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## Burma: The Fight for Freedom and Food

### **Introduction- Life of a Typical Subsistence Family Farmer**

Burma, also known as Myanmar, is located in Southeast Asia. Agriculture is big in Burma; 80 to 85% of the Burmese citizens qualify as subsistence family farmers. Survival is a struggle for these farmers as they are hard-pressed from all sides. An oppressive government, mistreatment of minorities, natural resource degradation, a lack of infrastructure, outdated farming equipment and methods, natural disasters, HIV epidemics, inflation, and food shortages, all contribute to the plight of the people of Burma. Burma has an extremely low GDP of 2.9%, and it is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup>

The current population of Burma is roughly 53 million people, representing about 135 different ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> They have a fairly high literacy rate of 89.9% since laws require 5 years of primary education (kindergarten-4<sup>th</sup> grade). Qualified students may continue onto 4 years of middle school and 2 years of high school; however, many cannot pursue education this far since they have to work on their family's farm. Rice is a staple in the Burmese diet, and people drink rice water or tea to stave off hunger pains. The family may only eat meat once or twice a week and statistics show that 15.8% of Burmese children are severely malnourished. Thirty-two percent of children under the age of 5 are underweight, and the Global Hunger Index level for Burma is ranked "serious".<sup>21</sup>

For a family of 3, daily needs include 32-40 cents for food, 5-10 cents for water, 5-10 cents for transportation, and 24-32 cents for cooking fuel. Just to sustain a family of 3, 66-92 cents are needed daily, but the Burmese have a difficult time supporting their families of 5-6 people with their average income of 80 cents per day.<sup>14</sup>

Burma is blessed with many natural resources. The main crop grown by the subsistence family farmer is rice, accounting for 60% of the country's total cultivated land area and 97% of total food grain production by weight.<sup>1</sup> Other farming and production industries include agricultural goods (beans, sesame, ground nuts, sugar cane, pulses, oilseed, cotton, jute, rubber, tobacco, and livestock<sup>3,2</sup>), textiles, wood products, construction materials, gems (precious stones), metals, oil, and natural gas.<sup>1</sup> They use outdated tools and farming methods, such as plows and water buffalo<sup>5</sup>, from which they must rent from wealthy land owners. They repay their debts each year after the harvest.<sup>4</sup> Every farm varies in size, depending on the crop the family grows.<sup>13</sup>

Of all the barriers that lead to poverty, the greatest cause of the hardship these people face is from their own government. The Burmese government is run by a military that oppresses and strikes fear into the struggling citizens of Burma. Because they burn buildings and raze cities, plant landmines, sexually harass and torture its citizens, engage in human trafficking and religious persecution, refuse any aid from other countries to help with natural disasters and food insecurity, and shoot those who try to escape this tyranny, the government is the most limiting factor in preventing the aid of the Burmese people. In over fifty years of civil war, the dictatorship has killed thousands of its own people and left millions internally displaced.<sup>3</sup> The pro-democracy movement in Burma is still alive, but they are being suppressed.

### **The Issue**

To determine which issue to address, the approach is the same as diagnosing a disease. The symptoms must be examined to deduce which disease is affecting the patient. However, just as with treating a patient, not only the symptoms but the cause should be treated in order to successfully cure the patient. The root cause of the “disease” that affects Burma is the poor management of the government. To truly be successful and eradicate food insecurity, Burma must first establish a stable government. By *engaging in diplomatic initiatives for conflict prevention and resolution and government based on principles of democracy, accountability and transparency in public institutions, and the rule of law that are basic to reducing the numbers of vulnerable members of society*, the Burmese food insecurity issues can be best addressed.

"The people of Burma, regardless of politics, ethnicity or religion, have suffered from more than 30 years of internal warfare and military oppression. After decades under a brutal military regime, a widespread movement for democracy culminated in the massacre of thousands of demonstrators throughout the country in 1988. The military dictatorship bowed to intense pressure and held elections in 1990. The National League for Democracy party won over 80% of the votes, and the military responded by ignoring the results of the elections and jailing many. Earlier, in 1989, the leader of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi, was placed under house arrest (where she remains today). She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize early in her captivity.

