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RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY'S NEWSLETTER



Democracy and Human Rights in Asia: Challenges, Trends and Opportunities

BY VITIT MUNTARBHORN, INTERNATIONAL BOARD MEMBER OF RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY. BASED ON AN INTERVIEW IN LONDON, ENGLAND, ON APRIL 28, 2006, WITH LLOYD LIPSETT, SENIOR ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT, RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO TALK about human rights and democracy in Asia without first acknowledging the continent's incredible political diversity. A large array of countries run the gamut of political systems, from the world's largest democracy to some of its most repressive authoritarian regimes.

Any assessment of the state of human rights and democracy in Asia must also take into account the fact that democracy is about much more than just elections. Democracy is about participation on numerous levels and involves everything from how people live to how the state operates. Judging a democracy by state elections alone is not adequate. Elections in a country where power and money rest in the hands of the very few do not make a democracy. Democracy means the sharing and decentralization of resources and redress for issues of equity, fairness and social justice.

The absence of an intergovernmental human rights mechanism in Asia, such as a pan-Asian treaty on human rights or an Asian court of human rights, means we must look to other regional responses for addressing human rights

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concerns on the continent. If we choose to emphasize the existence of international and national human rights norms, the question becomes one of implementing such rights in their totality at the local and national level. In this context, it becomes clear that doing so would be facilitated by a sub-regional or regional impetus, even though there might not be a regional treaty at this point in time.

The emergence of several national human rights commissions in Asia over the past few years is a welcome phenomenon that contributes to the system of checks and balances against the abuse of power and serves as an avenue for redress of human rights violations. The lack of a regional mechanism makes these commissions an important entry point for many countries. These commissions are also growing, both in numbers and in terms of expertise, and are establishing networks throughout the region.

There are also interesting developments at the sub-regional level that we can see having a positive influence on the advancement of human rights in Asia. To the west of Asia, the Arab League has adopted the Arab Charter

continued on page 3



Rights & Democracy
International Centre for Human Rights
and Democratic Development

Rights & Democracy is an independent Canadian institution created by an Act of Parliament in 1988. It has an international mandate to promote, advocate and defend the democratic and human rights set out in the International Bill of Human Rights. In cooperation with civil society and governments in Canada and abroad, Rights & Democracy initiates and supports programmes to strengthen laws and democratic institutions, principally in developing countries.



PRESIDENT'S
MESSAGE

Jean-Louis Roy,
President of Rights & Democracy

The Blooming of a Thousand Flowers: Human Rights NGOs in Indonesia

BY MIKA LÉVESQUE, ASIA REGIONAL OFFICER, AND MICHAEL WODZICKI,
COORDINATOR, DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT AT RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY

THE 21ST CENTURY WILL BELONG TO ASIA. In terms of demographics, technological developments and economic activity, the current trends point towards the increasing dominance of Asia in the coming years and decades. Closely linked is the rising geopolitical influence of Asian nations in multilateral organizations and in bilateral relationships. The question is therefore posed: how will the rise of Asia affect democratic development and human rights at the local, regional and international levels?

There is no simple answer to this question. We know that Asia is extremely diverse: Asian states vary tremendously in terms of their commitment to democracy and human rights; there are a number of institutions and non-governmental organizations that raise these issues at the national and regional level—some more tentatively and others more fervently; and, of course, there are all the individual Asians who want their rights recognized and want to participate democratically in the decisions that affect their lives.

Canada and Canadians have a great interest in the future of Asia. We are linked to Asia through immigration, through formal and informal networks and through partnerships of all sorts. Building on these existing relationships, Rights & Democracy will hold its Annual Conference on "Strengthening Democracy in Asia: New Networks and Partnerships for Human Rights and the Rule of Law." We will gather Asians and Canadians from different horizons—representatives from governments and multilateral organizations, academics and students, non-governmental actors and human rights defenders—to debate a range of important questions that will affect the future of democracy in Asia.

We view this conference as a springboard for future action. From the rich discussions that we anticipate in Toronto on June 14th and 15th, we will identify new topics for research, create linkages with new and existing networks and seize opportunities for new projects and partnerships between Canadians and Asians. Despite our differences in terms of history, culture and philosophy, there is a great deal of fertile ground for future collaboration around the shared values of justice, equality and human dignity.

Jean-Louis Roy

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NGOs (NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS) in Indonesia have proliferated since the end of Indonesia's dictatorship in 1998. Some observers have compared it to the blooming of a thousand flowers. No one can really be sure of how many NGOs there are in Indonesia, with some estimates suggesting more than 10,000.

Following independence in the late 1940s, one of Indonesia's first human rights groups was a women's organization called Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia). It brought together politically conscious women who were promoting women's and children's rights as well as democracy. By 1957 it had over 650,000 members. Linked to the Communist Party of Indonesia (KPI), it paid a heavy price in deaths, imprisonment, and exile during Suharto's violent ascension to the Presidency in the mid-1960s.

