

# Burma Archives Newsletter

Issue No. 1, July 1998

## Editorial

*"In the early morning on the day of my house arrest (July 20 1989), a hundred or so armed military personnel surrounded my house. Why they didn't immediately enter the compound I don't know, but those extra bouss gave my wife and other family members the time to tear up and flush down the toilet every NLD document, letter and address that was in my office."*

With soldiers at his door, NLD Deputy-Chairman U Tin Oo had no choice but to destroy documents. But many more documents are lost to posterity simply because people caught up in a maelstrom of events, with no security and in danger of persecution from totalitarian forces can give little thought to creating and preserving an archive of their own particular movement or organization. In Burma conflict has raged for decades between the central military government and ethnic minority groups, each having its own political agenda as well as its own language and cultural heritage to preserve. In 1988, following the military's suppression of mass pro democracy demonstrations seeking an end to one-party rule, thousands of students and activists fled to Burma's borders. After the Burmese military government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) failed to

honour the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy party in the May 1990 general elections, many more political activists and members of parliament elect were forced into exile, and thousands of ethnic minority villagers have also sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

The events of the past ten years in Burma have helped focus attention on a country that has long been inaccessible and little studied. There are worldwide extremely few academic centres and libraries with Burma specialists and collections. Although some libraries such as the British Library in London have unparalleled manuscript and archival collections on Burma, these relate predominantly to the British colonial period. A researcher today would be hard put to find in Western library collections an up-to-date run of even one national newspaper from Burma, let alone a comprehensive coverage of current Burmese publications. Given this fact, it is not surprising that the publications and unpublished documents of dissident, ethnic minority and opposition groups and individuals are not systematically collected and are by their nature rare and ephemeral. Rigid censorship within Burma together with the production of official

histories promoting the SLORC/SPDC version of events and the role of the Burma Army has virtually suppressed all independent and alternative views and source materials. For example, the pro-democracy publications that appeared briefly in late August and early September 1988 are now all banned in Burma and, in early 1998, a student who had compiled and circulated a history of the student movement and of education in Burma was sentenced to 17 years' imprisonment.

The Burma Archives Project exists to support and actively encourage the compilation, collection and safe preservation of documentation - in written and audiovisual form - particularly, but not exclusively, of material on Burma deriving from the 1980s onwards. A coordinated effort is needed to seek out material such as posters, photographs, pamphlets, diaries, correspondence, memoirs, political and ethnic groups' records. The creation of archives that preserve what has been called the 'collective memory of development' - material documenting social movements and social transformation, minority peoples and other subjects relevant to civil society - is essential to Burma's future development.

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irregular newsletter of the  
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The International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam offers a safe archival repository for the preservation of such material. Members of the Burma Archives Project (academics, librarians, and independent scholars and researchers) are concerned to use their contacts and expertise to help locate material and to ensure, on behalf of the individual or group from which it emanates, that it is safeguarded. It is planned that, as material accumulates, archival and conservation training and assistance can be given to those from whom the material originates, and that research, documentation and publication projects will develop.

The *Burma Archives Newsletter* - of which this is the first issue - is designed to keep BAP members in touch with latest developments and to become a forum for the exchange of ideas and reports on progress. Eef Vermeij of IISH is responsible and indispensable for putting the *Newsletter* together so please keep the information flowing.

Patricia Herbert

## The IISH and Burma

The International Institute of Social History (IISH) was founded in 1935. It is one of the world's largest documentary and research institutions in the field of social history in general and the history of the labour movement in particular. Most of the collections are open to the public.

### Collections

The IISH holds close to 2,000 archival collections, some 1 million printed volumes and about as many audio-visual items. The available collections are accessible through an online catalogue and inventories. The IISH is also home to a number of other documentary institutions, most notably the Netherlands Economic History Archive (NEHA) and the Netherlands Press Museum (NPM). Both offer supplementary collections and services. Their material is included in the IISH catalogue. Visitors can consult the collections for reference and research in the reading room.

### Research and Publications

The IISH carries out and stimulates scholarly research. It is a respected meeting place for researchers from all over the world and organizes conferences, symposia and international research projects. The Institute publishes research results through international academic publishers and its own inhouse publishing unit. The *International Review of Social History* is published for the Institute by Cambridge University Press and appears three times a year, plus one supplement.

### Burma Collections

The IISH has a growing interest in Burmese material. It collects documents, letters, diaries, minutes of meetings, pamphlets, posters, cartoons, newspaper clippings, audio-visual material, microfilms and other material on Burmese social history as well as current affairs. IISH is also building up a library of publications in any language on Burma and is keen to take subscriptions to journals, magazines and newspapers. Our idea is to rescue material which may otherwise get lost or damaged. We plan ultimately to make such material also available in Burma itself, in a future

Burmese archive of social history. If you have any material or publications which could enrich our holdings and make it possible for researchers worldwide to study Burmese social history, please contact us at the address mentioned on the frontpage.

