

MISSION AND JUSTICE

4/07

BURMESE REFUGEES

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Check this Out

This year things have been particularly busy - and it looks as if it will get busier. Large sections of the hospital in which I work have doubled, in some case tripled, in size. To give you some idea. The Intensive Care unit has increased from 18 beds to 38. Wonderfully modern, a boon for both patients and staff. Still the building upgrade has still not been completed. With it has come a corresponding increase in the need for patient support. I find very little free time these days.

The above is my reason for getting the last of the bulletin out this time. I don't want a repeat of what happened last year where I found myself struggling for each edition. So you get an early wish for Christmas and the New Year. I hope both are happy times for you.

While Joan Chittister's article naturally reflects the USA situation I found that it also reflected the Australian scene. Not surprising given the political persuasion here in Australia which finds itself in almost slavish agreement with almost anything which drops from the lips of the political powers there. I read, for instance, with some amusement, what follows.

"In a series of internal musings and memos to his staff, then US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that Muslims avoid "physical labour", and wrote of the need to "keep elevating the threat", "link Iraq to

Iran" and develop "bumper-sticker statements" to rally public support for an increasingly unpopular war... Mr Rumsfeld produced a memo after a conference call with military analysts. "Talk about Somalia, the Philippines, etc. Make the American people realise they are surrounded in the world by violent extremists," he wrote. People will "rally" to sacrifice, he noted after the meeting. "They are looking for leadership. Sacrifice (equals) victory."... Based on the discussion with military analysts, Mr Rumsfeld tied Iran and Iraq..."Iran is the concern of the American people, and if we fail in Iraq, it will advantage Iran," he wrote in his April 2006 memo - Rumsfeld memos: Snow-flakes from a man at war; Robin Wright; 2/11/07; http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2007/11/01/119361905_9810.html. And again: "You get a lot more with a kind word and a gun than you do with a kind word alone", This is Al Capone quoted by Rumsfeld as he airs his views on international diplomacy. These words were also said by Ramsfeld, as the US army unleashed its military force in the Gulf. For Ramsfeld, kind words were never an option.... Rumsfeld tried to run his propaganda campaign in the US concerning the war in Iraq, through maintaining an atmosphere of fear. He was actually playing the role of a puppet master in a scary movie because the nightmare was not fiction, it was and still is, for real". Mayada Al Askari; 6/11/07; See: <http://www.gulf-news.com/opinion/columns/world/10165602.html>.

Mind you I am sure you realise that one way the USA can reduce troops numbers is to employ civilians, mercenaries, who will do the same thing. What an ironic name: "Blackwater".

And then I stopped laughing because Rumsfeld is really all so sad - so I have included below the latest from Baghdad Burning. Yet another family from Iraq has joined the endless line of refugees which Rumsfeld's freedom has created. Those of you who have read the author's previous dispatches can detect the tears which would have been flowing, and final glances over her, and her family's, shoulders. But then we must see the big picture: "if we fail in Iraq, it will advantage Iran". What we need is more refugees and Iran would seem to fit the bill.

For those of you who have access to the Internet you will be able to get full versions of the articles included here. Given copyright problems I believe I have pushed the envelope as far as I can with all of them. For those of you who do not have access ask someone who does to look them up for you.

For years one of my continued sad observations has been Burma. It springs from a time when I had the pleasure of studying with a non-Catholic student from Burma - a wonderful, dedicated young man. I returned to Australia and he, literally, disappeared back into the forests of Burma. Perhaps, one day, he will reappear but I somehow feel we will never speak again. If Rumsfeld is humorous the generals in Burma are side-splitting. They would be great on stage but unfortunately they control their audience with bullets and terror. Check out the price of eggs in the article.

Politics is the same everywhere. Once in power politicians have this amazing knack of seeing nothing, knowing nothing, and promising everything. For years now child labour has been a problem in Indonesia. I keep reading new articles about the fishing children in Sumatra. Every time I find the situation difficult to compare with the Indonesians I know, with whom I work and with the children who pass me by on the way to school every morning.

But it is Christmas close-up. And with Christmas springs new hope. A hope for a wonderful new year for the oppressed of our world...and I hope for you

FROM WHERE I STAND

JOAN CHITTISTER, OSB, 5/9/07; [HTTP://NCRCAFE.ORG/NODE/1296](http://ncrcafe.org/node/1296); [HTTP://NCRCAFE.ORG/BLOG/5](http://ncrcafe.org/blog/5)

The closer the United States gets to choosing a president, the more the event begins to look like a papal election: it's all about religion and little about what religion teaches.

The United States, we love to say - and Europeans repeat in a kind of incredulous wonder - is the most "religious" country in the world. Meaning, of course, the most church-going country in the world. Whether or not going to church correlates well with religious values is clearly a debatable subject. To wit, the corporal works of mercy - as in, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit the imprisoned, visit the sick, and bury the dead.

It is on these criteria in Matthew 25: 31-46, however, that Jesus rests his definition of salvation. No small thing for those who considers themselves "religious." No small thing, then, one would think, if a nation - if a candidate for political office - were really serious about being "religious." Point: The corporal works of mercy would, it seems, be a very clear template, a constant standard in such a nation, for the evaluation of a party platform, a legislative program or a candidate's fitness for office by those who consider themselves Christian.

You can picture the score card now: Candidate A proposes keeping two of the works of mercy; Candidate B, five of them. Forget the need to count votes. The winner is ...

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In the nation in which, they tell us, the last two elections were decided by Catholic and Evangelical Christians, the need to define what we mean when we say we're looking for a candidate with "religious" values is not an idle exercise. Given all our commitment to bible-quoting candidates, how do we stack up as a religious people against the religious principles we're told are essential to Christianity? The answers may make us all think again about what religion really means where politics are concerned.

If "feeding the hungry" is a basic, we're slipping, no matter how much we congratulate ourselves on our virtue. According to Bread for the World, a faith-based movement seeking justice for the world's hungry, over 35 million people - including 12.4 million children - live in hunger in the United States. They skip meals regularly or, when they eat, eat too little. Some of them go without food, the report says, for entire days. But hungry children develop more chronic illnesses, suffer more from anxiety and depression, and have more behaviour problems than children who eat regularly. Those children we put in our institutions, call them social problems, and hire more police to keep them in line rather than feed them well.

If "clothing the naked" - sending people into the world with dignity and propriety - is a work of mercy, we will need legislators who are committed to spending money on education. With the amount of money we have spent on the war in Iraq - over \$449 billion - we could have provided 21 million four-year college scholarships to young people whose parents are already strained to the financial break-point. That means, of course, that we need legislators who indicate a willingness to spend money on the intellectual future of this country. Then maybe, in the future, we wouldn't have so many wars.

If "giving drink to the thirsty" is a work of mercy, we could be doing something on a national level to save the water supply in this country. We would need legislators intent on controlling the global warming that is turning the southwest into a dust bowl and threatening to swamp property on the coastlands of the United States. We could be putting money into saving the water we have before water is no longer free and the poor cannot afford that either.

If "housing the homeless" is a work of mercy, we could at least match our housing chest with our war chest to provide four million new public housing projects. The U.S. Conference of Mayors "Hunger and Homelessness Survey" of 23 major cities in 2006 reports that 59 percent of those cities report an increase in requests for emergency shelter for families in the past year alone. Almost 30 percent of those appeals went unmet for lack of resources, the report tells us, as we agonize over which political candidate is more religious than the other ones.

If "visiting the sick" is a work of mercy, we might want to ask legislators who are seeking to renew their long-running terms in office why it is that of the 45 million uninsured people, 21 million of them are full-time workers? Whatever happened to the notion that if we worked hard in this country, we could take care of ourselves?

If "visiting prisoners" is a work of mercy, then it is time to think again about how closely religious values parallel our institutional goals. According to Human Rights Watch, September, 2007, "Most inmates [in U.S. prisons] had scant opportunities for work, training, education, treatment or counselling because of taxpayer resistance to increasing spending on prison rehabilitation programs." Clearly, we are a "lock 'em up and throw

away the key" society. We send them to prison, do almost nothing to prepare them to live a decent life outside of it, and then wonder why the recidivism rate is as high as it is.

