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Myanmar, Factor 17: Good Governance

### **Improving Food Security under the new Burmese Government**

The Gilded Age, coined by Mark Twain in the nineteenth century, described “a time period which glittered on the surface but was corrupt underneath” (Mintz). This phrase might as well be used to describe one country, which might be the richest in natural resources, Burma also known as Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi describes the nation as a “Fascist Disneyland” that is a tapestry of hundreds of ethnic groups and distinct languages, which is also her own country. One hundred years ago, Burma exported two millions tons of rice per year and was called the rice basket of Asia. Forty years ago, it still exported one million tons of rice. In 1999, however, it exported less than 70,000 tons. Once the rice basket of Asia, “it has become the opium bowl of the world” (Hiller).

Burma, slightly smaller than Texas, is located in southeastern Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, between Bangladesh and Thailand. It is the largest mainland in Southeast Asia and is the fourth largest country in that area. It is rich in natural resources, including agricultural land, forestry, natural gas, various metals, gems and water resources (World Food Programme). It has been characterized as one of the planet's most tempting travel destinations: a land of faith, centuries-old stupas and traditional values. Governed by a military regime, it is one of the most politically corrupt and unjust nations in history. The corruption of the government damaged agriculture, healthcare and educational system. It is also known for permitting discrimination throughout the country. However, there is new hope of progress as a new civilian president, as close ally of Aung San Suu Kyi, was recently elected by Burma's parliament. The new government will improve health, education and agriculture, but it is only through educated citizens that the new government will be able to do so.

In this paper, I will be using Chin State to represent the rural people of Burma. I will be speaking from personal experience because I happen to be Chin. My family and I had lived in Chin States, Burma until, I was at the age of nine. In 2005, my father fled from Burma to Malaysia because of persecution by the military regime. Three years after my father went away, my mom, my siblings, and I also fled for refuge in Malaysia. On November, 2011 my family and I were admitted into the United States after waiting for three years in Malaysia. Now I have the opportunity to directly help improve the lives of my relatives and the Chin peoples who remain.

Despite significant amounts of natural and human capital as well as relatively good economic growth performance, Burma is categorized among the least developed countries. It is considered one of the poorest nations in Asia, ranking 149 out of 187 countries in the 2012 UNDP Human Development Index. It holds an estimated population of 57.5 million with more than 135 different ethnic groups, each with its own history, culture and language. All ethnic groups are divided into fourteen provinces - or seven states - including the Chin, the Kachin, the Kareni (also known as Kayah), the Karen (also known as Kayin), the Mon, the Rakhine, and the Shan. The majority ethnic group (Bamar) makes up about two-thirds of the population and controls the military and, until 2016, the government. The minority ethnic nationalities, making up the remaining one-third, live mainly in the resource-rich border areas and hills of Burma. (Ethnic Groups).

For over seventy percent of the population, agriculture is the main source of livelihood and considered as a driver for economic development. These jobs include crop production, hunting, fishing and forestry. About sixty percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) comes from agriculture, and as much as fifty-five percent of the labor force is employed in this sector alone (Nations Encyclopedia). Agriculture in Burma is heavily dependent on the monsoon rains. While some areas suffer from too much rain, other regions receive too little. One major issue it faces with agriculture is the use of slash and burn farming methods, which destroys the forests of the country, causing soil erosion and depletion of fertility. Natural disasters such as floods, landslides, and cyclones also have devastating effects on agriculture. For example, recent flooding caused by unusual monsoon rain in July and August of 2015 left 1.4 million acres of farmland inundated, with more than 841,000 acres destroyed. More than nine million people have been affected in twelve of the country's fourteen provinces, with the loss of homes, livelihoods, crops and food stocks (World Food Program).

Among the seven states of Burma, Chin state - also known as the "Chin Hills" due to its mountainous geography - is located in the southern part of northwestern Burma and is bordered by Bangladesh and India to the West, Rakhine State to the south, and Magwe and Sagaing Divisions to the east. It is an isolated ethnic minority area with poor health outcomes and reports of food insecurity and human rights violations. The land, is rich in natural resources that are primarily forest-based, and the climate includes three main seasons: summer, winter, and rainy (Scarlis). A survey conducted by the United Nations Development Programmer (UNDP) has found that Chin State remains the poorest state among fourteen regions and states in Burma with 73.3% of the people living below the poverty line (Pauk). Chin state is the only state in the country where there are no plain areas. All places in the state are at least 3,000 feet above sea level. Most of the natural resources (including gems, industrial minerals, oil and more) in Burma are underground in Chin State but the Chin people have no capacity to extract them. In Chin State, common government violations are food thefts, livestock theft or killing, forced displacement, beatings and torture, detentions, disappearances and religious and ethnic persecution. 91.9% of household reported forced labor (NCBI).

