‘THE LADY’ SEEN FROM THE THAI-BURMESE BORDER
Duncan MacLaren, reporting from Mae Sot and Ranong, Thailand

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is regarded rightly by the world as a female Nelson Mandela, a moral icon who reached that status through suffering, courage and human decency. The halo of ‘The Lady’ or even ‘Our Mother’, as she is known in Burma, has been slightly dented since she became an elected politician. She was initially silent about the plight of the Rohingya, a Muslim group from Arakan State rendered stateless on a whim of the Burmese Generals in 1982. In more recent times, they have been attacked by other ethnicities who accuse them of being ‘foreign Bangladeshis’ when most of them have lived in the country for 400 years. That violence has resulted in the displacement of 100,000 people and in countless desperate asylum seekers heading out into the rough waters of the Andaman Sea in search of safety. Many of them drown. They are now one of the few groups now coming over the border into the refugee camps in Thailand.

In terms of remaining sores in Burma, in addition to the plight of Burmese Muslims, can be added land confiscation, forced labour, the lack of progress on real ceasefires rather than temporary ones and the silence about moving from a centralised state to one with devolved governments to the ethnic regions. The broken promise by the British of autonomy in the ethnic regions at the time of Burmese independence was the source of the violence in the first place.

Many of the refugees I talked to in Mae La and Umpei camps on the Thai-Burma Border recently are refusing to fill in repatriation forms. They know that with landmines and no facilities in their homelands, they will be moved to the designated areas currently being thrown together for them by the Burmese government, even before there has been an agreement with the ethnic groups as to where and when they will return. Moving from a refugee camp made of bamboo huts in Thailand where there is comparative safety to one made of concrete slabs in an area which is not their home and with memories of the cruelties of the Burmese military fresh in their minds is not exactly appealing. With the cut in rations caused by NGOs and Western Governments cutting aid, they may be starved into moving back but there is great fear among the 150,000 people still living in camps along the Border.

There is also the question of the kind of development Burma has embarked on to move it from 149th place on the UN’s global Human Development Index which measures not just GNI but poverty statistics, gender equity, human rights, education and health. The signs do not look hopeful.

In the Bangkok hotels, you overhear eager conversations by Western and Chinese business people en route for Yangon about the opportunities opening up in Burma. A great deal of talk about profits - none about fair wages or human rights. A couple of months after President Obama’s historic visit to Burma in 2012, a US-Myanmar Business Council, endorsed by 70 executives from 28 companies, the first in 27 years, was formed. Special
economic zones are planned where workers, according to one minister, will be paid less than their (poorly paid) Thai peers in order to undercut them. The foreign investment law passed by the Burmese Parliament in November 2012 allows foreigners to own 100 per cent of their operations and guarantees “tax holidays” for at least five years. Aung Naing Oo, the director of the Myanmar Investment Commission, assured Western companies concerned about labour unrest that Myanmar had banned unions in the past and that “unions in our country would not be so active because we are at an early stage”.

Thailand pays billions of dollars for natural gas which lights up Bangkok. Yet those resource dollars have not resulted in education or health budgets, among the lowest in the ASEAN region, being increased. Large development projects such as the gas pipeline from Arakan Staet to Yunnan in China has resulted in the forced displacement of Kachin and Shan peoples and augurs badly for the so-called development about to be foisted on Burma on a huge scale.

Aung San Suu Kyi remains a lone voice among Burmese politicians when it comes to talking sense about the kind of development that will help lift the Burmese people from the poverty into which the dictatorship plunged them over decades. She has pleaded with investor Governments and entrepreneurs not to exploit the people but to ensure they are treated with decency in the market place. Entrepreneurs have no right to mire the Burmese in economic slavery to make even vaster profits with no social responsibility. ‘The Lady’ knows that economic growth is a means to making the lives of the poor of Burma more human, not as an end in itself or to promote pure consumerism as a way of life or to swap one oppression for another with a democratic facade. Despite the adulation from the West, she is not being listened to.

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