

**TEAK IS
TORTURE**

**Forced-Labor Logging
*in Burma***

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D R A F T

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In 1962, a military coup by the forces of General Ne Win removed control of the government of Burma from a democratic administration. The control of the nation has been in the hands of generals ever since. The repercussions of this and subsequent events aimed at maintaining control go far beyond who rules the people. Ne Win and subsequent military “leaders” have had a profound impact on the environment of Burma. Human rights abuses have coincided with a large-scale sell-off of Burma’s natural heritage. Massive migrations of people fleeing repression and subsequent increases in malarial infections along the borders and an increase in prostitution, have coincided with destruction of forests, depletion of fish stocks, wiping out of mangroves, reductions in wild flora and fauna, uncontrolled mining, oil drilling and increases in pollution.

The rule of the generals has brought with it a general centralization of wealth into the hands of a few, as local people are stripped of their ability to generate subsistence and small incomes from traditionally sustainable means.

This report will briefly review the destruction of Burma’s forests due to over-logging and the forced labour used by the military to do so.

Repression of the People and the Quest for Cash

On August 8, 1988, after massive non-violent demonstrations throughout Burma in which Burmese citizens demanded democracy, human rights and an end to 26 years of military dictatorship, the ruling military army ordered troops to open fire into a crowd of demonstrators, gunning down thousands of pro-democracy activists. During the unrest an estimated 3,000 were killed. On September 18, 1988, the regime reorganized, declaring themselves as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). SLORC imposed martial law on the country and later renamed Burma “Myanmar”.

In an effort to gain international legitimacy, SLORC held multi-party elections on May 27, 1990. The main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), founded by Tin Oo and 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming victory. This, despite the fact that the military had placed Suu Kyi under house arrest and barred her from running for Prime Minister.

The NLD captured 82% of the parliamentary seats. SLORC refused to acknowledge the election results, arrested NLD leaders and intensified its campaign of repression against the pro-democracy movement throughout the country.

SLORC has been condemned both domestically and abroad for its brutal crackdown in 1988 and its subsequent abuses. SLORC typically uses torture, summary execution, forced labor, forced relocation, beatings and rape — all in an effort to maintain or increase the flow of capital into the State and thus into the hands of the greedy generals and their friends and associates.

The Rape of the Land

The people of Burma are not the only ones being pillaged. The Earth is also the victim of SLORC’s rapaciousness.

There is very little environmental regulation in Burma under the SLORC. What little there is is rudimentary and rarely followed. Prior to the SLORC’s power grab, Burma was still operating under the Forest Act of 1902, introduced by the British Raj¹. This act protected public lands by preventing use by the native people. With their self-interests in mind, the British had forced extensive planting of teak by the indigenous people. By 1906 there were 70,000 acres of *taungya* plantations (that is, those cultivated by clearing the trees and planting new trees along with food crops).² However, compared to what was to come, this style of “forestry” had a much lower impact on the forests.

By 1994, the SLORC had passed a law legalizing the large-scale conversion of forests into commercial plantations and timber by the State.³ In the words of General Chit Swe, SLORC's Forestry Minister, this was forest "development" — the globally-used euphemism for annihilation. Although the SLORC's figures for forest cover have never changed⁴, satellite data and independent reports tell a different story.

At one time, forests covered 80% of Burma.⁵ In 1948, 72% was forested.⁶ Up until 1988 almost 47% of Burma was still covered in forest.⁷ Today, forest cover is estimated to be roughly 36% (UNFAO), with undisturbed forest cover estimated at as little as 20%.⁸ In 1991, Norman Myers calculated that Burma had the third highest rate of deforestation in the world, after Brazil and Indonesia, at 8,000 square km/year.⁹

An article appearing in a SLORC information sheet portrays the "Burmese people" as conservationists.¹⁰ "The people of Myanmar have a genuine understanding and love for nature which has imbued in them a spirit of conservatism with a focus on concerns for the welfare of future generations. The natural environment has been preserved *effectively, a lot of it* in pristine condition. Its *lush teak forests*, scenic lakes and mighty rivers, from the snow caps in the north to the coastal mangroves and unspoiled islands to the south can afford many thrills and *rich experiences* [emphasis added].

