

Interview

# Brutality in Burma: forced labor on the road to Mandalay

Thursday 16 November 2006, by [HEPNER Kevin](#), [SPENCER Metta](#) (Date first published: January 1995).

**KEVIN HEPNER:** In Burma half of the population is ethnic Burman and the other half comprises about 15 ethnic groups, such as the Karen. Ethnic Burmans mainly occupy the central low-lands. All the other groups occupy their own areas around the outside of the country. For hundreds of years the Burmans have tried to dominate the other groups. They saw British rule as oppression but several of the ethnic groups saw it as liberation. When the Japanese invaded in World War II, the Burmans had developed a real hatred for some of the ethnic peoples, seeing them as British collaborators. After independence in 1948, the Burmans took control of the whole government and immediately started violating the rights of the ethnic groups, which caused a civil war, starting in 1948-49, that's gone on ever since. It's the world's longest-running non-stop war, yet no one has heard of it. With more than 40 million people in Burma and God knows how many dead or dying, no one even knows it's happening. Ethnic resistance movements are all fighting the central regime in Rangoon.

**METTA SPENCER: Are they united?**

HEPNER: At first they weren't. Initially there were about a dozen different organizations. Then in 1976 they created the National Democratic Front, which brought together about 10 governments and ethnic armies that controlled territories all around the border of the country-about a third of the whole country. And the fighting kept going.

**SPENCER: Are the Karens the largest group?**

HEPNER: They are the third largest ethnic group. The Burmans first, then the Shans, then the Karen, with an estimated population of six to eight million. It's hard to guess because under the Burmese dictatorships, when they did a census, any Karen with a Burmese name or who was Buddhist was listed as Burman. In fact, the majority of Karens are Buddhist and a lot of them have Burmese names. So the official figures are completely off the wall.

The ethnic groups became pretty united because the Burmese government in Rangoon was getting more brutal. In 1962, the elected government in Rangoon was overthrown by the military and since then it's been a military dictatorship headed by Ne Win. Officially he resigned in '88 but he still pulls the strings.

He started implementing a thing called the "four cuts" policy which meant that the Burmese army started cutting off all sources of food, funds, recruits, and information from the rebel groups. The Burmese army treats all Karen civilians as supporters of the resistance forces. And the same with the Shan and all the others. After they fight with the Karen army, the Burmese troops just go to all the villages in the area and execute, torture, burn houses, burn crops, and deliberately wipe out food supplies.

Meanwhile, Ne Win's dictatorship implemented something they call the "Burmese way to Socialism," which is brutal dictatorship under the guise of socialism. Burma used to have the potential to be the richest country in South Asia. They have all kinds of resources. But with this "Burmese way to Socialism," he has sealed off the country from the outside world and driven it back to the Stone Age. By 1987, the U.N. declared Burma one of the world's worst countries. Even the Burmans in the cities tried to rise up several times and they were machine-gunned.

In 1988 Ne Win de-monetized the currency overnight. People didn't keep money in the banks because if they did it would just be stolen by the military. People kept their savings in currency and suddenly he just de-monetized it and wiped everyone out. He's loony. His lucky number is nine, so he changed all the currency denominations from things like 50 and 100 to 45, 90. When he wiped out people's savings, it was the last straw. Millions of them hit the streets headed by university students and monks. Ne Win officially resigned-although not really. The people were still in the streets. They wanted democracy. So Ne Win's army set up machine guns on the rooftops and mowed people down. They fired on Rangoon General Hospital where the wounded were being treated. Nurses in uniform were running out to the street trying to pull students off the street. They shot the nurses.

**SPENCER: How could he even hold the loyalty of his troops in that situation? Often an army just won't do that.**

HEPNER: He kept the troops locked in barracks and did not allow any outside information. Officers would come into the barracks and say, "The communists are invading Rangoon and most of them will be wearing red head bands and some of them will be disguised as monks!"

The university students were wearing red head bands with yellow fighting peacocks. The soldiers just didn't know what they were doing. There is a question whether they would do it again if there were an uprising.

In 1988 Ne Win handed power to a military junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which everyone calls SLORC. They let the demonstrators take control of the city for a few weeks, hoping there would be chaos and that the army would have an excuse to step in. But there wasn't chaos because the students and monks formed administrative committees and judicial courts. Monks directed traffic in some places.

