

ALTSEAN

BURMA

ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA
campaigns, advocacy & capacity-building for human rights & democracy

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WAITING TO EXPLODE?

- **Three bombs detonated in central Rangoon on 7 May 2005. The bombs detonated 5 minutes apart, in three locations: Dagon Center City Mart, Junction 8 City Mart, and the Yangon Convention Centre, where a Thai trade fair was being held.**
- **Senior officials in neighboring Thailand put the death toll at 12 – all Burmese nationals.¹ Official SPDC figures put the death toll at 11, with 162 wounded.² Others say at least 21 were killed, but hospital workers had been “gagged” from revealing actual figures.³ Four Malaysians and a South Korean were amongst the injured, prompting travel warnings.**
- **The SPDC has been accused of having had foreknowledge of the bombings, but only organizing protection of military buildings. Hospital staff were told in advance not to take leave during that weekend.**
- **The bombings have been commonly assumed to be an “inside job” to justify increased military actions against dissident groups, or as an expression of tensions between Vice-Sr Gen Maung Aye and “young guns” aligned with Sr Gen Than Shwe.⁴**
- **The reshuffle of half of the country’s regional commanders and the recall of many Burmese ambassadors, reported 2 weeks after the bombings, heighten speculation about the internal integrity of the regime post-Khin Nyunt ouster.⁵**
- **The SPDC said traces of RDX explosive, were found at the bombsites. They said RDX is not available in Burma and is utilized by “the armies in big nations,” and that the bombs could only be handled by “well-trained bombers”.⁶**
- **This is untrue: RDX is a relatively cheap explosive used in a range of civilian and military applications. It is also exported by NORINCO, a Chinese company with close ties to the SPDC.⁷ The SPDC has used RDX in landmines against ethnic groups.⁸**
- **Some economic effects were noted post-bombings, including a small drop in the value of the kyat, and the postponement of a Thai trade exhibition.**
- **Meanwhile, analysts have speculated that the bombings may provide a security-related excuse for ASEAN and the regime itself to defer Burma’s chairmanship in 2006.⁹**

1 AFP (9 May 05) Deadly bomb blasts in Myanmar reflect split in military: dissidents

2 Xinhua (15 May 05) Myanmar charges superpower with being behind bomb attacks

3 AFP (9 May 05) News blackout on Myanmar bomb victims, official toll seen as too low

4 Bangkok Post (13 May 05) Only junta has capacity for such careful planning

5 AP (29 May 05) Shake-up in Burmese Command & DVB (19 May 05) All change: Burma reshuffles officers again

6 Xinhua (15 May 05) Myanmar charges superpower with being behind bomb attacks & Financial Times (May 17 05) Burma accuses foreigners of bomb attacks

7 Jane’s Intelligence Review (Feb 1994) China’s Arms Trade Bureaucracy

8 Andrew Selth (2000) Landmines in Burma: The Military Dimension available at

<http://www.burmaproject.org/burmadebate/winter00landmines.html>

9 Jakarta Post (1 Jun 05) An ASEAN Deal for Myanmar & Bangkok Post (13 May 05) Only junta has capacity for such careful planning

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

"What is clear is that there is political instability and if not properly handled, the violence is going to continue." ~ Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar¹⁰

The bombings in Rangoon didn't only injure Burmese nationals. Four Malaysians were injured in the blast, one of whom was still in Rangoon¹¹. A South Korean woman was also injured in the bombings.¹²

Malaysia, South Korea and the US have issued travel warnings against visiting Burma.

The bombings provide a "back door" for either ASEAN or Burma to use security concerns as an excuse to defer Burma's chairmanship in 2006.¹³

It is important to note that one bombing target was a Convention Center that was being renovated for prospective ASEAN meetings in 2006. The detonation of sophisticated bombs in downtown Rangoon undermines confidence in the capacity of the regime to provide security for large, international events.

WHO DID IT?