The SLORC seems to take "rich experiences" in a somewhat different direction than nature walks.

When the SLORC took power, they quickly granted 42 large logging concessions to 36 Thai companies in the Manerplaw and Three Pagodas Pass border areas.¹¹

Ironically, it was in November of 1988, just a few months after the August massacre in Burma, that flooding in Thailand — exacerbated by the massive deforestation of that country for teak production — killed 351 people and caused US\$120 million in damages. Thailand's forests had been reduced from around two-thirds of the country's land area to roughly a third in just a few decades. Then-Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven, pledging to halt the deforestation of Thailand, stopped the issuing of new logging concessions and asked his cabinet to revoke existing logging permits nationwide.¹²

In December of 1988, Thai army commander Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyut flew to Rangoon for lunch with Gen. Saw Maung, Burmese army chief and then head of the SLORC. He came away with a fistful of deals for Burma's timber.¹³

Large scale logging and deforestation ensued.

The SLORC made arms deals totalling US\$1.3 billion, much of it from monies made from timber.¹⁴ These arms were used in the civil war against the ethnic minorities — the Mon, Karen, Karenni, Kachin and Shan — the very people whose lands the loggers were devastating.

Aside from hard currency, the SLORC gained another military advantage from timber sales — the clearing of the forests of their opponents. Thai and Chinese companies opened up remote and previously impervious areas to the military.¹⁵

Since the opposition groups were also able to charge "gate" taxes on logging trucks, and the SLORC believed the ethnics were profiting too much from the movement of timber¹⁶, the SLORC has since re-examined the granting of concessions and now gives out "harvest quotas" to Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwanese companies.¹⁷

The SLORC is encouraging the replacement of low-impact techniques used in logging (such as elephants) with heavy equipment, the building of sawmills and furniture factories.¹⁸

Although local people are sometimes hired as cheap laborers, they do not benefit from logging, as concessionaires pay money directly to the SLORC. None of those funds are used to better the living conditions of local people but instead to further arm the military.

Although cease-fires were declared with a number of indigenous groups, the Karen, having walked out of cease-fire talks, continue to actively oppose the SLORC. It is the Karen that occupy the southern area of Burma (the Tenasserim, or “panhandle”) that contains much of the remaining pristine forests.

High levels of logging have caused heavy flooding in the rainy season. As forests are cleared, rain runs off instead of being absorbed by the forest and recirculated into the atmosphere and environment slowly. This also leads to periods of drought, both of which adversely affect local peoples’ ability to grow food. Erosion is exacerbating flooding and causing siltation of rivers, affecting fish populations and again having a negative impact on local people.¹⁹

Burma is extremely rich in biodiversity. As some of the last primary forests in the region, Burma’s forests hold such treasures as elephants, tigers and other large cats, sun bears, giant wild oxen, barking deer, gibbons and hornbills, rare orchids and medicinal plants.²⁰ Logging is having an extremely negative impact on the native flora and fauna. Loggers in Burma, as elsewhere, are notorious for poaching and supplementing their income and diets with local wildlife, including many endangered species. Logging trucks have served as the primary conduit for illegal wildlife transported into Thailand for sale.²¹

Although little is known about logging in the interior of Burma, a steady stream of trucks carrying raw logs enter China from Shan state, Kachin state and Sagaing division.²² Although at a much lower rate, trucks are also passing regularly into India loaded with logs.²³ Illegal trade in teak into India is ongoing “and in direct complicity of SLORC. As teak trees are in protected forests, a teak trader simply has to cut down a tree and pay an amount to a SLORC personnel. Then it is transported by bullock carts up to the border where it is transported onto trucks and sent forward.”²⁴

