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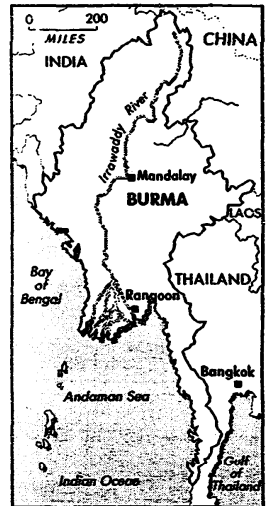
## WORLD

BRIEFING

Asia

*Forced labor is good, it gives people discipline. ... But, you know, it doesn't exist anymore'*  
 — A RICKSHAW DRIVER IN MANDALAY

## INSIDE BURMA, BIG BROTHER AND POVERTY RULE



CHRONICLE GRAPHIC

Men and water buffaloes toiled along the Irrawaddy River shore in Mandalay (left); Pa-O tribal women (below) sold their wares at an outdoor market in Inle Lake

PHOTOS BY MEREDITH LOW/SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**HIGHLIGHTS:** The Burmese ruling clique's economic opening has benefited only a handful of the country's 45 million people, who are kept on a tight leash politically and are generally living hand to mouth.

By Cort Howard  
 Chronicle Foreign Service

## Mandalay, Burma

Along the banks of the Irrawaddy River, the monsoons have turned the roads to a thick red mud. Makeshift bamboo huts full of dirty clothes and too many people hover on stilts inches above the litter-strewn shoreline.

Beside two modern ferries that sit idle awaiting nonexistent tourists, soot-coated men struggle with heavy barrels of oil, rolling them down bamboo planks from tanker to truck. The stench is incredible.

A woman in a sarong squats in the shallow muddy water, brushing her teeth and washing clothes amid floating pieces of black crud. Another crew of men, teeth stained red from chewing the opiate known as betel nut, try to coax a balky steamroller into cooperating with

their attempt to build a road of stones above the mud.

Welcome to the slums of Mandalay — and to Burma, where poverty is as prolific as pagodas.

If you didn't wander down to the banks of the Irrawaddy, however, you would think Burma's second-largest city is booming. In the more modern parts of the city, hotels and office buildings are furiously being constructed.

There are few signs of a Western presence, save for a few Pepsi and Lucky Strike billboards. But there is much evidence of Asian investment, such as the newly opened and opulent Mandalay Swan Hotel — one of many joint ventures between Burma's military rulers and Asian companies.

In Rangoon, a huge modern highrise that would not be out of place in down-



town Houston pierces the skyline. It too is a joint venture — between the military and infamous drug lord Khun Sa. Construction is under way on literally every block, where new cars tool alongside rickshaws, bikes and bullock carts.

But the way the new businesses are being built makes clear that the vast majority of Burma's 45 million people work far too hard for far too little. The woman carrying five bricks at a time on her head

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# BURMA: Junta Profits as Citizens Strain to Make Ends Meet

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back and forth all day at one construction site makes less than a dollar a day.

The new open-door economic policies of the ruling clique, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), have not improved the lot of ordinary citizens or loosened the still-tight restrictions on basic freedoms. The lack of clean water and food or adequate shelter leaves people little time to ponder their inability to engage in political discussions or travel freely within their own country.

"Things for civilians haven't changed despite the appearances of a good life," said Daw Phyu Nyo, the pseudonym of a political dissident who lives quietly in resource-rich Shan state.

"(Despite) the regime's opening to tourism and trade, people are harder up — even desperate," she said. "And inflation has made many necessities unaffordable even though most of the products are grown in Burma."

There is, of course, some trickle down from the military's dip into the free market. Privatization has created jobs in some towns where there were none before.

In Kalaw, a onetime British hill station that is now on a government-approved route for foreign tourists, laborers toil for 80 cents a day landscaping the medians along the main road. The workers say the project was ordered to impress some government officials who will pass through next week.

This year alone, 16 new hotels have been built in Kalaw, a town of only several thousand people. Into the night, people stand above the skyline on the roof of one of the hotels under construction in a human assembly line of brick passing. In town, two children under 10 share a dollar a day for taking out people's garbage.

On the outskirts, tucked away behind mountains and plantations of tobacco, bananas and corn, there are tribal villages that for decades suffered from their proximity to battles between ethnic insurgents and the military.

In one Paloung village, Daw Ohn Khin sorts and dries tobacco leaves that her daughters bring to her in baskets that they've carried for miles on their backs. In the solitude of the jungle, she is not afraid to talk politics.

She says the army, which used to raid villages like hers for food and women, has gotten better — "calm, quiet, settled." Now the soldiers carry their own food and come through less frequently.

Few other Burmese are willing to venture any political opinions — even ones as noncontroversial as Daw Ohn Khin's — when a foreigner is present.

In a Kalaw tea shop, when asked why the government was privatizing state-run companies, a tour guide abruptly turned his head, scanned the room for eavesdroppers and changed the subject.

A colleague of the man explained why: "Last year, a British couple who worked for the BBC interviewed and quoted a tour guide. The military found out and he was arrested, tortured, thrown in jail and is no longer allowed to practice his profession."

To the surprise of some Western visitors, however, most Burmese don't seem overly concerned about the military's control over their lives — a tribute, perhaps, to the SLORC's skills in indoctrinating the population.

Omnipresent red and green billboards written in Burmese and English promote good socialist behavior. A typical one reads: "Crush all internal and external elements opposed to the state." Other, more unusual messages include: "Burmese sports will be recognized by the world."

State-run television, the only channel available to most households, provides a laughable newscast that focuses primarily on which military officials visited which Buddhist monastery and how much money the government is donating for renovations.

Every story deals in some way with the regime's rebuilding efforts. High-level political meetings and the people who attend are duly reported. Never is there mention of what is on the agenda.

The regime is adept at exploiting Buddhism's all-important status in a land where most citizens have spent a significant part of their lives either being monks, feeding monks or praying to monks. Some say they are resigned to the military's stranglehold on politics because, simply, it is their karma; others say they are swayed by the SLORC's professed support of Buddhist causes.

The result of the media man-

agement is that most Burmese now lack the knowledge upon which to form political opinions. For the most part, they believe everything they hear, read and see.

A Mandalay rickshaw driver offered this Orwellian observation: "Forced labor is good, it gives people discipline. I had to do it once and it helped me. But, you know, it doesn't exist anymore."

A Rangoon shopkeeper said pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi "is being manipulated by foreign countries. I don't like her. She is out of touch with the people."

An Australian Embassy official recalled a currency devaluation ordered in the late 1980s by then military strongman and SLORC godfather Ne Win, and how as many as 16 different reasons for the move were floated by official

and media sources.

"And when I asked people on the street why they thought this had happened, they cited many or all of the reasons, even though they were incompatible and didn't make sense," he said. "It was as if they had no ability for critical analysis."

In recent months, the SLORC has tweaked its propaganda machine in order to attract more foreign visitors.

Daw Phyu Nyo said the government about three months ago halted its forced labor programs in her area — one where tourists are allowed to travel — and now assigns soldiers to do the work.

The Australian official said this was a transparent public relations move and the practice continues in many areas.