Working Paper Number 94

‘External’ Aspects of Self-Determination Movements in Burma

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Based on secondary resources and long term anthropological field research, this paper explores some of the ‘external’ factors involved in the pro-democracy and ethnic struggles for self-determination currently being experienced in Burma. The analysis draws in cultural, economic and political aspects to demonstrate that a number of macro- and micro-level external or external-origin influences are at play, at a number of different ‘inside’, ‘outside’ and marginal sites. The paper argues in particular that ‘cultural’ factors such as computer-mediated communication and contacts with outsiders when living in exile, serve as means by which real, virtual and imaginary connections are drawn between these different sites and the actors who inhabit them.

In the context of Burma, this paper thus presents a glimpse into this complexity of origin and substance of external influences, of interactions between the external and the internal, and of the multidirectional pathways along which they operate. After an introductory overview, it does so by first reviewing some pertinent macro-political and macro-economic external factors, including international views and strategic interests. The paper then focuses on micro-level social and cultural issues, examining aspects of new media as utilised by the Burmese exile community and international activists. External influences on exiled communities living in the margins on the Thai-Burma border (characterised by the paper as neither ‘inside’ nor ‘outside’ proper), including Christianity and foreign non-governmental organisations, are then explored. The paper concludes that inside views, reactions and experiences of outside influences are presently just as important in determining outcomes as are the outside influences themselves.

February 2003

1. Introduction

Burma is a beautiful place. It has the largest land area of any country in mainland Southeast Asia, mountains and pagodas aplenty, an ethnically diverse population of around forty five millions,[1] a rich array of natural resources including teak, oil, gas, and precious and semi-precious stones, and before the Second World War was so agriculturally productive as to have been known as the rice-bowl of Asia.

Burma is also a troubled place. Given United Nations Least Developed Country (LDC) Status in 1987, Burma now struggles to feed all its people. Numerous ethnic struggles have been ongoing since Burma's independence from Britain in 1948, particularly in the mountainous areas around the country's perimeter. At the same time, there is a continuing struggle for democracy and for the fall of the military regime in Rangoon. The pro-democracy struggle, its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and the military regime's generally abysmal human rights record have been internationally well known since 1988, when mass demonstrations were brutally put down by the army. Ethnic issues are less familiar abroad, however, as is the extent to which human rights abuses are often specifically targeted at Burma's non-Burman ethnic groups.

This chapter is based on extensive analysis of secondary resources, and long term anthropological field research conducted by the author between 1996 and 1998 with non-Burman refugees from eastern Burma currently living in camps in northwest Thailand (Dudley 1997, 2000). Here, I explore some of the 'external' factors involved in the struggles for self-determination currently being experienced in Burma, drawing in cultural, economic and political aspects. The overall project of which this paper is a part, understands the 'self-determination' process to comprise the struggle by a people or group for control over their own destiny. In this broad sense, Burma's pro-democracy struggle is as much about self-determination as are the various ethnic struggles. The latter are numerous and vary in political objective, but generally have a new secessionist state or, more often, at least membership of a truly federal (and democratic) Burma as their aim. All Burma's struggles, including the fight for democracy, revolve around a desire for more autonomy at some level and/or political participation within the nation, either as an ethnic group or as a mass of democratically enfranchised individuals. In the case of the pro-democracy movement, there is also a struggle for a major change in the values and organisation of society (c.f. Lloyd on the anti-fundamentalist democratic struggle in Algeria).

Struggles for self-determination can take non-violent or violent forms, and the wider project of which this study is a part has focused on violent forms. In Burma, the pro-democracy struggle has been largely peaceable on the side of some but not all of those wanting democracy, and not on the part of the military regime.[2] Ethnic struggles have comprised ongoing guerrilla warfare and direct armed conflict on both sides lasting, in some cases, over fifty years. In practice, however, in examining both internal dynamics and external influences, it is not possible entirely to separate ethnic struggles and the pro-democracy struggle. Consequently, this paper considers issues that pertain to both.

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[1] World Bank 2000.

[2] As well as killing and injuring demonstrators in 1988 and later, the military regime has pursued a policy of harassment and threat, house arrest and general restriction of movement, detention without trial, torture and occasionally summary execution of pro-democracy activists.

Trying to separate 'external' from 'internal' factors is an artificial and ultimately arbitrary exercise. An 'external' factor such as an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) working inside Burma, for example, is and remains 'external' in so far as its core personnel, objectives, values and financial backing come from 'outside' and, furthermore, are likely to be heavily influenced by and in step with many 'international' attitudes concerning human rights, human development, etc. But the relationship between this INGO and 'insiders', be they, say, HIV-infected villagers, local military officers, or senior officials in Rangoon, is neither unidirectional nor momentary. The 'external' resources, values and core *experience* that stem from contact with the INGO are not received impassively and neutrally: 'internal' responses, attitudes and values not only play a huge part in how external influence is perceived and reacted to, but also feed back to the 'external' actors, resources and values, perpetuating a fluid relationship in which influence is mutual. In other words, while it is external factors that are of concern in this paper, it is important to note that the internal also plays a big part in determining the impact of the external.

'The external' itself is multi-layered and complex, ranging from the impact of post-cold war regional and global geopolitics and economics, through the broad influence of exiles, political activists and international civil society, to the specific role of particular individuals, situations and INGOs, for example. Moreover, all these external factors operate not only simultaneously and interactively with each other and with internal factors, but also through a number of different, real and metaphorical pathways in both (or many) directions. In the context of Burma, this chapter presents a glimpse into this complexity of origin and substance of external influences, of interactions between the external and the internal, and of the pathways along which they operate. After an introductory overview, it does so by first reviewing some pertinent macro-political and macro-economic external factors, including international views and strategic interests (section 3). Section 4, 'inside looking out', is most concerned with internal views of the outside world. It is the first of two sections looking more closely at *the relationship between* the external and the internal, demonstrating that the influences of the external are dependent on internal views and reactions and vice versa. Section 5 both changes level, becoming more focused on micro-level social and cultural issues, and alters direction, concentrating on the 'outside looking in' and examining aspects of the Burmese exile community and international activism. Section 6 then considers some factors in external influences on the 'inside out', or exiled communities living in the margins on the Thai-Burma border, neither 'inside' nor 'outside' proper. Sections 3 to 6 therefore explore different levels and forms of 'the external' and its multi-directional interactions with 'the internal' as they apply to self-determination struggles in and focused on Burma. Some of the more social and cultural pathways through which these operate are touched on particularly in sections 5 and 6, the former looking especially at the role of computer-mediated communication, and the latter at the potential impact of foreign NGOs.

2. Background: the situation in Burma

2.1 Introduction

Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, the whole country only having been annexed to the Empire since 1886.[3] Since 1962, despite various changes in leadership the government has been

[3] On colonialism and/or the struggle for independence, see Bless 1990 and Tinker 1983. On ethnic resistance, see Ghosh 1999.

a military one.[4] The population is highly diverse in ethnicity and language, and *Ethnologue* lists 111 languages.[5] The ethnic majority consists, just, of Burmans, but other groups are numerous in Burman areas and, mostly, in the mountainous regions around the Burman centre.

In 1988, after years of isolationist government Burma was at an economic low point, with foreign exchange reserves of only about US$28 millions. In that year, the Burmese army, the *Tatmadaw*, responded brutally to pro-democracy demonstrations led by students and Buddhist monks. Perhaps 10,000 people were killed.[6] International coverage of these events was slight compared to reporting of the later Tiananmen Square massacre, but sufficient to cause outrage in the West. Meanwhile, inside Burma one repressive military regime was replaced with another, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, subsequently known to all by the splendidly Orwellian acronym 'SLORC'. In 1990, the SLORC held a general election in which a landslide victory was won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD's victory was internationally recognised and various resolutions of United Nations General Assembly mandated senior UN officials to maintain dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as well as with the SLORC, but the election result has never been honoured by the military regime.

The new government – that in 1997 was to transmogrify into the still military State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – was little if at all better on human rights, but it did attempt to modify Burma's economic isolationism. It intended to open up areas of the economy to the private sector which would, it was hoped, lead to a degree of economic opening up to the outside world. Indeed, Taylor suggests that there was an intention inside Burma to facilitate Western investment from that point but that this was squashed by the political and economic isolation imposed on Burma by the USA, Japan and most of the EU in response to the shooting of demonstrators in 1988. 'Ironically, the end of Burma's self-imposed isolation led to a new isolation, imposed from the outside in an attempt to force from office the new military government which took power' (Taylor 2001c: 5). However, as Steinberg points out, failure truly to open up Burma's economy to the private sector and to the outside world was due too to the fundamental, historical Burmese mistrust of the private sector, and the fact that for so long and in colonial times especially, the economy and especially the private sector was dominated by outsiders (Indian, British, Chinese): 'political and economic xenophobia feed each other' (Steinberg 2001: 45).

2.2 Economic and humanitarian problems[7]

It is impossible to write about Burma's economy without an apparently endless series of caveats. As Steinberg explains,

> many statistics are politically correct though lacking in objectivity, some are inaccurate, many are plans that often are simply hopes, some use the official and unrealistic exchange rate, and there are enormous gaps in the data …
>
> (Steinberg 2001: 44).

Gross domestic product (GDP) for 1996-1997 was US$2,407 per capita if calculated using the Burmese government's official and unrealistic exchange rate, US$111 at the unofficial rate, US$225 at a 'weighted average exchange rate', and US$1,000 in terms of purchasing power parity

[4] The evolution of postcolonial politics in Burma is of obvious relevance to the issues under discussion in this paper, but there is not space to discuss them further here. See instead Carey 1997, Maung Maung Gyi 1983, Steinberg 1982, and Taylor 1987.

[5] http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/myan.html

[6] Smith 1991: 16; see also Anon. 1998, Carey 1997, Houtman 1999, Lintner 1989.

[7] Unless stated, economic statistics are from Burma Economic Watch, June 2001.

(Steinberg 2001: 45).[8] By 2000, per capita GDP at the realistic unofficial exchange rate was US$118, and US$1,200 in terms of purchasing power parity. Real growth is estimated at 5% in 2000, compared to 5.5% in 1999, 5% in 1998, 5.7% in 1997, and 6.4% in 1996. Burma's economy has minimal formal activity beyond agriculture, which accounted for 34.4% of total GDP in 2000. Other sectors are stagnant or very slow growing, and all are 'constrained by political instability, a lack of access to capital, poor physical and social infrastructure and the deteriorating macroeconomic environment' (Burma Economic Watch June 2001). In general, the dire state of the economy implies that overall growth is unlikely to be able to continue 'without substantial and far more comprehensive economic reforms and foreign assistance' (World Bank 2000). But the necessary international support for economic reform is unlikely to come while foreign debt arrears are so large and without significant political reform (the responses of Japan – which tends to reward nominal reforms in Burma much more readily than do Western countries or multinational organisations – being a major exception).