Elected members of parliament and other pro-democracy people were forced to flee, and many of those who stayed were arrested, tortured and/or killed. Since that time, in an effort to stay in power, the military dictatorship has continued systematic repression against the people of Burma, including random arrests, extra judicial killings, rape, forced labor and military service, torture and ongoing campaigns against ethnic minorities and pro-democracy groups. Surveillance by the military intelligence is pervasive. Meanwhile, most of the world's heroin comes out of Burma, with the complicity of the dictatorship, who spends over 50% of the national budget on arms, while the Burmese people slide deeper into poverty. What was one of the richest countries in Asia is now one of the poorest in the world--and has one of the worst human rights records."<sup>9</sup> – Global Prayer for Burma

## **History**

Burma is a food-surplus country with significant agricultural potential, and under the British administration, it was the wealthiest country of Southeast Asia. The world's largest exporter of rice, Burma also exported much oil through the “Burmah Oil Company”. Burma also produced 75% of the world's teak, had a high literacy rate, and was thought to be on the fast track to development.<sup>18</sup> How did Burma go from one of the richest countries in southeast Asia to one that is struggling to survive?

In 1948, the parliament and Prime Minister U Nu agreed to make Burma a “welfare state” and adopted a central planning. This proved detrimental; rice exports decreased by 66% and mineral exports by 98%, hurting the economy badly!<sup>10</sup> Then in 1962, a coup d'état and a subsequent “Burmese Way to Socialism” (a plan to nationalize all industries) combined to finish the process of turning Burma into the impoverished country it is today. In 1987, Burma was given “Least Developed Country” status by the UN, which announced Burma's bankruptcy.<sup>20, 14</sup> The Burma economy is rated “the least free in Asia” and

is tied with Somalia for the title of “Most corrupt country in the world” by Transparency International in their 2007 report, “Corruption Perceptions Index” released September 26, 2007. <sup>11</sup>

### **Limiting Factors**

The military junta known as the *Tatmadaw* contains 480,000 soldiers. Burma has the 12<sup>th</sup> largest standing army in the world and the government spends over half of their annual income on weapons and supplies for these soldiers. The Burmese junta requires people to pay fees to support the army and even serve in the Burmese army against their will. The government burns villages, uproots their crops, and shoots villagers if they find them. <sup>17</sup>

The Burmese government also controls all independent businesses (they are either co-owners or full-owners of even “private” business),<sup>14, 20</sup> making capitalism and free market practically impossible.<sup>4</sup> Many countries are aware of the oppression inflicted by the Burmese government on their citizens and the food insecurity crisis; however, when other countries try to help, the Burmese government refuses any aid, making helping Burma extremely difficult. In spring of 2007 Hurricane Nargis hit Burma, killing at least 85,000 people (with an addition 54,000 missing), destroying 700,000 houses, killing seventy-five percent of the livestock, sinking half of the fishing fleet, and flooding the farmlands with salty water. Despite this major national disaster, the military junta resisted aid for an extended period of time, even refusing to grant visas to organizations willing to give aid. French and U.S. naval ships brought supplies and waited offshore for 2 weeks but were never granted permission to unload their supplies, so they withdrew. <sup>6</sup>

All people face discrimination and harassment from the government. Burmese who are brave enough to speak out fear getting arrested, questioned, or worse. Things are especially bad for minorities like the Karen people, women, and religious groups. <sup>7</sup> People are forced into labor and lack many freedoms common in America such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The government searches peoples’ residences, monitors telephone conversations and emails, and has even outlawed many forms of communication. <sup>7</sup> The Burmese army even carries a list of those to execute. <sup>16</sup>

As recently as mid-August of 2009, Burmese armies attacked the Shan civilization and displaced 10,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Currently, one to four million people are displaced inside the country and 100,000 are in refugee camps outside Burma.