If "bury the dead" is work of mercy, then it is time to increase home health care facilities. According to the National Association for Home Care and Hospice, "one in five U.S. households are involved in home health care for an adult." Nevertheless, in August, Medicare announced proposed cuts of \$7 billion dollars to local home health care agencies. Surely we need legislators who are intent on providing caregivers and families the support they need to care for their sick and earn a decent living themselves at the same time.

It's time, it seems, if we're Christian, to judge people the way Jesus told us to judge them: "By their fruits." But if that's the case, then the question is not: What do each of these candidates tell us about how religious they are? The question is: What do each of these candidates plan to do to make the corporal works of mercy a living sign of the Christian tradition in this so-called Christian culture?

In fact, how conscious are we of the silent erosion of each of these works of mercy in the society around us while we define "religion" as single-issue politics? After all, food and education and decent housing and support services are exactly the things that take the strain off families and make abortion unnecessary.

From where I stand, it may well be our own unawareness of the loss of these services that's making it so difficult for us to make a distinction between what is really "religious" about our candidates and what is only religion being used as another kind of slippery election strategy. God save us all from that kind of religion again.

CHILD WORKERS 'ABANDONED' AT SEA

19/4/07; [HTTP://ENGLISH.ALJAZEERA.NET/NR/EXERES/0BBD09C0-EEB1-4922-8DE7-E05F6F25FE66.HTM](http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/0BBD09C0-EEB1-4922-8DE7-E05F6F25FE66.htm)

Across the Asia-Pacific region some 122 million children aged between 5 and 14 are forced by poverty to work for a living.

Perhaps one of the worst places for a child to work is on one of the fishing platforms known as jermals off north Sumatra, Indonesia. These are basic wooden structures, hours from dry land, where people - many of them underage - work for months at a time for less than a dollar a day. Under Indonesian law it is illegal for anyone under 18 to work on jermals. But with the platforms located far offshore it is a law that is often ignored.

On one platform, 50 kilometres off the coast of Tanjung Balai, in northern Sumatra, we found two older men and four workers who looked like teenagers. All four claimed to be at least 18, but they looked much younger.

Alan Boulton of the International Labour Organization says conditions for child workers aboard the jermals amount to virtual imprisonment. "They can't be attending school if they are on platforms," he says. "They are completely cut off.

Of the workers on board the jermal we visited Ngadiman is the smallest and probably the youngest. He says he has been working on the jermal since the beginning of the year. "In my village there are jobs but the salary is very low," he says. "It's less than \$20 for working in a rubber plantation. Here, it's about \$28 a month" Neither Ngadiman nor any of the other workers on the jermal will see the money until they return to dry land after at least three months at sea. Many stay for much longer.

Ahmad Sofian of an Indonesian NGO that monitors the jermals says the average age of workers on the fishing platforms is between 14 and 17. Ten years ago, he says, there were more than 1,000 jermals, employing hundreds of underage workers. A government crackdown shut many of the platforms down and while only about 50 ageing jermals are still operating today, the children that work on them seem to have been abandoned.

"The government's commitment to eliminate child labour from jermals has dropped off," Sofian says. "They are satisfied the number of jermals and child labour has decreased but they don't do anything to eliminate it." Instead, he says, the authorities seem content to let nature to take its toll on the remaining jermals so they eventually fall into disrepair and go out of business.

On the jermal we found Ngadiman says his contract is for a year and, if he is lucky, he will be allowed a home visit in September for Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month. By then, it would have been 9 months since he last saw dry land. Life on a jermal is tough. Ngadiman says he works everyday doing the same thing: hauling the catch up from the sea, before the fish is boiled, dried and graded. He says he misses his family and wants someday to be able to go back to school.

His foreman, Bawor, returns to the mainland every three weeks and is responsible for recruiting labour for the jermal. "The parents bring the children to me to ask for a job," he says. "I know the minimum age to work in a jermal is 18. If the parents come to me I will ask whether the child is 18. If they say yes, I have to believe

them - it depends on what the parents say, not how old the worker looks." With no other way to make a living he says some parents even beg him to employ their children.

At night on the jermal, during the few hours of downtime, Ngadiman and his fellow workers gathers around a tiny television set powered by a generator. It is their only connection to the outside world at least 4-hours boat ride away - the same distance they have to travel if they need medical help.

On a jermal safety precautions are virtually non-existent and accidents are common. "I once stepped through a hole while drying fish and injured my leg," says Ngadiman. "There was blood. I cleaned it with my shirt, had a short rest and started working again.

While child labour is officially illegal in Indonesia, officials in charge of monitoring the situation say they lack resources to do their job effectively. Dr Suwito Ardiyanto, Indonesia's director-general of labour inspection, says there are only about 1,600 inspectors spread across Indonesia, an archipelago of more than 13,000 islands. Since local authorities took over responsibility for labour issues he says few people have been penalised for breaking child labour laws. "I think it's because local authorities are not ready to take on more work if the cases go to court - so they prefer to stay quiet."

Back at sea the jermal on which Ngadiman and his foreman Bawor live and work is more than 20 years old. With a lack of wood to repair the platform and growing competition from fishing boats, Bawor thinks it will last another two years before it finally rots and falls into the sea.

FREE AT LAST, BUT STILL AFRAID

CONNIE LEVETT; THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD; 7/9/07; [HTTP://WWW.SMH.COM.AU/NEWS/NATIONAL/FREE-AT-LAST-133/2007/09/06/1188783415589.HTML?PAGE=FULLPAGE](http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/free-at-last-133/2007/09/06/1188783415589.html?page=fullpage)

The screaming started about 4.30am on March 28 in Lima Dorm, the single women's quarters at Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. Wang Meihui, a Chinese detainee who had lost her claim for asylum as a Falun Gong follower, was dragged from her bed by four security guards. Barefoot, still in her pyjamas, she was carried to a van, driven to the airport and deported to China. There had been no warning from authorities she was to be taken.

As terrified faces appeared at bedroom doors, guards held tight to the doorknobs of her friends' rooms so they could not come out and help her. "I have never heard such a horrible noise, like an animal struggling for their life," says 24-year-old Lee Jiao, who says her door was held shut. "After that, life in Villawood changed. The 6am Falun Gong exercises stopped. Three women went on a hunger strike."

The following day, a spokesman for the Immigration Minister told the ABC the woman had not been removed with force.

One of those hunger strikers was Zhao Mei, a 50-something Falun Gong detainee. For 51 days she refused to take food, dropping 13 kilograms to 37 kilograms. "Because the woman they deported was Falun Gong, we went on the hunger strike to support her," Zhao says.

Immigration officials finally convinced Zhao to end her fast by promising to personally review her claims and send an official from Canberra. Three months after the hunger strike (she has now spent more than a year at Villawood), she remains in detention limbo. She has been moved from Lima Dorm to a low-security shared house, but remains terrified that the guards will come for her.

On this day, she sits huddled over a table in the carport, weeping constantly and too weak to walk properly. "I am living a frightened life every day, especially after what happened on March 28. I never forget, not even now, here. I hear it every night."

Mandatory detention for unauthorised arrivals was introduced in 1992 and applies to asylum seekers arriving by boat or air and anyone else without a valid visa.

Initially there was a 273-day limit on detention but this was removed by the then Labor government in 1994. The High Court confirmed that year that authorities had the power to hold "unlawful non-citizens" indefinitely. By the mid-1990s, the medical community had begun to sound warnings about the impact of mandatory detention on detainees.

The number of asylum seekers peaked in 1999-2000, with 4174 people, mainly Iraqis, Iranians and Afghans who had fled persecution, locked up in remote jail-like centres on arrival in Australia. Today that number has fallen to 483. There are 89 asylum seekers held on Nauru under the Government's controversial "Pacific solution". The Howard Government says mandatory detention is an important part of its border-security strategy to deter unauthorised arrivals...