The SLORC hired people to go out and burn down factories and incite riots but it didn't work. So eventually the demonstrators got bold and started taking the bandanas off their faces. Then in September the army picked off all the leaders and massacred people everywhere.

After all these massacres, all the students, monks, and dissidents fled to the border areas, joined up with the ethnic groups in the areas they controlled, and formed their own political opposition organizations and armies. Since then they've worked together with the ethnic groups, fighting against the SLORC. After the SLORC took power, all international aid was cut off because of the massacres. The SLORC was desperate for legitimacy so they held elections in 1990, taking all kinds of measures to make sure they would win. For example, they offered people petrol rations and phone lines if they'd form political parties. Two hundred parties were formed. Their candidates would stand up and say, don't vote for me, vote for the NLD (The National League for Democracy) which was Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party. They arrested her 10 months before the election, figuring that would defuse it but it had the opposite effect. The NLD won 80% of the seats, its allies won 18%, and the SLORC's party only won 2% of the seats. They just started arresting and disqualifying all the elected MPs. And they have held power ever since.

**SPENCER: Can we back up a bit? First the conflict was ethnic, and now it's about**

## **democracy?**

HEPNER: Now it's both.

### **SPENCER: If the democrats should get power, would there still be a division on ethnic grounds?**

HEPNER: It depends on who got into power. There's more to this issue than just democracy. They've been working hard to resolve these things. The alliances that operate in the border areas have drafted proposed constitutions, to hammer out any differences and problems in advance. All the Burmese opposition groups and the ethnic groups have agreed to a federal union similar to Canada or Switzerland, with state governments, a federal government, and a division of powers. Ethnic people would control the resources in their own areas but without having to become independent.

### **SPENCER: Will most Burmese go for that?**

HEPNER: The Burmese who get to know the ethnic people go for it but the Burmans inside the country have been exposed to nothing but propaganda all their lives, saying that the ethnic peoples are a bunch of barbarians. An education process is needed. But before anything can happen the SLORC has to be chucked out. The SLORC has shown that it's just not sincere. Now they are doing this business about Aung San Suu Kyi, dragging her out of her cell and pretending to talk with her every now and then, like just before the U.N. General Assembly, to show the world. They're just trying to use her. And they are using neighboring countries like Thailand to try to force the ethnic groups into surrendering. They're signing cease-fires with groups by pressuring them, without addressing any political or human rights issues. Immediately after the cease-fire deals are signed, the SLORC floods the area with new troops and starts encroaching on the cease-fire area. The human rights situation gets even worse.

This "four cuts" business is getting worse all the time. If you live in a village of, say, 50 houses, you will receive orders from each of the local military camps to send, perhaps, 10 people per week from your village to the army camps. They have to take all their own food for a week, stay at the camp, and dig trenches and bunkers. They do all the physical labor for the soldiers, such as chopping wood. Women are forced to carry water for the soldiers, wash their clothes, massage the officers, sing them to sleep at night-and then they're raped, often at gun point. That group of villagers won't be allowed to go home until their replacements come the next week.

The same village will have to send people to build military supply roads by hand. They have to take their own food and tools. The money for those roads is extorted from the village. Once it's done, you get called out whenever maintenance has to be done. You have to provide the building materials, you have to cut the logs and drag them to the site. And you have to send people to sleep on the road every night at designated sentry spots. It's usually the women and kids who do this, and then they have to sweep the whole road for land mines. If a mine is discovered, your village is accused of laying it. They will come to your village and demand financial compensation-about \$10,000. They can't pay it. A village is supposed to send people as porters every week to carry their ammunition and supplies over the hills. Usually the soldiers don't carry anything but guns. You have to carry maybe 40 kilos of mortar shells. You have to sleep in the dirt and the mud, in the rain, and you are fed maybe one or two handfuls of rice per day and nothing else. If you collapse you are beaten and left there to die.

The SLORC is expanding its army from 300,000 to half a million. They have no outside enemies. There's no threat of attack from any neighboring country. They've got billions of dollars worth of weapons.

**SPENCER: China is supporting them?**

HEPNER: Oh, they're virtually a Chinese satellite. China is looking upon the SLORC as their route to the Indian Ocean. And the SLORC has already given China naval bases in the Indian Ocean. The Indians are upset about this, but their response was to be friendly to the SLORC too. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is very friendly with SLORC.