During the British occupation of Burma from 1824 to 1948, the Chin Hills Regulation Act stated that the British govern Chin State separately from the rest of Burma, which allowed for traditional Chin chiefs to remain in power while Britain was still allotted power via indirect rule (Human Rights Watch, 2009). There are about forty-five dialects of the Chin languages with each one representing an individual unique culture. Each dialect is so distinct that people who speak different dialects will not likely understand each other (Scarlis). Of the forty-five dialect, I speak two-Falam and Mizo. In Chin State, there are 100,000 estimate speaker of Falam and 19,000 speaker of Mizo (Language Tip Sheet-Burmese and Chin Languages). Chin National Day celebrated on February 20, is a day that marks the transition from traditional to democratic rule in Chin State. To this day, it is celebrated among Chin people even in those who lived in foreign country such as North America, Australia, Europe, and New Zealand (Chin Human Rights Organization, 2010). Among those who live in foreign countries Chin National Day is mainly used to unite Chin people together, celebrating each other's culture and showing off the dances and talent within each ethnic group.

In the Chin Hills it is quite common for couples to have four to six children. Children are considered to be the future and a husband is considered the head of the household, the decision maker and breadwinner. They do not have first, middle or last names as is common in Western countries, but rather one name that reflect the achievements of a grandparent or the grandparents' future wishes for the child. The naming of the child is considered very important and the honor is given to the grandparents. Marriages among Chins are not arranged, although parental approval is sought (Scarlis). Most Chin people have fewer than five

years of education even though education is free. Obstacles such as school fees and the needs to stay home to help their parents with their farm prevent them from furthering their education. My parents, both living in different parts of the state and speaking different dialects, have six children with my grandparents naming each child, including myself, except our youngest who was born in the U.S recently.

Typical houses are made with bamboo and thatch with no running water or electricity. The life of a civilian in Chin State is devoted to full-time farming. Farmers go to the fields at about 8am and come back at about 5pm. In a typical town in the Chin State, daily life for most people consist of part-time farming, even for people with a regular government job such as teaching. Every household has a small garden or farm where the family grows vegetables to offset their grocery expenses. Both parents leave to farm leaving their oldest kids to watch the younger one. At the age of six, my oldest brother Kim watches me while my parents are away in the farm. Although, he was only 6, he was capable of taking care of a two years old me through the days while my parents are away, which is illegal in the United States.

The Chin people are nonpioneer shifting cultivators (Carey). Where soil characteristics and climate permit, farmers grow dry hill rice as their chief staple. Grown amidst the staple are a variety of vegetable crops, mainly melons, pumpkins, and most important are various kinds of peas and beans. They also include various condiments such as chili peppers, ginger, turmeric and rozelle. Cultivation is entirely by hand and the tools involved are mainly all-purpose bush knives, axes and hoes (Countries and their Cultures). According to the World Food Programme (WFP) there are limited viable farmlands and growing population pressures, in turn leading to shorter field rotation cycles, poor soil fertility and crop yields. Most struggling farmers in Chin State rely heavily on expensive imported fertilizers, which both hurt the soil and keep them in poverty. Today, all farmers just cultivate enough for their daily lives. Even though Chin State lies on the border of India, where there is a strong market for both agriculture produce and livestock, Chin farmers have not been able to take advantage of this economic opportunity. These farmers are feeling detrimental effects of globalization, yet they have never received an education about the most appropriate seeds to sow, the proper timing for planting commercially viable products and how to reap a rich harvest from a small acreage of land, while enriching the land for future generations.

Despite the fact that villagers have the access to land for farming they are largely cut off from markets, which are mostly accessible only by foot and take on average 4.5 hours to reach. Those who do not have agriculture land earn about two US dollars a day at best when they're able to find work as a sharecropper. As for those who do have agriculture land they are deeply in debt as they cannot fully rely on their harvest because of issues such as rat infestation - which leave more than 100,000 people in need of food aid (Chin Human Rights organization) – and the government extorting excessive amounts of money from villagers. For those unable to make a living off the land, a marginal livelihood can be made scavenging for timber or bamboo, cane resin, honey and orchids in steep, mountainous areas. Others sell millet and earn about four US dollars a month (IRIN).