Zachary Steel, a senior lecturer in psychiatry at the University of NSW, and his colleague Professor Derrick Silove have been monitoring the effect of detention on asylum seekers for more than 10 years. Mental health professionals are only now beginning to assess the long-term effect of detention. "People are fairly resilient, but those who spent more than six months in detention, that was the threshold, then they crumbled and three years later they were still disturbed, with no major improvement," Steel says.

"Comparing people who came to Australia through the non-detention route to those who went through detention, three years after release, the people detained were still experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder on a daily basis where the intrusions were about detention, not about what they went through in their home country." Steel, Silove and Patricia Austin will this month publish a comprehensive review of the impact of detention on the mental health of detained asylum seekers in the journal *Transcultural Psychiatry*.

Steel says post-traumatic stress continued to affect people once they were released on three-year temporary protection visas. Interviews with former asylum seekers found the stress of detention and the visas were equal to anything they had encountered up to that point.

Temporary visas were introduced by the Howard Government in 1999, with a view to repatriating visa holders if the situation in their countries of origin improved.

"Even though we were technically meeting our protection obligations it shows that for a person's psychiatric integrity, they need to know they are safe," Steel says. "You can't live a normal life knowing you may be sent back to a place where you have been tortured.

"The very existence of TPVs will rewrite the whole understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder in the world."...

For all those inside the wire at Villawood, the threat of sudden deportation hangs heavy over their heads. The screams of Wang Meihui on March 28 only crystallised the fear they already shared. ... Since Wang Meihui was forcibly repatriated refugee advocates in Australia have been unable to contact her. Her husband says she has not returned to their village.

MILKING THE COW DRY IN BURMA

AWZAR THI, MEMBER, ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, HONG KONG; ARTICLE 2 8/07; THIS ARTICLE CONSISTS OF THE EDITED TEXT FROM A SERIES OF WEEKLY COMMENTARIES, ENTITLED RULE OF LORDS, WRITTEN UNDER A PEN NAME FOR UPI ASIA ONLINE. ALL OF THE ORIGINAL COLUMNS, AND OTHERS, CAN BE READ ON THE UPI WEBSITE, WWW.UPIASIAONLINE.COM/HUMAN_RIGHTS, OR ON THE AUTHOR'S BLOG: WWW.RATCHASIMA.NET.

If you are among those fretting about the global financial slump that has taken up so much news time lately, spare a thought for the people in Burma. On 15 August 2007 the military regime there, which holds a monopoly on the sale of vehicle and generator fuels, multiplied prices without prior announcement. The cost of diesel was doubled. Ordinary petroleum was raised by two-thirds. Compressed natural gas was increased five-fold.

A lot of buses just didn't run that day. Where they did, fares were immediately increased in line with the new tariffs. Millions of folk who ordinarily venture out with just enough money to arrive at work or school and perhaps get back again were left with a stark-alternative: go home or walk. Two young men who took photographs of crowds waiting on the curbs in Rangoon were reportedly detained until that night. In a country without unions, employees in an industrial area demanded more wages.

Four days afterward, around 500 people walked together across Rangoon to urge that the price rise be revoked. One woman tearfully told an outside radio station that she was with them because she was sick and tired, but also determined. Security police took photographs. Onlookers applauded.

On August 21, hundreds again marched, and were this time met by government-organized gangs armed with sticks and slingshots. That night, at least a dozen were arrested at their houses. But that did not deter others: the next day hundreds more, mostly women, took to the streets. Thugs acting for police and soldiers came out and blocked them too.

The price increases come on top of an annual inflation rate of about 40 percent, and at a time that people in many parts of the country have been struggling with floods. Small civic groups have been set up in urban centres to alleviate the needs of the hungry.

In rural areas things are far worse; according to one news report, a man in Sagaing Division died in police custody at the start of the month after stealing some instant noodles and a soft drink. Sporadic protests against runaway commodity prices earlier in the year had already been met with arrests and inquiries.

When asked about the unexpected hike, economists were at a loss. Some put it down to sheer incompetence. Most pointed out that it will obviously affect other basic commodities; and jumps in rice, oil and salt prices have already been confirmed. An analyst in Bangkok said the move was in the opposite direction to the rest of the world, and didn't make sense given that Burma exports natural gas. ...

Today Burma is alive with discontent. Its public is perhaps closer to open resistance to the government — as distinct from the quiet subverting of officialdom that is a part of everyday survival there — than at any other time in recent years. But the junta is still in charge, and psychologically very much at war. It has not hesitated in the past to demonstrate that the use of force is its only true recourse, and it can be relied upon to demonstrate the same again. This much, at least, it guarantees.

Politics and the price of eggs

The price of eggs is a sensitive topic in Burma. Anger at the cost of an omelette, one Rangoon resident recently discovered, can land you in jail. But it could also land the government in hot water.

When U Thein Zan in February 2007 learned from his daughter that eggs were selling at four for 300 Kyat, around 25 US cents, he took some government propaganda articles from publications lying around the house and scrawled ironic comments across the top. Then the retired seaman impulsively stuck them to his suburban fence. Within a short time a crowd gathered. Then the officials arrived. They photographed Thein Zan's handiwork, pulled it down, and took him for questioning. Nearly two weeks later he was charged with causing a public disturbance.

Thein Zan's spontaneous protest came at the same time that a small group went into the street near a central market, calling for a halt to rising commodity prices, and for improved electricity and water supply: most of the city is dark at night, and residents of the suburbs and peripheries still depend heavily upon wells for their water. The persons involved were detained and interrogated, but apparently none have been charged... The courtroom was crowded for the first hearing in March, and people around the country listened to the details through Burmese-language radio broadcasts beamed in from abroad. The accused was refused bail and transferred to the central prison.

Then something odd happened. After a few days, two strangers in a Land Rover appeared at Thein Zan's house and told his family that they would act as guarantors for his release. Despite the court's earlier order, they easily posted bail, not even producing documents to support their application. At the start of April, they went with him to the court, where the judge promptly declared the case closed. Thein Zan was free: but how, and thanks to whom? When asked which group they were with, the two bailors replied "the people". A more honest reply would probably have been "the state", although in truth this too raises more questions than it answers...

In Burma, a conventional political activist gets harassed and, if necessary, locked up either until they've learnt their lesson or they die. But what's to be done about an old man who just wanted eggs for dinner? What's to be done about a farmer who complains that his land has been stolen by village councillors? This is the persistent conundrum for the generals and their subordinates, and why Thein Zan and others like him are a greater threat to their authority than is democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

After his release, Thein Zan iterated that he wasn't interested in politics; he just couldn't accept how expensive ordinary commodities had become. "Try telling an old timer born in 1942 that eggs are 300 for four," he told one interviewer by phone. "I got angry... it's enough for me if prices go down and my family can survive." But as he proved, in Burma the price of eggs is political, and the prospect of a wave of similar protests makes the authorities justifiably nervous. There is only one Suu Kyi, and she remains under house arrest. But how many more Thein Zans are there?

If you can't beat them, beat them up

On 15 June 2007 a man in upper Burma emerged from a crowd to smash another in the face with knuckledusters. Then he ran off and hid in the office of an organization under the patronage of the country's senior army commander. The identity of the assailant remains unknown. Police officers called to the scene were denied entry to the office, even though they have the right to search any premises in pursuit of an alleged criminal.

The victim was 70-year-old U Than Lwin, a parliamentarian from the 1990 annulled general election. He had just led a small group of local residents in prayer, as part of a peaceable nationwide campaign for the release of political prisoners.

Than Lwin and his colleagues had informed the trustees of pagodas in Mettaya that they would come that morning, and they had not been refused access. So they were apparently taken by surprise at the crowds of

thugs hanging around the entrances to each compound. Hoping to avoid a disturbance, they instead went to a nearby monastery. Only after praying did they see that the gangs had come to wait there too, where Than Lwin had his nose and cheek busted.

The assault on Than Lwin speaks to how the military government is itself systematically undermining the law and order that it claims ad nauseam to uphold, and upon which it has based its mandate since assuming power almost two decades ago.