As well as logging, local people in the Shan plateau, encouraged by the SLORC, are clearing forests to grow more poppies for expanding opium production.²⁵

Forced-Labor Logging

The use of forced, coerced or slave labor by the military to extract or transport trees has been well-documented by numerous human rights organizations and ethnic groups. A few citations follow:

- “A teak forested hill behind MOUNG PYIN town was selected for [the] newly arrived LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] 360. People from MOUNG PYIN and surrounding villages were ordered to clear it, and the felled logs were sold in KENG TUNG town, with the money shared by Brigade Commander BOHMU HTIN GYAW of LIB 43 and Brigade Commander of LIB 360. The labor was unpaid, and there was a fine of 50 kyat and a packet of cooked rice and curry for not working, or else punishment, a fine and jail. Those who complained got punishment and torture. Nearby forests were cleared for firewood and charcoal for the army; unpaid labor, no rations. Construction materials for barracks, buildings, were supplied by local people without compensation”.²⁶
- “The people of WETSHU have been forced to offer their labour and property for the project... A big saw mill was set up at WETSHU by the army in 1992. Though logging of teak and some other hard timbers is illegal...the Army officers export them to the Indian smugglers of MOREH (Manipur). Both the prisoners and the villagers were used for timber production as unpaid labourers.”²⁷

- “Troops from 36 Battalion arrived at our village on April 30, 1994. They stole 8 pots and one pig, just as if it were their own. They steal so many things from us — they’ve also ordered 1,000 shingles of leaf roofing and 20 cattle cars, and we have to send it all by May 15. Whenever they come to the village, all the girls have to hide away because the soldiers always give them trouble. T--- army camp also demanded 75 tons of logs from us. The log circumference has to be 2 feet to 4 feet, and they must be 10 feet long. They said if we don’t send these on time, we will be forced to move within one week.”²⁸
- “Whenever the soldiers came to our village they made trouble for us. They always asked for money — each family had to pay them 40 or 50 Kyat every month. They also demanded wood, bamboo, and roofing leaves. Each family had to send them 4 or 5 logs, with circumference of at least 2 feet 3 inches and the length has to be 7½ feet. The officer sent a letter to the village head with a bullet inside as a threat to make sure we’d do it. We had to go far from the village to cut these logs, and then we had to carry them with our cattle carts to the place where the soldiers told us at the Salween river. There the soldiers put the logs on people’s boats, sent them to Pa’an and sold them. Every family in the village had to send firewood...”²⁹
- “In Kengtung now, people are miserable because #244 Battalion takes people and forces them to cut down all the trees in the nearby forest. They also use porters from other places to cut down the trees. Everyone has to go, cut them down and take them to the Army base, and then they send them some other place. Not only trees in the forest, but also trees which were planted by the villagers for their own use — but when the villagers protest, the soldiers won’t listen. So all the mountains are becoming barren. Now #244 Battalion has moved to another place and #245 has come to replace them, and they too are ordering all the forests cut down.

“This work started 3 months ago. Everyone in the town and the area has to go in rotating shifts. Each village and section of town has had to send people on 60 of the last 90 days. Each day my section of town has to send 2 or 7 or 10 or 20 people, depending on how many the soldiers demand. There are 60 houses in my section. I’ve had to go twice to cut the trees, for one day each times. We had to take all our own tools, machetes and saws... They make us cut everything down, even the bamboo trees. Then we have to dig out the stumps too, and give them to the Army. It’s all taken away by Army trucks. When the trucks are full, the people have to transport the remaining trees to the army camp at their own expense, on carts pulled by buffalos, or however they can. The best wood is taken away somewhere else... They take away the *myo sang, ha kong, gaw long, mak mong, lo haw, sak mong* and other valuable trees. Some of them are very big, because the villagers have always preserved this forest for various uses. There are also shrines to the spirits that guard each village so the villagers preserved the trees around the shrines, and even those have been cut down. They’ll never stop cutting down the trees. Now the land for 5 or 6 miles around Kengtung is all barren. It was jungle before. All the trees around the water ponds were cut down so the ponds have all dried up, and so have most of the streams and wells, so now there’s a water shortage problem. We can’t understand why they’re doing it... Nong Pan village still has forest around it, but they’ve got a plan to cut that down too. From Kengtung up to Mong La on the border of China all the big trees have been cut down, and there’s only a small bit of forest left.”³⁰