**SPENCER: So, India and China are cooperating?**

HEPNER: Right. Not India as much. Mainly China and ASEAN. ASEAN policy is called "constructive engagement," which means that they encourage trade with SLORC and then use that as leverage to nudge them into political reform. In fact, they are friendly, they encourage trade with them but they don't try to push them into any kind of reform. It's just unrestrained trade. Countries like Singapore are supplying SLORC with arms also.

Other countries, like Sweden, theoretically don't sell arms to SLORC, but they do sell them to countries like Singapore and Pakistan, who then ship them onto SLORC. Canada is also included in this list. Canada supplies the engines in the main turbo-propeller bombers that the SLORC use. They used them to destroy my village and I've been bombed by them and seen people killed by them. The engines are from Pratt and Whitney in Montreal. The Canadian government's excuse is that they are not selling them directly to SLORC, they are selling them to Switzerland, who then sells them to SLORC. Foreign Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet has said that as long as they are labeled as commercial equipment they have no right to stop SLORC from using them for military applications, once they have them. A lot of countries are doing this-not only Canada, but Belgium and Britain. Canada has no arms embargo against SLORC. There are also no international trade sanctions against them.

**SPENCER: Why not?**

HEPNER: There just isn't the political will to do anything. Burma is not an issue. People don't know about it and no one wants to drag it out in the open. A lot of countries are just chomping at the bit to get in there because of Burma's resources. Starting in 1988 the SLORC threw open the doors to foreign investment. Oil companies are pouring hundreds of millions into SLORC just for the right to look for oil. They're ripping all the teak out of the country. Burma has been reported as having the world's third highest deforestation rate at the moment. The teak won't last another 10 years at this rate. And the fish! They are selling concessions to ASEAN trawlers to come close to shore, dragging, and dynamiting the reefs. The military battalions issue orders to the local villages that they are not allowed to fish there anymore. So the SLORC is selling all this stuff at bargain basement prices because they need the cash. A democratic government won't sell stuff nearly as cheaply. Thailand especially, has proposals to build seven dams and divert a whole river into Thailand to provide water and hydro power for Thai industry.

A democratic government would never go along with that but the SLORC loves it because they can make personal fortunes, and at the same time these dams would flood out much of the Karen-controlled territory. A gas pipeline is sucking out the gas from the gulf near Rangoon. They want to pipeline it to Thailand at cheap rates. This pipeline has to go through virgin rain forests, through a nature reserve set up by the Karen government. This means that the SLORC has to mount a military offensive to secure this pipeline. They have already forcibly relocated a lot of Karen. The Thais have sealed off the border to refugees and are now forcibly repatriating refugees to Burma, using them as a tool, both as a way of providing the SLORC with slave labor to build the pipeline and other development projects, and also as a weapon to attack the ethnic resistance organizations from behind. Many of the ethnic organizations' supply lines come from Thailand. The Thais want to force

them to sign these cease-fire deals with SLORC. Then the SLORC can claim, "Look, we've brought peace to the country. Give us your aid." They will then use all the aid for the army, which they have done up till now.

The only ones who didn't cut aid after the massacres of '88 were the U.N., the U.N. Development Program, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), and that lot. During that time, UNICEF was recommending raising their agency aid to SLORC from \$5 million a year to \$65 million a year. The U.N. Development Program has recommended that the SLORC's border area development program be the target of all U.N. and other aid in the future. What the SLORC's border area development program is, is a program to build military infra-structure, to tighten military control on the border areas and give them military access to ethnic controlled areas. To build a railway they forced 20,000 Karenian people into relocation camps where they had to bring their own food or starve-which many did. The SLORC itself admitted that it was forced labor. They admitted that dozens of people who work on these railways were dying each day. If they slack off they get beaten with rifle butts. There is disease everywhere, no food, nothing. And this is a border area development project, which the U.N. Development Program says should be the focus of all aid!

**SPENCER: I'm speechless. I can't imagine anything worse. If you had a favorable scenario, what would it be?**

HEPNER: Some people, including the Canadian government, are saying we have to give up the idea of completely chucking the SLORC out. It looks like they'll be there for a while. Therefore we should focus on leverage to make them reform. But in fact, people who have contact with SLORC know that the SLORC will never reform except under direct international pressure.

