

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 32

To accompany the **November 2008** issue of the Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *Capital Blues*, pages 10-19.

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1

Discussion

This article is about Burma's new capital city, Naypyidaw. The word 'blues' in the title refers to feelings / emotions. What kinds of feelings / emotions do you think this word refers to?

Activity 2

Discussion

What do you know about Naypyidaw? Why do you think the military government decided to move the capital there? Do you think it is a good place to live? Why / Why not?

B. Activities during reading

Activity 3

Match the vocabulary

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

b) Match these words or phrases with their definitions.

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|-------------------------|--|
| 1. imposing (adj.) | a. careful, concerned about danger |
| 2. backwater (n.) | b. strangely, mysteriously |
| 3. eerily (adv.) | c. extreme |
| 4. curfew (n.) | d. think about, consider |
| 5. entice (v.) | e. grand, impressive |
| 6. to be overheard (v.) | f. stop, break |
| 7. wary (adj.) | g. order, command |
| 8. prohibit (v.) | h. when nobody is allowed into the streets |
| 9. makeshift (adj.) | i. an isolated, undeveloped place |
| 10. scarce (adj.) | j. to attract |
| 11. interrupt (v.) | k. temporary and quickly done |
| 12. decree (n.) | l. to forbid, make illegal |
| 13. radical (adj.) | m. to take over by force |
| 14. commandeer (v.) | n. not enough |
| 15. contemplate (v.) | o. when someone hears what you are saying |

Activity 4 Gap-fill

In your exercise books, write these sentences and fill the gaps with the appropriate words from exercise 3b).

1. My friend never listens to what I say. He always _____ me when I am speaking.
2. We are not allowed to leave the house after 8pm. There is a _____.
3. There are a lot of snakes near my house so I am _____ when I walk outside.
4. The ancient temples in Bagan are very big and _____.
5. Some of the students have very _____ opinions. They don't want to compromise.
6. The factory near our village uses a lot of water, so now water is _____.
7. Last year the government _____ smoking in restaurants. Now people have to go outside if they want to smoke.
8. When the refugees arrived in the camp they were given _____ accommodation until proper houses were ready.
9. Yesterday, pirates _____ a ship in the Andaman Sea and stole its cargo.
10. The ghost floated _____ across the room and disappeared.

Activity 5 True or false

Decide whether the following statements are true or false by looking at the article. If they are false, correct the statement.

1. People are allowed to walk on the streets of Naypyidaw at all times.
2. Most Naypyidaw residents interviewed in the article are not happy living there.
3. The army gave farmers enough compensation for their land to build a new house.
4. People can use the internet without worrying.
5. The authorities frequently prohibit journalists from taking pictures of buildings.

Activity 6 Identify the problems

The author of the article mentions problems faced by different people in Naypyidaw. Can you identify what the problems are for each group of people and make notes about them *in your own words* in your exercise book.

1. Labourers / construction workers
2. Ethnic Chinese
3. Students
4. Shopkeepers

Activity 7 Comprehension

Answer the questions below.

1. How was the building of Naypyidaw financed?
2. Why is it dangerous to crack jokes in Naypyidaw?
3. Who do business owners rely on to make a living?
4. Why have many construction companies stopped working in Naypyidaw?
5. What happened to one visitor from Rangoon when he used the internet?

C. Activities after reading

Activity 8 Discussion

'...it's a city without a heart' (Paragraph 1)

Why do you think the author of the article writes this? What does he mean? What do you think makes a city's 'heart'?

Activity 9 Discussion

What does this article tell you about the military government of Burma?

Activity 10 Article of the future

Imagine you are a journalist visiting Naypyidaw in 20 years time. What is the city like? Is it still the capital? Who lives there? What do they think about it? Write a short article about it.

ARTICLE

Capital Blues

By MIN KHET MAUNG

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Naypyidaw, now three years old, was designed and built to serve as the seat of Burma's military government. For the ordinary Burmese who have to live and work there, it's a city without a heart

NAYPYIDAW — BROAD avenues lined by imposing public buildings crisscross an undulating landscape where bamboo forests and sugar cane plantations once stood. This is Naypyidaw, three years after the military regime moved its capital here from Rangoon.



