

The Shadow of 1767

Old enmities still weigh on Thai-Burmese relationship

By Aung Lwin Oo

The recent visits to Burma by Thailand's foreign minister, Kantathi Suphamongkhon, and the supreme commander of the Thai armed forces, Gen Chaisit Shinawatra, appear to indicate that relations between the two neighbors are back to normal.

A question mark had hung over the state of ties between Burma and Thailand following the downfall of prime minister Gen Khin Nyunt last October, a purge that effectively closed the channel of communications between the two countries. Thailand now seems to be intent on reestablishing communications with the generals.

Several key issues, such as drug suppression, border demarcation and the identification of Burmese migrants in Thailand, have still to be solved in a permanent settlement between the two countries. Yet the drug issue alone—a national agenda item in Thailand—is sure to remain intractable, given the importance of the narcotics trade to the economic life of the junta's allied ethnic armed Wa, who provide a buffer between the Burmese army and the Shan, another ethnic community.

Burma and Thailand share not only a frontier of more than 1,000 km, but a common history of internecine wars and invasion. Thailand has never forgotten the Burmese destruction of the Siamese capital, Ayutthaya, in 1767, and the lingering bitterness over barbarous Burmese invaders is now compounded by modern-day problems such as the influx of drugs, migrants and refugees from Burma into Thailand.

"Memories of the past, both written and oral, contribute to shaping the attitudes of the governments and peoples in the two countries," wrote US academic Josef Silverstein, a longtime Burma watcher. Other incidents that tested Burmese-Thai relations included the Thailand-based revolt by former Burmese prime minister U Nu in the early 1970s and the incursions into northern Burma in the 1950s by Chinese Kuomintang (Nationalist) troops fleeing victorious Chinese com-

munist forces. Burma appealed to the UN Security Council for help in removing the Chinese in 1953, but Thailand joined the US in supporting a milder resolution which would have involved Taiwan and included a voluntary Chinese withdrawal.

Thailand has long been practicing a buffer-zone policy on the question of ethnic nationalities living in Burma-Thai border regions, and despite Bangkok's assurances that any attempt to "undermine stability of neighboring countries" would not be tolerated, the generals in Rangoon remain skeptical.

Internationally, Thailand's reputation has often suffered because of the Burma problem. On the eve of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's meeting with US President George W. Bush in Washington in September, a group of US congressmen wrote to

" We take jobs which they [Thais] won't do. They see us as trouble-makers, never as friends "

Bush complaining that Thailand's government "has become the region's chief champion of the military dictatorship in Burma."

Ironically, while Thailand is widely regarded as being a spokesman for the junta, it has had its own share of problems with the Rangoon regime in recent years. During border skirmishes three years ago, Rangoon pointedly insulted its neighbor by substituting the name Thailand with *Yodaya*, a purportedly derogatory term used in the era of warring kingdom states. The official newspaper *New Light of Myanmar* published a series of articles insulting the Thai monarchy, a grave offence in the eyes of Bangkok, which demanded an apology and threatened to review its Burma policy. The generals in Rangoon ignored the demand.

The following year saw the initiation of the Thai-sponsored Bangkok

Process, aimed at furthering democracy in Burma but which foundered when junta representatives pulled out. Thailand claimed that Rangoon's subsequent formulation of its "road map" to democracy was a product of the Bangkok Process. Another attempt by Thailand to help reconciliation in Burma by brokering peace talks between the junta and the Karen National Union, a major ethnic rebel group, also failed.

On the social front, Thailand has earned a bad reputation for itself because of its treatment of Burmese migrants, who are said to be held in low regard by most Thais.

"The Thai people regard us as garbage—they don't see the Burmese as helping the economy," a Burmese migrant was quoted as saying in a recent report by Amnesty International. "We take jobs which they [Thais] won't do. They see us as trouble-makers, never as friends," the migrant complained.

Such impressions are carried back to Burma, contributing still further to bad blood between Burmese and Thais, according to Myint Wai of the Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma.

Nationalism also weighs on relations between the two countries. Thai nationalistic sentiments, found even among educated Thais, posed a risk to society, according to Professor Thongchai Winichakul, a Thai academic who teaches at the University of Wisconsin in the US. In Burma, readers of the *New Light of Myanmar* are urged on the front page and under the heading "True Patriotism" to "cultivate and possess strong Union Spirit."

In his assessment of Burma-Thai relations, Silverstein believes "both nations' leaders and opinion makers use nationalism as a factor in their case against the other."

Nationalism, historical memories, slights and insults, mutual distrust and dislike—Burmese and Thais have much baggage to discard before they can hope for the kind of relationship that should exist between neighbors.

Learning with the Irrawaddy 7

To accompany October 2005 Issue of Irrawaddy Magazine

Selected article: *The Shadow of 1767*, page 21

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

What do you know?