**SPENCER: If you asked them what it would take for them to stop the brutality, what would they say?**

HEPNER: They would say, we are not doing anything.

**SPENCER: There must be a price at which peace would come. What would that price be?**

HEPNER: They want to constitutionalize military rule of the country forever. That's what they're working on now. They've called a national convention. They've hand picked all these people and they are ramming this constitution down their throats. The number one clause right at the beginning says, this constitution must guarantee the military a leading role in the country in the future. It also included conditions such as: No one who is married to a foreigner will be allowed to hold a position in the government. That clause was specifically aimed at Aung San Suu Kyi because she's married to an Englishman, despite the fact that Ne Win has had about eight wives, including foreigners. The SLORC want control over the whole country, border to border; they don't want any ethnic autonomy. Most of them are racist. They want to Burmanize the country. They've tried to change the name of the country to Myanmar illegally. They tried to change the names of all the ethnic states into Burmese, to wipe out any evidence of ethnic diversity. They want to wipe out the ethnic languages. They only want to keep vestiges of the other cultures in the country to show to the tourists.

**SPENCER: Are you saying that even the most hopeful people think it's impossible to get rid of them?**

HEPNER: No, on.

**SPENCER: What I asked you was, if you had the most hopeful scenario, what would it look like?**

HEPNER: The most hopeful would be some kind of revolt within the Burmese army that would topple the whole SLORC house of power. Their army, which before '88 was all volunteers, now is all conscripts, all teenage kids whose officers steal their pay and beat them. It's a shaky structure so, ideally, something like a revolt in the army would bring down the SLORC. Another uprising in the cities among the Burmans would also bring them down for sure but unfortunately, if that happens a lot of civilians would be killed first. So the best hope is that somehow the whole SLORC structure collapses. Then the MPs who are still around who were elected in the '90 elections would come forward and form an interim government. Then the ethnic groups would get involved.

**SPENCER: Okay, at this point the ethnic groups and the anti-government groups are unified and they are fighting. Where do they get recruits?**

HEPNER: They have groups based on the Thai side of the country. Some come from Cambodia or Vietnam. None of these groups have any foreign governments supporting them.

**SPENCER: It sounds as if this group is not going to win.**

HEPNER: No, they can't. They just don't have the people but the ethnic revolutions are not really revolutions. They are more like resistance movements. They have never sought to march into Rangoon and take over the government. All they are doing is defending their homeland against attack by the Burmese army.

**SPENCER: It doesn't sound very successful.**

HEPNER: No, it hasn't been. The Burmese army is still getting foreign funding, whereas the ethnic organizations have lost their resource bases. The SLORC has opened the international trade doors which has cut off a lot of revenue to the ethnic groups. They are having to make as much money as they can from gemstones and logging teak with elephants and hand saws.

**SPENCER: Okay, what would your strategy be?**

HEPNER: It's hard to say because they are in such a bind right now. The Thais are essentially attacking them from the rear. The Thais cut off their supply lines and are forcibly repatriating refugees.

They're willing to sign a ceasefire but they want, not just a military ceasefire, but a peace deal, and they want to talk about political issues, human rights issues. The SLORC refuses. The ethnic groups also want to negotiate in a neutral country but the SLORC refuses.

**SPENCER: It sounds as if the military defence of the ethnic areas isn't working. What happens if they stop it and just give up? What happens then? Would the people in the city go back to their nonviolent protest?**

HEPNER: No, the opposite would be the result. The people in the city would then say, there's no more point in resistance, there's no resistance in the country. The people from the city tell me that the ethnic struggle in the border areas is one of the things that still gives them hope that the SLORC might fall. They are too terrified to hit the street. But they still might. Rice prices have gone through the roof and no one can even afford to eat anymore. This still might drive them into the streets. People are getting poorer.

**SPENCER: What is your strategy?**

HEPNER: I can try to encourage international governments and others not to invest in SLORC, not

to give them recognition and to put the squeeze on them. They are very vulnerable to international pressure.

**SPENCER: Doesn't someone have to take the leadership to initiate international pressure?**

HEPNER: No one wants to do it. Everyone is sitting there saying, we'll support any movement at the U.N. that goes against the SLORC-arms embargos, trade embargos, anything. But if you ask them if they will move it at the U.N. they say no, but we will support it if someone else does.

