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# UNITED DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF BURMA/MYANMAR NEWSLETTER

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Canada This Week-Volume 2, Issue 1

January 03, 2008

## India urges Burma reconciliation

*BBC News / Jan 02, 2008*

India has urged Burma to launch broad based political reforms and initiate "national reconciliation".

The call came as Burmese Foreign Minister U Nyan Win held talks in Delhi with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

An Indian foreign office spokesman said the prime minister stressed the need for greater urgency in bringing about political reforms. He said that the process has to include all sections of society.

The spokesman said that included detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and all the various ethnic groups.

The two countries are expected to finalise a \$100m project on the river Kaladan that will provide a transit route to India's north-eastern states.

The foreign minister is the highest-ranking minister to visit India since September's military crackdown on Buddhist monks in the Burmese capital, Rangoon.

## Myanmar junta hikes satellite TV fees

*Reuters/ Jan 02, 2008*

Without warning, Myanmar's military junta has ordered a massive 166-fold rise in the annual satellite television levy in an apparent attempt to stop people watching dissident and international news broadcasts.

With no word in state media of any license fee increases, the first satellite dish owners knew of the hike was when they went to pay the 6,000 kyat levy, only to be told it was now 1 million kyat (\$780), three times the average citizen's yearly income.

An official at Myanma Post and Telecom confirmed the increase on Wednesday, but was at a loss to explain it.

"It's not our decision," the official, who asked not to be named, told Reuters. "We were just ordered by the higher authorities. Even I was shocked when I heard about it."

The increase is way beyond the meager means of virtually all the former Burma's 56 million people, for whom international broadcasts such as Al Jazeera or Norway-based dissident network Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) are the main source of news.

Without satellite, the only other television news is on rigidly state-controlled MRTV. The few private television stations avoid all current affairs in favor of a diet of soap operas and pop music.

Foreign and external media played a major role in the dissent in August and September that mushroomed from a handful of sporadic demonstrations against shock fuel price rises into major protests against 45 years of military rule. Since killing at least 31 people in suppressing the protests, the ruling junta has sustained a relentless assault on the BBC, DVB, Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, accusing them of broadcasting a "skyful of lies."

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 **Burmese Junta not interested in dialogue with opposition, EIU says**
- 2 **Myanmar reports bird flu outbreak in chickens near Myanmar-Thai border town**
- 3 **Regime denies fuel price increase rumors**
- 4 **Monk group urges peaceful protest**
- 5 **Government seizes farmland from locals**
- 6 **India's halt to Burma arms sales may pressure Junta**

## **Burmese Junta not interested in dialogue with opposition, EIU says**

*The Irrawaddy / Jan 02, 2008*

Burma's junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), "fails to show any interest in talks" with Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), *The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)* said on Tuesday.

In its January 2008 report on Burma, the London-based EIU, an influential think tank, said the junta took a small step forward in October with the appointment of Aung Kyi, the labor minister, as a liaison officer to meet the detained leader of the opposition, Suu Kyi.

The liaison officer subsequently met with Suu Kyi three times. The most recent meeting was on November 19, and since then "the junta has shown no interest in holding a dialogue with the opposition."

Snr-Gen Than Shwe, the head of the junta, has shown no sign of honoring the commitment to meet with Suu Kyi himself that he made in September during talks with the UN Special Envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari.

The EIU added that there is certainly no sign that the junta has heeded Suu Kyi's recent call for preliminary confidence building talks with Aung Kyi to move swiftly towards substantive dialogue with senior members of the junta.

The junta has appointed 54 members of a commission to draft a new constitution, but failed to include any members of opposition groups. The minister of information, Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan, rejected calls by the UN to include opposition, indicating the commission would be implementing decisions already taken by the National Convention, the body set up by the junta to agree on principles to be included in the new constitution, the report said.

The EIU also noted Gambari's concerns over the continued detention of Suu Kyi and the ongoing arrests of those involved in the pro-democracy demonstrations, calling it "counter to the spirit of national reconciliation." The EIU said Asean, as a regional body, "is not prepared to step up pressure on the junta." It noted that Gambari's scheduled briefing on Burma to Asean leaders in November was cancelled at the last minute after strong opposition from the junta's Prime Minister, Lt-Gen Thein Sein.

## **Myanmar reports bird flu outbreak in chickens near Myanmar-Thai border town**

*Jakarta Post / Dec 31, 2007*

Myanmar has reported an outbreak of the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus among domestic chickens in a village near the Myanmar-Thai border, state-run media reported Saturday.

The unusual deaths of domestic chickens in a village in eastern Shan State's Mongphyat township, about 50 kilometers north of the Myanmar-Thai border, was reported to the Livestock Breeding and Veterinary department on Dec. 23, the state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported.

Laboratory tests confirmed the presence of the H5N1 virus, the paper said. A report by the department assessed that the virus spread to the area from Keng Tung township following a bird flu outbreak there on Nov. 18 when 2,058 chickens at a farm died and another 533 were slaughtered to prevent the virus from spreading.

Mongphyat is situated 58 kilometers south of Keng Tung. Myanmar had earlier confirmed its first human bird flu case on Nov. 27, when a 7-year old girl in the village in Keng Tung township was infected during a bird flu outbreak among poultry.

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## **Missionaries give Christmas donation to prison inmates**

*DVB / Dec 31, 2007*

Christian missionaries in Kalay township, Sagaing division, were given permission to provide a Christmas meal and donate clothing to inmates in three local prison camps.

The missionaries had been denied permission to give donations last year, but were told this year by authorities that they would be able to do so.

The clothing and meat-based meals were provided to inmates in the Yarsakyo, Mawlike Kalay and 55 Miles work camps.