That the mobs were not there by coincidence is obvious. The regime has used them in the past: notably for the murderous attack on a convoy carrying the Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters at Depayin in 2003. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that these groups are being incorporated into the routine surveillance and day-to-day intimidating of people throughout the country...

The unidentified assailant in Mettaya was not just a tough with a steel fist; he was the spectre of arbitrary violence conjured up behind some 50 million people, to keep them in their places. Whereas the regime's central concern could at one time have been properly described as adherence to order, with or without law, this no longer holds true. Through knuckledusters it is indicating its preparedness to depart from even this limited notion of legality where it serves its topmost objective: the retaining of power in one form or another, no matter the consequences.

Burma's long and steady downward slide

The International Committee of the Red Cross at the end of June 2007 issued a remarkable press release on Burma. Remarkable, because in contrast to the committee's usually circumspect approach in discussing problems of government in countries where it operates, it now damns the regime there for its continued gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The committee's president, Jakob Kellenberger, is quoted in the release as describing Burma's authorities as being directly responsible for "immense suffering for thousands of people in conflict-affected areas". The committee lambastes the army for "the large-scale destruction of food supplies and of means of production" and restrictions that make it "impossible for many villagers to work in their fields".

The statement, which comes at a time that the committee is dramatically scaling down its operations in Burma after repeated failed attempts at getting the freedom it needs to work according to its mandate, coincided with the leaking of an internal report by the UN Humanitarian Coordinator to Burma, Charles Petrie, which characterizes the poverty weighing down millions throughout the country as a consequence of "ill-informed and outdated socio-economic policies". It refers to the UN strategy for intervention in the country as premised on "the belief that the downward slide could still be checked". But today even many optimists would question that assessment, and it is doubtful that the coordinator believes it himself...

Taxes and oppression are starving the village.

There's no time to work, only to pay taxes and do forced labour; many villagers have little food. Some must eat porridge; some only water skimmed off boiled rice, and others only sweet potatoes. To feed the children some adults go without food for one or two days at a time. Even so, children increasingly suffer diarrhoea, sore stomachs and death.

In 1999, the tribunal concluded that hunger in Burma was the result of a common cause, which by all accounts "is social rather than natural, rooted in the structure and actions of the state rather than vagaries of land and climate". Thus, "Militarization does not simply implicate the Burma army (its part in creating food scarcity is obvious), but more importantly, suggests that authoritarianism, oppression and violence have become ingrained in routine government business."

The tribunal did not give any cause for encouragement. It did not see any reason to believe that military rule and concomitant hunger in Burma would end any time soon; on the contrary, its findings suggested the opposite. Regrettably, they proved correct. The farmer describing conditions in his village ten years ago could just as easily have been speaking yesterday.

Having reached the end of its tether, the International Committee of the Red Cross has come out to state the obvious: that Burma's government is the pre-eminent cause of the country's degradation. But in this also there is little room for reassurance. Indeed, it brings the committee no further forward than the tribunal was years ago, in part because of the unavoidable contradiction facing all those doing humanitarian work under authoritarian states: the cause of the problems is in the government; but the solution to the problems must also be through the government. The question then arises, where in the cause of the problems can ways be found toward

solutions? Eight years after the people's tribunal presented its findings, the answer remains elusive. Perhaps we need some new questions.

A wedding video and an injustice system

The wedding video of a Burmese general's daughter has proved a surprise hit throughout the country. Footage of Thandar Shwe's glittering marriage ceremony has since July 2006 been watched around the country on black market CDs, and globally on You Tube and news broadcasts. It has shocked viewers unaccustomed to seeing first-hand the sheer extravagance enjoyed by an otherwise inaccessible elite. In some versions, it has been cut to incorporate scenes of abject poverty in and around Rangoon's streets, in contrast to those of diamonds and champagne behind its walls.

One person who had copies was Ko Than Htun. Acting on a tip-off, in March 2007 a team of police raided his house and charged him with possessing videos that had not been approved by the board of censors. He was initially released on bail but later rearrested. Shortly thereafter police claiming to have information from Than Htun arrived at the house of Ko Tin Htay, who lives in the same township. Entering without a search warrant, they found nothing. They called him to the station on a pretext and arrested him there.

The following day the local ruling council met and decided that both men should be charged with intent to cause public alarm.

In court, the police produced a statement taken from Ko Tin Htay and used it against him as evidence, which is illegal. Absurdly, they also produced a photograph of Aung San, Burma's independence hero and father of democracy party leader Aung San Suu Kyi, to demonstrate that Tin Htay is politically active: a point anyhow irrelevant to the charges against the accused. Nonetheless, both Than Htun and Tin Htay were found guilty and sentenced respectively to over four years and two years in prison with hard labour. They have since been transferred away from their hometown and reportedly denied access to their families.

Two features of the case point to how years of dictatorship have thoroughly corrupted criminal law and procedure in Burma.

First, whereas rights groups and political activists describe the military government in terms of its tailor-made security laws and other specialized tools for oppression, ordinary criminal law already contains everything the authorities need to arrest and prosecute almost anyone for anything. The country's penal code is virtually the same as it was at independence in 1947. It consists of provisions devised by the British colonial regime to suppress dissent. These—including section 505 on "statements conducing to public mischief", under which Than Htun and Tin Htay were prosecuted—continue to be used today...

Secondly, Burma's police, prosecutors and judges are unable or unwilling to follow even the most basic requirements of criminal procedure. Over the decades, functions have merged: an army officer heads the police force; other agencies assigned security duties are also under military control. Prosecutors and judges are mere extensions of the executive: the attorney general and Supreme Court bench are appointees of the ruling council. The very notion of checks and balances has been obliterated. Criminal procedure and law at all levels and in all parts of the judicial system are ignored and undermined: whether at time of search and arrest, decision to prosecute, and presentation of evidence, or on matters of trial procedure, competency of courts, and passing of judgments.

The implication of Tin Htay's case and thousands of others like it is not merely that Burma's criminal justice system is rotten. Rather, it is that Burma has no justice system at all. The existence of a justice system, in the true sense, cannot be inferred from the existence of a person wearing a uniform with the powers of arrest or a building called a court. A justice system derives from the extent to which that person in uniform acts with integrity and in accordance with a higher set of standards, and the building stands with authority, independently from others. It derives from the confidence invested in the system by the public, and confidence of the judiciary in itself.

There are important lessons in this for persons working to effect change in Burma. One is that simple descriptive reports have little merit. Nobody of any credibility seriously denies that there is widespread and flagrant abuse of human rights there. But the mountains of reports about that abuse have contributed little to our understanding of the country's real problems. International experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, have a special obligation to develop cogent arguments on the links between institutional defects and rights violations, and what must be done to address these.

Critiques of the country's legal system that privilege political detainees and emphasize draconian security laws also miss the point. The answers to questions about Burma's human rights problems are not to be

found with them. Rather, they are to be found in the stories of ordinary victims of dysfunctional criminal process and the commonplace operation of a penal code that already grants extensive powers to abusive government officials. They are to be found in the stories of illicit wedding videos and complaining farmers; in the systemic injustice described felt daily by millions.

“To use the trappings of judicial form where the essential conditions for a judicial decision are absent,” Friedrich Hayek has written, “Can have no effect but to destroy the respect for them...” Well may we say how true this is of Burma today; it remains for us to understand what it really means, and what must be done about it.

A duck, six prisoners and human rights in Burma

Six men in Burma have been jailed on account of a duck. Anyone wanting to appreciate the real nature of human rights abuses there, and also why years of international efforts have so far failed to effect any significant change, should take interest in how and why.

In April 2007, a crowd suddenly attacked four persons travelling through a village in the delta on motorcycles, injuring two, one seriously. The latter, Ko Myint Naing, made a complaint to the local court that village council members, police and quasi-government officials had coordinated the assault. The reason? He and his friends had been talking about human rights.