### Donating or depositing collections at IISH

If you consider donating material to IISH, you could do so in the form of a gift or a deposit or a sale (conditions available upon request). Material is accepted from individuals as well as organisations. It is also possible to retain the originals and give IISH microfilm copies, or the other way around.

### Short description of material to be collected

1a. Personal papers of political & cultural figures. These can be either 'leaders' or common people. The papers should include correspondence, diaries, photographs, things like membership-cards, documents referring to the person's involvement in political and/or social movements, associations, parties etc., or any other papers which place the person against the background of the social history of his/her time. Period can be extended as far back as possible, but contemporary material is equally valuable. In order to be useful for researchers in future, such material should be ordered roughly, and a list of broad categories of material is very helpful. Such lists could be in Burmese, or English

1b. Organisational papers. These are the archives of political parties, labour unions, student organisations, progressive culture organisations, professional groups, ethnic associations, etc. (Information on the background of this material would be very helpful)

2. Any printed material to do with (oppositional) politics: pamphlets, (proscribed) books, notices, flyers. It would be very helpful if these were accompanied with lists giving background information (year, organisation, place of publication)

3. Posters, cartoons, drawings (preferably

with lists) IISH has a special interest in oppositional politics, but government propaganda is also collected.

4. Political buttons, shields, statues, decorations, banners. (See also remark under 3)

5. Old press photographs of demonstrations, political activity, 'social events', important personalities, etc. These could be either prints or negatives (year, place, photographer's name, scene depicted - these are very important here)

6. Audiocassettes with political songs, speeches, etc. (again with background information on date, place, occasion, speaker/singer)

7. Anything about labour relations

8. We could also think of making a photographic record of current propaganda (billboards, slogans, etc.) and demonstrations.

Older libraries/librarians in Burma are more outward looking and have had experiences and contacts w/ foreigners. However, move to market economy has made it more attractive for brokers to sell to commercial outfits rather than to exchange w/ other libraries. Daw San San Maw is archivist, librarian for new institute of archaeology in Rangoon, in charge of National Museum in Rangoon. New cultural museum in Pagan, huge monstrosity built next to Gadawpalin on riverbank, with exhibit of 50 wigged plaster heads to show "hair styles through the ages." All Pagan pagodas tidied up. New gov't projects: Bayinnaung's palace in Pegu, Suleimani pagoda in Taunggyi, Mindon's palace reconstructed, two new military pagodas.

**Subjects discussed:**

- How to encourage collection, preservation, documenting of ethnic histories and cultures, through oral histories, photographs, music, memoirs, letters
- How to check authenticity of rare unpublished manuscripts
- Copyright issues.
- Which dialect privileged, if any, as the defacto "common language" in translations?
- How to encourage ethnic research that passes muster w/ authorities.
- How to revive, preserve old languages.
- How to empower/encourage local initiatives, involve community in developing cultural identity
- Training for national/local NGOs outside Burma?
- How to quietly encourage recording of disappearing knowledge.
- Special effort to collect material on minorities w/out ghettoizing cultures.

**British Library, London:** has well kept records; priceless documents; difficult access, vast holdings, not indexed, reliance on individual researcher's diligence. Needed: concerted research team to identify items.

**National Cultural Institute, Rangoon:** new 7 story building, wants exchange w/ British Library, books on museology. Problem of material that reaches Burma, but hoarded by recipient rather than made available to the public.

**OSI Archives/Budapest:** State of art archival space and maintenance, can help

in training on any archives topic. Future location Burma Project archives

**International Institute of Social History (IISH)** Gov't and privately funded, ability to put things on deposit, be gate keeper to private collections. Regularly collects ephemerals--buttons, banners; photos. Need input on other databases so not to duplicate. Can put full text files into databases, do complex searches, combine database and/or fulltext. Would like to become documentation center for Burmese material, including ephemeral, material for electronic archiving. IISH focuses on emancipation movements, labor, new social movements: human rights, women, ethnic nationalisms. Would like to develop trade union archives.

**Northern Illinois University,**(DeKalb, Illinois) Center for Burma Studies and Paul Bennett Collection. Curator: May Kyi Win (mwin@niu.edu). Collection includes old photographs, English books on Burma (catalogued up to 1995); books in Burmese from 1910; duplicates of books, journals for exchange; newspapers (can donate originals after being microfiched); videos, documentaries, CDROM of 6th Sangayana.

**Other Burma Archives:** To be identified in Japan, China, Thailand, India, USA: Bucknell, Denison, Cornell, Yale Universities, Library of Congress, private collections.

