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Burma

Enough hypocrisy, action!

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The Burmese military junta has suppressed the uprising of the people against the dictatorship, initiated over a month ago. There have been dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrest. The regime benefits from the support of the “international community”.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/wburma.jpg>]

Teargas on the streets

Demonstrations are rare in Burma, a country living under the yoke of one of the most repressive military juntas in the world. But, following a spectacular increase in the price of fuel in mid-August in Rangoon, demonstrations grew. Initiated by students, in early September they took a more political turn, following the repression suffered by monks in the town of Pakokku in the centre of the country. The latter mobilised massively to demand an apology from the government, as well as economic reforms and the liberation of all political prisoners, including the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. The last great popular revolt in 1988 ended in the death of at least 3,000 demonstrators and thousands of arrests. The Burmese people live in extreme poverty in the absence of democracy. The country is locked down by paramilitary militias and organisations like the Association of the Union for Development and Solidarity, systematically involved in operations of repression – among others, against Aung San Suu Kyi, who they have tried to kill.

In contrast to 1988, the current crisis in Burma has a high profile in the international media. This has shown to what level of hypocrisy the governments and international organisations have stooped. The United Nations, the European Union and the United States reacted promptly to the repression of the demonstrators. Bit appeals to “restraint” and “the use of peaceful means to restore stability” are nonetheless cynical. Who can believe that one of the most ferocious dictatorships in the world, headed by a paranoid madman, Than Shwe, will be intimidated by such timorous words? Big European firms, like Total (see below) have been present in Burma for too many years. Their activities directly enrich the ruling military, in complete legality, the European Union having placed no ban on trade in the strategic sectors (rare wood, precious stones, minerals, fuels), which bring money to the junta and help keep it in power. The people are condemned to forced labour.

In Asia, the neighbouring countries, notably India and China, are consumers of the raw materials that Burma possesses in abundance and have decided to close their eyes to the systematic violations of human rights and children’s rights. India and China have decided to extend their influence in Burma, their rivalry allowing the junta to play them off against each other. Billions of dollars have been invested in projects (infrastructural developments, exploitation of fuel deposits and so on). These two countries have also largely contributed to making the Tatmadaw, Burma’s army, the second most powerful army in Southeast Asia, selling it state of the art weapons, planes, helicopters, boats and every kind of materiel which the dictatorship uses to crush the people. In return, these countries refuse to condemn the exactions of the junta in the name of “non-interference in the internal affairs of a foreign country”. Twice this year, China has blocked a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Burmese regime.

For their part, the countries of the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) including Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, have begun a policy of “constructive engagement” with the dictatorship which is supposed to open the road to democratic reforms. No change favourable to the people has followed, and the policy of repression of opponents and ethnic minorities has intensified. During this time, business and the pillage of natural resources have continued to go well. Thailand, for example, signed a memorandum of understanding with the junta for the construction of several dams on the Salween River bordering the two countries, without consideration of the serious humanitarian and ecological consequences.

45 years of dictatorship

The ruling military have never had any objectives other than personal enrichment and staying in power. It has a sad history in the struggle against ethnic rebels, it employs the large-scale forced enlistment of children into the army, forced labour, summary executions of villagers, the rape of women and children, torture, the forced displacement of populations, and pillage. It burns villages and livestock and destroys the food resources of villagers, killing health workers who attempt to aid them. No country, no association can say today that it is unaware. The health and social situation of the country is so dreadful that we are witnessing in the adjacent countries (India, China, Thailand, Bangladesh) the emergence or re-emergence of diseases like dengue, tuberculosis, and virulent forms of malaria. This situation is worsened by the fate of millions of Burmese refugees, who are denied the status of refugee by the neighbouring countries. The drug trade, organised by the army, has made Burma the second biggest world producer of opium and the first of amphetamines.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/monks.jpg>]

Arrested monks

In all countries, notably in the European Union, pressure should be exerted to ban trade and financial investment with the junta (boycott of Total and other companies established in Burma). At the international level, the UN can no longer simply request "a peaceful dialogue between the two parties". They should explicitly condemn the exactions of the junta and work for the rapid instalment of a civilian government. This government should take the emergency social measures which the people need and re-establish democratic freedoms leading ultimately to the election of a genuine constituent assembly bringing together all the components of Burmese society. The only aid authorised should be humanitarian aid which does not fall into the hands of the junta or the associations it controls.

Total out of Burma!

France is particularly involved in Burma. The multinational Total possesses significant investments in the country (equivalent to some 7% of the Burmese state budget) and has collaborated since 1992 with the military junta. In 2003, a report by Bernard Kouchner absolved the French oil company of accusations that it was responsible for the super-exploitation of Burmese workers. Now minister for foreign affairs, he reaffirms that Total should stay in Burma. In Paris, after having met Dr. Sein Win, Prime Minister of the Burmese government in exile, Nicolas Sarkozy stated that "private companies, Total for example" should "show the greatest restraint" and should not make "new" investments in the country.

These declarations do not reflect the gravity of the situation. It is necessary to put an end to all collaboration with the Burmese junta. Total should withdraw from Burma; the political prisoners and all persons arrested during the recent demonstrations should be freed. A solidarity rally will be held on Saturday September 29 in Paris.