It is important to realize that even under Burma’s authoritarian regime it is not illegal to promote human rights. On the contrary, officials have in the past themselves been schooled on them by Australians. They sometimes even get a mention in official propaganda.

The country also has been a party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from the beginning and in recent years has joined two important agreements on women and children. Myint Naing and the others were merely distributing copies of these and related domestic laws and informing villagers of their contents.

The assault attracted some passing concern. A spokesperson for a big human rights group said that the government “should order its thugs to stop harassing people for promoting human rights”. Two United Nations experts called for the authorities “to take all the necessary steps to protect human rights defenders” and “conduct an independent and thorough investigation into this event”.

Unsurprisingly, none of these things happened. Instead, gang attacks continued and Myint Naing and five local farmers with whom he had cooperated were themselves accused of upsetting public tranquillity, thanks in part to the duck, which in January a teenager and his friends were accused of stealing from the local council chairman. When they failed to pay the full recompense demanded, council members allegedly assaulted him and took him to the police. Myint Naing, who knew the boy, tried to help him out. Another time, he came to assist someone accused of causing a bicycle accident with a schoolteacher.

While a stolen duck and bicycle collision are unlikely to threaten the state — even one as paranoid and introverted as that in Burma — they were sufficient cause for Myint Naing to be rebuked in the press and jailed for eight years under a regulation once written by the British to suppress anti-colonial dissent; the farmers received four years each. Their families are struggling to survive without them.

Again the sentence attracted fleeting media interest and ritual censure from abroad. But the six are still in jail and no one has gone beyond shallow reporting and criticism to glean the full facts and what they signify about human rights abuse in Burma.

This is one reason that outside approaches to human rights problems there have been wanting. Take the UN experts’ response to this case.

On the one hand, it elevated the attack victims to a category worthy of comment, as human rights defenders. Had they been assailed over a personal dispute, they would not have obtained outside interest. Had they been one of any number of persons whom police and local officials in Burma routinely assault and kill for trivial reasons they also would not have received so much notice. The young man who was beaten up because of the duck — and against whom charges are pending — remains of no particular interest.

On the other hand, having accorded the victims a special status, the United Nations did nothing useful for them. The two experts called for the relevant authorities to conduct an independent and thorough investigation into the attack. Which relevant authorities? If pressed, would the experts be able to identify any? And if not, what is the point of demanding action by imaginary persons and agencies? What benefit is there in pretending that something exists where there is in fact nothing?

Thus, not only do concerned outside groups and individuals fail to intervene effectively on behalf of individual victims, they also fail to enrich the impoverished dialogue on human rights in Burma through some

thoughtful analysis or new insight, or even by telling the truth: that there is no one in Burma who can make an independent inquiry about anything.

Here is the challenge for work on human rights not only in Burma but also throughout Asia.

Well-meaning international monitors approach and critique specific incidents in terms of global norms — as they must — but fail to bridge the gap between those norms and local realities through detailed studies of how and why something has actually occurred. The gap is easily identified, but little attempt is made to understand what it really means and what can be done about it. What follows instead is the pretence that there exist relevant authorities who must somehow bridge it themselves, when neither they, nor the will, exist to make it so.

Both the abuse and defense of human rights can be understood only through frank and detailed assessments of what is actually going on, rather than what is supposed to be so. To comprehend violence against human rights defenders in Burma today, it is necessary to start with the blows upon a teenager accused of stealing a village chairman's duck, rather than abstract notions of relevant authorities found only in the offices of Geneva.

The rights of the six jailed men are only as good as his, and their fates are inextricably tied. If the boy can't be helped, then what hope do they have? If his problems can't be gauged and addressed, then how can theirs?

Why can't the UN crime office find crime?

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is having trouble finding violent crime in Burma. This is strange, given its mandate; stranger still given that police and local officials assault and kill people there with impunity, and often over the most trivial things.

In March 2007 local council officials beat a man in suburban Rangoon to death for having a row with his wife. Naing Oo was picked up after an in-laws complaint, brutally assaulted and dumped in the council office for the night. The next morning when his brother saw the mauled body and asked what had happened, he was told that the young man had "caught a cold". The authorities worked fast to cover up his death.

Similar reports of senseless killings by security officers are commonplace. In January, a man in the delta region was taken from his house after eloping with his new wife. The police, apparently again acting as a favour to the woman's family, took him on the pretext that he hadn't registered on the overnight visitor list. When relatives found his bloodied corpse in a local hospital the next day they were told that the cause of death was malaria; they have since been intimidated and silenced.

Last year municipal officers in a city marketplace killed a young man after a dispute over where he had urinated. When his mother persisted in making complaints, some trishaw drivers were charged instead of the real perpetrators. Elsewhere, a young lady died in police custody after being casually stopped on her way home from shopping. Police also beat a washerwoman to within an inch of her life after a client accused her of petty theft. This is a handful of the total number of incidents. What they reveal is not a society where the "stability of the state" prevails, as trumpeted by its military government, but where random violence and criminality are the norm, and where institutions hang on the verge of barbarism.

Why doesn't the UNODC seem to know anything about this? The profile on its Web site describes Burma as a country where "there is very little violent crime: not even anecdotal reports of murders, rapes or kidnappings". Crime, it concludes, just "does not appear to be a major concern among the population". How did the profile's authors reach this remarkable conclusion? They don't say. Nor do they seem to consider it a matter of any importance. After all, they are not in Burma for crime; they're there for the drugs.

Does it make any difference to the UNODC that police and local council officials are beating people to death in Burma? The short answer is that it does, because its credibility depends upon realistic and candid assessments of what's going on beyond the doors of its office. The fact that it is in denial about crime, or that it does not seem to rate it as worthy of serious attention, suggests a much deeper denial that undermines everything it does and represents.

The agency talks in its documents about the need for improved "law enforcement". To achieve this it cooperates with police and army personnel, and civil servants. This cooperation presumes the existence of "law enforcement" officers. But what if the presumption is wrong? What if such persons don't exist?...

What exists in Burma is a system of order enforcement, not a system of law enforcement. Where order alone is enforced, it is both normal and necessary for people to be routinely tortured and killed by state officers. Where law is enforced, such incidents will be relatively few and contrary to the interests of the system itself.

The challenge for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime is not just admitting that violent crime is prevalent in Burma, but that its root cause is the system of order enforcement. The challenge is to acknowledge that there are no law enforcers with whom to cooperate. This is not to say that cooperation is out of the question, but it cannot begin from the same presumptions that may apply elsewhere.

The United Nations' capacity to work effectively and speak with authority depends upon clarity of thought, word and deed, not denial, obfuscation and disarray. If it is unable to see and speak clearly about the obstacles to the rule of law and human rights in a country then it should get out. At the very least it should not publish and distribute documents that completely misrepresent reality and insult the intelligence of every man, woman and child there who knows better...

Almost two decades of diplomatic niceties, advice from overpaid specialists, training by well-meaning constitutional experts and toying with substitute charters have failed to bring any meaningful change in Burma.

By now, scholars and funding agencies alike should have learned to stay away from constitutional pipe dreams and stick to reality instead. They should contribute by learning about what is actually going on in the country and get involved in relevant work and discussions on the lives of the majority of people there, rather than theorizing.

United Nations experts and diplomats should have learned that if they intend to go head-to-head with the regime, then they must first understand the intricacies of structural obstacles to meaningful reforms in Burma, rather than engaging in simplistic political debates and making piecemeal humanitarian gestures. Otherwise, another decade will pass and the country will still be in much the same spot as it is now. The military will thus have achieved its objective while everyone else will have wasted their time.

Pointless predictions about a haphazard state

The latest one-year extension to the house arrest of Burma's democracy icon Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in May 2007 brought with it the usual speculation about the country's future and the thinking of its military rulers. What will be their next steps? Are they going to abandon any pretence at reform? Will there be a renewed clampdown on opponents? What's happening to the constitution drafting convention?

Conjecture on these and other questions, such as those about Burma's strategic position and its presumed nuclear aspirations, serves little purpose because no one actually has any answers. For years, presumed experts, diplomats and exiled political leaders have excelled at making wrong forecasts about Burma...