**Next steps**

- IISH conduct workshops on borders to: collect newsletters, especially those no longer published, statements by political groups
- Publish unpublished manuscripts
- Reprint/subvent publishing of emerging writers
- Encourage collection of like-material in one archive
- Encourage indexing of would-be private collectors/libraries
- Identify existing documents/data bases, create "international" format for Burmese documents for wider usage
- Collect directives of local commanders, eyewitness accounts, original tapes
- Training Burmese to do documentation themselves
- Alert Burmese broadcast stations to save broadcasts and letters from listeners

**Archives Meeting**

Summary of Amsterdam Archives Meeting hosted by IISH, May 15-16, Amsterdam. Follow up to last meeting November, 1997 in London.

**Background/update:**

More extensive access in Burma, at least Shan and Kachin States. Atmosphere acute in Rangoon, but situation not static, compared w/ BSPP era. Foreigners can get around. Burmese academics from older generation concerned about "replacing" themselves in schools and institutions. Future of education bleak. Even with new Phd programs, quality of research and education low. May be unrealistic currently to work w/ government and universities, however, much can be done with ethnic elders w/ fewer agendas. Cease-fire areas more accessible compared to complete deadlock of previous years. Much can be done under "cultural" context. Minority materials less heavily censored, quicker turn arounds. The Karen Encyclopedia in Payap University (Chiangmai) library might be a model as initial project for some groups.

- Resource center to check facts/ authenticities
- List of private collections, including in libraries
- List graduate theses by Burmese academics

#### Other News:

##### 8888 Anniversary Exhibit:

##### “VOICES OF 88”

Travelling exhibit ready August 1998, of selected materials largely from summer of 1988—newspapers, posters, stamps, cartoons, buttons, poetry, trade union insignias. A commemorative, portable exhibit, in Burmese and English. A tribute to all those who died at that time. Panels with captions. Catalogue in English and other languages (to be determined). Contact OSI Burma Project for exhibit schedule.

## Burma Acquisitions

Although the Burma Archives Project wasn't widely announced until this Newsletter, the IISH already received some printed materials in this initial stage. I've made a rough listing of the materials received the first 6 month of this year (donations by private people and organizations), just to give an idea of the material that we want to collect. In the near future all this material will be accessible through the general catalogue of the IISH. (<http://www.iisg.nl>)

#### Amnesty International:

- press-statements/reports (1995-1997)

#### Burma Centre Netherlands:

- BYVA Bulletin
- K.Y.O. News Bulletin
- Wunpawng Shi Shanan
- Dawn: vol. 1-3 (incomplete)
- Voice of Burma: 1996-1998
- Karenni Journal
- Karenni Calendar 1996
- Karenni Alphabet poster
- Mythology of the Karenni People
- Karenni Schoolbooks (3 copies)
- Independence (vol. 7, december 1997)
- The Shan Case; Rooting out the Myth of the Golden Triangle
- Forced Labour on the Ye-Tavoy railway construction
- Karen National Union Bulletin
- Report on cease-fire talks between KNU & SLORC
- Karen Refugee Newsletter
- Students' Friend
- Liberation Journal & Leaflet/ Postcard/Sticker (People's Liberation Front)
- several publications and statements (All Burma Federation of Students' Union)
- several booklets and newsletters (Democratic Party for a New Society)
- several booklets (National Council of the Union of Burma)
- New Era Journal
- Kwe Ka Lu

#### Burma Ethnic Research Group/

##### Friedrich Naumann Stiftung

- Forgotten victims of a hidden war: internally displaced Karen in Burma

#### Drum Publications (Kanchanaburi, Thailand):

- several educational booklets, mostly in Karen.

- Teachers Health Education Guidebook. - 1996
- Picture Dictionary - Karen language. - (1996)
- Junior English - Karen Dictionary. - (1996)
- Why is Naw Thee crying? (1997)
- Saw Htay Koo and Saw Htay Ler go to fetch water (1996)
- How your body works (1997)
- Saw Wah gets diarrhoea (1996)
- Karen National Union Calendars 1989-1998
- Kwe Ka Lu Newspaper (1997 - )

#### Images Asia (Chiangmai, Thailand):

- "Migrating with hope": Burmese women working in Thailand and the sex industry
- No childhood at all: a report about child soldiers in Burma
- Report on the situation for Muslims in Burma

#### From different private persons:

- Birma Alert: vol. 1 (1990) - vol. 8. (incomplete)
- New Burma Times: vol. 2 - vol. 4.
- Myanmar News Bulletin (other titles: Burma Press Release, Myanmar Press Release): 1988-1998 (incomplete)
- Burma Newsletter (Asia Society): vol. 3 (1982), no. 1
- Burma Newsletter (re-incarnated first issue since 1982): vol. 1 - vol. 9: no. 1 (incomplete)

and several publications by Martin Smith, published by Article 19 in London

- Fatal silence? Freedom of Expression and the Right to Health in Burma, 1996
- Ethnic groups in Burma. Development, Democracy and Human Rights, 1994
- State of Fear. Censorship in Burma, 1991
- Paradise Lost? The suppression of environmental rights and freedom of expression in Burma, 1994
- Censorship prevails. Political deadlock and economic transition in Burma, 1995
- Burma. beyond the law, 1996