What do you think you know?

What do you want to know?

- a) You are going to read an article about Burma's relations with Thailand. What do you know about this topic?
- *Things you know* are facts that you are quite sure about, (e.g. Dr Cynthia is a woman.)
 - *Things you think you know* are things you are unsure of.
 - *Things you want to know* are things you are interested in finding out.
- Complete the chart.

Thai-Burmese Relationship		
Things I know	Things I think I know	Things I want to know

Activity 2

Prediction: True or False

- a) Do you think these sentences are true or false?
1. Thailand wants to have communication with the Burmese generals.
 2. In 1767, Thailand destroyed Burma's capital city.
 3. Thailand has a good international reputation, because of the Burma situation.
 4. Thailand tried to help reconciliation in Burma by arranging talks between the Shan State Army and the Burmese junta.
- b) Read the article, and check whether they are right or wrong. If the sentence is false, write the correct information.

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 3

Summaries

Here are some paragraph summaries. Match the summaries with the paragraphs.

- a. Thailand uses ethnic nationalities as a buffer-zone between Thailand and the junta. The Burmese government does not like this.
- b. There are many issues Thailand and Burma must solve. The most important is the drugs problem.
- c. Thailand is trying to arrange peace talks between the junta and opposition movements. These have not succeeded.
- d. Both Thais and Burmese are encouraged to be very nationalistic.
- e. Thailand treats Burmese migrant workers badly.
- f. Thailand's foreign minister visited Burma. This implies relations between Thailand and Burma are OK.
- g. Thailand and Burma must forget about nationalism and bad past history if they want to have a healthy relationship.
- h. There are many incidents from the recent past, that make Thai/Burmese relations difficult.
- i. Thai and Burmese leaders use nationalism to make problems with each other.
- j. Some people thought that Thailand and Burma were not communicating, after Khin Nyunt was removed.
- k. Burma often insults Thailand.
- l. Thai people don't like Burmese migrant workers. They don't understand that Burmese workers help the economy.
- m. Thai / Burmese relations have a bad history, which still causes problems today.
- n. Migrant workers tell people back in Burma that Thais treat them badly. This causes more problems.
- o. Many people, including some US politicians, do not like Thailand's attitude to Burma.

Activity 4**Match the vocabulary**

- a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't know.
- b) Here are some words from the article. Match these words with their definitions.

suppression	<i>anger for a long time</i>
demarcation	<i>drawing lines to show territory</i>
frontier	<i>insulting</i>
lingering	<i>a thing that influences a situation</i>
bitterness	<i>border area</i>
influx	<i>serious</i>
skeptical	<i>opinion or feeling</i>
skirmish	<i>arrival of large amounts of people or things</i>
derogatory	<i>ongoing</i>
grave	<i>following, coming after</i>
subsequent	<i>fight, battle</i>
impression	<i>forcing people to stop doing something</i>
to urge	<i>strongly persuade</i>
factor	<i>doubtful, not believing something</i>

- c) Fill the gaps with words from **b**.
1. There was a large _____ of new refugees into the camps, because of the fighting across the border.
 2. One _____ in the bad relations between Thailand and Burma is past history.
 3. The situation is very _____, many people are worried.
 4. My _____ is that things are not so good.
 5. Thai and Burmese governments said many _____ things about each other.
 6. Burmese government _____ of minority education has been happening for a long time.

Activity 5

Rephrasing

Choose the sentence or phrase that means the same as the underlined sentence or phrase from the article.

1. ...appear to indicate that relations between the two neighbours are back to normal. (paragraph 1)
 - a. maybe
 - b. we don't think
 - c. it looks like
 - d. probably

2. ...contribute to shaping the attitudes of the governments and peoples in the two countries. (paragraph 5)
 - a. influencing
 - b. admiring
 - c. insulting
 - d. controlling

3. any attempt to 'undermine stability between neighbouring countries' would not be tolerated... (paragraph 6)
 - a. invade other countries
 - b. make problems in other countries
 - c. invest in other countries
 - d. help other countries

4. ...Burmese migrants, who are said to be held in low regard by most Thais. (paragraph 10)
 - a. violent
 - b. disliked
 - c. imprisoned
 - d. employed

5. ... contributing still further to bad blood between Burmese and Thais (paragraph 12)
 - a. thinking of people as the enemy
 - b. fighting and arguing
 - c. treating people like animals
 - d. paying low wages

6. Burmese and Thais have much baggage to discard before they can hope for the sort of relationship that should exist between neighbours (paragraph 15)
 - a. have to sign a peace agreement
 - b. have to stop fighting
 - c. have to unpack your bags
 - d. have to throw away bad feelings

Activity 6**Comprehension**

Answer these questions. If the answer is not in the text, write 'don't know'.

