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Graveyards, Not Labor Camps

by Bo Kyi

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Torture, mistreatment, lack of international oversight have turned Burma's prison labor camps into death traps

For some prisoners in Burma, especially military officers imprisoned for corruption, murder or drug charges, sentences to labor camps can be easier than life in a prison cell. The majority of other prisoners, however, find that assignment to a labor camp can amount to a death sentence.



Labor camp inmates at a quarry in western Shan State in 2005

Burma operates 91 labor camps in areas across the country, including the Kabaw Valley (western Burma), Taungswun/Mupalin quarry in Mon State, Twante Camp near Rangoon, Bokpyin Camp in Tenasserim Division and the New Life camps, according to a government Web site.

The thousands of prisoners in these camps are used to build Burma's highways, dams, irrigation canals, special agricultural projects, and in working rock quarries. But their lives are subject to the whims of their jailers.

Prisoners must pay bribes to ensure their safety and security while in the labor camps, and the money is due long before they even arrive. A new prisoner must pay between 1,000 and 5,000 kyat (US 80 cents-\$4) for the bus fare to avoid continuous beatings en route to the camp.

On arrival, prisoners enter the discipline room to receive instructions about the rules of prison camp life. That orientation takes the form of torture and beatings, which are intended to elicit bribes from the intimidated inmates. Basic amenities like a bed, a bath and access to a toilet are also controlled by bribes.

Often, prisoners are transferred without notice to other labor or porter camps. To avoid transfer, or to be sent to a more comfortable camp or one closer to family members, prisoners must pay as much as 150,000 kyat line kyay (per prison term) to the camp superintendent or other prison authorities. Additional "fees" are required for more comfortable accommodation or occasional home visits.

I have witnessed one instance of how far bribery can get a prisoner. A military officer was sentenced to five years hard labor for corruption. He bribed prison officials to be allowed to carry out his sentence in Twante Camp, near Rangoon. Additional bribes to camp authorities bought him permission to build a

home for himself and his wife, who was allowed to stay with him in the camp and who later bore him a second child. Inmates soon christened the baby *htaung winser*, which in Burmese means “the baby that was made in prison.”

But most prisoners are not so fortunate. If they cannot afford bribes, inmates are condemned to the harshest labor camps, where conditions are far worse than in Burma’s prisons.

The use of prisoner labor in Burma began in June 1962, when inmates were forced to work on the Pale-Gangaw road construction project. Since that time, prison labor camps have been established throughout the country, and prisoners are used extensively on state development projects, all of which rely heavily on manual labor.

Also in 1962, when the government launched offensives against insurgent ethnic groups, prisoners and civilians were conscripted to work as military porters.

Prisoners in Burma have suffered greatly under the military regime from arbitrary arrest, detention and incarceration, brutal torture and appalling prison conditions.

In some cases, political prisoners—including members of the National League for Democracy—have been charged under a section of Burma’s criminal code that enables officials to send them to hard labor camps. This is intended to destroy their dignity.

The comedians Par Par Lay, Lu Zaw, U Htwe and U Aung were each sentenced to seven years’ hard labor for performing at an NLD-sponsored Independence Day celebration on January 4, 1996. They were sent first to a labor camp in Kachin State, which used prisoners to construct the Myitkyina Airport. Later, they were transferred to another camp in Sumprabum, north of Myitkyina, to help build a road.

In 1997, the government forced 18 NLD political prisoners to serve as porters in Htantapin Township in Rangoon Division. One of the prisoners, the Karen national Saw Htun Nwe, 75, died of fatigue. Others were severely wounded.

Prisoners who could no longer endure the sufferings of camp life tried to escape. After their recapture, some were tortured and executed in front of other inmates to serve as an example. Others committed suicide by jumping under trucks or off mountain cliffs rather than continue to work as porters. The Taungswun/Mupalin Quarry in Mon State is notorious for the number of prisoners beaten to death by guards and suicides by jumping into the quarry pit.

In order to avert international pressure, the then State Law and Order Restoration Council, Burma’s ruling body, issued two secret directives in 1995 concerning the use of forced labor on development projects. Directive No.125 instructed all State/Division Law and Order Restoration Councils to stop using unpaid labor in national development projects. It stipulated that “in obtaining the necessary labor from the local people, they must be paid their due share.” Directive No. 125 also instructed local authorities to “avoid undesirable incidents,” so as not to cause “misery and suffering to the people in rural areas.”

Directive No. 82 instructed the Rangoon Division Law and Order chairman and the Ministry of Agriculture “to stop the practice of obtaining labor from the local people without monetary compensation” in the construction of dams in Rangoon Division.