Several human rights NGOs find their roots in legal aid networks that were formed in Indonesia in the early 1970s. The parent organization of many human rights activists and NGOs is the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, or YLBHI. Formed in large part as a response to the massacres that occurred around the time of President Suharto's rise to power, YLBHI provided legal assistance to victims of state oppression, such as people forcefully evicted from their homes or those who had unlawfully lost their jobs. YLBHI attempted to defend these people, thus serving as a magnet for human rights defenders – the same defenders who would form the nucleus of major Indonesian human rights NGOs in the 1990s.

In the 1990s, Indonesia's political system slowly began to open and consequently new organizations were established, largely by members of YLBHI; organizations such as the Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy, or ELSAM, the Commission for Disappearances of Victims, or KONTRAS, and Indonesian Corruption Watch, or ICW.

In 1995, women lawyers from YLBHI created LBH APIK (the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice). LBH APIK provided

free legal aid to women who were socially, economically and culturally marginalized, as well as campaigning and advocating in the area of women's rights. Other issues addressed by women's human rights groups during Suharto's years included domestic violence (Mitra Perempuan – Women's Crisis Center) and the condition of women migrant workers (Solidaritas Perempuan).

It is only after Suharto relinquished power in 1998 that the blooming of a thousand flowers truly occurred. Some of the key human rights NGOs created include the Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN) or Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago, Indonesia Women's Coalition for Justice and Democracy (KPI), the Indonesian Human Rights Monitor, or IMPARSIAL, the Indonesian Centre for Human Rights and Democracy Research, or DEMOS, and the Human Rights Working Group, or HRWG.

Today, Indonesian human rights NGOs can be found at all levels of society, in all regions including in-conflict or ex-conflict zones such as Aceh, Papua and Central Sulawesi. Despite the fact that human rights activists are important actors in building democracy in their country, their contribution is not always acknowledged by state institutions. The documented implication of members of the Indonesian intelligence services in the recent murder of noted human rights activist Munir demonstrates that despite their numbers, these "thousands flowers" still work in challenging and often dangerous circumstances. ¹

For further information on some of the above mentioned NGOs, see:

AMAN: www.aman.or.id

DEMOS: www.demos.or.id

ELSAM: www.elsam.or.id

ICW: www.antikorupsi.org

IMPARSIAL: www.imparsial.org

KONTRAS: www.kontras.org

KPI: www.koalipersempuan.or.id

LBH APIK: www.lbh-apik.or.id

YLBHI: www.ylbhi.or.id

¹ Not all are available in English.



Democracy and Human Rights in Asia: Challenges, Trends and Opportunities

continued from page 1

on Human Rights. To the south, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is helping promote cooperation between countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on issues such as the rights of children and women and transnational crimes such as human trafficking. Also, throughout Southeast Asia, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has adopted declarations and action plans on the rights of children, youth, the elderly and the elimination of violence against women. Such developments could be seen as leading towards the creation of a more focused regional mechanism or a commission for children's and women's rights.

The fact that there is no formal human rights institution for the region similar to the commissions and/or courts in place in Africa, Latin America and Europe poses a significant challenge for the effective promotion of human rights in Asia. However, the absence of such an institution means the United Nations has an important role to play on the continent. For example, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is filling this institutional void with sub-regional offices/presence in places like Beirut, Bangkok and Fiji, the aim of which is to see to the concrete implementation of human rights. The UN is also providing technical assistance to Asian states in all their plurality and monitoring the human rights situation within certain states. Specialized UN agencies like UNICEF have made important contributions to the protection of the rights of children throughout Asia. Another example is the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which is doing important work on implementing the Millennium Development Goals, including the reduction of absolute poverty and halving the number of children who do not have access to primary education.

Beyond these mechanisms, it is important that Canadians do not forget other entry points for international cooperation for human rights and democratic

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development in Asia. It is not just about building institutions; it is also about strengthening civil society networks within the region and internationally. Important links must be forged from individual to individual and from group to group. Rights & Democracy is one such group that has been active in this field and Canadian organizations should not ignore the important impact that they have had and are still having in terms of fostering regional dialogue and building networks between human rights defenders and organizations.

Finally, we should not forget the important role youth have to play. Youth are a key entry point for dialogue and nurturing shared values, and have a higher receptivity to the concepts of human rights and democracy. They are also engaged and willing to embark on action-reflection and action-sharing type projects. Their capacity for building a shared culture of human rights and democracy between Canada and Asia should not be underestimated, and the Rights & Democracy Network has a key role to play in pursuing these linkages.

Rights & Democracy's June conference will be an exciting occasion for dialogue and debate, where we can listen to Asian voices on these issues and engage Canadians for future partnerships that will help implement human rights and strengthen democracy in Asia.

Vitit Muntarbhorn is a member of the Board of Rights & Democracy, Canada. He is a Professor of Law at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. He is a former United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children and is currently the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). Mr. Muntarbhorn has helped many UN agencies and non-governmental organisations. ℓ

THE SPIRIT OF THE FIGHTING PEACOCK: ALWAYS TOGETHER

BY AUNG DIN, POLICY DIRECTOR, US CAMPAIGN FOR BURMA

A COMMON DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY links student movements and popular struggles in Burma. This link was forged through the fight against colonialism and fascism, strengthened through the independence movement during the Second World War, and remains strong to this day in opposition to Burma's current military dictatorship. When oppression rears its head, students in Burma have always stood with the people.