In 2000, outstanding foreign borrowing was around US$6,470 millions, more than the year's total real GDP of US$5,800 millions. In the same year, there was a trade deficit of US$1,408 millions, over 24% of GDP. The balance of payments, in US$ millions, for 1996 to 2000 was:[9]

	1996	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**
Exports	895	930	1,011	1,113	1,132
Imports	1,832	1,946	2,291	2,713	2,539
Trade Balance	-937	-1,016	-1,280	-1,600	-1,408
Services (Net)	60	-169	-317	178	229
Private Transfers (Net)	460	457	465	490	469
Current Account	-416	-728	-1,132	-931	-710

The private transfers are from Burmese workers overseas, and, as shown here at least, are small indeed by comparison to other developing countries. How meaningful these figures are, however, is questionable. Expatriates can send money via channels outside the notice or control of the regime, and it is impossible to know the sums involved. More generally, missing from balance of payments calculations are the revenues resulting from trade via informal border trade networks and smuggling. Such revenues are impossible to calculate, but certainly significantly benefit the regime and its supporters. To a far lesser extent, these revenues are, or mostly were, also of some value to the ethnic insurgent groups and others in opposition to Rangoon (see below). Commodities generating such revenues include teak and other natural resources and agricultural products, labour (including sex workers), and illegal drugs. Collignon estimates that drug revenues to the regime and its allies reach more than half a billion dollars, or US$13 per capita. At market exchange rates this is approximately 20% of official GDP, and over twice the Burmese regime's declared revenue in 1996-7 (Collignon 2001: 86).

[8] The official exchange rate in 1996 was 5.99 Kyat to US$1, while the market rate for the same period was 155 Kyat/US$. By 2000, the official rate was 6.53, while the unofficial rate had soared to well over 500 Kyat/US$ (Burma Economic Watch 2001). By July 2001, there were 610 Kyat to the dollar (http://www.burmafund.org).

[9] Table from Burma Economic Watch 2001.

Monetarily, things are also dire:[10]

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Domestic Credit (Kt. Millions)	229,535	297,431	382,133	485,940	634,891
Of which: Claims on Public Sector	*183,953*	*218,773*	*263,402*	*319,375*	*435,879*
Currency (% p.a growth)	25.9	34.7	28.9	17.3	17.5
Average Inflation (% p.a)	21.8	20.0	33.9	49.1	11.4
Call Deposit Rates (% p.a)	3.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	5.0
Six Month Term Deposits (% p.a)	10.0	12.5	12.5	12.5	10.5
Overdraft Rates (% p.a)	17.0	18.5	18.5	18.5	16.0
Loan Rates to Farmers (% p.a)	18.0	18.0	18.0	17.0	15.0

Average inflation is here grossly underestimated, as these figures do not account for accelerating demand and costs within the important black-market economy. But even if such figures were accurate, the reported interest rates are nonsensical. 'Burma's banking system, in short, cannot be functioning in a way that can be remotely considered rational' (Burma Economic Watch 2001). Furthermore, what is most shocking in these figures is

> the extent to which the military regime is the primary recipient of the resources generated by Burma's financial system. That 69% of credit created in 2000 went to the government is an extraordinary testimony to the regime's exhaustion of Burma's economy [and] … weakness of the private sector.
>
> (*ibid*)

Other indicators demonstrate the extent of Burma's humanitarian as well as economic problems. Average life expectancy at birth is only 55 (in comparison with 69 in East Asia and Pacific region in general); 40% of the population have no access to healthcare, clean water and sanitation; 70% of children do not complete primary school; and mortality rates are among the worst in Southeast Asia (infant mortality: 94/1,000 live births; under five mortality: 147/1,000 live births; maternal mortality: 232/100,000 deliveries).[11] Burma's human rights record is also appalling, with the regime regularly indicted by international organisations as one of the world's most repressive regimes, with its failure to recognise freedom of speech, its extensive use of forced labour, its closure of universities in order to minimise dissent, and the widespread occurrences of political persecution, imprisonment without trial, summary execution, rape, etc. Meanwhile, HIV/AIDS and other health issues have become increasingly urgent through the 1990s (e.g. see Smith 1996). In and mostly from the ethnic areas that encircle the Burman-majority lowland areas, there are also large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees and illegal migrants. Refugees and migrants now outside Burma, include over 250,000 'Rohingyas' (minority Muslims who fled in 1991-2 from Burma's Arakan [Rakhine] State to Bangladesh and who the UNHCR has since been attempting to resettle in Burma),[12] plus, by July 2001, over 136,000 Karen and Karenni refugees (*BurmaNet* 2001) and up to three-quarters of a million illegal immigrants in Thailand.

[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Tegenfeldt 2001: 112; see also Ministry of Health & UNICEF 1995.
[12] For more on the Rohingyas, see AI 1992, for example.

2.3 The ethnic groups

Ethnic diversity combined with the colonial legacy is variously interpreted (e.g. Gravers 1993, Smith 1991/1999, Taylor 1987) as a major factor in the struggles ongoing since 1948 in Burma's non-Burman areas. The extent of armed, ethnic opposition in Burma has been said to surpass 'even a Lebanon, Yugoslavia of Afghanistan in its complexity' (Smith 2001: 32; see also Smith 1991/9). Furthermore, the complexity of ethnic politics has been enhanced by splits in some ethnic groups. Such splits have been at the least welcomed by the Burmese regime, and at most actively promoted by it. The pro-SLORC/SPDC Democratic Karen Buddhist Association (DKBA), for example, split from the Karen National Union (KNU) in late 1994 and has frequently attacked Karen refugee camps on Thai soil. The Karenni National Defence Army (KNDA) or *Naga Ni* (Red Dragons) similarly split from the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) in 1995, and are believed to have been responsible for an attack on a Karenni refugee camp around New Year 1997, in which several people were killed.

Most of the ethnic groups want some form of federalism, and a few want independence. However, loss of central control (or an illusion thereof) is intolerable to the military regime, and while a large number of groups have now reached cease-fire agreements with the Burmese, others – notably the KNU and the KNPP – fight on. Their weapons have come from various sources, particularly Cambodia. The main source of payment for such armaments was teak logging and other smuggling revenue, but the ethnic groups now have significantly less money. This is partly because of a loss of territory – and thus border control and smuggling revenue – to the Burmese army (especially in and since 1997), and partly because on both sides of the border the insurgent groups have been increasingly squeezed by Burmese political activity and, in the case of the Thai-Burma border groups, by a reduction in official Thai sympathy to their cause.[13] When the SLORC turned into the SPDC in 1997, it did so with a younger generation of military leaders who 'also set about modernizing the [*T*]*atmadaw*' (Smith 2001: 22). This, combined with further opening up of the Burmese economy since 1997 and the domination of that economy by companies with military connections, has also meant 'rapid erosion of the financial support base of many insurgent groups, who previously controlled substantial parts of the black market trade in goods such as timber, luxury items, cattle and medicines' (Smith 2001: 23).

Of those groups which have reached cease-fire agreements, the largest are the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP). Areas affected by cease-fires have to a limited degree opened or are in the process of opening up to outsiders, including INGOs. This has made ethnic cease-fire groups reluctant publicly to support the NLD on several occasions – to do so could cause renewed fighting in their areas. The human costs in both lives and arrested development would, as they perceive it, be too great, as would the political cost in possible reversal of what ethnic cease-fire leaders regard as progress in raising ethnic issues further up the national agenda. But cease-fires have not spread all over country, and progress even in cease-fire areas is slow: deprivation continues.

The NLD have made some headway in ethnic areas, taking some seats in ethnic areas in the 1990 election. Generally, however, like the Burmese army they are seen by many members of ethnic groups as a Burman-majority organisation. Ethnic leaders are sympathetic towards Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, but the latter are still seen as Burman, and historically Burmans have, from a

[13] Thai authorities' support and sympathy for the struggles of the Burmese ethnic opposition groups on their border has withered as Chinese, Bangladeshi & Indian sympathy and tolerance had already done. For an example on the now toughened attitude of Thai authorities to Burmese refugees, see AFP 2001.

non-Burman perspective, proved untrustworthy. Ethnic parties and organisations consider it is the non-Burmans who 'have always paid the highest price for the political volatility in the country at large' (*ibid.*), as evidenced by internal displacement and outpouring of refugees on a massive scale particularly after 1988. Nonetheless, internationally, ethnic hardships and struggles have received less coverage and sympathy than has the general pro-democracy cause. Perhaps this is because the ethnic situation is or appears to be so much more complex and entrenched, or perhaps it has less obvious appeal to simplistic ideas of right and wrong.[14] But whatever its cause, it is a relative neglect that the ethnic groups feel strongly and sorely.

2.4 Narcotics

Attention focused on some of Burma's non-Burman ethnic groups centres not on politics and struggles for federalism or independence, but on the production of drugs. In fact, only some of two ethnic groups, the Shan and the Wa, are involved in major narcotic production and sale.[15] Certainly, none of the main ethnic opposition organisations is thought to benefit significantly from drug revenue. Nonetheless, opium is produced mainly in ethnic, upland areas. Until the late 1990s, Burma was the world's largest opium producer, and in 2001 it regained this title, after the Taliban's success in eliminating 75% of opium production in Afghanistan (*FEER* 2001b). Burma probably produces well over 2,000 tonnes of opium a year, supplying most of the heroin consumed in the USA and a large proportion of that used in Europe. There is insufficient evidence categorically to prove the military government's involvement in narcotics (although see *The Nation* 2001b), but without doubt its local agencies benefit. Senior government figures also argue privately that drug money contributes to economic and social development projects. Furthermore, in recent years the Wa in particular have branched out into amphetamine production on a grand scale; unlike opium/heroin, however, it seems that amphetamines are mostly bound for Thailand and other regional markets.[16]

3. Macro-political and macro-economic external factors: an overview

3.1 International views: the West

Since 1988, international views of events in Burma have ranged from the Western human rights perspective in which Burma symbolises to many a simplistic, good-versus-evil fight for democracy and justice, to the more pragmatic and even opportunistic stance taken by some private companies and governments (particularly governments in Southeast Asia). International opinion was outraged by the events of 1988, and aid from industrialised countries was stopped in that year. The appointment in 1991 of a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, was a sign of the level of continuing international concern (see Lallah 1998). A major investigation into forced labour practices in Burma was also begun by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which reported in 1998 (Smith 2001: 20), and re-visited Burma in September 2001. Western intolerance of Burma's military regime and its human rights record has, Taylor suggests, been made worse by the end of the Cold War and the consequent

> end to the tolerance of authoritarianism which had prevailed since the late 1940s. Democratic elections, multi-party democracy, a free press and human rights

[14] The ethnic groups also feel such relative international neglect is due to their geographical marginality, their longer history of struggle, and, above all, their relative lack of education that has made it harder for them to convey their predicament to an international audience.