In late 2006, bamboo in Chin State began flowering. This led to an explosion in the rat population because of the fruits produced by the bamboo. In 2008, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) estimated that as many as 200 villages were affected by severe food shortages associated with the bamboo flowering, and no less than 100,000 people, or twenty percent of the entire population of Chin State, were in need of immediate food aid. CHRO now believes those figures are much higher (Burma Library). As thousands struggle with hunger, starvation and disease, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which does neither of what the name implies, continues practices of forced labor, extorting excessive amounts of money from villagers, confiscating people's land and property, in addition to other severe human rights abuses. In addition to the rats, heavy crop loss was reported in many parts of Chin State due to crop-eating insects, such as locusts or grasshoppers. Not only do locusts consume crops in

rice paddy fields but also the fruit of large fruit-bearing trees, such as banana and mango. In addition to the fruits and grain, all the leaves and stalk are consumed by the insects turning the fields into barren wastelands in a short amount of time (Burma Library). In an attempt to decrease the continued flow of rats and prevent further destruction of farms, fields and food stores, villagers have devised a number of methods including; traps, fences and poison.

As a young child, whenever incident happen while playing with my friends or cooking and I bled, I would go to the wood and find a plant called “tlangsam” (“GAHN-SAM”) and would chew the leaf and put its juice on the cut and after a while the bleeding would stop, much like a bandage. In the United State however, if I would get a cut, I have bandage or if it’s serious going to the hospital is an option, but in Chin State, hospital is not even an option. In 2000, the health care system in Myanmar was ranked 190<sup>th</sup> out of 191 by the World Health Organization. The government spent only about two percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care which limits the access to healthcare for its citizen and doctors are in very short supply (Shobert). According to a January 2009 Human Right Watch (HRW) report, there are only twelve hospitals, fifty-six doctors and 128 nurses for the population of 500,000 in Chin State. Which is 4,726 patient of age 15-64 years of age per doctor and 22,050 patients in one hospital. To put it in perspective, in the United State the ratio of patient per doctor is 1,000 to 3 (Countries Compared by Health Physicians per 1,000 People). While the country itself is improving its health care system, primary health care is still out of reach for most people in Chin State since poor transportation and rough terrain mean rural residents have to walk for days to reach medical care in the nearest town. Some arrive close to death while others do not survive the journey. As healthcare is not easily available, many people rely on the traditional remedies for seasonal sicknesses even today.

For every 200 students there’s only a single teacher and one school is shared by up to four to five villages in the area. With only forty-nine high schools, there is no higher learning institution such as a college or university in Chin State (Chin Human Rights Organization). High school graduates must continue their higher education outside Chin State, an added barrier to educational access for Chin students, as well as, a financial burden for parents with one or more students studying in a colleges or university. Since 1990, teaching of the Chin language as a separate subject in primary schools has been banned by the government. The restrictions on the use and learning of Chin language have meant higher percentages of Chin youths unable to read or write in their own language. This also means that Chin children are losing part of their culture and traditions that go hand-in-hand with the use and learning of their language (Chin Human Right Organization). There are significant challenges in retaining teachers, leading to high dropouts in schools. One main reason for the high dropout rates is parents rely on children to perform domestic work, collect fuel and water, care for siblings and contribute to agricultural livelihoods. Through a recent phone call with my family in Burma, I learned that one of my cousins who is two years old had to stay by the village well at 3 in the morning in order to get enough water for the day since her mother is ill. By five o’clock in the morning, villagers start to fill in their pots and she’ll have no time to fill hers since there is not enough water for the whole village.

Living in Burma, people not only are facing an agricultural crisis but also ethnic cleansing, forced labor, human right abuses, and persecution because of differences in religions. As of 2011, there are currently 10,000 refugees from Burma in the United States and 6,000 more in Malaysia (Julia). Many of the refugees come from refugee camp bordering Burma and Thailand as well as from Malaysia. Chin people fled illegally to Malaysia for refuge because there are no refugee camps in Chin State. My family, for example, fled to Malaysia in 2008, in search of refuge. Because we were fleeing illegally, we had to walk miles and miles through the forest and ride in a van packed with 25 other people and hide in a fishing boat (much like a canoe) with ten other people to get around the river while trying not to be caught by the border patrols. Typically, it takes about a week to get from Burma to Malaysia, if by luck it could be 4 days and if not sometime longer than a week. After arriving in Malaysia, we had to hide from the

government there and were always on the run to not be caught by the police and border patrols. We lived in Malaysia for three years waiting to be accepted in the US with no education available for the kids. Many of the refugees coming into the US have similar story and once arrived in the U.S still have a fear of police because they have been on the run for so long. My family fled because of fear of government punishment in Burma, the military regime has detained prisoners for decades to use as an example to promote fear and self-censorship among the people living in Burma (US Campaign for Burma).