### **Increasing Agricultural Productivity**

If the small-scale subsistence farmers increased agricultural productivity but the current government remained in power, the factor I have selected would remain relatively unchanged. Because of the oppression of the government, the soldiers would simply have more crops to burn and more money to take. Even if the farmers were to harvest their crops before the government found out, a lack of infrastructure would make it difficult to trade. It would not harm the farmers to be more agriculturally productive (and in fact, if the government became stable, it would indeed solve many food insecurity issues). However, considering the current conditions, being more agriculturally productive would not help them either. Once stability returned to Burma, the fertile abundant farm land could once again produce much food and decrease food insecurity for Burma and much of Asia.

The best way to increase agricultural productivity would be to work with a stable government and stop cultural discrimination. Once this is accomplished, farmers could grow crops, free from governmental destruction, and feed their own families. Farmers who lack current farming practices could receive training in more up-to-date farming methods and receive loans to purchase more modern farming

equipment (they currently farm with plows and water buffalo)<sup>5</sup>. Crop yield could be improved by improving infrastructure, making it easier for getting produce to market, and improved crop hybrids that resist drought and diseases could increase the agricultural productivity.

Biofuels are also another current issue to discuss as Burma is a natural resource-wealthy country, capable of producing large amounts of biofuels. There is no shortage of water so the farms are easily irrigated. Sugar cane, oil palm, and jatropha are products that can be grown for the use of biofuels. Jatropha is "... a drought-resistant perennial, growing well in marginal/poor soil and has a very high oil yield/hectare. It is easy to establish, grows relatively quickly and lives, producing seeds for 50 years. It has been used for years as a hedge plant to protect food crops from animals and livestock."<sup>8</sup> With the current biofuels push, the government is mandating that 20,000 hectares to set aside to grow jatropha.

### **Conclusion- Addressing the Governmental Dilemma**

If a stable government were in place for Burma, many other issues could then be addressed. First, other countries could be allowed to assist the needy Burmese, helping them get immediate food and medical attention and assisting them in making their farms functional again after the negative impacts of the cyclone. Second, without the oppressive government, people could become more knowledgeable in farming methods, therefore giving them and their families more income. Third, with more income, families could then buy better farming equipment and increase their crop yield. With their extra profit, they could invest in improving infrastructure and roads, making it easier to trade and further stimulating the Burmese economy. Furthermore, if the oppressive government were removed, the minority groups would then be able to improve their livelihoods and freedoms. The standards of living for all people would increase and they would be able to enjoy freedoms desired by all human beings.

Another solution could be for a humanitarian organization (like the International Federation of the Red Cross) to establish a connection with the current Burmese government and request that Burma send government employees to be educated in farming methods. This training would educate the government employees on how to help the Burmese people increase the knowledge of the agricultural production, thus improving agricultural productivity and helping alleviate food insecurity. Organizations like the UN could select universities from many different countries to send professors of agricultural to train these Burmese governmental employees. The Burmese government could choose the location of the training and monitor it. Once the Burmese government officials were trained to help the Burmese farmers improve farming methods, the Burmese citizens would see the governmental officials helping them and this might improve citizen's relationships with the government. This solution may also work for getting together a force to create better roads, reverse natural degradation, improve medical clinics, and many other such needs. The Burmese government, which "prides itself on the ability to cope with any challenge"<sup>2</sup>, could take credit that it was helping its own citizens.

Burma has many problems that cause food insecurity, including natural disasters, lack of agricultural education, poor farming methods, degradation of natural resources, food shortages, inflation, and governmental oppression. The source of many of these problems originates with a corrupt government who persecutes its citizens by burning villages, pillaging crops, and displacing and slaughtering people. If the government is either replaced by a more stable government, or if current governmental employees could be trained to assist subsistence family farmers, the fight for food security could be won.

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