[15] Note however that other, smaller ethnic groups in Shan State in particular, such as the Lahu and the Akha, traditionally have been and continue to be producers of opium.

[16] The Wa have also recently branched into major production of pirated CDs and videos; see *FEER* 2001a.

> replaced economic development and anti-Communist policies as the essential elements for international acceptance, foreign aid and support, and investment and trade development programmes
>
> (Taylor 2001c: 11).

In Burma's case, an increasingly strong movement in the West, especially in the USA, has been lobbying for recognition of the 1990 election result and for general democratic change. This movement comprises both Burmese exiles (many of them university students forced to flee Burma in and after 1988) and foreign activists. It has been strongest and most successful in the USA, partly because a greater number of exiles have sought refuge there, partly because the US government can take a strong human rights line as it has little strategic interest in Burma (except perhaps as a minor stage for playing out wider US-China issues),[17,18] and perhaps partly because of the effectiveness of technological tools such as the Internet, still at its strongest in the USA (see section 5 below).

Activist groups based in the USA and elsewhere have drawn an analogy between Burma and South Africa in their attempt to convince Western governments that trade sanctions would be effective against the Rangoon regime. They also have an articulate and powerful figurehead in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Both Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the South Africa analogy have been used as powerful symbols in an attempt to whip up popular opinion and the anti-SLORC/SPDC lobby in the West. This, together with the fact that no Western governments really have significant interests in Burma and all of them consider good relations with China and with the rest of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to be more important than appeasing Rangoon, mean that the anti-SLORC/SPDC lobby in the West has been relatively successful. At least, it has been successful in bringing about bans on new investment in Burma by American companies, and probably also in restricting Western tourist numbers in Burma, for example. Yet the situation in Burma has come nowhere near the state of democratic government sought by the activists in the West as well as by considerable numbers of people inside Burma. Indeed, it could be argued that since 1988 'there has been a perceptible hardening of attitudes in the *[T]atmadaw* on the retention of power, and on the part of the United States and other foreign nations on the requirement of transferring power to the elected officials of the opposition' (Steinberg 2001: 44). In other words, despite the increasing size and power of lobby groups in the West, and despite hardening attitudes on the part of Western governments, in particular the USA, one could say that not much has really changed for the better inside Burma. As Smith points out, despite

> the opening of the door after 1988, Burma remains a very isolated and inward-looking country… As a result, international points of contact and leverage have been relatively few. The reality is that military rule has continued, despite the groundswell of foreign support for the pro-democracy movement. Indeed, among postcolonial states in Asia, Burma stands out as a country where international expectations have been most confounded, and most especially in the West
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> (Smith 2001: 19).

Western-based lobby groups and attempts to bring about change in Burma are further discussed in section 5 below; suffice to say here that Western attempts to bring about political change have thus far been ineffective because of insufficient economic and political leverage.[19] Furthermore, unlike,

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[17] R. Venugopal, personal communication, 2002.

[18] Recently, some Thai officials have intimated that 'a third country' was involved in stoking Thailand-Burma border clashes in 2002. It is suggested that the 'third country' is the USA (Anon. 2002a).

[19] '…no foreign government had sufficient interest in the future of Burma, or political influence in the country, to have effected [change]. This remains the case today' (Taylor 2001c: 10).

say, the Philippines, where internal and external attempts to effect political and economic change have been largely successful, Burma's thirty years of socialist isolation ensured Burma had not developed

> a significant middle class… [with] wide and deep experience of the outside world… In Burma the government was not dependent on such groups for support and co-operation… The fact that much of the remaining business community [by 1988] was of Indian and Chinese descent, or was perceived as such by the military officer corps, further undermined their capacity to form a legitimate opposition, thus allowing the army to maintain a populist nationalist stance.
>
> (Taylor 2001c: 7)

3.2 China and South and Southeast Asia

China remains of great economic and military significance to Burma. Burma's cross-border trade with China reached US$2 billion in 1999 (Kynge & Kazim 2001). China is also the SLORC/SPDC's largest arms supplier,[20] and one of, if not the most, important supporters of the regime. Between 1989 and 1996, it is estimated that China provided Burma with military hardware worth US$1.4-2 billion (Rüland 2001: 142). As Steinberg suggests, China's support for Rangoon is probably due to a number of factors, including

> the clearing of the border with the collapse [in 1989] of the Burma Communist Party [sic; Communist Party of Burma (CPB)], China's internal economic liberalization policy, and the strategic importance of Burma, especially to south-west China, as a potential market, supplier of raw materials, an access to the Bay of Bengal, and as a buffer state on the still unsettled and disputed north-east Indian border
>
> (Steinberg 2001: 49).

There are also many Chinese immigrants in Burma, including up to 200,000 Yunnanese Chinese apparently in Mandalay alone, comprising a staggering 20% of the city's population.

China's support for Rangoon has had a number of influences on other countries in the region. China's strategy of gaining access to the Indian Ocean via Burma is of obvious threat to India (Rüland 2001: 142). Throughout much of the 1990s, China's approach stimulated India to be significantly anti-SLORC and pro-opposition. Indeed, India initially took the confrontational stance towards the SLORC that was urged by the West, although by 1992 it was already becoming more conciliatory. In turn, India's negative approach to Rangoon stimulated Pakistan to supply small arms to the SLORC. Subsequently, India's concern about China and the latter's use of Burma, and about the increasing and associated influence of Pakistan, must be a major reason for the softening in India's tone towards the Burmese military regime. Further east, not only was China's involvement contributing to the undermining of Thailand's virtual monopoly of border smuggling into and out of Burma, but Thailand also considered that strong Chinese influence on Burma was not in Thailand's interests. ASEAN in general is anxious about Chinese influence and plans in Burma, as well as in Laos and Cambodia (See Munro 1994). ASEAN nations believe that if they do as the West would like, and isolate Burma on account of its human rights record, they will drive it further into China's arms. In general, it has been argued that ASEAN's and others' 'constructive engagement' policies have hardened the Burmese military's position as much if not more as the

[20] Interestingly, amongst other places Burma has also bought arms from North Korea, purchasing 20 howitzers in 1998. Burma and North Korea are now said to be further exploring military co-operation (*Korea Times* 2001).

West's confrontational policies (Rüland 2001). Constructive engagement has, Rüland claims, provided the regime with the revenue it needs to maintain its security apparatus. It has also, by diminishing Burma's dependence on China, widened the regime's foreign policy alternatives: 'Burma's military leaders now have more cards to play' (Rüland 2001: 149).[21]

Meanwhile, Burma's military regime's following of the 'Indonesian [Suharto] model' of government has allowed them to survive in power. Indeed, as to many of their neighbours this model seemed attractive 'as a means by which economic development can take place in a riven society such as that of Indonesia or Myanmar … without threatening the ongoing basis of military dominance over the state' (Taylor 2001c: 11). This approach is unacceptable to Western governments but not to China and most ASEAN nations. Thus Burma's post-1988 attempt to overcome isolation, while it may not have succeeded in the West, did so nearer to home. Its joining of ASEAN in 1997 was seen as a considerable success both for Burma and for the pre-existing members of ASEAN: the lead-up to admission had been slow because of US and other opposition to the move on the grounds of Burma's human rights record.[22] Eventual membership was seen as an attempt by ASEAN both to woo Burma further away from China's influence and to spite the USA (Steinberg 2001: 50; see also Steinberg 1997).

Despite joining ASEAN, however, areas of friction with Burma's neighbours remain. This is especially so in the case of Thailand. Since 1997, for example, there have been an increased number of border disputes between the two countries. Furthermore, Thai anxieties about Burmese refugees have heightened. Attacks on refugee camps launched from inside Burma have raised international concern and pressure on Thailand to protect the camps more effectively. This led to the involvement of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from 1998 onwards. Both the Thais and UNHCR have been talking hypothetically for years about repatriation of Burmese refugees. In 2001, it was reported that Thailand was attempting to persuade Unocal and the Petrol Authority of Thailand (PAT),[23] amongst other major companies involved in Burma and as well as the Japanese government, to help set up jobs in Burma to which refugees could return (*The Nation* 2001a). Thai anxieties about illegal Burmese immigrants have also increased, especially since Thailand's financial crisis of 1998. Before that time, illegal immigrants were tolerated for their willingness to do menial manufacturing and service jobs for wages unacceptable to Thais living with a booming economy. After the 1998 crash, however, there have been increasing attempts to register all and repatriate some illegal immigrants. There is also greater resentment of them for the diseases (malaria, HIV/AIDS) they are perceived as spreading.

Nonetheless, despite border and refugee points of friction the Thai military has been especially supportive of its Burmese counterpart at times in and since 1988. This support has undoubtedly been for opportunistic reasons: the Thai logging ban in 1989 (as a result of increasing deforestation in teak forests) meant a need for new teak sources for Thai logging firms, most of which were said

[21] Of course, China, ASEAN and India are not the only rivals for influence in the area. The USA too, though not necessarily particularly so in Burma's case, has contemporary strategic concerns in Southeast Asia (see Kynge & Kazim 2001).

[22] In 1997 Burma joined not only ASEAN but also BIMST-EC, an organisation including also Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and aimed both at promoting Bay of Bengal economic cooperation and at countering China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean (Rüland 2001: 147).

[23] In the same report, the Thai authorities were said to have described Unocal & PAT as 'keen to help develop self-supporting communities inside Burma to help the refugees resettle in their homeland' (*The Nation* 2001a). If true, there is considerable irony in this story: Unocal, the US partner to PAT and the French company Total-Fina-Elf in a major pipeline project that has been ongoing in Burma, allegedly with the widespread use of forced labour, are currently being sued in an American court by Burmese forced labour victims living in exile in the USA.

to be close to the Thai military. This has also meant a negative change in Thai military and official attitudes towards Burma's ethnic opposition armies, now seen as impediments to the trade of teak and other goods into Thailand. Meanwhile, other ASEAN countries have been concerned to balance Thai dominance in mainland Southeast Asia. Singapore, for example, has been keen to boost its contacts with Burma, and in the 1990s became one of the military regime's main arms suppliers and the second largest foreign investor in Burma.

In sum, macro-level foreign influences are complex, strategic and opportunistic, as well as ideological. The paper now turns to examine some of the views inside Burma.

