

Burma: Alcatel in troubled waters

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A documentary directed by journalist Paul Moreira reveals that the Chinese subsidiary Shanghai Bell, a company of the US-French multinational Alcatel-Lucent specializing in communication technologies, has helped the military junta in Burma to create a telecommunications and internet network.

Since 1962, Burma has been enslaved by a military dictatorship which is among the most repressive in the world. The junta in power essentially owes its survival to the investments that countries like India, China and Thailand and multinational companies like Total and Chevron make in the country.

To cement its power and perpetuate its enrichment, the military junta has never hesitated to suppress and control the population. However during the Saffron revolution of September 2007, dissident bloggers or ordinary citizens used the internet to post photos and videos of the events to demonstrate the brutal levels of repression. This has exacerbated condemnation and pressure against the military junta. Since then, everything has been done to control the Internet. Internet cafés must now account for all of the users in their shops. The Burmese junta also plans to issue digital certificates to all Internet users. The authorities want to control all information leaving and entering the country, in particular to control access to web sites, indeed block them. It is for this purpose that the Government has founded Yadanabon, a cyber-city of 50 hectares near Pyn Oo Lwin, allowing it to centralize and control all means of communication in the country.

The official newspaper "The New Light of Myanmar" relates that 3 foreign companies, Alcatel Shanghai Bell, ZTE (China) and CBOSS (Russia), are contributing to the project in Yadanabon which should cost around 22 million dollars. Alcatel confirms that "following the signature in 2006 of a contract financed by the Chinese governments, Alcatel-Lucent, through its Chinese subsidiary Shanghai Bell, participated in the construction of an information highway in Myanmar". Alcatel has supplied to the Chinese authorities an integrated interception system, Lawful Interception Integrated, which allows listening and monitoring of all electronic communications. Despite the denials of the representatives of Alcatel, it is very probable that Shanghai Bell has allowed the Burmese regime to profit from this precious system of repression and monitoring. A dramatic situation when it is known that in Burma the regime is the sole provider of access and that the internet users who share information that the government deems "sensitive or subversive" risk jail sentences of between 7 and 15 years.

The argument from Alcatel that "improvement of the infrastructures of communication is to favour the economic and cultural development of the country and also contributes towards its evolution towards democracy" is a lie which serves to mask juicy and morally reprehensible investments. No political progress has accompanied multinational investment in Burma. It has rather favoured a phenomenal enrichment of the ruling generals and their maintenance in power. The "constructive engagement" preached by the nations of southeast Asia has failed. The only language the Burmese regime understands is that of sanctions, in particular a ban on investment in the sectors which are most lucrative for the junta: rare woods, precious stones, minerals, oil and gas.

P.S.

* Translation from the French: International Viewpoint.