"According to the junta, CIA operatives based in Thailand trained dissidents to plant bombs in Rangoon. Who on earth is going to believe that?" ~ Aung Zaw, The Irrawaddy

The SPDC has blamed:

- The Karen National Union (KNU);
- The Karenni Nationalities Progressive Party (KNPP);
- The Shan State Army (South) (SSA-S);
- The National Coalition for the Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB);
- The CIA;
- The All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF);
- The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB);
- A journalist.

DESPERATE ALLEGATIONS

Initial blame went to the KNU; the KNPP; the SSA-S and the NCGUB, who had committed the "brutal acts in collusion."¹⁴

The SPDC later went out on a limb with its most recent allegations over who was responsible. In a press briefing on 15 May, Information Minister Brig Gen Kyaw Hsan alleged that the bombers were trained in a "neighboring country by an internationally known organization of a superpower country."¹⁵ He was likely referring to the CIA.

He said the SPDC had received "information" the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) and other Thai-based anti-government groups had received training since December 2004. Casting the net as wide as possible, he also alleged that the "foreign organization" had provided US\$100,000 to the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) to finance sending 10 "saboteurs" inside Burma.¹⁶ The bombers were among a

10 AFP (10 May 05) Don't go to Burma for now: Syed Hamid

11 AFP (10 May 05) Don't go to Burma for now: Syed Hamid

12 Irrawaddy (10 May 05) Bomb scare at sports stadium increases fear in Rangoon

13 Jakarta Post (1 Jun 05) An ASEAN Deal for Myanmar & Bangkok Post (13 May 05) Only junta has capacity for such careful planning

14 Irrawaddy (13 May 05) Who could be behind Rangoon bomb attacks?

15 AP (15 May 05) Myanmar junta blames bomb attacks on foreign-trained terrorists

16 AP (15 May 05) Myanmar junta blames bomb attacks on foreign-trained terrorists

group of 20 people trained by three foreigners, including a journalist, near the Thai border at an ethnic Karen rebel camp called Zala, the minister said.¹⁷

Loyalty meant nothing to the SPDC as the generals even included Thailand in the list of suspects that assisted the bombers. "RDX is found in a neighboring country," said Brig Gen Kyaw Hsan in his statement on 15 May, referring to Thailand.¹⁸ This wasn't received well with SPDC-loyal Thai PM Thaksin Shinawatra, who said Rangoon was perfectly capable of using diplomatic channels to express their concerns, but had failed to do so: "Myanmar has not asked anything of the Thai government," he said. "If there is suspicion, then tell us. We are ready to cooperate."¹⁹

RESPONSES

After the SPDC's absurd allegations, rational responses are of great value:

NCGUB: "The NCGUB...harshly condemns the ruling Burmese generals for exploiting such situations to hurl false accusation against political opponents, including the NCGB, of being responsible for the explosions. The loss of human lives and physical injuries are already tragic occurrences and the generals should not stoop so low as to gain political profit out of such incidents."²⁰

KNU General Secretary Phado Mahn Sha: "They tend to have that habit of accusing us thus before they made any investigation. That is not the way to find a solution. They need to open their mouth only after investigating the matter thoroughly...The situation is becoming rather rough (within Burma). This kind of thing happens because they are unable to solve political problems. We ourselves are also worried about this kind of development."²¹

KNPP General Secretary Khoo Raymond Htoo: "Groundless accusations are the basic problems of the SPDC. They are accusing us this way so that the world would see us as terrorists."²²

Thai PM Thaksin Shinawatra: "We don't support anyone to conduct any activities to hurt our neighbors," he said. "We don't harbor terrorism."²³

MORE LIKELY EXPLANATIONS?

- The SPDC did it to reinforce amongst rival factions that the army needs to "stick together" and unite against a common enemy. Speculations have been rife about the degradation of the regime's internal integrity.²⁴
- It was an expression of tensions between Vice-Sr Gen Maung Aye and "young guns" aligned with Sr Gen Than Shwe.²⁵
- It was done by disgruntled ex-MI agents irritated by the loss of business interests and lengthy jails sentences imposed on their colleagues.
- It was the work of a new, secretive, anti-military group comprised of young activists frustrated at the opposition's anti-confrontational approach.