4. The external and the internal (i): inside looking out

A crucial element in the extent or lack of impact on Burma of external factors is the regime's self-image and view of both its country and of the outside world. The regime seems to perceive Burma as the 'Yugoslavia of Asia', with all that implies about the 'potential for "Balkanization" and political break-up after the [ethnic] violence that erupted after independence' (Smith 2001: 21). Associated with this view 'is a belief, which also frequently surfaces in the state media, that politicians of any persuasion are not to be trusted' (*ibid.*). It has further been claimed that identification by the UN in 1987 as one of the world's LDCs, ranking Burma alongside the poorest African countries, was 'a major blow to national pride and self-esteem' (Taylor 2001c: 7). This is disingenuous, however, for, as Steinberg points out, the military regime actively *lobbied* for LDC status in order to receive debt relief and lower interest rates, despite their adult literacy rate technically being too high for them to qualify (2001: 42).[24] Meanwhile, the numbers of people in the Burmese military have doubled to about 400,000 so that Burma now has '(or with Vietnamese demobilization soon will…) the largest standing army in South-East Asia' (*ibid.*: 41). In general, while foreigners may dismiss the pronouncements of the regime as mere and often laughable propaganda, 'it is more likely… given the insularity of the leadership and the hierarchical structure which often keeps unpleasantness from reaching the apex of the power pyramid, that the senior levels actually believe themselves to be under siege and the state in danger of disintegrating' (*ibid.*: 43).

Indeed, it is the regime's paranoia together with its suspicion of outside 'interference' that perhaps plays the greatest role in its reaction to external factors. Head of military intelligence, Lt.-Gen. Khin Nyunt, for example, wrote in the state media about '[h]ow some Western powers have been aiding and abetting terrorism committed by certain organisations operating under the guise of democracy and human rights by giving them assistance in both cash and kind' (Press Release, Rangoon, 27 June 1997, cited in Smith 2001: 24). The regime's difficulties in dealing with criticism, both internal and external, privately are admitted by anonymous government officials themselves. In the context of criticising the approach of the NLD, for example,

> [w]hat such people warned is that if you confront – even through the tactics of non-violence – a military government that is trained to act according to military principles, then it will always react this way. Confront it, and then it will confront you back – and this… is in a country where, after fifty years of armed conflict, the state of siege mentality is maintained
>
> (Smith 2001: 28).

[24] The regime reduced its estimate of adult literacy from 60% to under 20%, in order to qualify for LDC status (Collignon 2001: 85).

One might add that elements in the international pressure for change in Burma, including both Western governments and exiled and foreign activists, have not always recognised the regime's sensitivity, and have contributed to the confrontational and non-dialogic nature of most exchanges inside and concerning Burma. Furthermore, foreign governments and activists, as well as elements within the Burmese opposition itself, have not always recognised or acknowledged the extent to which the military regime, while still abhorrent in many respects, has moved in some new directions in the period since 1988 (for more on these new directions, good and bad, see Smith and others in Taylor 2001a; see also Fink 2001). Indeed, some have argued that international condemnations of Burma have made things worse, by enhancing the military regime's sense of isolation and siege:

> In a world in which the army saw the country as beleaguered and friendless, and where within the country itself there were perceived to be political and military forces allied with hostile external forces, the extreme of suspicion this generated led to an inability to consider alternative forms of political behaviour other than armed force, and solidarity within the officer corps took precedence over any other consideration
>
> (Taylor 2001c: 9).

Suspicion of the West and generally of outside criticism and 'interference' is also related to a more culturally entrenched Burmese nationalism, even xenophobia. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, since 1988 has been repeatedly denounced in the Burmese government-controlled press and threatened with deportation because of her marriage not only to a foreigner, but to a citizen of the former colonial power. Steinberg alleges that the SLORC/SPDC have deliberately exaggerated the xenophobia that already existed in Burma, partly in response to foreign condemnation of the military government, partly in order further to vilify Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her foreign support, and partly further to condemn the external contacts of many of the ethnic opposition groups: 'there seems little doubt that the regime believed itself to be surrounded, beleaguered and under siege, which for a period was an accurate description of conditions' (Steinberg 2001: 50–51). The end-result is something of a paradox: on the one hand, the SLORC was and is trying to encourage tourism and foreign investment, and on the other they put a great deal of effort into denouncing potential foreign influences 'seen to be destructive of what the authorities believed to be Burmese (read Burman) culture' (*ibid*.). And ironically, as outlined in section 3 above, foreign economic and other leverage is actually rather limited. Sanctions, for example, are unlikely ever to be greatly effective alone, despite comparison with South Africa.[25]

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is also on the inside looking out, and she is aware of the significance of her foreign connections and the international esteem in which she is held. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, further enhancing an international reputation that she has used effectively as a lobby instrument outside Burma. She is regularly interviewed by foreign journalists, diplomats and other visitors, and routinely voices her articulate requests for international trade sanctions, no aid or investment, and no foreign tourism. But this use of her influence on Western governments and public opinion has been controversial within the Burmese opposition, her tactics until recently of asking for international sanctions and isolation in order to push the military regime towards change not always meeting with unanimous approval. Her position was formerly that any aid or investment would strengthen the Burmese army, but other individuals felt that perhaps it would hasten a rise in living standards and thus facilitate social and political change. Ma Thanegi, for example, a former

[25] As Steinberg points out, unlike Burma South Africa's economy and its political elite were both geared towards the West, and all the countries around South Africa were pro-sanctions (2001: 54).

political prisoner and member of the NLD, wanted Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to use her influence 'to win Western aid and, through such a process, begin dialogue with the government over the greater issues of transition' (Smith 2001: 28; see also Ma Thanegi 1998). At least one Western diplomat in Rangoon suggested in 1999 that the increasing difficulties and lack of progress inside Burma was placing Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a difficult position in terms of her relationship with the international community: the more some elements within the NLD pushed for compromise and dialogue with the military regime, the more Daw Aung San Suu Kyi might worry 'that diminishing her demands might diminish her international status and Gandhi-esque aura and the whole impetus of her movement might be damaged' (anonymous diplomat quoted in the *Bangkok Post*, 7 May 1999, cited in Smith 2001: 30). More recently, however, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been projecting a neutral stance on sanction (Anon. 2002b).

On the humanitarian side, compared to Burma's needs[26] 'involvement by UN agencies and INGOs has been relatively small' (Tegenfeldt 2001: 114), partly because of the concern (voiced by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) about not bolstering the military's hold on Burma, and partly because of the government's own xenophobic unwillingness to encourage foreign NGOs. Nonetheless, as the 1990s progressed Burma became more open to 'humanitarian and development programmes at the community level' (Smith 2001: 23). UN agencies have gained greater access, especially in areas such as HIV/AIDS education, anti-narcotics programmes, reforestation, water and sanitation. Post-1993, other groups like Médicins Sans Frontier (MSF) and World Vision were also allowed back (*ibid.*).[27] Most agencies that are involved inside Burma work in health-related areas. Their position is difficult: they receive both international criticism for being involved in Burma in the first place, and obstruction from officials inside Burma. They are also heavily criticised by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who considers that their assistance programmes only help a relative few, and that changing the political system in order to assist all is more important.

In general, views inside Burma demonstrate fixed positions on *all* sides. In 1998-9, for example, there was mooted the possibility of a joint UN-International Monetary Fund (IMF) initiative 'to develop a strategy for the future economic development of the country, coupled with a degree of political reconciliation' (Taylor 2001b: 3-4). This initiative was rejected almost instantly, however, by both the military regime and the NLD. So what prognosis is there for Burma? Taylor suggests it is unlikely to change in the way recently witnessed in Indonesia. Not least among the reasons for this is the economy: the Indonesian economy is

> deeply imbedded [sic] in the structures of the global economy and the ability of its financial institutions to resume economic growth and development are dependent upon support from the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank, and Western governments and financial institutions, thus ensuring that these bodies have a degree of leverage on events in Jakarta
>
> (Taylor 2001c: 13).

[26] Carrière has described Burma's humanitarian situation as a 'silent emergency' (1997: 209).

[27] For a discussion of some of the implications for Burmese civil society of greater foreign NGO involvement, see Burma Center Netherlands and Transnational Institute 1999.

But in Burma's case, no similar leverage exists. Meanwhile, according to Taylor, as

> those with the means in the West refuse to engage themselves in Myanmar's affairs at levels more effective than the rhetorical, Myanmar's neighbours are temporarily unable to assist the process of change to any significant degree [as a result of the economic crashes of the 1990s] … Being shunned by the West costs the regime little, but denies the society the capacity to develop and change
>
> (Taylor 2001c: 13).

Steinberg, meanwhile, considers that despite the Burmese xenophobia manipulated and magnified by the regime, the real potential dangers to the country are not external. 'Rather, they may emanate from the xenophobia that could be directed at internal foreigners should there be any major economic crisis' (2001: 51), particularly Burma's Chinese community. He suggests that as in Indonesia the regime could try to direct dissatisfaction towards the resident Chinese. Economically, foreign investment has lessened since the late 1990s, not least because the Asian financial crisis made it increasingly hard for ASEAN countries to maintain their earlier levels of investment. At the same time, the attitudes of the international community continue to be ineffective and contradictory. Extreme positions on human rights such as the stance taken by the USA make gradual, incremental progress difficult: as Steinberg says, continually

> calling for the recognition of the results of the May 1990 elections that resulted in the overwhelming NLD victory' means the USA 'has *de facto* recognized the NLD as the legitimate government. [Furthermore], by continually and stridently advocating the amelioration of the plight, however tragic, of Aung San Suu Kyi, and attempting to secure her future role in a new administration, [the USA] has personalized its foreign policy …
>
> (Steinberg 2001: 55).

This personalisation is not good, not least as historically and traditionally power in Burma is in any case a highly individualised phenomenon based on personal charisma, and historically there has been 'a strong tendency for alliances to collapse as authority becomes focused on a leader or small group' (Steinberg 2001: 56). Furthermore, the USA's stance has divorced it from ASEAN on this issue, although admittedly Burma remains a relatively low priority for nations on all sides of the argument (with the exception of countries like Thailand). Nonetheless, the fact remains that USA policy,[28] driven by a core group of congressmen and an effective lobby of Burmese exiles and American activists (largely organised via the Internet; see below), is unlikely to change/moderate until there is a change of government in Rangoon. But this change of government, as Steinberg admits, seems unlikely without either a major uprising on the streets of Burma or a military coup or major split, both of which presently seem remote possibilities, to say the least (Steinberg 2001: 57). Certainly, foreign investment or sanctions seem unlikely alone to bring about transition to democracy in Burma. But so too do the confrontational, if moral, stances taken by the USA and other Western governments. Indeed, such stances may contribute only to an increased divorce both between the Burmese regime and foreign governments and agencies, and between Burmese people

[28] Specifically, the USA has declared Burma a pariah state and banned both new investment in Burma and travel to the USA by senior members of the Rangoon regime. It is also demanding recognition of the 1990 election results, improvements in Burma's human rights record and significant progress in suppressing the production and export of narcotics. The EU has taken a less dramatic stance, condemning Burma's human rights and narcotics records, and ending general trade preferences.

inside Burma and those living in exile beyond Burma's borders. This is one issue to which this paper returns below, in the context of Internet activism.