**SPENCER: What country is most likely to take the initiative?**

HEPNER: At one point it looked like maybe Australia but now they've backed down, they are so desperate to be friendly with ASEAN. They're talking about "constructive engagement." The main possibility at the moment seems to be the United States. They are outspoken against SLORC. Another possibility in the past seemed to be Norway but they are not outspoken these days. They all argue that they have no power to influence-that ASEAN has to go first, but ASEAN'S never going to go first. It has to be the Western countries and then you've got a chance of convincing ASEAN. These Western governments stand up at the ASEAN meetings and say, we think you should do this to SLORC. Then an ASEAN representative stands up and says, "Why should we do it? You're trading with them, why can't we?"

**SPENCER: Is any organization trying to push some sort of international coordination?**

HEPNER: There are small organizations that are underfunded. They try to spread awareness but it's difficult because it's been hard to get the media interested in Burma.

**SPENCER: That's obvious! You don't hear anything about this.**

HEPNER: Someone at The Globe and Mail for example, recently told a friend of mine, "Oh, we've done too much on Burma already this year." I think they had one story on Burma a few months ago.

**SPENCER: Okay, what would you want our readers to do?**

HEPNER: The international community could start putting some pressure on them. Of course, that is not going to completely bring down the SLORC, but it's going to give morale to the people inside the country who are thinking about protesting. We'll just have to wait and see if there's going to be a revolt in the army or if there is going to be another uprising. It's only the SLORC who are making money. Everyone else is starving. So, the people might be driven out into the streets. SLORC is still desperately trying to raise foreign money and legitimacy. They've declared '96 "Visit Myanmar" year. Right now they've got tens of thousands of people on slave labor projects to beautify the place for tourists. Thousands of people are stomping down dirt with their bare feet to make run ways for the international airport.

**SPENCER: Can you go back? What is your status there?**

HEPNER: I don't go in through their territory. I stay in Karen-controlled territory.

**SPENCER: What do you do there?**

HEPNER: I document the human rights situation on the ground with emphasis on the Karen areas. We interview villagers, refugees, and other victims of human rights abuse. I record what they say, translate it, and we make reports to provide raw data for international human rights organizations.

**SPENCER: You work for a group?**

HEPNER: I work for a small group that we actually created over there. It's called the Karen Human Rights Group. We have young Karen volunteers who operate pretty far inside the country. We train and equip them with cassette recorders and cameras. They gather information in areas which a foreigner wouldn't be able to penetrate.

**SPENCER: What do you want our readers to do?**

HEPNER: Petro Canada gave over \$20 million to SLORC but fortunately they pulled out in '92, largely because of public pressure. Pepsi is giving the SLORC several million a year. So there is a Pepsi boycott on, boycotting them and everything they own, like Kentucky Fried, Taco Bell, etc. As for other companies, there are companies like Eddie Bauer in Burma. So any companies that are in Burma, people are being encouraged to boycott, to write to them and try to get them to pull out.

They are producing Pepsi in the Rangoon area and they have to pay several million a year just in direct bonuses to SLORC.

**SPENCER: Is Pepsico the worst?**

HEPNER: Well, the oil companies are actually much worse but at the moment Pepsico has been identified as the prime easy target for Canadians to use. If they can be driven out then other companies will start shaking in their boots and companies that are thinking of going in might change their minds. Also, the Canadian government can put pressure on Thailand to stop mistreating and forcibly repatriating refugees. Thailand is doing that with impunity. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) is not protecting refugees, not even releasing statements about it. The embassies aren't doing anything.

There are groups in Canada, like Canadian Friends of Burma in Ottawa, and OPIRG (Ontario Public Interest Research Group) at Carleton University in Ottawa, who are co-ordinating these things. People can write to them to find out what initiatives they've got going. Also, write to Andre Ouellet, Canadian parliamentarians, and your own MP, trying to get them to push the Canadian government to take some of these initiatives. Canadian policy is still definitely anti-SLORC, but they're not doing anything about it. The government is just not under enough pressure to do anything.

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**P.S.**

\* From Peace Magazine Jan/Feb 1995, p.8. Metta Spencer interviewer.

<http://www.peacemagazine.org/archive/v11n1p08.htm>

\* Metta Spencer is editor of Peace Magazine.