Anyone wanting to gain insight about Burma's future might as well spin a bottle as ask an expert. But why is it so difficult to get right? The reason is not just that the regime and its institutions are relatively inaccessible to outsiders; it is that they are completely haphazard. What is true one day is not true the next. What goes on one occasion does not go on another.

Although the current leadership does not openly change monetary policy or traffic rules on the whims of astrologers, as Ne Win did, the behaviour of the government and its agencies owes much more to habits ingrained during his decades in power than to any policy or directive since. Arbitrariness is not just a feature of administration in Burma; it is its defining characteristic.

Persons imputing some form of rational behaviour to statecraft find this difficult to understand. Conventional political theories struggle where there is no discernible pattern to authoritarianism, apart from the imperative to remain in charge. It is relatively easy for people from established democracies to think of dictatorship as highly-organized; Orwellian, totalitarian. It is much harder to think of it as being as confused as it is controlled, as it is in Burma today.

There is no way of knowing what's going to happen next in Burma, because there are no reasonable grounds upon which to sort facts from fiction and anticipate the future with any degree of certainty.

Instead of engaging in pointless guesswork about what might be, persons concerned about the country would do much better to confine themselves to what is: the appalling conditions in which millions of ordinary people are forced to subsist from day to day; broken-down schools and hospitals; a system of policing and local administration that operates with complete impunity; courts that have long since ceased to function as anything other than an arm of the executive. Useful contributions about Burma should be distinguished and acknowledged for persistent detailed study of the obvious, rather than meaningless speculation about the unknowable.

The inanity of dictatorship

A group of schoolchildren in Burma were recently given a lesson on the inanity of their government and its officialdom. According to a report by the Thailand-based Yoma 3 news group, representatives of the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association came on 6 June 2007 to distribute free books to students at a

middle school in Shwepyithar, an industrial area among Rangoon's outskirts. They posed for photographs on the school grounds with the chairman of the local council, the books and the children.

When done, they took the books back and left the children with nothing.

This little event speaks volumes about how dictatorship debilitates society.

Whereas all ceremony is in part about something being seen to be done, it is in most places also about something actually being done: the awarding of a prize, the giving of a donation, the opening of an edifice. But in Burma, whether or not something is actually done has long since ceased to be of primary importance.

What matters above all is the affirmation that it has been done, through endless public performances choreographed to demonstrate the benevolence of the state and wisdom of its agents, irrespective of reality.

Official observances are important to autocrats because they put everyone else in his or her correct place.

In Burma, teachers, students, parents and members of the public are co-opted to witness and applaud the largesse of their self-appointed leaders. They are reduced to the role of silent passengers on endless bureaucratic voyages. Whether at a ceremony to hand out books that are never actually given, to open a hospital that has no doctors or drugs, or to discuss a chapter of a constitution that is never actually finished, the respective roles of all participants are predetermined and unchanging.

In a 1990 performance recorded on video that can be viewed via You Tube, Burma's most famous comedian makes a mockery of these public rituals. Waves of laughter roll across the stage as Zarganar and his troupe hold their "Beggars' Convention". A man in rags formally announces the arrival of The Chairman to others squatting on the floor amid filth and bandages. Zarganar approaches regally and tugs at his national headgear, only to find a bit fall off.

He opens his mouth to speak and even before the first sentence is finished the assembled delegates chorus agreement.

This biting ridicule earned Zarganar four years in jail. Although continuing to joke, he has since been subjected to frequent bans and has been forced to be more circumspect in what and how he satirizes.

The tragedy of Burma is that it is a country full of brilliant and creative people, none of whom are welcome to contribute anything to the state. As in all dictatorships, it is the dull and mediocre who get ahead. Cardboard-cutout army officers parade nightly around the television news, followed by their untalented children performing bad MTV covers and selling toothpaste. Scholars and writers of dubious credentials are feted with literary awards while the greats of the 20th century fade one by one into the distance.

Artists unwilling to compromise their integrity produce obscure works of hidden significance, beyond the comprehension of both the censors and the general public. And as for students, those who succeed are certainly not the ones waiting in vain for a free book: while in most countries money and privilege count in getting an education, in Burma these days they count far more than in most.

Dictatorship is bad not just because it permits abuses and perverts institutions, but because it wilfully denies talent and saps enthusiasm. It obliges people to be champions of their own debasement. While a few openly resist, most unwillingly go along until it looks safe to do something else. Whatever else happens, the struggle for change in Burma will have to overcome the accumulated suspicions of these millions who have repeatedly had things put in front of them only to have them cruelly snatched away again.

▪ **Be a new man - like Fidel, Brazilian Dominican advises**

14/6/07; <http://www.cathnews.com/news/706/71.php>;

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=9612>; Brazilian religious praises Castro and Al Qaeda mentor, acknowledged past guerrilla involvement (Catholic News, 13/6/07)

In a wide ranging interview, Brazilian Dominican liberation theologian, Frei Betto, has slammed "vaticanisation" of the Church and held up Cuban strongman, Fidel Castro, as a model of the revolutionary "new man".

In the interview with the Fray Tito News Agency for Latin America, Dominican Alberto Libanio Christo, known as "Friar Betto", expressed his admiration for Fidel Castro and for the "father" of urban terrorism, Carlos Marighella.

He also revealed his enthusiasm for the time he spent with Marxist guerrillas during Brazil's military government, Catholics News reports.

▪ **Why do I have to go to church?**

http://www.catholica.com.au/ianstake/056_it_print.php

Finding "communion with God" in the mountains...

Tom McMahon 24/10/07; a former priest now married, lives a very fulfilled life in San Jose and continues to contribute voraciously to several Catholic discussion lists in the States. See; http://www.catholica.com.au/gc1/tm/008_tm_191007.php

▪ **Sins of Commission - Torture/USA - The Bush administration's "license to torture."**

Paul Magno is coordinator of the Campaign to Repeal the Torture Law, a project of Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC International) in Washington, D.C. Sojourners; - 10/07, <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.home>

In 2006, the Supreme Court struck down the military commissions that President Bush had set up to try Guantanamo prisoners, ruling that they were not authorized by federal law and that they violated the Geneva Conventions.

A few months after the high court's ruling, a compliant Congress passed, and Bush signed, the Military Commissions Act (MCA), seeking to provide the legal backing for the commissions and ignoring an obvious alternative: trial in federal criminal court of those who actually have been charged with a crime. Despite the questions about the MCA that continue to crop up in both the federal and military legal systems, the administration has stuck by the act, which is breathtaking in the depth of its departure from the due process supposedly assured by the U.S. Constitution. At this point, the act is aimed at those outside the U.S., but there's no guarantee that the rights of U.S. citizens won't follow.

BAGHDAD BURNING - BLOGGERS WITHOUT BORDERS...

... I'LL MEET YOU 'ROUND THE BEND MY FRIEND, WHERE HEARTS CAN HEAL AND SOULS CAN MEND...

MONDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2007; [HTTP://RIVERBENDBLOG.BLOGSPOT.COM/](http://RIVERBENDBLOG.BLOGSPOT.COM/)

Syria is a beautiful country - at least I think it is. I say "I think" because while I perceive it to be beautiful, I sometimes wonder if I mistake safety, security and normalcy for 'beauty'. In so many ways, Damascus is like Baghdad before the war - bustling streets, occasional traffic jams, markets seemingly always full of shoppers... And in so many ways it's different. The buildings are higher, the streets are generally narrower and there's a mountain, Qasiyoun, that looms in the distance.

The mountain distracts me, as it does many Iraqis- especially those from Baghdad. Northern Iraq is full of mountains, but the rest of Iraq is quite flat. At night, Qasiyoun blends into the black sky and the only indication of its presence is a multitude of little, glimmering spots of light - houses and restaurants built right up there on the mountain. Every time I take a picture, I try to work Qasiyoun into it - I try to position the person so that Qasiyoun is in the background.