5. The external and the internal (ii): outside looking in

5.1 Introduction

'Outside looking in' is a conceit intended to describe external factors involved in Burma's self-determination struggles as explored broadly from their own perspective. Crudely, these factors may be grouped into three categories:

1. individuals and groups, micropolitical and apolitical: exiles, broadly defined (including political dissidents, refugee communities, and apolitical diaspora); what may be termed 'international civic society'; and sectors of international public opinion
2. macropolitical events and organisations: international organisations; foreign governments; global political concerns and events
3. regional factors in Southeast, South and East Asia

In reality, of course, these categories blur into one another around their edges, but broadly the first two are distinguished from each other by the different sorts of main concerns, approaches and structures that characterise them. The third category is a special one that recognises there are specific regional concerns or, at least, concerns which *start out* as regionally specific, although as both the drugs issue and China's geopolitical strategies exemplify, such concerns may subsequently become global in scale or potential impact.

Actors, structures and pathways that fall into the first category include various exiled communities; foreign and foreign-influenced non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and foundations in Burma, on its borders and beyond; international activist, academic and journalistic communities; the Internet and other media; and flows of capital, arms, drugs, and consumer goods to and from both the military regime in Rangoon and those groups in opposition to it. Factors falling into the second category include large-scale assistance programmes, policy and action (or lack thereof) on trade with and economic sanctions against the Burmese regime; and the roles of the UN and other international organisations. The third category is similar in content to the second, but with a specific regional focus, and a particular emphasis on trade concerns, drug issues, and regional strategic alliances and political positioning. Intersecting all three categories are flows of and attitudes towards consumer goods, drugs and armaments – i.e. economic patterns and cultural implications of trade, be it legitimate or not.

All these actors and issues, then, are 'external' factors pertinent to understanding self-determination struggles in Burma. There is not, however, sufficient space here fully to explore them all. A number of issues particularly pertinent to the second and third categories were overviewed in the preceding sections, but the bulk of this section concentrates particularly on the intersecting impacts of those factors falling into the first category above, although with the awareness that other factors also play an important role.

5.2 The role of 'new media'

5.2.1 Introduction

The most potent means by which exiles of various kinds, non-Burmese NGOs, interested foreign individuals and others are drawn into closer entanglements not only with each other but also with wider external factors falling into my other two categories, is computer mediated communication

(CMC).[29] The diverse uses of CMC, combined with its potency, merit its discussion here both because it is a special case in its own right and because its discussion also provides a means of exploring aspects of the roles of various individuals and groups.

'CMC' connotes the use of email, the world-wide web, bulletin boards and Internet newsgroups. Such phenomena are now hardly new or strange to large numbers of people around the world, and the context of Burma provides little general exception. One specific factor, however, is that Internet access is virtually impossible for almost all inside Burma. The private ownership of a modem (and even a fax machine) requires a special licence that very few are granted (violation of this requirement is punishable by 15 years imprisonment; see Fink 1997), and other, public means of accessing the information superhighway are virtually non-existent.[30] The CMC discussed here is thus very much an external factor, with little if any impact on or input from inside Burma. It is primarily a tool central to the work of NGOs, activists, academics, journalists and others. Indeed, as will become clear, it could be argued that CMC provides the locus for a virtual community of those originally from or at least interested in Burma. In so doing, in itself it has significant impact on those who are outside Burma but trying to have an influence on what is happening *inside*. Indirectly, therefore, CMC may have some impact on what happens inside Burma, insofar as it may, through spread of both information and opinion, influence the other, non-CMC-based actions and alliances of dissidents, activists, NGOs and others in the world beyond Burma's borders. Directly, however, 'the inside' is both little influenced and poorly represented by CMC. Exceptions include Internet postings by sections and agencies of the Burmese government, particularly its embassy in Canada, and regular inclusion in news bulletins not only of reports carried by foreign news media but also of items in the *New Light of Myanmar*, the Burmese government's own English language newspaper published in Rangoon. Furthermore, 'old media' in the form of radio stations such as the Burmese language services of the BBC World Service, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia and the Norway-based Democratic Voice of Burma, do translate and feed back into Burma news stories and occasionally opinion thereon, picked up from the Internet. Nonetheless, the fact remains that for the vast majority of 'ordinary' people inside Burma, be they members of ethnic groups, participants in the pro-democracy struggle, members of the army, or anyone else, 'new media' such as the Internet have little if any impact whatsoever, direct or otherwise.

5.2.2 The nature of Burma-focused CMC: content and objectives

In Burma's case, CMC is thus primarily an external phenomenon, in both who directs its content and who is exposed to it and why. This does not, however, mean it is without major significance. CMC is the main means by which all the disparate individuals and groups outside Burma, be they Burmese or be they foreign, keep themselves informed, educate others, maintain contacts with each other and, in some cases, organise political opposition activities. Broadly, there is the personal, daily use of email, various Burma-focused websites and, perhaps most widely used and significant

[29] I follow Stubbs 1999 in the use of this term.

[30] Such restrictions are but one aspect of wider government control of communications. The state controls TV and radio and print media, and tapping of telephones and opening of personal correspondence is routine. Foreign news is also strictly controlled: the Burmese media reports are highly selective (e.g. the disturbances in Indonesia were not reported, and Suharto's stepping down was mentioned only briefly), while to be caught listening to the BBC, VOA or similar radio stations can incur a prison sentence. A very few organisations (principally foreign businesses and NGOs) and individuals (senior members of the military regime) have access to email providers 'which call to systems outside the country to upload and download mail once a day' (Fink 1997), although even these users are not permitted to access *BurmaNet* or similar sources likely to be critical of the regime (Fink 2001).

of all, *BurmaNet*,[31] a list-server sending out daily news bulletins to subscribers all around the world, its moderator based in Bangkok but its funding American (it is funded by the Burma Project of George Soros's Open Society Institute). *BurmaNet* is associated with a website, Orchestra Burma (http://www.orchestraburma.org), which is 'dedicated to representing organizations working for democracy and human rights inside Burma' (Orchestra Burma home page). Although it doesn't explicitly say so, in practice Orchestra Burma devotes itself to providing information and links relevant only or primarily to indigenous organisations – i.e. it does not also generally carry information about foreign activist groups or NGOs, for example. It divides the groups it represents into four categories: human rights, political parties, women's organisations, and the environment. In this, it echoes four themes also predominant in one form another on other websites more significant than Orchestra Burma in size and frequency of usage. Those most broad in their coverage include the Free Burma Coalition (FBC; http://www.freeburmacoalition.org), the Open Society Institute's Burma Project (http://www.soros.org/burma), and the Burma Fund (http://www.burmafund.org). These principal sites all cover, to varying degrees, subjects ranging from political opposition views, human rights abuses in Burma and other news, activism, programmes and scholarships in the USA or elsewhere open to exiled Burmese students, and cultural and economic information concerning Burma and her peoples. All are also USA-based and USA-dominated in terms both of those adding information and of those using the sites.

BurmaNet and all the websites mentioned thus far have a stance opposed to the military regime in Rangoon. Their specific objectives, style and balance of contents vary, however. Broadly, while still opposed to the Rangoon regime, the Burma Fund and Burma Project websites together with *BurmaNet* are more neutral in tone than the FBC website. *BurmaNet* aims primarily to disseminate news and information, including that put out by military sources in Rangoon, although it does also occasionally provide its own editorial commentary on certain news stories or articles, especially if they are critical of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself or the mainstream democratic opposition in general. That is, *BurmaNet* will always carry a story critical of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and/or the NLD – be it one originating with the military regime or with some foreign journalist or academic seeking to write a critical assessment of events and progress inside Burma – but will often add its own opinion after repeating the story. As a result, *BurmaNet* usually gives the impression of a relatively objective news vehicle, but occasionally voices opinion that demonstrates a concern to support, and minimise criticism of, the opposition orthodoxy that is centred around Daw Aung San Suu Kyi but, much of it at least, based abroad. The Burma Fund and Burma Project websites also aim primarily to disseminate information of various kinds, especially news of events inside Burma and reports on human rights abuses perpetrated by the military regime. Furthermore, they too largely support the opposition orthodoxy, although such support is often less explicit than *BurmaNet*'s occasional defensive editorials. In terms of objectives, while it is *BurmaNet*'s principal aim to disseminate news, both the Burma Fund and Burma Project websites provide a large number of links to other organisations' sites, and information and links concerning culture, history etc. as well as news, politics and human rights abuses. Additionally both, but especially the Burma Project website, carry information concerning scholarships and other opportunities available to Burmese exiles. Both also provide extensive (though not comprehensive) bibliographies. In this wider scope, both sites demonstrate a concern to appeal not only to Burmese exiles and activists, but also to journalistic and academic researchers, and other interested users.

The FBC site has much in common with the Burma Fund and Burma Project websites, but it also has a particular style and set of objectives of its own. Its main aim, beyond the general dissemination of information about the political and human rights situation in Burma, is the

[31] General and subscribing information is provided at http://www.burmanet.org.

encouragement and organisation of activism. The site provides ample explanation of the problems inside Burma, particularly those that can be characterised as human rights abuses, and includes documentation of such abuses in the form of interviews with survivors and photographs of injuries and deaths, forced labour, forced village relocations, etc. Such documentation, mostly provided by indigenous groups themselves, serves both to encourage website visitors to get involved in activism in the first place, and to provide existing and potential activists with evidence to bolster their campaigns. The aims of campaigns vary and are explored on the FBC website. They include agitating for general trade sanctions and, in the USA especially, for selective purchasing laws effectively to penalise companies that still invest in/do business with Burma; pressurising particular companies to withdraw from Burma (e.g. Premier Oil, Total-Fina-Elf); and, especially in and since the Rangoon regime's 'Visit Myanmar Year' campaign in 1996, discouraging tourist travel to Burma. Burmese exiles, particularly in the USA, are heavily involved in such campaigns, but so too are campus-based student groups, and these are especially targeted by the FBC site. FBC provides information on tapping into international student and other activist networks, and gives advice on how to take part in campaigns, to whom to write letters, etc.

