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Are Tourist Dollars Keeping Burma in Chains?

by Bertil Lintner

"Burma is a country of breathtaking beauty—golden pagodas and temples beyond description, countryside as varied as snow-capped mountains, lush green paddy fields and white sand beaches. Isolated for many years, Burma retains the fascination of an unchanged culture with its atmosphere steeped in the past, its gentle people—always friendly and welcoming."



Forget that 1996 has been officially designated "Visit Myanmar Year," the guidebook that begins with the above paragraph actually recommends that you not visit the country. That is because Burma remains under the iron heel of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), one of Asia's least democratic regimes.

To make their point, the authors of *Burma: The Alternative Guide* quote pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi: "As long as new money comes in, the SLORC is under less and less incentive to change."

Tourist dollars, the guidebook claims, help perpetuate the regime's grip. Published and distributed by the Burma Action Group (BAG), the volume champions the U.K.-based activist group's argument

that the best way to bring democracy to the country is to isolate its regime.

To tourists who insist on making the trip, *The Alternative Guide* suggests they pack a few facts about the regime along with their hiking sandals.

Indeed, the guide is an unusual tip sheet on a sometimes surreal country. Maps included in the book indicate the distribution of forced labor as well as a democracy legend of Rangoon showing the places where protesters and others were killed in the pro-democracy uprising in 1988. The White Bridge on Prome Road, according to the map, is where students were clubbed to death by police in March of that year. The Kyandaw Crematorium is where wounded demonstrators were burned alive. The aptly homophonic Insein Prison is described as the site of many prisoner deaths and still houses hundreds of political prisoners.

While few tourists may visit those places, they are nonetheless coming to see Burma. There are signs that badly needed foreign exchange is flowing in to the regime, which has prompted the campaign to boycott "Visit Myanmar Year." In 1990, Burma welcomed 9,000 visitors. In 1995, that had grown to 100,000, bringing in more than \$32 million.

Where did that money go?

Did it really benefit only the military as BAG and others claim?

There is evidence of military control of the tourist cash flow. High fees for visiting museums and even pagodas and other places of worship go directly to the military. Visitors are also obliged to exchange their currency at the official rate of five or six kyats to the dollar, while the black market values the greenback at more than 120 kyats.

Yet it seems obvious that a share of traveler spending benefits hotel owners, tour operators and guides, who work independently of the government.

Even if there is a trickle-down effect on the Burmese economy at large, there are other causes for concern.

Burma's military government has reportedly increased the use of forced labor in order to construct and maintain infrastructure improvements to facilitate "Visit Myanmar Year." Young people in chains have been seen clearing the moat around the old royal palace in Mandalay. Foreign visitors who took pictures of the chain gains claimed to recognize many of the laborers as political prisoners, including dissident Buddhist monks arrested and forcibly disrobed. In the southern city of Bassein, more than 30,000 local people were "mobilized" in July 1994 to work on a new airport project. These "volunteers," as the government calls them, were not paid and none received medical treatment following an outbreak of cholera on the site.

The fabled temple city of Pagan, Burma's foremost tourist attraction, has also been the scene for a number of gross human rights violations. Pagan's entire

population was forcibly removed from the area in 1990 to make sure that tourists, who were expected to pour into the country, would not be disturbed by anything they could possibly perceive as an eye sore, such as bamboo huts or unbathed locals.

What remains today is a "history park," which is very different from the lively community Pagan once was. Bulldozers have created moats and ponds that never existed at any time in the history of Pagan—and, in the process, destroyed archeological sites being excavated even as the "beautification process" began. In private, Burma's few remaining professional archeologists complain bitterly, but none has dared to speak publicly for fear of arrest.

To make this "history park" more accessible, "a new rail link to Pagan from the main Rangoon-Mandalay trunk line is being built, reportedly with the use of forced labor," states a report by the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon. Although written in the malleable language of international diplomacy, the document nevertheless supports the argument that the bulk of tourist money benefits the authorities: "Several of the larger hotels both in Rangoon and in provincial sites (the Strand, New World Inya Lake, Ngapali Beach and Sandoway Hotels, for example) continue to be owned in whole or part by state economic enterprises. Several other hotels are believed to be owned in whole or in part by senior military or ex-military figures or their relatives. Train transport remains largely, although not exclusively, a state monopoly. Domestic air transport is provided by state-owned Myanmar Airways, Myanmar Airways International, Mandalay Air and Yangon Air, owned in part by foreign firms and in part by the Government of Burma."

Given Burma's underdeveloped infrastructure and limited number of hotel rooms, "Visit Myanmar Year" may not bring in the hundreds of thousands of tourists the government is hoping for. But it has encouraged many to air their feelings about traveling there—or staying away. And *The Alternative Guide* is not the only example of the struggle with the moral issues involved.

Amnesty International has raised the point and offered what could be interpreted as a compromise solution to the dilemma of "Visit Myanmar Year:" mass tourism channels foreign exchange earnings to SLORC, the organization says, but "backpack tourism is beneficial, because of the personal contact it allows with local people. If we don't boycott tourism to Myanmar, we must promote information and awareness and spread information from tourists who return to their home country."

After all, the pictures of chain-gangs working on the Mandalay moat, which appeared in the world press, were taken not by the international media, but by wide-eyed young tourists.

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