Multimedia (View)

The contrast between then and now is spectacular—even more so at night, when street lamps and the lights that bathe the government offices illuminate the black sky that covers an otherwise power-starved country. The streets are eerily quiet, however, and an 11 p.m. curfew empties them altogether.

By day, at least half a dozen large markets draw crowds of shoppers, while off-duty military officers play rounds of golf on one of the courses that have sprung up around the new capital. Tourists are enticed to visit the new city by such attractions as a zoo.

Most residents aren't so impressed by the transition of this former central Burmese backwater into the nation's new capital, financed from the income raised by exports of such resources as gems, teak, natural gas and even opium.

"This place may be Naypyidaw for them [the ruling generals], but it's 'lock-up land' for us," said one local resident, looking around to make sure he wasn't overheard. People have reportedly been arrested and jailed for cracking jokes about the generals and their "Royal City"—the English meaning of Naypyidaw.

Most residents are wary about using the Internet for fear they're being monitored. Mobile phone service is unavailable in Naypyidaw for security reasons.

One visitor from Rangoon told me that while he was using the Internet a government agent ordered him to hand over his memory stick to be checked for possible anti-government content.

Naypyidaw-based journalists working for local publications complain of a lack of cooperation by the authorities, who frequently prohibit them from photographing government buildings.

Security officers are reportedly instructed to keep a close eye on the movements of visitors and

journalists.

Most residents I interviewed said their lives had not improved in the three years since the seat of government moved from Rangoon to Naypyidaw. 11

Laborers drawn from many parts of the country who are still engaged in building the new capital, work under severe conditions for the equivalent of US \$1.50-\$2 per day, housed in makeshift huts and existing on poor food and well water. 12

Most construction companies working on completing the public buildings of Naypyidaw have had to suspend operations there and move to the cyclone-devastated areas of Rangoon Division and the Irrawaddy delta. Construction workers receive no compensation for the days lost, and many of them have to take out loans at 20 percent interest in order to survive. 13

Money is scarce in Naypyidaw, where business owners have to rely on well-paid, free-spending senior government officials and their families to make a living. 14

As Naypyidaw grew to attain a population estimated to number 1 million, local business people hoped the expansion would bring prosperity. It didn't—and many who moved to Naypyidaw in the expectation of making a good living are now planning to leave. Most of those who chose to remain are struggling to keep above water. 15

"I'm now thinking of closing my shop because I can no longer afford the rent," said a jeweler at Naypyidawmyoma Market. 16

There's another reason why she is thinking of leaving Naypyidaw—she's Chinese and a victim of scarcely concealed official racial discrimination. 17

"The authorities have said Naypyidaw must be cleansed of the Chinese," said a Sino-Shan barbecue restaurant owner. 18

"My place was closed down twice," he said. "We had to bribe the authorities to let us reopen." As he talked, a group of military officials chatted, laughed and ate heartily at a nearby table. 19

Naypyidaw is no place for young people, either. Undergraduates at its Yesin University of Agriculture have been told that after their second year they must leave and follow practical courses of study in the countryside. 20

"We don't want to interrupt our studies," said one student. "We want to continue and complete our fourth year at university." 21

Many students see the government decree as a move to limit the number of politically radical young people living in Naypyidaw. 22

"The authorities are afraid of an uprising occurring one day if there are too many students on the 23

university campus,” said one student. “They know we hate them.”

Naypyidaw also has its homeless—hundreds of families left without a roof over their heads after their villages were commandeered by the army. They received compensation equivalent to between \$1,000 and \$2,000, less than half the cost of constructing a new house. Many farmers lost their means of making a living when the army ordered them to leave their land. 24

“The name Naypyidaw leaves a bitter taste in my mouth,” said one woman, contemplating her half-completed house. 25

Lower-ranking civil servants are as unhappy as most locals about life in Naypyidaw. “I miss my family, but I don’t want to bring them here,” said one woman civil servant, gazing sadly at a water fountain playing in the evening twilight. 26

“This place can’t afford my family any warmth as long as it’s the capital of the country’s rulers. I want my children to grow up in a capital of the people.” 27

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