The first weeks here were something of a cultural shock. It has taken me these last three months to work away certain habits I'd acquired in Iraq after the war. It's funny how you learn to act a certain way and don't even know you're doing strange things- like avoiding people's eyes in the street or crazily murmuring prayers to yourself when stuck in traffic. It took me at least three weeks to teach myself to walk properly again- with head lifted, not constantly looking behind me.

It is estimated that there are at least 1.5 million Iraqis in Syria today. I believe it. Walking down the streets of Damascus, you can hear the Iraqi accent everywhere. There are areas like Geramana and Qudsiya that are packed full of Iraqi refugees. Syrians are few and far between in these areas. Even the public schools in the areas are full of Iraqi children. A cousin of mine is now attending a school in Qudsiya and his class is composed of 26 Iraqi children, and 5 Syrian children. It's beyond belief sometimes. Most of the families have nothing to live on beyond their savings which are quickly being depleted with rent and the costs of living.

Within a month of our being here, we began hearing talk about Syria requiring visas from Iraqis, like most other countries. Apparently, our esteemed puppets in power met with Syrian and Jordanian authorities and decided they wanted to take away the last two safe havens remaining for Iraqis- Damascus and Amman. The talk began in late August and was only talk until recently- early October. Iraqis entering Syria now need a visa from the Syrian consulate or embassy in the country they are currently in. In the case of Iraqis still in Iraq, it is said that an approval from the Ministry of Interior is also required (which kind of makes it difficult for people running away from militias OF the Ministry of Interior...). Today, there's talk of a possible fifty dollar visa at the border.

Iraqis who entered Syria before the visa was implemented were getting a one month visitation visa at the border. As soon as that month was over, you could take your passport and visit the local immigration bureau. If you were lucky, they would give you an additional month or two. When talk about visas from the Syrian embassy began, they stopped giving an extension on the initial border visa. We, as a family, had a brilliant idea. Before the commotion of visas began, and before we started needing a renewal, we decided to go to one of the border crossings, cross into Iraq, and come back into Syria - everyone was doing it. It would buy us some time- at least 2 months.

We chose a hot day in early September and drove the six hours to Kameshli, a border town in northern Syria. My aunt and her son came with us- they also needed an extension on their visa. There is a border crossing in Kameshli called Yaarubiya. It's one of the simpler crossings because the Iraqi and Syrian borders are only a matter of several meters. You walk out of Syrian territory and then walk into Iraqi territory- simple and safe.

When we got to the Yaarubiya border patrol, it hit us that thousands of Iraqis had had our brilliant idea simultaneously- the lines to the border patrol office were endless. Hundreds of Iraqis stood in a long line waiting to have their passports stamped with an exit visa. We joined the line of people and waited. And waited. And waited...

It took four hours to leave the Syrian border after which came the lines of the Iraqi border post. Those were even longer. We joined one of the lines of weary, impatient Iraqis. "It's looking like a gasoline line..." My younger cousin joked. That was the beginning of another four hours of waiting under the sun, taking baby steps, moving forward ever so slowly. The line kept getting longer.

At one point, we could see neither the beginning of the line, where passports were being stamped to enter Iraq, nor the end. Running up and down the line were little boys selling glasses of water, chewing gum and cigarettes. My aunt caught one of them by the arm as he zipped past us, "How many people are in front of us?" He whistled and took a few steps back to assess the situation, "A hundred! A thousand!". He was almost gleeful as he ran off to make business.

I had such mixed feelings standing in that line. I was caught between a feeling of yearning, a certain homesickness that sometimes catches me at the oddest moments, and a heavy feeling of dread. What if they didn't agree to let us out again? It wasn't really possible, but what if it happened? What if this was the last time I'd see the Iraqi border? What if we were no longer allowed to enter Iraq for some reason? What if we were never allowed to leave?

We spent the four hours standing, crouching, sitting and leaning in the line. The sun beat down on everyone equally- Sunnis, Shia and Kurds alike. E. tried to convince the aunt to faint so it would speed the process up for the family, but she just gave us a withering look and stood straighter. People just stood there, chatting, cursing or silent. It was yet another gathering of Iraqis - the perfect opportunity to swap sad stories and ask about distant relations or acquaintances.

We met two families we knew while waiting for our turn. We greeted each other like long lost friends and exchanged phone numbers and addresses in Damascus, promising to visit. I noticed the 23-year-old son, K., from one of the families was missing. I beat down my curiosity and refused to ask where he was. The mother was looking older than I remembered and the father looked constantly lost in thought, or maybe it was grief. I didn't want to know if K. was dead or alive. I'd just have to believe he was alive and thriving somewhere, not worrying about borders or visas. Ignorance really is bliss sometimes...

Back at the Syrian border, we waited in a large group, tired and hungry, having handed over our passports for a stamp. The Syrian immigration man sifting through dozens of passports called out names and looked at faces as he handed over the passports patiently, "Stand back please - stand back". There was a general cry towards the back of the crowded hall where we were standing as someone collapsed - as they lifted him I recognized an old man who was there with his family being chaperoned by his sons, leaning on a walking stick.

By the time we had re-entered the Syrian border and were headed back to the cab ready to take us into Kameshli, I had resigned myself to the fact that we were refugees. I read about refugees on the Internet daily... in the newspapers... hear about them on TV. I hear about the estimated 1.5 million plus Iraqi refugees in Syria and shake my head, never really considering myself or my family as one of them.

After all, refugees are people who sleep in tents and have no potable water or plumbing, right? Refugees carry their belongings in bags instead of suitcases and they don't have cell phones or Internet access, right? Grasping my passport in my hand like my life depended on it, with two extra months in Syria stamped inside, it hit me how wrong I was. We were all refugees. I was suddenly a number. No matter how wealthy or educated or

comfortable, a refugee is a refugee. A refugee is someone who isn't really welcome in any country - including their own... especially their own.

We live in an apartment building where two other Iraqis are renting. The people in the floor above us are a Christian family from northern Iraq who got chased out of their village by Peshmerga and the family on our floor is a Kurdish family who lost their home in Baghdad to militias and were waiting for immigration to Sweden or Switzerland or some such European refugee haven.

The first evening we arrived, exhausted, dragging suitcases behind us, morale a little bit bruised, the Kurdish family sent over their representative – a 9 year old boy missing two front teeth, holding a lopsided cake, “We’re Abu Mohammed’s house- across from you- mama says if you need anything, just ask- this is our number. Abu Dalia’s family live upstairs, this is their number. We’re all Iraqi too... Welcome to the building.”

I cried that night because for the first time in a long time, so far away from home, I felt the unity that had been stolen from us in 2003.

USA - MERCENARIES

▪ Guns for hire

Rohan Pearce; 11/5/07

See: <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2005/626/34765>

See; <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/guns-for-hire/2007/10/10/1191695989149.html>

The post-9/11 rehabilitation of thinly veiled imperialist militarism, in the guise of the “war on terror”, has been a massive windfall for “private military companies” (PMCs) — the preferred euphemism of the modern mercenary company. The Pentagon's military programs have long been a vital source of profits for an important section of US capitalist ruling class. In return, defence contractors sponsor the election campaigns of warmongering politicians — to the tune of US\$16,098,091 in the 2004 election cycle, according to the Centre for Responsive Politics.

PENTAGON PRIVATEERS

Nicolas Rothwell 3/11/07;The Australian; No Internet Text; Was The Australian's Middle East Correspondent in 2004-05.

Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army; Jeremy Scahill; Serpent's Tail

Crew-cut, goatee-bearded, their eyes veiled by dark wraparound glasses, their sub-machineguns at the ready, the men of Blackwater made a bad impression on the bleak, terrifying streets of Baghdad: "Back up, sir, or I will shoot: authorised to use deadly force." Correspondents in the Iraqi capital, during the halcyon days when free circulation was still possible, quickly learned the private security contractors working for the Pentagon were a much more immediate threat than Arab terrorists.

A multitude of these bizarre formations, more gangs than paramilitary teams, rode shotgun as security for supply convoys or policed the Western residential compounds.