1. Why was communication difficult between Thailand and Burma recently?
2. Has the border demarcation problem been solved?
3. Why was Burma annoyed with Thailand in the 1950s?
4. Does President Bush of the US support Thailand's attitude to Burma?
5. Is *Yodaya* a nice thing to call someone?
6. Why was the 'Bangkok Process' unsuccessful?
7. Has Thailand tried to arrange peace talks with many ethnic rebel groups?
8. The article mentions 5 incidents that have caused problems between Thailand and Burma. What are they?

Activity 7**What are the problems?**

a) What problems do Thai people have with Burma?

What problems do Burmese people have with Thailand?

Look through the article and write down all reasons Thais and Burmese have problems with each other.

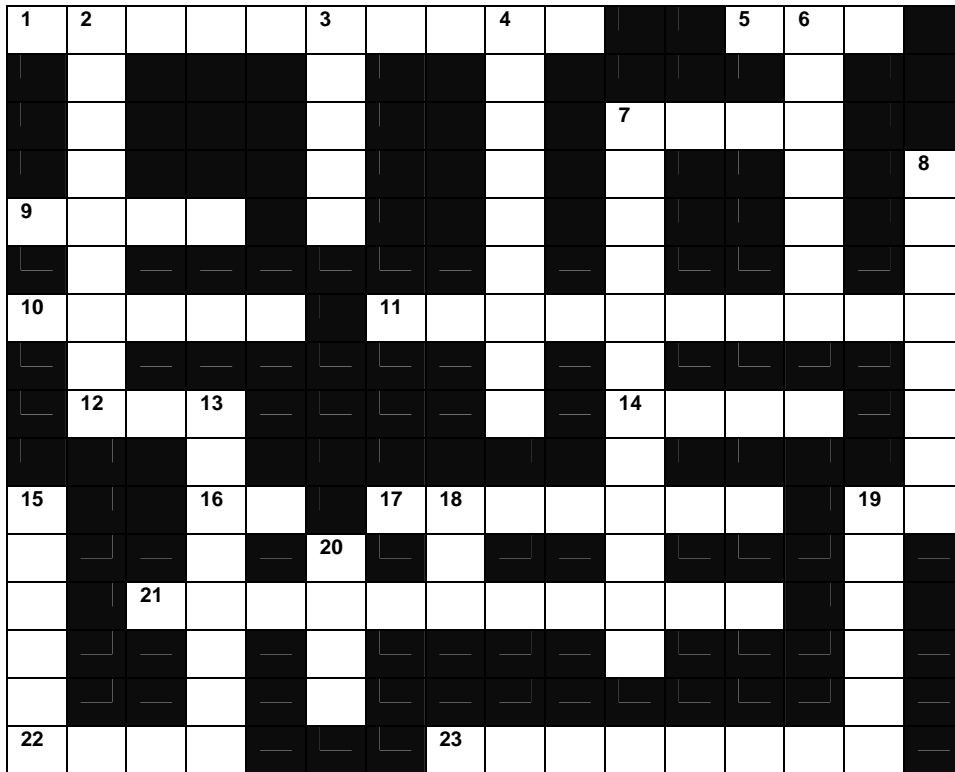
Thai problems with Burma	Burmese problems with Thailand

b) Brainstorm other issues you can add to the lists – more problems Thais and Burmese might have with each other. Make a class list on the board.

Activity 8

Crossword

All the answers to this crossword are in the article.



Clues across

1. Thai policy to use ethnic groups between Thailand and Burmese junta.
5. Kuomintang (abbreviation)
7. many _____s are smuggled from Burma into Thailand
9. a military force
10. Thailand's foreign minister recently made an official _____ to Burma
11. Thai prime Minister – Thaksin _____
12. just before = on the _____ of
14. history that is spoken, not written down.
16. United Nations (abbreviation)
17. _____ International, a worldwide human rights organisation
19. indefinite article
20. historic name for Thailand
21. one of the main causes of the problems between Burma and Thailand, according to the article
22. Burma's map to democracy
23. Thailand's reputation has _____, as other countries think it supports the Burmese junta

Clues down

2. to create instability in a country
3. a person who fights the government
4. A category of drugs, including heroin and *ya-ba*
6. a person who moves to another country
7. Burma's form of government is a military _____.
8. When one country tries to take over another country by force
13. someone who has been to university is well _____.
15. the official line separating two countries
18. not women
19. fighting together against a common enemy

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 9

Discussion

The article concludes that nationalism – the belief that your country is better than other countries- is one of the biggest problems, one of the main reasons why Burma and Thailand cannot solve their issues.

- Do you think nationalism is a good or bad thing? Why?
- Can you think of any example of nationalism in your community? Does it cause problems?

Activity 10

Presentation

Look at the list of problems from activity 7. In groups, choose one or two of these problems, and think of some ways to solve them. Present your ideas to the class.