- “Information reaching us has it that the Burmese Na Sa Ka forces of Buthidaung township have ordered the Muslim villages... on the west bank of Mayu river to supply 5000 people to the Na Sa Ka for... road construction, building embankments and logging in the Mayu hill. These labourers are further ordered to work continuously for 10 days and cut 6000 trees. The officials have reportedly sent the order in the first week of February, 1994.

“Similarly, villages... on the east bank of the Mayu River are also to supply 5000 labourers for 14 days continuously for the purpose. Neither food nor any wage has been paid to them.”³¹

- “There are three Concentration Labour Camps in the Babow valley in the Tamu township in the Saggaing Division near the Indo-Burma border... Wet Shu camp [was the first] to be built and [the] main camp of the three... The camp was constructed by the porters from nearby villages... For the building and furniture for the servants, the prisoners have to work at timber cutting. The prisoners are divided into six teams for sawing. The sawing stands are 1 – 2 hours walk away [from] the camp in the forests. They have to... us wood and teak in the forests. The cut tree[s] are saw[n] at the sawing frameworks into 10" x 12" x 10' or 8" x 8' 10' logs. The heavy logs are also carried by the prisoners up to the camp. During 1994, 3 prisoners [broke] their legs in...accidents with logs. There is no compensation for the accidents for the prisoners.”³²
- “As in Toungoo district, most of the forced labor is being used in the construction of roads, and most of these roads will directly benefit military efforts or powerful business interests who control resource-related endeavours... Laborers have also been taken to build a road between Papun to Parheik, where there is a large military base. From Paheik, this same road is being extended northwards to Kyauk Nyat on the Salween river, which forms the border with Thailand. The river itself has always served as the major transportation artery in the area, both for military purposes and logging interests. Soldiers and timber traders ply the river from dawn to dusk in long-tail boats. When the access road is completed, it will greatly facilitate movement of troops through the area, and of logs and sawn timber to Rangoon.”³³
- “Last year I worked on the railway for one month. After each 10 days’ work, I had 2 days’ rest and I could sleep at home. Since then I had to work for one whole year cutting wood for them. I had to work all the time, every day. I had no time to work for my family, so we didn’t have anything to eat anymore...
 “I worked for one month, then I could take only 2 days’ rest and then they called me again to cut the wood. It was expensive hardwood. We were ordered to cut ironwood, all hardwoods, all wood with an expensive price. I don’t know all the names in Burmese. Sometimes [the soldiers] used it to build their houses and sometimes they sold it. We had to cut the wood into planks. There were 6 people in each group cutting wood. There were many groups. Some people had to cut the trees down, and others had to cut the planks. I saw 60 people working in the same area. Sometimes it was near the railway, sometimes far. We had to do it for #404 Battalion. They have moved now. They didn’t give us anything, no salary. When I couldn’t go to work, I had to give *them* money. I had to give 200 kyats per day. Every evening, all the workers had to go to the soldiers’ camp and they told us what we had to do the next day and how. If we were cutting trees near our village we could go sleep at home, but sometimes it was far from the village and we had to sleep under the trees. I had to bring rice, fishpaste and salt from my house...
 When they disliked a villager, they beat him with a stick... Sometimes they beat them... so hard that they had to be carried to hospital.”³⁴
- “According to well-informed reports in the area, Infantry Battalion 39 Commander Lt. Col. Khin Maung Nyunt spent the dry season forcing hundreds of local villagers to defoliate approximately 150 acres of communal pasture and forests south of Kyauk Kyi town. The authorities announce that the purpose of the project is to create sugar cane and vegetable plantations...
 “As of early May, approximately 100 acres had been cleared for cultivation, but no plantations had yet been established.
 “Villagers report that as a result of the deforestation, two local ponds, Htat Htu and Kya In, have dried up.”³⁵
- “At the end of 1994, when I was in LIB No (72), Capt. Htay Win, Capt. Wai Zin Htun, Capt. Nyan Htun and Capt. Myint Lwin cooperated with venerable U Thaw Pe Ta, a Buddhist mission from Pa Laung village monastery in Loi Kaw Township, who was sent by Lt.-Gen. Myo Nyunt, Minister of Religious Affairs did some corruption for their own business. They collected the 200 Kyats and

