
ELECTION MONITOR NO. 13

CENSUS OF RETIRED CIVIL SERVANTS IN RAKHINE AND RANGOON DIVISION

The Burmese junta has begun taking a census and collecting personal details of retired government servants in the education sector in Sittwe and Taung-gok townships in Rakhine State. According to a retired female teacher from Taungok Township, "I retired three years ago. Officials from the education department came and asked me when I retired, my age and who my family members are. Even if they had come in connection with the forthcoming elections, I will vote for the candidate and the party I like." Another retired teacher in Sittwe said, "the authorities are collecting details of retired employees of the education department in the township and [it is] thought to be related to the elections. They already have lists of retired government servants but they are confirming who are retired and still alive. It is being done for the 2010 elections. During the 2008 referendum to approve the constitution, they used the votes of retired government servants as "YES" votes." Similar census activities are also being undertaken in several townships in Rangoon Division. Family member's lists (Tha-gaung-sa-yin) are being checked for those currently living and working abroad, and those over the age of 18 years. While the regime had announced that it will hold nation-wide elections this year, it has not announced the dates nor declared the electoral law yet.

USDA WOOS VOTERS WITH FREE EYE TREATMENT CAMP IN KACHIN STATE.

With the aim to win over support and votes of local residents in the upcoming elections this year, the Burmese junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) organized a two-day free eye treatment camp in Kachin State in northern Burma, according to local news sources. The USDA's free camp was temporarily based in the associations' office in Moemauk, Bhamo District on 5 & 6 January. According to a local resident from Moemauk, many people from Moemauk and neighboring areas participated in the eye treatment campaign. A group of eye specialists brought over by the USDA examined and checked all the patients, who were provided spectacles free of charge. Different types of eye surgeries depending on eye examination results were also conducted, according to participants. Brig-Gen San Htun, Deputy Commander of Kachin State's capital Myitkyina-based Northern Regional Command also joined the free eye treatment camp on 5 January. A farmer from Moemauk said that the association's free eye treatment camp was announced to the people through the government administrative office from village to township level, and it was also advertised with the help of posters on roadsides. The USDA's eye treatment campaign is mainly in Myitkyina and Bhamo districts, two of the most populated areas in Kachin State.

SHAN PARTY EYE 2010 ELECTIONS

A Shan political party that came second in the 1990 elections in Burma has requested a meeting with its imprisoned party leaders prior to elections this year, apparently with an eye to participating. The request was made in a letter sent to the head of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Senior General Than Shwe. "The SPDC Chairman in his Independence Day speech said that the upcoming elections will create a political environment where everyone can participate," said Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) party spokesperson, Sai Lake. "The party sees 2010 as the year when all must cooperate in bringing about Burma's democratization and national solidarity," he added. The letter said that the meeting should be permitted so that the SNLD can "play our part in democratization and the national solidarity," in what could be a reference to its potential involvement in the looming elections. The SNLD Chairman and elected MP from Hsipaw, Khun Htun Oo, is currently serving a 93-year prison sentence in the remote Putao prison in northern Kachin State. The letter also requested a meeting with SNLD General-Secretary, Sai Nyunt Lwin, known as Sai Nood who is serving an 85 year term in Kalemyo Prison, Sagaing Division. Hkun Tun Oo and eight other leaders were detained on 8-9 February 2005 on charges of treason, defamation, setting up of illegal organization and violation of the 5/96 Law prohibiting people from criticizing the constitution drafted by its rulers. The draft was "ratified" by an overwhelming 92 per cent of the country's eligible voters in May 2008, according to a junta announcement.

NLD MEMBER FORCED TO FLEE HOME TOWN

According to a local resident from Yatheidaung Township in Rakhine State, officials from the local police station recently visited family members and relatives of NLD member U Maung Kywonn Aung, and collected photos and details of Aung's relatives. Sources close to officials involved in the operation stated that they were merely carrying out orders from higher authorities. Maung Kywonn Aung, originally from Min-kan-chaung village in Yatheidaung, has been at the center of attention since the 1990 elections and on many occasions in the past has been pressured to resign from the NLD. His failure to do so led to the closure of his family business as well as other restrictive measures being imposed upon him. Aung and his family were forced to flee their home town for fear of further persecution and harassment by local authorities and moved to Sittwe. Residents of Yatheidaung were fed fabricated rumors that even the road works to upgrade the Sittwe-Yatheidaung had been not been implemented due to Aung's unwillingness to resign from the NLD and that he is the cause of the troubles and misfortunes occurring in the town. Some local residents have criticized the measures and actions taken by the authorities as being a smear campaign targeted against Aung.

ANALYSIS

The early weeks of the election year have shown the NLD party reorganizing its structure, as well as taking plans to introduce new blood within the ranks. The regime, on its part, continues its strategy of intimidation of opposition parties and members, while at the same time campaigning to garner support of local residents in towns and cities throughout the country. The census of retired civil servants in Rakhine and Rangoon Divisions is part of a plan being put into place to readily compile would-be junta voters come the elections. Many former government employees blame the regime for causing the present day political, economic and social failings and thus the initiative to foster support of civil servants could become counter-productive for the authorities. The recent free eye treatment camp organized and provided by the government-backed USDA in Moemauk township, Kachin State is but one of the many lobbying tactics being used by the regime and its allied parties to foster support of local residents. Locals are provided with free medical services on the condition that they vote for the military in the elections.

The request by the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) to the SPDC Chairman to allow a meeting with their two detained leaders is a positive move in the right direction by the SNLD party in itself. The way forward to bringing about change in Burma's democratization process can only be made possible with all actively participating and cooperating. The SPDC should also recognize that the initiative by the present SNLD leadership to request a meeting with its detained leaders falls directly in line with the words of the junta chief's Independence Day message, "*all the national people to cooperate in realizing the State's seven-step Road Map with Union Spirit and patriotic spirit.*" The junta's sincerity will now be tested to see if it will allow the meeting between the SNLD and its two detained leaders. Recent requests by other opposition parties, for example Aung San Suu Kyi's meeting with three NLD leaders, have been approved and it would be only fair for the regime to extend the same to the SNLD. While there are positive steps, harassment and intimidation of opposition party members still prevails. The forced relocation of an NLD member from his hometown Yatheidaung to Sittwe is but another example of pressure tactics used by the regime to frustrate and intimidate opposition parties and its members. The likelihood of these intimidation activities will continue to rise and become more frequent in the run-up to the elections. The aim of the authorities is to remove all threats and dangers - be it opposition parties or members.