

Burma

FISHING IN THE TIME OF THE MILITARY JUNTA

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As the civil war rages on in Burma, the ruling military junta (SLORC) is locked in a struggle with ethnic minority groups and other opposition parties which make up the Democratic Alliance of Burma. Frightening stories of human rights violations are now regularly pouring out of the country. Meanwhile, following the September 1988 military coup, Burma's doors have been flung open to foreign companies. The one area which is attracting global capital is fisheries. Leases for offshore fishing are now offered to foreign vessels. Foreign aid and loans have increased Burma's catching, storage and processing facilities.

According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, the state Pearl and Fishery Corporation has acquired new trawlers, taking its fleet size to 68. In 1989-90 the corporation produced about 13,438 tons of fish. Burma's principal fishing areas are in the delta region, the southern coastal regions and the Bengal Gulf.

Today the most important player in the Burmese fishing industry is Thailand. Though co-operation between the two countries began over 20 years ago, when Thai companies were allowed to fish in Burmese waters in 1968, the inexperience of both countries led to the abolition of this co-operation. However, in 1988 SLORC began to revive that policy, eager to earn foreign exchange to fund purchase of weapons from China, as alleged by human rights activists. Initially, only three Thai companies were allowed to send their trawlers into Burmese waters. But by mid-1989, there were 241 Thai trawlers legally fishing there.

Since 1990 Thai fishing companies have been rampantly exploiting Burmese marine waters. Thailand's largest supply of shrimp comes from Burma, to be exported to the US and Japan. According to the Burma Rights Movement for Action (B.U.R.M.A.), many Thai boats get illegal entry into restricted coastal waters by bribing the Burmese navy. The Thai companies are said to earn thrice as much profits from illegal fishing boats as from those legally permitted inside.

All this activity has depleted fish stocks for local traditional fishermen, impoverishing many, especially in areas of the Tenneserin coast, forcing them to cross the border to enter Thailand illegally in search of jobs. Each day an average of 30 people from Mon State and Karen State leave for Thailand illegally. Most end up working as cheap labourers in building construction sites. According to one

estimate, each month around 700 Burmese (not all fishermen) legally leave the country.

The poor traditional fishermen are also forced to pay the Burmese army the 'porter tee to avoid having to serve as porters and human mine sweepers. The first fishing agreement between Thailand and SLORC, signed on April 13, 1990, was a joint investment project for one year (of a potentially ten-year contract). This led to the creation of a new joint venture company, the Thai Myanmar Fisheries Co., comprising members of the Thai Fisheries Association and the Myanmar Fishing Enterprise. With a total investment of about US\$ 24 million, the project allowed 165 Thai vessels to operate legally in Thai waters.

SLORC favoured Thai investment because of the need for foreign currency, Thai expertise in fishing technology, and the hope of new jobs from these joint ventures. After the agreement, however, twice as many illegal Thai vessels began to fish in Burmese waters too. Subsequently, the joint venture was extended both in time and scope to include fish-meal and canned tuna factories, as well as ice and cold storage facilities. The ownership pattern was changed to 50/50 from the previous 51/49 in favour of SLORC.

Foreign investment is not confined to Thailand. Countries like Singapore, Japan, China, South Korea and even the US (with one fishing company, MMA Finance Inc.) have a presence in Burma. Such investments have led to strong and demonstrative reactions, particularly by those who view them as an interference in Burma's struggle for freedom and democracy. In one instance, Burmese student activists captured and later destroyed one large Thai trawler which was fishing well within the area declared off-limits to foreign boats.

Activists are also appealing for international protests. Since August 1991, US Senator Patrick Moynihan has asked for sanctions against shrimp imports to the US from Thailand. Explaining the rationale for sanctions, one Burmese dissident said, "By importing sea foods from Thailand which are harvested in Burmese waters, the US, Japan and other marine food importers are indirectly placing money in the hands of SLORC, and are also supporting the severe exploitation of small local Burmese fishermen who can no longer make their living and must become refugees and illegal immigrants". ■