Their men wore T-shirts with urgent slogans: "Death Kill Motherf . . ker", or "Remember 9/11", though for sheer menace it was hard to go past Blackwater's trademark bear's claw in the crosshairs.

They were unpredictable and over-armed, and seemed like extras who had drifted off the set of some Roger Corman Hell's Angels movie. Perhaps the most bizarre of these outfits was DynCorp, whose leather-clad members favoured a private, Gurkha-guarded leisure club on the top floor of the Sheraton Ishtar; but the firm that dominated the headlines was always Blackwater, a billion-dollar private empire controlled by Erik Prince, a right-wing Christian.

The crowd killing of four Blackwater men in Fallujah in 2004 and the mutilation of their bodies unleashed the most devastating phase of the American campaign to pacify the Sunni heartland; this September's fire-fight in Baghdad, which saw Blackwater guards kill 17 Iraqis and wound 24 others, has sparked a new crisis in relations between Washington and the Iraqi Government. There are now about 160,000 private security contractors working in Iraq, a larger number than the total force of US soldiers in the country. This is an extraordinary, and largely unexamined, phenomenon.

Radical journalist Jeremy Scahill's exhaustive Blackwater appears with perfect timing. His account of Blackwater's rise and the company's tentacular associations is a product of the American independent reporting sector, a vast, sleuthing, idealistic realm of journalistic endeavour that operates alongside the established daily and weekly publications and the television networks. Blackwater displays both the great strengths and the

besetting weaknesses of this rich current of investigative journalism: it is relentless in its chasing down of links and leads; it is somewhat conspiracy-minded, and presents suggestive associations as telling pointers to concealed truth.

Thus, Blackwater personnel seem to have been present at airports that served as bases for the CIA's rendition flights: transfer missions taking terrorist suspects to compliant foreign countries for interrogation beyond the protective bounds of US law. This leads Scahill to tiptoe towards, yet pull back from, the idea of a connection between the company's aviation arm and the covert renditions program. Blackwater's publicity-shunning executives, unsurprisingly, refused to co-operate with Scahill, so his research forms an unanswered case for the prosecution.

The world he opens up is surreal in the extreme. Blackwater's headquarters is a 2800ha spread located in a peat bog at Moyock, North Carolina, developed as a military training compound by Prince, a former navy special forces member whose Republican connections are detailed extensively. We encounter the innovative products tried out by Blackwater teams in Iraq, including the armour-piercing limited penetration round, which shatters on contact with the human body, creating untreatable wounds.

We hear of the Killology Research Group and encounter J. Cofer Black, the State Department's counterterrorism chief, who led the hunt for Osama bin Laden before joining Blackwater as vice-president. Even this high-profile hiring pales besides that of chief operating officer Joseph Schmitz, a former Pentagon inspector general obsessed by sex trafficking and moral relativism, and devoted to hero worship of a Prussian veteran of the American War of Independence, General Friedrich von Steuben.

So far, so diverting. Scahill, though, has an argument to advance, and he fleshes it out through precise descriptions of Blackwater's involvement in Iraq and the wider Middle Eastern theatre. He provides persuasive evidence that Blackwater teams were commanding US Marines during the bloody assault on the Iraqi Shia shrine of Najaf in April 2004; he traces the company's activities in the Caspian Sea oil province and in Afghanistan, and its penchant for recruiting unsavoury Chilean mercenaries.

The cat's cradle of ties between the company and the US administration had become so extensive by mid-2004 that Blackwater received the lion's share of the State Department's worldwide personal protective service contract, which has already been worth more than \$US330 million (\$367 million).

There is an elegance to this systematic outsourcing. Each party benefits on some level from the implicit deal. The Pentagon gains a supply of extra men on the cheap; they operate without oversight and with wide immunity from prosecution; they give their lives freely and fill a particularly unpleasant niche in the eco-system of modern war. Blackwater enriches and entrenches itself, and expands its role as America's unofficial praetorian guard in the war on terror.

Scahill unfolds a series of critiques. He contends Blackwater gives its contractors insufficient protection, although those contractors are doubtless attracted to their employer precisely because it offers high pay for high-risk work. More seriously, he believes the company is not cost-competitive and has a covert ideological agenda that's shared by fringe elements in the White House. Dwight Eisenhower warned decades ago against the emergence of a military-industrial complex. Scahill sees in the rise of Blackwater the fulfilment of that dark prophecy:

What is particularly disturbing is the issue of the company's right-wing leadership, its proximity to a whole slew of conservative causes and politicians, its Christian fundamentalist agenda and secretive nature, and its deep and long-standing ties to the Republican Party, US military, and intelligence agencies. Blackwater is quickly becoming one of the most powerful private armies in the world and several of its top officials are extreme religious zealots, some of whom appear to believe they are engaged in an epic battle for the defence of Christendom.

On the ground, deployed in the war zones of the Middle East, this messianic strain seems more often blended with a rather grainier consciousness of the dirt of urban warfare. I well remember seeing a Blackwater team at Baghdad airport waiting for a transport plane. One of them, blond and muscular, had a tattoo on his biceps: "Everybody's going to Heaven," it read, "Because already we've all been to Hell."

▪ **Arms makers winning war on terrorism - USA**

Frank Walker; 4/1/07; See: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/arms-makers-winning-war-on-terrorism/2007/11/03/1193619200266.html>

Arms manufacturers are making record profits from the war on terrorism and unprecedented spending on weapons programs. The massive earnings have drawn condemnation from Australian defence experts, who say expensive weapons such as jet fighters, warships and satellites are not the way to combat terrorism. The world's biggest arms maker, Lockheed Martin in the US, maker of fighter jets including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which Australia is buying, announced last week it had increased third-quarter profits by 22 per cent to \$US11.1 billion (\$12.1 billion).

▪ **Terror must be fought within the law**

Editorial; 14/11/07; See: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/editorial/terror-must-be-fought-within-the-law/2007/11/13/1194766674415.html>

The safety and security of the Australian public is rightly of major concern to the Australian Government, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, and the Bali bombings of October 2002. To protect the community against terrorist acts, intelligence agencies such as ASIO have been given increased powers. What is to be hoped is that such powers are exercised responsibly and within the boundaries set by the law, as anything other than that can threaten the liberty and rights of individuals facing prosecution. But any such expectations have been dashed by the collapse this week in the NSW Supreme Court of ASIO's case against Sydney medical student and erstwhile jihadi Izhar-ul-Haque.

▪ **Iraq war cost put at \$1.7 trillion - Iraq/Terrorism/Morality**

Josh White; 14/11/07; See: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/iraq-war-cost-put-at-17-trillion/2007/11/13/1194766675019.html>

The cost to the United States of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is about \$US1.5 trillion (\$A1.69 trillion), according to a study by congressional Democrats. The study estimates the wars' hidden costs such as higher oil prices, the expense of treating the wounded and interest payments on money borrowed to pay for them. This is almost double the \$US804 billion the White House has spent or requested for the wars, says the Democratic staff of Congress' Joint Economic Committee. The study, *The Hidden Costs of the Iraq War*, estimates the wars have cost the average American family of four more than \$US20,000.

▪ **'Charge suspects to test terror laws'**

Sally Neighbour; 13/11/07; See:

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22748933-5013404,00.html>

A senior counter-terrorism officer with the Australian Federal Police has testified that police were directed to charge "as many suspects as possible" with terrorism offences in order to test the new anti-terrorism laws introduced in 2003. The admission was made by federal agent Kemuel Lam Paktsun, the senior case officer on the Operation Newport investigation that led to the arrest of Sydney medical student Izhar Ul-Haque, whose trial was sensationally dismissed in the NSW Supreme Court yesterday. Mr Lam Paktsun's startling testimony came during a pre-trial hearing on October 24 that has not previously been reported, when he was questioned about the circumstances of Mr Ul-Haque's arrest in April 2004. "At the time, we were directed, we were informed, to lay as many charges under the new terrorist legislation against as many suspects as possible because we wanted to use the new legislation," he testified.

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