three logs of teak or hard wood of two feet in diameter and 18 feet in length by force, from each house in Daw Tago, Daw Khe, Daw Kheraw, Lein Ein Su and Pa Laung village in Pa Laung Township for the reason of building of monasteries and schools in the region. The teaks were extracted and sold, and the profits were benefited by U Thaw Pe Ta and the commanders.”³⁶

- “On xx December I went to Loh Baw village and listened to a village elder from Pah Klu. He said that that very afternoon, Maung Chit Thu of the Ko Per Baw had sent a verbal message to Pah Klu, Loh Baw and other villages. It was to the effect that for the next 3 days, each village had to send at least 30 people to clear land, that they were required to bring along their own food, and furthermore the villagers must bring with them a total of 400 logs, each at least 7 feet long and three hands in circumference, all to Ker Ghaw village. The message also said, ‘If you do not do as we instruct you to do and then something happens to you, don’t say it was our fault... Maung Chit Thu did not say... what would be done with the logs [The DKBA is known to be selling logs across the border to Thai traders in Meh Dan, 80 km north of Mae Sot]”³⁷
- “They have been cutting so many trees that the climate is now changing here and it has become drier, so every year the rice harvest is worse. Usually the traders hire villagers to cut the trees. They pay them 250 Kyat for a ton but then they sell the logs for 12,000 Kyats a ton. The traders get permits to cut the trees by bribing the military and also the SSA.”³⁸
- “Privates are ordered to work unpaid for business ventures run by the army officials in the name of Self-reliance programs of the battalions. All the money and benefits earned from these programs are shared among the officers but not with low-ranking soldiers. ‘Our LIB 72 runs several businesses such as a sawmill, logging and mines as Dawsee village in Lawpita. Every soldier is required to work unpaid in these businesses. No inquiry can be made. All money is shared among the officers,’ said Myo Min Aung, an 18-year-old private from LIB 72 based in Lawpita.”³⁹
- “We have to do work for them. During the rainy season they brought in logs and we had to cut them into planks with saws. I don’t know where they got those logs [other information confirmed that the logs were from a forced-village-labor logging operation further up the Han Thayaw river]. We have to pull the logs up the river bank and cut them, then pull the planks down and load them onto boats. We have to take turns doing that work for one day... If you can’t go it is 150 Kyats per day, so 900 Kyats for 6 days... This year there have been some beatings because people arrived late for forced labour.”⁴⁰
- “My village is south of Kawkareik, near the Han Thayaw River ... It is also close to SLORC Battalion #330... They order us to cut wood and bamboo, and if there is also other work to do we are ordered to do it... They also ordered us to find good timber and then made us pull those logs. They sell this timber in Kawkareik and do business. We do not receive anything at all. It’s sheer bullying... They don’t even provide our food, we have to take our own food to eat.”⁴¹
- “During the first week of March 1997, the villagers from Min Tha village were subjected to forced labour. Men, women and even ageing were used [as] forced labour to take out the Teak from the jungle for Burmese Army BN228. Forced labourers were beaten up by soldiers in work place as usual. One villager [was] severely beaten and [his leg broken], but Army denied... any medical treatment. Relatives brought him to Tamu Government Hospital but admission was not accepted. Therefore they went to the Kalay Myo [a long distance away] and [received] medical treatment there.”⁴²
- “SLORC regional commander ordered to all village headmen located along the Dee Mawsoe-Daw Tama Gyi main road that a family member from each must come out and must work at the project of rebuild[ing] old logging road from Htee Thanga, Pon river to Daw Pet and Daw Tama Gyi. This project must be finished at the end of September, 1997. Slorc commander [is] planning to transport all teaks and hard-wood from east bank of Pon river down to Rangoon for exportation as well as trying to finish their log’s transportation at the end of this year, 1997.

