

A Case Study of Human Security in Burma: A Checkerboard of Insecurity

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‘The disruption of their food production, burning of their homes and the shoot-on-sight orders of the Burma Army have made staying in their homeland untenable for thousands of people.’

FBR (2007: 8)

This paper analyses the current human security situation in Burma. It is contended the majority of the population living within the borders of the Burmese State suffer from low levels of human security. To understand what a ‘low level’ of human security is, we must first consider what human security means. A discussion of the most important aspects of this concept, as it applies in practice within Burma, will then be considered.

A new idea

During the Cold War, the traditional view of security was state-centric. Throughout this period, security focused on territory retention; the maintenance of strong defensive postures through powerful armies; and the building of large armaments to support state policy. The end of the Cold War brought with it a new analysis of security. In particular, this new analysis questioned who or what should be secured and who and what it should be secured from (Tan & Boutin, 2001: 1). With an end to the constant fear of mutually assured destruction from the world’s two superpowers, analysts began to wonder about new paradigms of security.

One of the most prominent scholars influencing the analysis of security in the early 1990s was Buzan (1991) who led the consideration of how economic, environmental and societal pressures could de-securitize the state. His broadening of the security

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concept to include non-tradition factors was as important as the deepening of the concept to analyse who or what should be secured. This new analysis of what the main security threats were led scholars to consider the human impact of and for security. Collins (2003: 3) refers to this focus as the 'referent object of security'. It was during this period that we are introduced to the idea that humans, not the state, should be the concern of security. This - predictably - led to a new school of thought known as 'human security.' The notion of human security has inspired much consideration of whether it operates along side security of the state, whether the two are mutually exclusive, maybe even conflicting, or whether they are complimentary concepts.

By the end of the 1990s, the Canadian Government had emerged as a leading advocator of human rights and human security concepts. Canada's then Foreign Minister, Axworthy (1999) frequently preached that the purpose of the state was to provide security for its people. He argued that security for the state was only a *means* of achieving this much higher goal. Axworthy succinctly captures the change in traditional to non-traditional analysis of the security concept since the early 1990s. The state now had a defined purpose that went further than itself; the purpose of the state is for its people. It is through the state that people should be able to achieve security.

Similarly, Zaw (2000) quoted the Thai Foreign Minister, Pitsuwan, as saying only a few months after Axworthy that, 'One cannot have support for human security and effectively pursue people-centered development if one is unable to ensure that people are protected from abuse, suffering and deprivation.' This essay will clearly demonstrate that the State of Burma does not support human security.

Human security was quickly mainstreamed throughout much of the world. Assisted by the process of globalisation and its favourable perception of *people*, human security successfully made *people* the referent object of the security paradigm. By 1994, the world's peak supranational body, the United Nations (UN), had accepted human security as the driving force behind all of its work. The UN's Development Programme's (1994), Human Development Report defined Human Security as,

‘Safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the pattern of daily life.’ It was quickly accepted that human security is influenced by environmental degradation, pandemics, economic disruption, population displacements, urbanization, famine, energy shortages, human rights, cultural diversity, nationality identification and recognition.

It is well worth noting, as Acharya & Archarya (2001) have, that while human security has become mainstreamed in many western societies, non-traditional security threats have not had the same level of acceptance within some Asian states, who still prefer a focus on the security considerations fostered by a belief in Realpolitik, military alliances and absolute state power. Specific consideration of the situation within Burma is important because it not only provides a vehicle for practical analysis of human security within a state, but because it also highlights the plights of millions of people - not only those within Burma - who are still suffering from low levels of human security.

Desecuritisation of the state by the state

As explained by Foot (2005: 293), we can look at the past and present Burmese State to identify enduring characteristics; characteristics that can help us understand (although by no means justify) the behaviour of a state and with some likelihood, predict its future behaviour. Burma’s history is a checkerboard of mistakes, mismanagement, fear and corruption. British Colonial rule had transformed Burma from a primarily agricultural subsistence economy to a large global exporter of raw products and minerals. By 1939, Burma was the world’s leading exporter of rice, earning the reputation as the ‘rice bowl of Asia.’ When Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948 it was a thriving, economically rich state (CIA, 2008). What has shaped Burma’s human security predicament most significantly though, is the brutal and xenophobic military rule that the population has suffered, almost exclusively, since 1958.

In late September 2007, monks, along with members of the general public, protested to the Burmese Junta about the rising cost of fuel. The world media widely reported the military crackdown on public dissent, with International Crises Group (2008) reporting 13 deaths along with several thousands of arrests of political protestors as a result of military action against the public. The ICG estimates that many more have since been arrested in house raids and others have died whilst in detention.