17 AFP (15 May 05) Military explosives used in Yangon blasts: junta

18 AFP (15 May 05) Military explosives used in Yangon blasts: junta

19 AFP (16 May 05) Thailand surprised at Myanmar fingerpointing over bomb blasts

20 NCGUB (8 May 05) NCGUB Condemns Junta for Making 'Political Profit' Out of Bomb Blasts

21 DVB (16 May 05) Burma junta is good only at pointing fingers – opposition groups

22 DVB (16 May 05) Burma junta is good only at pointing fingers – opposition groups

23 Irrawaddy (16 May 05) The Regime's Bombing Theories – How Ridiculous Can They Get?

²⁴ AP (29 May 05) Shake-up in Burmese Command & DVB (19 May 05) All change: Burma reshuffles officers again

25 Bangkok Post (13 May 05) Only junta has capacity for such careful planning

Who benefits?

Analysis of the bombings shows the SPDC was set to benefit most from the bombings.²⁶

- The SPDC can show there is a “terrorist threat” inside Burma, leading the way for international sympathy, cooperation, funding and continued rationale for ongoing assaults against opposition groups.
- It offers rationale for deferring political processes inside the country.
- It offers opportunity for the SPDC to quietly step down from the ASEAN chairmanship, under the pretence of concern for the safety of regional allies.

Toe Zaw Latt, a researcher from the Burma Fund, noted Sr Gen Than Shwe’s background in Psychological Warfare is an important factor in the bombings: “He is especially skilled at projecting threats to the nation that appeal to the hearts and minds not only of ordinary soldiers but also middle-class Rangoon society.”²⁷

The Targets

Junction 8 City Mart and Dagon Center City Mart are run by a consortium of Aungmyingalar traders. Vice Sr Gen Maung Aye’s daughter has major shares in the venture.²⁸

The third bombsite, a Convention Center, was the location of a Thai Trade Convention: the bombs were geared to detonate at a time that would draw international attention. The Convention Center was also being renovated for prospective ASEAN meetings in 2006.

The RDX Question

The SPDC’s claims that the presence of RDX at the bombsites absolves them of responsibility is a farce. RDX, a relatively cheap explosive with a range of military and civilian uses²⁹ is exported by a partially state-owned Chinese company NORINCO (China North Industries Group) that has been supplying the SPDC in recent years.³⁰ NORINCO reportedly enjoys close ties to the SPDC.³¹ Some reports even suggest NORINCO is in the process of establishing an office in Burma.³²

The SPDC has been documented as having used RDX in landmines against ethnic groups.³³

Background

These are not the first set of bomb blasts in Burma. The Rangoon bombs come only two weeks after a bomb exploded in Burma’s second largest city, Mandalay, which killed 2 people and injured another 15.³⁴ Small, homemade bombs are also regularly uncovered throughout the country, usually before they detonate. It is widely believed the SPDC is behind these bombs.

26 Bangkok Post (13 May 05) Only junta has capacity for such careful planning

27 Bangkok Post (13 May 05) Only junta has capacity for such careful planning

28 NCGUB (10 May 05) News Desk

29 As a military explosive, RDX can be used alone as a base charge for detonators or mixed with another materials for use in landmines, rockets and torpedoes. Common military uses of RDX have been as an ingredient in plastic bonded explosives, such as semtex and C-4. Civilian use of RDX is in fireworks, in demolition blocks, as a heating fuel for food rations, and sometimes, as rat poison. Combinations of RDX and HMX, another explosive, have been the chief ingredients in approximately 75 products. Source: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/munitions/explosives-nitramines.htm>

30 Iran Watch (20 Jul 04) Supplier: China North Chemical Industries Corporation (NOCINCO)

31 Jane’s Intelligence Review (Feb 1994) China’s Arms Trade Bureaucracy

32 DVB (16 May 05) RDX traces in Rangoon blasts linked to Chinese chemical company?

33 Andrew Selth (2000) Landmines in Burma: The Military Dimension available at <http://www.burmaproject.org/burmadebate/winter00landmines.html>

34 Xinhua (10 May 05) South Korea issues travel warning for Myanmar