Other issues include transportation and communication. Both are difficult as the natural geography consist of steep hills and deep valleys. However, Chin State is right on the border of Mizoram, India, which has a modern transportation system. Chin State could be connected to roads that would allow it to easily move the community's products to growing foreign markets, improving the economy. Unfortunately, the lack of a modern and maintainable road system has hindered the ability to do so (Hualngo Land Development Organization). All remnants of a government that didn't represent all peoples.

To boost food security and reverse the state's malnutrition crisis to improve health, experts suggest improving infrastructure by expanding education, energy supplies, telecommunication and roads. Another idea is to create more community rice banks – a place where farmers can store their rice surplus post-harvest, from which they can borrow at low-interest rates during a rice shortage, and increasing microcredit lending to reduce dependence on extortionist money lenders.

To me, however, it seems that there is only one way to improve the lives of the civilian of Burma- and that is through better government. We cannot change the government from the outside; it has to be done inside of the country and the leadership of Aung San Suu Khi's party is a good first step. Aung San Suu Khi is a Burmese social democratic stateswoman. She build her youth, and adult life in India, England and the United States. She's married to a British academic and has two sons. In 1988, she returned to Burma from abroad and soon began speaking out publicly against U Ne Win - dictator of Burma - and his ironfisted rule, with issues of democracy and human rights at the forefront of her agenda. In July 1989, the junta –the military of Burma - placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, cutting off any communication with the outside world. After twenty-one years under house arrest she was finally released on November 2010 and subsequently held a seat in parliament for the National League for Democracy (Aung San Suu Kyi).

Despite being the leader of NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi is not the president because of the 2008 Constitution that stops anyone who has children who hold a foreign passport from becoming president. Of the other leader in NLD, U Htin Kyaw select by Aung San is the new president. On the other hand, she hold four ministerial portfolios: foreign minister, education minister, minister of electric power and energy and minister of the Office of the Presidency. Natural resources in the country such as natural gas timber, jade. Copper, hydropower, etc. often go to other countries such Thailand and China, leaving Burma starved for electricity and power. As the minister of energy and electric power, one of the most important policy decisions she will have to make is whether or not to terminate, suspend, or resume the construction of a dam on the Ayeyarwaddy River, a project founded by the Chinese to export hydroelectric power from Burma into China (Rieffel Lex). Of the livelihood of Burma, seventy percent is depended on agriculture, however, many face high levels of debt due to failure of the local credit system. Unlike the outgoing party, NLD plan is to reform the agricultural sector by allowing foreign investor and giving greater independence to the central bank. Development programs to be launched in 2016 and 2017 from international donor and lending institutions, such as the World Bank, USAID and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to support the country's will give a chance to the change made by NLD party (Corben Ron). Some barriers that may challenge the plan is the infrastructure and stability between the ethnicity.

Chin States is an isolated ethnic minority area, which result in poor health outcome. Furthermore, foreign organization that are willing to help are unable to get into the state because of the government neglecting. However, access to the region has increased in recent years with the government being more cooperative. Organizations such as Hualngo Land Development Organization (HLDO), are already working in Chin State and illustrate to the people how to improve the quality of their lives by developing their agriculture practices. One of their programs is through a 10-acre sustainable organic farm to teach farmers, local organic fertilizer is beneficial to health, welfare and economic condition to their farms, peoples and the future generations. This organization is successful because the organization is approve by the government of Burma and all of its worker and volunteers are the Chin peoples with a combination of others. Not long ago, one of the organization leader, Zirthan Hnuni came to the United State to gain support from the Chin people living in the US and share her experience with other nationality.

Another way in becoming a better government is to raise the quality of education of the citizens. The barriers of citizen becoming educated is because parents take children as young as seven years old out of school to work at menial to increase family income. One solution to this is to provide more free school that are accessible in the rural areas. Currently, NLD have established 200 free school, serving nearly 20,000 students (Naing, May Thinzar). Additionally, scholarship opportunities and student loan for higher education such as universities should be available (Aung, Ei Cherry).

The Borlaug-Ruan International Internship or similar programs would be a great way to educate the people from outside the country on how to properly grow their crops. The program will give knowledge and people to help improve the lives of the civilians of Burma, especially the rural areas such as Chin State. Teaching the farmers the new way of handling crop would increase the quantity of food production which in turn will decrease the malnutrition in Burma, which then will decrease the number of diseases because of lack of nutrients. As many of the restricted areas are now open to public, the people are in need of people to help them become more developed in their health care and their agriculture systems.

By educating the people of Burma, we can change the mindset of the people and give them knowledge of how to improve their agriculture and health care system, helping them become more developed. Giving the people the power of knowledge will increase the number of civilians involved in politics and will better the government, which then will improve the economy for all. More youth will have options to make a change in the country and make a meaningful difference for less developed countries.

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