BurmaNet and the three websites discussed here all include material specific to the political and humanitarian situations of Burma's ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the heaviest emphasis is probably still on the struggle for democracy. This essentially follows the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi/NLD orthodoxy that first must come democracy, and only then can the particular concerns of the ethnic groups be addressed. On a nationwide scale, this is understandable: as far as the NLD is concerned, ethnic concerns often seem to be of only local import whereas democracy is a goal for the whole country. From the perspective of the ethnic opposition parties, however, it does sometimes seem as if their concerns are given relatively less weight in the international arena of news and activism, and while they are by no means neglected on *BurmaNet* and websites, the primary emphasis placed on the struggle for democracy can act to confirm ethnic doubts about their relative level of international support. Having said this, one objective sometimes articulated by Burma-focused websites or by those concerned with creating and/or writing about them, is the hope that the worldwide web might act to enhance inter-group understanding, in both political and cultural terms, although as the discussion in section 5.2.4 indicates, in reality the likely influence inside Burma is likely to be slight at best.

5.2.3 Using Burma-focused CMC

Subscribers to *BurmaNet* include individual Burmese living outside Burma, Burmese political opposition (including ethnic) organisations, foreign and – to a lesser extent – Burmese governmental agencies and embassies, NGOs, activists (both foreign and Burmese in exile), academics and journalists. *BurmaNet*'s provision of regular daily news reports of events inside Burma and of relevant events outside it, including coverage of refugee and border issues, comprises reports drawn from Asian English-language newspapers, other foreign media and Burmese state newspapers. It also carries press statements and human rights reports released by various dissident Burmese organisations and – in the case of press statements at least – the Burmese government.[32] Much of the news coverage, especially that of events inside Burma and particularly that provided by indigenous groups of goings-on in rural ethnic areas, is of enormous value in itself as it is not possible for foreign journalists to travel to many of these areas. Of course, this also means that independent verification of many reports is impossible, but such reports are still important sources of information.

[32] For further description of *BurmaNet*, see Anon. 1996.

The value of news and dissemination of information is more generalised, too: many exiled Burmese, foreign activists, scholars and other users of *BurmaNet* in particular are based in North America and Europe, where reading of all the Asian media reports included on *BurmaNet* would be precluded both by the practical difficulties of accessing Asian newspapers and by the time such a daily exercise would take. To this end, *BurmaNet* is indispensable to all Burma watchers. Nonetheless, its detailed contents take time to read, and it is unlikely to be greatly engaged with by the very casual Burma follower: as Strider (*BurmaNet*'s Bangkok-based moderator) admitted himself in 1996, the volume of material carried by *BurmaNet* demands quite a commitment on the part of the reader/user – i.e. it is really for the specialist user, whereas websites such as those discussed above are better as more general sources for less involved Burma watchers (Neumann 1996).

Many of the committed users of *BurmaNet* are Burmese exiles living in North America, Europe, Australasia and Japan. There is a small, long-standing Burmese diaspora in Britain, the USA and elsewhere, many members of whom are relatively apolitical or even pro-Rangoon. The majority of committed, exiled users of *BurmaNet* and the anti-Rangoon websites, however, are individuals who fled Burma in or after the brutal suppression of pro-democracy uprisings in 1988. Many of these people were university students in Burma before they left and, now in their thirties, have been enabled by scholarships from the Open Society Institute and elsewhere to return to study at universities in the West. All Burmese exiles in the West find themselves in a world where computers hold sway, but students in particular are in a situation that facilitates particularly fast learning of computer and Internet use, which then enables and encourages them to use and add to the email- and web-based sources of information and news on Burma. Equally, the more information and activism concerning Burma becomes based around CMC, the more Burmese exiles – majority Burman but including members of other ethnic groups – are encouraged to learn the necessary information technology (IT), English language and general communication skills not only to be an end-user but also to create and develop web-pages etc. A further effect, first noted by Fink in 1997, is that the more CMC is used by the Burmese community in the West, the more the exiled Burmese community in Thailand and India is encouraged, directly and indirectly, to improve its own CMC skills and levels of usage. Of course, CMC accessibility is nowhere near the level of, say, every refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border having a computer hooked up to the Internet. But most if not all ethnic political party offices have a computer, a modem, and, by now, the knowledge to use them.[33] Hence they have the capacity to use *BurmaNet* and the web, and to distribute electronically their own news bulletins, press statements, opinions, cultural information, etc. In practice, input by ethnic groups into *BurmaNet* but particularly into Burma-focused websites is patchy and varies with group. The Karen perhaps have the most input, which may simply be a reflection of their relatively larger numbers and the fact that more Karen than, say, Karenni and Mon, are to be found abroad.

5.2.4 Virtual communities?[34]

[33] Grants for equipment have been provided by the Burma project, amongst other sources. Initially, training was also provided the Burma Project and by other foreigners along the border. Then, around 1996-7, during my first period of fieldwork, indigenous organisations such as Green November 32, a Burmese exile group concerned with environmental and human rights issues, began undertaking training programmes themselves (see also Fink 1997). Now, computers are also used by refugee communities for such purposes as producing their own educational materials for camp schools, and although camps themselves are usually not online, school curricula include some sort of computer training, taught by members of the refugee communities themselves.

[34] In this section, I am concerned to explore the nature, impact and, crucially, extent of the 'virtual community' created via the use of CMC in the context of Burma. I am interested in that community's influence and impact, if any, on the situation and people inside Burma. I do not set out theoretically to critique the notion of 'virtual community' in general.

CMC is thus a facility of considerable power for Burmese exiles and others involved in supporting their cause. Indeed, on first inspection it seems to confirm now common claims about the Internet and computers in general enabling the creation of 'virtual communities'. Here, it seems, an exile and activist community is kept informed and brought together by mutual use of information technology. A diverse set is *created* through technology, its members' bonds stemming from their shared involvement in a single issue, Burma and the situation therein. As Strider put it back in 1996, 'it was the Net … that helped mobilize activists on college campuses and elsewhere in their opposition to investment in Burma by Eddie Bauer' (cited in Neaumann 1996; Eddie Bauer is an American clothing manufacturing company that earlier in 1996 had pulled out of Burma after a successful campaign by activists). As Danitz & Strobel identify (1997), the Internet also played a major role in the successful campaign for a bill passed by the state of Massachusetts in order to impose sanctions on companies investing in Burma, despite the fact that Massachusetts has no sizeable Burmese population. This, it is claimed, 'illustrates how the Internet can be used to create geographically dispersed networks for non-violent action, even when there is no locally concentrated constituency…' (*ibid.*). More generally, as Strider has pointed out, 'there are few Burmese in the States, and relatively few people who even know where Burma is. But those who care are organized and effective, and it's because of the Internet' (cited in Neumann 1996).

Certainly, Burma activists are well organised though relatively few in number, and certainly they use CMC to their advantage. Indeed, this optimal use of CMC leads to grand claims being made by some observers. Neumann, for example, claims that those concerned about Burma

> and hundreds of other modem-driven activists are using the Internet to quietly transform the work of monitoring human rights violations and pressuring governments. They may exist outside most of the recent public Net scrutiny, but dozens of mailing lists, webpages, Usenet groups, and other tools are springing up to track events and affect political decisions in under-reported countries ... These "countrynets" unite activists separated by tens of thousands of miles and allow instant access to a common pool of narrow cast news and information on nations and issues that are largely ignored by the mass media
>
> (Neumann 1996).

In similar vein but in terms that are even more glowing, Danitz & Strobel write:

> Burma may be the first international movement for non-violent change in which the Internet has been the movement's tool of choice for those organizing outside of the Southeast Asian nation. The Internet has allowed them to establish a virtual community intent on engaging in cyberdiplomacy to nonviolently pressure the current military regime … to step down and allow the democratically elected officials to take office. The Internet was originally used, and continues to be used today, like a crowbar to pry open the very closed, highly secretive and tightly controlled nation by creating an information-rich highway to the world. The road may have four lanes out of Burma and only one narrow lane in, but it has allowed the global community a glimpse into the real events and happenings inside of Burma and occasionally allowed information to leak back into the country…
>
> (Danitz & Strobel 1997).

There is a wider literature on this topic, much of it centring on or critiquing Rheingold's formulation of the term: 'virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on… public discussions… to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (1993: 5; see Stubbs 1998 and 1999 for critique of this model).

Such a characterisation is, however, deeply problematic. The information circulated on BurmaNet and elsewhere does not, for a start, all emanate inside Burma, and even that which does, comes largely from the pronouncements of the NLD and ethnic opposition groups: that is, it does not comprise objective reporting of the situation inside Burma, and there most certainly are not 'four lanes out'!

More broadly, however, it is deeply questionable how if at all CMC really has an impact on the inside. But this very fact may simply serve to demonstrate that the conventional inside/outside distinction is limited in its usefulness: the combination of diaspora and CMC means that struggles are not constrained within borders; nonetheless, we tend still to be principally interested in the outside's impact on the inside. One could argue, however, that, at least from the perspective of those on the outside who are participating in it, what happens on the outside is as much a *part* of the whole struggle in its own right as is what happens on the inside. But of course for those on the inside who are perhaps unaware of the extent and nature of the struggles on the outside, this is not necessarily so. The net result is an increasing and problematic divergence between the two. Such a divergence may be enhanced by language issues. If, as Bakhtin claimed, genres are the 'drivebelts' between the history of language and the history of society, perhaps the different language use and language ideology inside and out, the latter increasingly characterised by the use of English and of the genre of the Internet, contributes to a greater divergence. For ethnic groups, the CMC-driven language use and genres on the outside may be less problematic than it is for members of the democratic opposition: greater geographical proximity between those on the inside and those in exile on the outside may both counteract divergence and actually encourage an increased awareness of the international on the inside. At the same time, if ethnic refugees in Thailand and elsewhere were to be sent back without significant improvement in Burma, being at ease with international language genres could make things worse for them, providing an additional justification for racist treatment of them by the Burmese army (c.f. Kuipers 1998).

In any case, be they ethnic group members or pro-democracy Burmans, exiles may be more outsiders than they are not, and certainly more so than they realise. That is, while on one level CMC and other networking tools can be said to create a virtual community, a 'computer-mediated diasporic sphere' (Stubbs 1999: 1.2) and 'politicised interpolation of "homeland" across geographical boundaries' (*ibid.*) in which the 'idea of the nation flourishes transnationally' (Appadurai 1996: 172), it does so in Burma's case at least in a way that does not include the inside and indeed diverges increasingly from it. The 'long-distance nationalist' (Stubbs 1999: 5.1; see also Anderson 1992) in exile from Burma has both little impact on what happens inside the nation and little price to pay for the possible effects of his or her actions. Nonetheless, making this point does not necessarily conflict with seeing the outside as an important part of the struggle too, or perhaps more accurately, occasionally a separate struggle. That is, while it is true that the greater number of people may still be on the inside, and that the outside may have a poor idea of what is happening on the inside and vice versa, from the perspective of the outsiders they too are engaged in struggle and, ultimately, in the construction of their own reality.[35] As Stubbs puts it:

[35] Perhaps it would be reasonable to add the craft of the web-page writer/CMC user to Anderson's emphasis on the roles of newspapers and other print media, and the census-taker and cartographer in the creation of nations (Anderson 1991 & 1998).