Despite legal restrictions on the practice and increasing pressure from the International Labour Organization, Burma’s ruling junta continues to use forced labor throughout Burma.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has not been allowed to visit prisons and labor camps in Burma since 2005, and conditions for prisoners are getting worse every day. The death toll in labor camps has risen because of torture, exhaustion, malnutrition and the complete absence of medical

treatment.

Labor camps have become graveyards for prisoners. Those without the resources to buy their safety are afraid of going to a labor camp because they know they will likely never again return to the society they left.

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Learning with the Irrawaddy 21

To accompany the August 2007 issue of Irrawaddy magazine

Selected article: *Graveyard, Not Labor Camps*, pages 24-25

Activities to do before reading

Activity 1 Title

The title of this article is 'Graveyard, Not Labor Camps'.

What is a graveyard?

What is a labor camp?

What do you think the title means? Why does the author compare a graveyard to a labor camp?

Activity 2 Spelling

There is another way to spell the word 'labor'. Do you know it?

Why are there two spellings?

Here is a list of words that can be spelt differently. Write the second spelling.

organize

license

metre

color

program

honour

criticise

traveling

dialogue

center

Activity 3 Disappearing paragraph

Follow the instructions given to you by your teacher.

Activities to do during reading

Activity 4 Find the vocabulary

a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't understand.

b) Below is a list of definitions of words from the article and the paragraph where the word can be found. Read the paragraph and find the word that matches the definition.

1. A sudden idea or want for something.

Paragraph 3

2. Money or gifts given to a person in return for unfair assistance.

Paragraph 4

3. Scared or frightened of someone.

Paragraph 5

4. Extra.

Paragraph 7

5. Given a punishment or forced to suffer.

Paragraph 8

6. Very, very bad.

Paragraph 11

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 7. A feeling of pride or respect for yourself. | Paragraph 12 |
| 8. Extreme tiredness. | Paragraph 14 |
| 9. Famous for something bad. | Paragraph 15 |
| 10. Instructions or orders. | Paragraph 16 |
| 11. Something given to someone because they have suffered. | Paragraph 17 |
| 12. Something caused by a lack of healthy food. | Paragraph 19 |

Activity 5 Gap-fill

Fill the gaps with the words from Activity 4.

- No _____ was offered to people who lost their homes in the storm.
- He is _____ in the school for having many girlfriends.
- I felt _____ when the soldiers came to my house.
- To burn the village and arrest men were the first _____ received today.
- He knew he would be _____ to an unhappy life if he didn't leave the camp.
- He hadn't planned to visit his girlfriend; he decided on a _____.
- HIV, malaria and _____ are common problems in Africa.
- His mother-in-law's food tasted _____.
- Cleo refused to accept the _____ because she is honest.
- The doctor said he was working too hard and suffering from _____.
- When they reached the border the guards forced them to pay _____ money.
- Although he was very poor, Derek always worked hard and never lost his _____.

Activity 6 Word families

Here are some words from the article. Complete the chart by adding other parts of the word families.

noun	verb	adjective	adverb	person
safety	X			X
		corrupt		X
	assign	X	X	X
				murderer
operation		X	X	
		special		
	X	harsh		X
development			X	
	govern		X	

Activity 7 Comprehension

a) Answer these questions.

1. What does the author say can be the result of being sent to a labor camp?
2. How do prisoners protect themselves while they are in labor camps?
3. How much does a prisoner have to pay to be moved nearer to their family?
4. What project did the first prison laborers in Burma work on?
5. Why does the government send political prisoners to hard labor camps?
6. What was Lu Zaw's profession?
7. Which place in Burma is famous for people killing themselves?
8. Who cannot visit the labor camps?
9. Why are more people dying in the labor camps?

Activities to do after reading

Activity 8 Poster

You are a prisoner in a labor camp in northern Burma. You and your friends are very angry about your treatment and decide to organize a protest for next Sunday. In groups, make a poster to advertise the protest. Your poster should include details of when and where the protest will be held and why you are protesting.

Activity 9 Speech

It is now Sunday and the protest will start in 2 hours. Your friends have asked you to give a speech to the protesters. In your groups, write a speech about 2 minutes long and choose someone to read it. Remember you are very angry about your treatment by the authorities and want to fight for change in the camp.

Activity 10 Plan your escape

It is 3 months after the protest and nothing has changed in the camp. You know that if you don't leave soon you are going to die. In the same groups as before write a short play of a conversation you had last night planning an escape from the prison. Your teacher will ask you to present your play to the class. You can use this information to help plan your escape:

- Every Saturday morning you are allowed to walk around the camp for 2 hours.
- Every Sunday the guards have a party and get drunk. They usually fall asleep early and don't guard the prisoners.
- One of the guards, Win Thu, is known to be friendly with some prisoners and will help them if he is paid enough money.
- There is a hole in the fence at the north side of the camp.
- One member of your group can open the lock on your cell with a piece of wire.