“The Karenni people from Daw Tanaw, Daw Tatho, Daw Ladu and 20 other villages in Soe Moe Township who [are] fleeing to Shan-Karenni border having suffered from shortage [of] foods and diseases. They [are] only relying on the bamboo shoots, jack fruit and rice soup for their daily lives. Mostly, the elders and children having deficiency by the lack of foods and medicines...”⁴³

The Role of Teak Demand in Logging

Teak makes up about one half of total hardwood exports from Burma.⁴⁴

Demand for teak has led to the deforestation of India and helped to deforest Thailand. Indian teak supplied the British with ships. Thai teak went mostly to the decks of battle ships, yachts, building construction, furniture and small consumer items such as salad bowls and napkin holders.

In 1994 it was estimated that Burma held 80% of the world’s remaining natural teak.⁴⁵ Today, teak continues to be used for furniture. Numerous companies, especially Danish ones, use large amounts of teak originating in Burma.

Although teak is grown extensively in plantations, the quality of plantation teak is much lower than natural teak, so demand remains high.

Thai companies continue to expand processing facilities both in Thailand and in Burma, to make use of the expiring supply of Burmese teak. German companies import large quantities to process into veneers for the Danish furniture makers.

Anyone buying teak originating from Burma (i.e., directly from Burma, or indirectly from Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan or Hong Kong) is benefitting directly or indirectly from forced labor. They are also supporting the use of torture, beatings, imprisonment and summary execution that surrounds forced-labor logging in Burma.

Solid teak lumber is imported into Asian countries, Europe and the U.S. for boat building, building interiors, flooring, and furniture. In Asia, Japanese-style traditional furniture, such as “wadansu” is made of teak and Buddhist temples use large amounts of teak in their construction for altars, flooring, doors, and furniture. Buddhist-related construction may be the largest single use of teak in Japan. “Agon Kyo”, a wealthy new Buddhist group, constructed two new temples made almost entirely of Burmese teak.⁴⁶

If democracy is ever to be regained in Burma, the military must feel that the tide of international support is turning against them. As things stand, the SLORC is comforted in their continuing relationship with other Asian trading partners, most notably with Thailand and China. The relationship with Thailand is a tenuous one, however, as there is a history of tension between the countries. As well, the generals may not feel that they want to get too close to China either, since they could easily be swallowed up like Tibet. So, relationships with other countries are important to the generals.

It could take many more years for the isolation from the West to “trickle in” to the region, although this may already be starting as we see Japan beginning to make strong statements against the regime. But, truly, if the SLORC are ever to give up their power, they will need to be de-funded.

Obviously, teak must be a part of any strategy to pull the financial rug out from under the generals, as it is by value their second largest legal export after rice. Successfully delegitimizing the use of teak originating in Burma would strike a large blow to the SLORC accounts.

This would necessitate a great deal of cooperation on the part of NGOs in Thailand, Japan, Europe and the U.S. But it can be done as surely as it was done for ivory in the West and mahogany in the U.K.

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