> The existence of computer-mediated diasporic public spheres deepens the understanding of what have been termed transnational and postnational imaginings since, as complex discursive and historical fields they represent particular constructions of the national space from diverse global sites, which become, effectively, a unified imagined place or homeland
>
> (Stubbs 1999: 1.2).

I am not attempting to make the political point that the outside is just as important as the inside (a point with which I would disagree). Rather, I am trying to make the analytical point that we still need to consider and be interested in the outside. The world and world-view those on the outside construct, and the struggle, real or virtual, in which they engage, have reality to those involved.

Having said this, one cannot overstate the significance of the distances, literal and metaphorical, that have opened up between those on the inside and those on the outside. Indeed, the exiles on the outside could be said to be forming a new elite in comparison to those who remain inside. Elites are characterised by greater levels of access to education and technology, greater opportunities and skills to manipulate language and technology, and increasing distance from the non-elite. In this sense, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that many – though not all – members of the international Burmese exile community do indeed comprise a new elite in relation to the society they have left behind and to and for which they consider themselves still to belong and fight. Furthermore, the tiny degree to which CMC has influence on events inside Burma demonstrates the inaccuracy of claims that the Internet contributes to the dialogic process.[36] Certainly, there are Burmese government responses to news and views aired on *BurmaNet* and elsewhere. The regime now has, for example, its own news/discussion group, 'Myanmar-list', which distributes SPDC information sheets and news, and criticism of the pro-democracy movement and of the non-cease-fire ethnic groups. Activists, both Burmese and foreign, in turn respond critically and as a result sometimes manage to spark a dialogue that happens nowhere else (Fink 1997). Furthermore, in 1997 the SPDC, as well as setting up with the help of an American PR company its own home page, http://www.myanmar.com, 'allegedly hired a former Burmese embassy official to engage in cyberdebate on behalf of the govt. But [it] cannot stop the debate and information flows on Burma now circling the globe. All it can do is add its voice to the debate' (Danitz & Strobel 1997). Outside Burma this is true, but inside it is patently not so. Dialogue, in other words, is still limited and based on the outside, with little impact on the inside.

6. Inside out: external factors among exiled communities on the margins on the Thai-Burma border and beyond

6.1 Introduction

One way in which some have attempted to compensate for the international community's relative neglect of ethnic issues, has been by working extensively with and focusing on the displaced groups based on and around the Burmese border. In particular, groups living in exile in Thailand, together with their ethnic relatives inside Burma but near the Thai border, have received an especially high level of contact, support and attention from Western governments, agencies, and individual activists, journalists and scholars. This is, however, problematic from the perspective of

[36] So too does it seem tenuous to suggest that CMC enhances inter-group understanding of each other's cultures, except perhaps between groups in exile outside Burma who all have some access to information and communication technology.

some ethnic leaders inside Burma: for them, focusing on border politics means not seeing the ways in which internal ethnic struggles have changed and moved on (see Smith 2001).

On the other hand, one way in which analysis of the experiences of those living in displacement along the Thai-Burma border can enhance understanding of wider issues is in exploration of the effects of increased contact with the outside world. Such increased contact comes via interaction with NGO staff and other visiting foreigners, through access (albeit still limited) to CMC, and through the greater availability of globally distributed material objects, images and ideas. Foreigners, objects, images etc. can play a significant part in people's constructions of their own identities and their ideas of the world and of their place in it.[37] This is precisely because a SDM's ideology, objectives, strategies and prognosis may be intimately related not only to economic, political and social connections between the SDM's leaders, people, diaspora and other elements in the world beyond, but also to more cultural matters of identity and world-view. More generally, Appadurai's 'diasporic public spheres' (1996) are characterised by global flows of mass-mediated images and information, such as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listening to sermons recorded in Iranian mosques. Modern diaspora of whatever kind is different from that in the past because of mass-mediated images and objects and knowledge, which consequently deeply affect the politics of adaptation, exile and return. Furthermore, as the discussion of CMC in the section above illustrated, SDMs have often created a sphere of transnational (but perhaps not internal) discourse resting on the authority of displaced persons such as refugees and exiles (c.f. Tibet as well as Burma).

6.3 External factors and identity in the Karenni border camps

In the Karenni refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, for younger people especially,[38] the wider world is both a source of knowledge, and itself something about which they wish to know more. The acquisition of knowledge from and about the wider world not only allows it to be better understood, but also alters Karenni perceptions of their own place within it. Tantalising glimpses of parts of this wider world are had in the camps, through the visits of foreigners and through radio, video, and printed media. Short-wave transistor radios are highly valued items, and those who do not possess them (the majority) often visit the houses of those that do in order to listen to news broadcasts. Inevitably, news about Burma and the border is of particular concern, but there is also a general awareness of and interest in international current affairs.[39] During my field research there were numerous occasions on which I was asked, unprompted, my opinions on current situations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the Middle East. Discussions often extended beyond immediate 'news' – educated, young people, for example, wished to explain their admiration for such revolutionary figures as Yasser Arafat, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro.[40] Furthermore, interest in persons and events elsewhere in the world goes beyond politics: sport, in particular the English football league, is of major interest to well-informed young men, who are often able to discuss not

[37] For example, back in 1984 Worsley remarked that Tamil ethnopolitics in Sri Lanka must have been influenced by TV coverage of events on Israel's West Bank.

[38] SDM populations are not homogenous, and age as well as background and gender (and ethnicity in the Karenni case) can generate important differences within one SDM's 'constituency'.

[39] It is also the case that international support for the cause of Burma's ethnic groups and pro-democracy movement, circulated via *BurmaNet*, makes a difference not only in enhancing morale but also in emphasising the place of Burma and its people in the wider world. Foreign media headlines such as 'East Timor's independence leader Xanana Gusmao yesterday declared the country's solidarity with Burma's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi…' (Anon. 2001) feed the relationship between the opposition groups and the outside world.

[40] C.f. Eriksen on the effects of 'globalisation of culture and the relativisation of boundaries', on which he cites as an example Mauritians talking about Chernobyl (1993: 148-9). Karenni conversations in 1998 about the death of Princess Diana provide similar examples.

only teams but also individual players. For a few individuals who have previously lived in urban areas in Burma with access to cinemas, Hollywood films and the Oscars are also of major interest.

These sorts of sources of information, pertaining to a modern world, beyond contribute to a continually growing curiosity in and knowledge of both the international community and its machinations, and of cultural diversity around the globe. As more knowledge is consumed, so more is desired, and so grows the realisation of being a part of a wider community. Becoming refugees and coming to the camps has hastened and intensified this process for all, but perhaps particularly for young people – their interactions with foreigners, video and printed media are often greater than amongst other members of the refugee population. Furthermore, the increasing availability of internships or other opportunities outside the camps means greater numbers of educated young Karenni people are gaining experience of the wider world through physical interaction with a part of it, and, once out there in an internship or on a course, through email contact with other parts of it. Such experience is by its nature partial, so that ideas of the outside world are part knowledge and part imagination; by extension, so too are conceptions of Karenni-ness in relation to the wider world, and of the place of the Karenni within it. As experience of the wider world increases, so do its impacts on constructions of Karenni-ness.

Ideas about the wider world are important too for ways in which Karenni refugees conceive of their current situation as refugees. The camps themselves are seen not alone but in relation to the world beyond. The commonest way in which life in the camps is compared to the world beyond uses the idiom of the jungle. On one level, this entails emphasising the paucity of opportunities for educational advancement and political expression, and other palpable disadvantages of jungle living. Relative isolation, ignorance, hardship and boredom are all variously pointed to as problematic results of camp-based exile, and 'the jungle' becomes shorthand for all of them. The feelings of young people in particular about being confined to such a life at times reach desperation, although such strong emotions are often qualified by attempts to think of the positive side. Paul, for example, while talking of his depression at being stuck in the jungle and his desperation not to have to spend the rest of his life in such a socially, politically and intellectually restrictive environment, added that he supposed it was not all that bad as at least there was lots of fresh air. Most importantly, expressions of unhappiness at the current situation are invariably counteracted by statements about having to put up with it out of duty to one's country and people – i.e. living in the jungle is a price that must be paid for being a positive part of the Karenni struggle.

For all refugees, living in the marginal situation in which they find themselves is characterised by some degree of restriction, be it constructed primarily in intellectual, political, agricultural or other terms. The refugee response to such restriction is often rather passive, and for some, passivity also becomes a more generalised way of talking about things, even an affectation. When, for example, I asked Saw Eh Gay if the Karenni tried to make contact with outsider groups (e.g. religious organisations), he replied 'Oh no. They contact us, because we don't know how to. We are quite content and when things are needed God sends them – like he sent you.' Yet in reality various Karenni individuals and organisations do make and maintain contacts with a number of outside groups. Indeed, by 1999 the Karenni were successfully using email from Mae Hong Son to seek replacement English teachers. Admittedly, such organised efforts, and knowing where to start in making them, are relatively new. Admittedly too, Saw Eh Gay's apparent Christian fatalism is more marked than most. Nonetheless, it is also slightly disingenuous. Many Karenni portray themselves as poor, ignorant jungle-dwellers, yet do not always behave or really see themselves as such in practice. Indeed, the simplicity and ignorance so often claimed by the Karenni and so often rationalised as being due to having to live in the jungle, is sometimes a useful tool in the effort to win outside sympathy and assistance. Living in camps in the jungle is problematic, but it is also

part of a wider way in which separateness from the outside, the non-Karenni, is asserted (c.f. Malkki 1995) and used, both in reinforcing what it means to be Karenni and in relating to what is non-Karenni in the context of SDM identity politics.

It is young people who are particularly affected by contact with foreigners and by the consumption of non-Karenni and non-Burmese objects and ideas that displacement into Thailand permits. Contact with foreigners and the consumption of images, music, information and objects (e.g. jeans, radios, magazines, videos) draws the Karenni and others like them into a wider world from which their present marginality seems to separate them. The boundaries that are drawn around refugees and that separate them off from both 'inside' and 'outside' proper are not removed, but are nonetheless made more porous through the gaining of greater access to the symbols of a wider world. It is through consumption of and attribution of meaning to these symbols that Karenni refugees, the 'constituents' of their particular SDM, move, conceptually at least, back and forth across the boundary, staying Karenni but rejecting real or imagined isolation.