At the time of the Junta's actions against the population, the rotating President of the UN Security Council said that, "The Security Council strongly deplores the use of violence against peaceful demonstrations in Myanmar..." (UNSC, 2007) The UN's Human Rights Council (2007) was also,

'Deeply concerned at the situation of human rights in Myanmar... Strongly deplores the continued violent repression of peaceful demonstrations in Myanmar, including through beatings, killings, arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, expresses condolences to the victims and their families, and urges the Government of Myanmar to exercise utmost restraint and to desist from further violence against peaceful protesters...' (Emphasis from original text)

The Junta responded to international pleas and demands for restraint by expelling the UN's most senior representative on the 2nd of November. The Junta's refusal to acknowledge international concerns for the security of the people living within Burma display their long-running disregard for international pressure. The Junta did not fail however, to pressure the ASEAN regional forum to withdraw an invitation to the UN's Special Rapporteur to Burma who was scheduled to present his initial investigation's findings to the group. (ICG, 2008) This successful attempt to avoid more widespread dissemination of the UN's investigations illustrates the Junta's desire to not reform, but continue with its current style of rule.

The United States of America, The European Union, Japan and Australia have all enforced economic sanctions on Burma and visa restrictions on senior Burmese figures (CIA, 2008; DFAT, 2008), but these have thus far had little effect on the human security situation in Burma. The lack of effective diplomacy from western

nations is made worse by the encouragement received from countries such as China and Russia who have benefited from favourable energy trade deals (Economist, 2008a). While the Junta and the country's elites are enjoying the benefits of profitable oil, gas, mining and timber exports, the population's economic security is still very poor because of an insufficient national infrastructure and framework, unpredictable government trade policies, health structures that are becoming progressively worse, low levels of literacy and general education and corruption that appears to all observers to be systemic (CIA, 2008; Nash, 2007: 2; FCO, 2008).

Failings of the State to provide better levels of human security for its population is resulting in the smuggling of people for sexual exploitation, forced labour and child soldiering. (CIA, 2008; FCO, 2008; UN Secretary-General's Report, 2007; UNCHR, 2005) The FBR (2007) report demonstrates how the population's security is being repeatedly abused by the Burmese Military who 'routinely force villagers to participate in labor projects without pay' including the use of children (p. 47) and actively participate in ethnic cleansing activities (p. 57). Many parts of Burma fail to have any resemblance of operating within the rule of law, with Burma estimated to be the world's second largest illicit producer of opium, with eastern parts of the country affected by armed conflict and rebellion, and now suffering from up to 500,000 IDPs. (CIA, 2008; DFAT, 2008; FCO, 2008; HRW, 2006; Ling, 2005: 288).

The human security challenge

A state has the responsibility to serve and protect its citizens. Our case study has shown that the Burmese Junta appears to be the antithesis of state responsibility. Foot (2005: 291) reminds us that,

“there has been a reasonably widespread understanding that... governments were expected to protect individual human rights... A state's reputation no longer rested on its ability to exercise authority over territory and the population that resided within it, but it now also embraced the idea of 'sovereignty as responsibility.'”

The Junta has failed in its responsibility to provide the people of Burma security. Human security is concerned with anything that affects people's quality of life, or as we know it from the human development index, the capacity to achieve one's full potential. The people of Burma need help; they are currently rated 132 of 177 countries in the human development index (UNDP, 2008). The economic security for the majority of the population is doomed because of mismanagement by the state; their security is not guaranteed because of ongoing internal conflict; they do not enjoy complete freedom because of persecution from their own state forces; they are forced to live lives filled with fear and want.

The people of Burma have been fighting the battle for peace and security for over six decades. The people of Burma need a State that respects human rights and the rule of law, a state that is free from corruption, bigotry, and hatred. The Junta prosecutes without challenge and terrorises the population under the guise of providing security for the state, but Burma is a state that serves only the elite and a small privileged few. Tan & Boutin (2001: 3) give the promising example of Vietnam who underwent a restructuring of their own state and its structures as they became aware that their most significant threats were in fact internal matters: poverty, economic dilemmas, social problems and environmental abuse. The analysis of Vietnam shows that it is possible to reform Burma; it is possible to introduce law, democracy and freedom. It should have been of no surprise when David Kaufman from the World Bank, recently released a study that - understandably - argues that governments that uphold the rule of law, are more likely to have better economies and create better human security conditions for its people. (Economist, 2008b) Better forms of government ultimately result in better levels of human security and improved peace for the state.

It is in everyone's interest to restore order and law to the State of Burma. As long as human security is non-existent within the borders of Burma, people will suffer and many will seek to relieve the burdens imposed upon them by the Junta through rebellion or by searching for safety and freedom in other countries. (UNCHR, 2005: 18) The international community needs to encourage reforms that bring peace and all of its associated rewards. The UNOCHA: HSU (2008) reminds us that by freeing the

population from the painful desires of want and the tremendous weight of fear, human security can be created and can cement a positive outcome on an effected group.

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