Kalay township residents said that the living condition for inmates in prison work camps in the area has been very poor, with prisoners shackled and given demanding farm work to do with no proper meals.

## **Regime denies fuel price increase rumors**

*The Irrawaddy / Jan 02, 2008*

In an apparent attempt to quash rumors of impending fuel price rises or restrictions on sales, Burma's state-run press has assured motorists that no increases or quota cuts are planned.

On the contrary, according to an official announcement on Tuesday, natural gas fuel, CNG, is to be made freely available.

Rumors circulating in Rangoon said that even if the government plans no fuel price rises it could be considering a reduction of the daily quota for car owners from two gallons a day to one.

A big hike in fuel prices last August sparked the demonstrations that grew into an anti-government uprising in September.

Fuel price changes are rarely announced officially, and a report in the state-run *The New Light of Myanmar* on Tuesday, saying increases are planned, is seen as an attempt to head off any repeat of public protests.

The report was greeted with skepticism, however. "I don't believe in any government promises," said one Rangoon taxi driver.

"There are so many examples of broken promises."

Gasoline and diesel has been sold under a rationing system in the country's major city, Rangoon, since 1980. Each car has a ration book, allowing car owners to purchase 60 gallons per month.

One gallon of gasoline at state-controlled outlets costs 2,500 kyat (US \$2), half the price demanded on the black market.

Limits are to be lifted on the purchase of CNG, which will be made freely available at government controlled outlets in Rangoon, according to the government announcement.

## **Monk group urges peaceful protest**

*DVB / Jan 02, 2008*

The All-Burmese Monks Alliance called on the people of Burma to support their struggle against the regime, but stressed that they should not use violence, in a statement issued yesterday.

The statement urged monks to continue with their boycott of the Burmese regime, and said that if monks and the general public work together, they can bring an end to the country's humanitarian problems.

"If the public and monks join forces, we can resolve all our problems," the statement said.

"We vow to continue with the boycott until every monk and political prisoner is released."

However, the group rejected the use of violence to achieve its goals.

"We must take responsibility for our own future, but avoid all violence," the statement said.

Monks have been targeted in raids and arrests since their involvement in the September protests.

In response to the government's violent crackdown on these demonstrations, many monks have refused to accept alms from government officials and supporters, and called for a boycott of government-run monk examinations.

## **Government seizes farmland from locals**

*DVB / December 31, 2007*

The Burmese government has seized over 1000 acres of privately-owned farmlands near Meikhtila airbase for an upcoming factory project, according to locals.

On 27 October, Meikhtila military airbase authorities summoned 350 farmers from 16 villages in the area surrounding the airbase to the village-group Peace and Development Council and asked them to sign an agreement allowing the government to seize 1300 acres of their farmlands, a Meikhtila resident said.

"Villagers who own farmlands in 16 villages from three village-groups were asked by an air-force officer to sign the agreement which says they acknowledge the government's seizure of their lands for a future factory project," said the Meikhtila resident.

"Most of the paddy rice produced in the district comes from these farmlands. They are vital food sources for all the people in the whole district." The airbase authorities reportedly promised the farmers compensation of twelve times their farm tax rate for the loss of land. The tax rate for each acre of farm is 1.50 kyat.

## India's halt to Burma arms sales may pressure Junta

*Washington Post / Dec 30, 2007*

India has halted all arms sales and transfers to Burma, a development that could increase international pressure on the military junta that brutally crushed the pro-democracy "Saffron Revolution" led by monks this fall.

The Indian government's decision has not been officially announced, but diplomatic sources said it has been privately confirmed by New Delhi to top U.S. officials in recent weeks.

In a little-noticed statement, first lady Laura Bush noted the decision in a video teleconference she held on Dec. 10 in recognition of International Human Rights Day.

Ticking off actions taken by countries around the world in response to the crackdown, Bush said, "India, one of Burma's closest trading partners, has stopped selling arms to the junta."

A spokesman for the Indian Embassy in Washington declined to comment. Burma, also known as Myanmar, is regarded as one of the world's most repressive nations.

The National League for Democracy, the party of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in the country's last elections, in 1990, but the military leadership refused to recognize the outcome. Suu Kyi has been under house arrest or in prison on and off since then.

## 2007 Burma's lead Rock band to perform at Kachin State's day

*Mizzima / Dec 28, 2007*

Burma's leading rock band Iron Cross is all set to perform in what is to be one of the biggest festivals marking the 60th anniversary of the formation of Kachin State slated for next month in Myit Kyi Na, an organizer of the festival said.

With an estimated budget of nearly 300 million kyat (USD 0.23 million), ethnic Kachins in Northern Burma said they are gearing up to hold one of the biggest historic festivals from January 5 to 11, 2008.

While the famous and traditional Kachin Manau Dance will be the main draw of the festival, organizers said, the youths will be attracted to the performance of Burma's leading rock stars.

"There will be Manau dances through out the festival and performance by the Iron Cross as well," spokesperson of the Manau Dance committee told Mizzima. An official at the Iron Cross' office in Rangoon told Mizzima, "Yes, IC will go to Myit Myi Na and perform on January 9 and 10. And all the singers with whom IC has contracts will come along."

However, he added that the lead Rock singer Lay Phyu is not likely to join the tour. The Manau festival committee spokesperson, however, said the IC band, which has not been officially invited, will come on its own and will perform with a view to collecting all proceedings from the show.

The United Democratic Party of Burma/ Myanmar  
213-1065 Ramsey Crescent,  
Ottawa ON, K2B 8A1  
Tel/Fax +1-613-596-5615  
[www.uniteddemocraticparty.org](http://www.uniteddemocraticparty.org)  
[uniteddemocracticparty@gmail.com](mailto:uniteddemocracticparty@gmail.com)

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