Indeed, as Eriksen suggests (1993: 85), the dynamics of ethnicity and nationalism are themselves products of the processes of modernisation. For refugees such as the Karenni, displacement alters and hastens these processes. As

> symbolic universes merge … people become more similar in terms of practices and representations … [and they become] more liable than before to reflect upon and objectify their way of life as a culture or a tradition … [thus becoming] a [self-conscious] people with an abstract sense of a community and a presumed shared history
>
> (*ibid*., emphases original).

This stresses the relational aspects of a people's construction of their group identity; i.e. the more people are exposed to others, the more self-conscious becomes their identity, defined as it is in opposition to others. It also emphasises instrumentality: identity is a political tool rather than some mysterious, fixed essence (c.f. Cohen 1974b).

The SDM support base in the refugee community is also strengthened by relief organisations. Aid strengthens support bases in a physical sense by providing food and other material assistance. Beyond that, in the eyes of recipients it also reaffirms the authority and leadership of groups such as the Karenni's KNPP. It acknowledges the KNPP as the main point of contact with and representative of the refugee population, and visibly affirms the authority of individual KNPP leaders by visiting their houses. Indeed, the relationship between the Karenni and relief organisations is a dynamic one. NGOs are important outsiders not only in their shoring up of KNPP authority but also in their role as one element in a wider international constituency amongst which the KNPP is as keen to promulgate its [nationalist] aspirations as it is amongst Karenni refugees. The elicitation of outsiders' understanding, support, assistance and, ultimately, legitimation, is crucial to the KNPP. In forging relationships with outsiders, be they NGOs, governmental representatives, or interested individuals, the KNPP attempts simultaneously to secure international assistance for humanitarian, educational and political purposes, and to raise international awareness of the Karenni situation and political aspirations. In pursuing the second objective, the KNPP manages to raise with outsiders its own general profile, and in pursuing both, but especially the first objective, to strengthen its own authority and legitimacy amongst the insider refugee population.

6.3 Christians and non-mainstream NGOs

Some NGOs operating in the context of Burma, and especially along the Thai-Burma border, have a particularly Christian ethos. Christian Freedom International (CFI), for example, an organisation that split in 1995 from Christian Solidarity International (who also work with Karen & Karenni and others), work on the border as well as elsewhere in the world. They project themselves and are portrayed as brave fighters for justice and humanitarian needs, driven by evangelical Christianity. 'Braving perils from shootings to land mines, contagious diseases and arrest, CFI's relief workers conduct missions on territory more befitting paramilitary groups than nonprofit organizations (Rahe 2001). Like a number of other Christian organisations, CFI devote a significant amount of resources to the Karen, providing 'freedom hospitals', 'backpack medics' and 'jungle schools' to Karen hiding 'in remote villages or [living in] refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border' (*ibid.)*. 'Backpack medics' apparently are Karen medics who trek into Burma to help those in isolated areas, supplying them with 'medicine and Bibles'. Although many Karen are practising Christians and Christians dominate the refugee camps in Thailand, Karen Buddhists and those practising traditional religion are between them probably still in an overall majority – given this, the relief programmes of organisations such as CFI show a considerable evangelical as well as humanitarian motivation.

At the same time, the extent of Christianity already present throughout the Karen and Karenni populations, combined with the relatively well known ease with which nineteenth century Christian missionaries converted the first Karen and Karenni, seems to make Karenic peoples especially attractive to Christian relief and missionary organisations. During my own field research, American and British Christian groups visited Karenni Camp 5 on a number of separate occasions. Their motives and the extent of their romance with the 'simplicity' and 'humility' of the Karen and Karenni varied, as did their actions while in the camps. The ordained priest accompanying one group went as far, during a sermon he had been invited to give at the camp's Baptist church, to encourage Karenni Christians to 'wage war on Buddhism', a statement of extraordinary evangelical zeal if not political naivety, given not only the complexity of Burmese politics and culture but also the courteous presence in his audience of a number of Karenni Buddhists. The audience as a whole listened politely, but afterwards when I and another European present expressed outrage at the priest's tactlessness, Karenni friends merely laughed: 'of *course* we won't "wage war" on Buddhism', they protested, 'half of our friends are Buddhist!'. Similarly, my own disgust at the symbolism of behaviour by a visiting American missionary group was not matched by Karenni friends: instead of focusing as I did on the way in which the Americans, all in any case taller than Karenni people, stood on a raised platform to distribute prayer books and sweets one by one to Karenni schoolchildren trooping before them, patting each one on the head as they did so,[41] the Karenni were more interested in the Americans' overweight bodies.

The romantic view often espoused by Christian NGOs can extend into dramatic hyperbole. Vickie Koth, for example, development director of CFI, is quoted as claiming that the Karen, 'given that they've been oppressed and persecuted for so long, statistically speaking, could be wiped out in 10 years' (Rahe 2001). Certainly, the Karen, together with other of Burma's ethnic groups, have been oppressed and persecuted for a long time now, but it seems highly unlikely that they will be 'wiped out'. Nonetheless, such suggestions, together with broader statements by more mainstream NGOs and pressure groups claiming that what is happening to Burma's ethnic groups is genocide (see, for example, Jubilee Campaign 1998), can have complex and far-reaching effects. For one thing, the emotive power of the term 'genocide' and its implication of similarity between the actions and

[41] To touch an individual's head is problematic for many of Burma's and other Asian peoples. This is especially so for Buddhist males, of whom there were highly likely to have been some in the group of schoolchildren brought before the visiting Americans.

motives of the Rangoon regime and the Serbian government of Milosevic, is seized upon as important affirmation and demonstration of their suffering and cause by exiled and active members of Burma's ethnic groups and by their supporters. 'Genocide' is a word that in the post-Holocaust world has an especially powerful and painful international currency. Yet there are those, including some supporters of the struggles for democracy and greater ethnic autonomy in Burma, who are more cautious about the use of such a term and of the more obviously hyperbolic language used by certain NGOs in the context in Burma. Certainly, Burma's ethnic groups are oppressed and the victims of human rights abuses targeted at them specifically because of their ethnicity, as well as abuses experienced more generally by Burmans and non-Burmans alike. But it is difficult widely to demonstrate that there is a systematic attempt on the part of the Rangoon regime or local army commanders to wipe out entire ethnic groups. There are indeed local and targeted attempts to wipe out a particular way of life (e.g. the enforced relocations in 1996 of virtually all 'traditional' Kayah villages in the area of Karenni State that lies between the Pon and Salween rivers) and to change permanently the demographic balance in certain ethnic areas (e.g. the active encouragement of inward Burman migration and of the fathering of ethnic women's children by Burman soldiers and others). Such policies and their implementation are obviously abusive and abhorrent. However, they do not necessarily meet international legal definitions of 'genocide'. Furthermore, to emphasise such terminology in activist struggle and international discussion of Burma may alienate and further entrench the regime in Rangoon, as well as further entrench the position of the ethnic and democratic opposition groups, rather than encouraging the dialogue and positive change activists apparently want.[42]

7. Concluding remarks

Through an examination of secondary sources and by drawing on the author's field research, this paper has explored some of the 'external' factors involved in the simultaneous ethnic and democratic Burmese struggles for self-determination. Ethnic struggles have received less international coverage and support than has the pro-democracy movement, but as this paper acknowledges total analytical separation of the two is impossible. The paper has shown that the views, reactions and experiences inside Burma of outside influences are just as important in determining outcomes as are the outside influences themselves. Crucial to the quality and quantity of impact on Burma of external factors on the one hand is the military regime's self-image and view of the outside world, and on the other is the type of approach by elements in the international community. Indeed, the combination of the military regime's deliberate xenophobia (albeit in some conflict with attempts by the regime to open up the economy) and the confrontational human rights-oriented approaches by certain international elements has perhaps contributed to the ongoing combative and non-dialogic nature of most exchanges inside and concerning Burma. At the same time, it is also likely that the 'constructive engagement' approach of ASEAN and other Asian countries has served merely to strengthen the military regime in Rangoon.

Powerful lobbies in the West have been pushing hard for change in Burma, and for such change to be brought about by pressure of economic sanctions and political isolation. On the micro-level, sociological side of this lobbying, the Internet and CMC in general are especially important. More generally, pressure efforts in the West have been largely unsuccessful in terms of forcing change

[42] C.f. Smith 2001: '…doubting voices in Burma [have] privately argued that, within a decade, different actors in the international community had moved from trying to comprehend the gravity of Burma's political crisis in 1988, to reflecting the underlying divisions in Burmese politics through partisan support or contacts, to taking up polarized positions which may actually prevent Burma's peoples from finding their own solutions – and in their own way' (*ibid*.: 18).

inside Burma, largely because of insufficient economic and political leverage on Burma. Certainly, foreign investment or sanctions seem unlikely alone to bring about transition to democracy in Burma. Nonetheless, to some degree CMC seems to have been successful in bringing about the creation or enhancement of a strong and vibrant international lobbying community, composed of both Burmese exiles and foreign activists. Yet because Internet and email access is virtually impossible for almost all inside Burma, CMC is very much an external factor, with little if any impact on or input from inside Burma. Indirectly, it may have a very small effect on what happens inside Burma. Nonetheless, for the vast majority of 'ordinary' people inside Burma, 'new media' such as the Internet have little if any impact whatsoever, direct or otherwise. Furthermore, contrary to some claims it seems unlikely that CMC contributes significantly to ongoing dialogue *inside* Burma. Indeed, it seems more likely that CMC has been one important factor in an increasing divergence between inside and outside. But this does not mean that the lobbying activity outside Burma is without interest or significance: it has changed or strengthened opinion in some Western governments and boardrooms and, to an extent, it has created its own reality and provided meaning in daily life for many exiles and activists. It has also encouraged the further development of language, technological and political skills amongst Burmese exiles.

Also contributory, perhaps, to an increasing divergence between inside and outside, is the relatively high level of contact, support and attention from Western governments, agencies, and individual activists, journalists and scholars that has been received by ethnic groups living in exile on the Thai-Burma border. Focusing primarily on border politics may mean not seeing the ways in which internal ethnic struggles have changed and moved on. Nonetheless, border experiences are illustrative of some wider dynamics. For inhabitants of border refugee camps, the wider world is both a source of knowledge, and itself something about which they wish to know more. As experience of the wider world increases, so do its impacts on constructions of identity and, in turn, impacts on SDM ideology and practice. The SDM support base is also strengthened by relief organisations. The same foreign contact also serves as one conduit for further dissemination of SDM rationale.

In sum, this paper has drawn in cultural, economic and political aspects to demonstrate that a number of macro- and micro-level external or external-origin influences are at play, at a number of different 'inside', 'outside' and marginal sites. 'Cultural' factors such as CMC and contacts with outsiders when living in exile, serve as means by which real, virtual and imaginary connections are drawn between these different sites and the actors who inhabit them.

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