled "'They Came and Destroyed Our Village Again': The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Karen State" documents the atrocities. "When the Tatmadaw entered my village they killed men and beat women when they caught them," a Karen villager from Thwa Hta village, Papun District told Human Rights Watch. Another Karen woman said, "The Burmese soldiers attacked us again at Htee Hto Kaw Kee, in 1992. They shot and killed my husband and injured other villagers. The soldiers burned down our houses and killed and ate our animals. They also burned our rice barn, destroying 190 tins of rice. [They also] killed my son-in-law, who was just collecting betel nut in the forest. He [had] small children."

Although WCS is not working in Karen State, it is working in the same country and with the same military regime. WCS is not directly responsible for the human rights atrocities but the destruction of Burma's forests is not taking place in a political vacuum. By ignoring the murderous regime that it is working with, WCS is in effect legitimising the regime and helping it gain international credibility.

By Chris Lang, e-mail: <http://chrislang.org>