Burmese students and the student unions have always respected and honoured this tradition. Their commitment to truth, their belief in peace and democracy, and their sacrifices for that belief are well-known as the "Spirit of the Fighting Peacock." The fighting peacock is the sacred symbol of the national student union of Burma, known as the "All Burma Federation of Student Unions" (ABFSU) or "Ba-Ka-Tha," which Burma's military junta has outlawed. Yet the "spirit of the fighting peacock" remains the trademark of Burmese students.

The struggle for democracy in Burma started in 1962, when the military seized power, and experienced a resurgence in 1988, when students led a popular, nationwide uprising that brought down former dictator Ne Win and his hastily appointed two successors. The struggle for democracy continues to this day, and thousands of Burmese students have been arrested, killed and tortured in their ongoing fight for freedom, justice and democracy.

Burma's student movement continues this struggle on three fronts. While the majority of student activists work against the military regime from inside Burma, many support their efforts from the liberated areas at Burma's border with Thailand and India and others contribute from countries around the world. The "spirit of the fighting peacock" is a bond that binds them, no matter how far they find themselves from Burma.

The brutal, public killing of student activist Thet Naing Oo by municipal police and fire fighters in Rangoon recently, serves to highlight the dangers students continue to face. In addition to the daily harassment, threats of arrest, and torture by government authorities and military personnel, they also are now facing death threats from civilians, who are organized, trained and supported by the regime.

Conditions in the liberated areas are not much better. Students living there face malaria and other infectious diseases, brutal attacks by Burmese military personnel and harassment by authorities in neighbouring countries. The cost in student lives has been high. But they remain committed to the struggle for democracy, true to the "spirit of the fighting peacock."

People may think that students who leave Burma altogether will be in a better situation, but they too face tough challenges. Tempted by the many

The struggle for democracy in Burma started in 1962, when the military seized power, and experienced a resurgence in 1988, when students led a popular, nationwide uprising that brought down former dictator Ne Win and his hastily appointed two successors

comforts of a life abroad, Burma's student activists struggle to lead simple lives in order to support the ongoing efforts of their colleagues inside Burma, often at the expense of improving their own individual lives. The "spirit of the fighting peacock" makes them stay with the cause.

That is because they know that one fine day, they all will be reunited in Burma with the people they love, in a Burma that will embody the spirit of the fighting peacock. That day is coming soon.

In 1988, Aung Din was a 26-year-old mechanical engineering student at the Rangoon Institute of Technology, where he helped organize the nationwide uprising in Burma in August of that year. He was elected Vice-Chairperson of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) in 1989 and arrested by military intelligence soon after. Aung Din served over four years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement, and was adopted by Amnesty International as a Prisoner of Conscience. Aung Din also worked closely with former student leader Min Ko Naing. In 1995, he fled Burma for the United States, where he now serves as a policy director for the U.S. Campaign for Burma in Washington. www.uscampaignforburma.org

Aung San Suu Kyi



AS OF JUNE 14, 2006

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will have spent altogether 3,883 days of her life in detention, the equivalent of 10 years and 233 days under house arrest. 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the National League for Democracy in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest for the 3rd time on May 30, 2003 during the Depayin Massacre. (1st time placed under house arrest on July 20, 1989 and released on July 10, 1995; 2nd time arrested September 23, 2000 and released May 6, 2002.)

In 1990, the National League for Democracy in Burma won 82% of the seats in the Burmese elections. Yet the military remains in power and continues to violate human rights.

For the last 15 years, Rights & Democracy has supported the struggle for democracy in Burma.

To support this cause, contact Mika Lévesque, Rights & Democracy's Regional Agent for Asia, at www.dd-rd.ca



A FORMER STUDENT LEADER SPEAKS OUT

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIN KO NAING ADAPTED FROM THE IRRAWADDY

MIN KO NAING IS A LEGENDARY FIGURE OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN BURMA. DURING THE 1988 NATIONWIDE DEMOCRATIC UPRISING, HIS STATEMENTS, SPEECHES AND POEMS AROUSED THE DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS OF THE PEOPLE. VIEWED AS A THREAT BY THE MILITARY REGIME, MIN KO NAING WAS ARRESTED IN 1989 AND SENTENCED TO 20 YEARS IN PRISON. HE IS THE CO-RECIPIENT OF RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY'S 1999 JOHN HUMPHREY FREEDOM AWARD AND ONE OF THE 2005 WINNERS OF THE CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE, AWARDED ANNUALLY BY THE NEW YORK-BASED NORTHCOTE PARKINSON FUND. IN A PHONE INTERVIEW PUBLISHED IN THE NOVEMBER, 2005, ISSUE OF *THE IRRAWADDY*, MIN KO NAING TALKED ABOUT THE SITUATION IN BURMA:

A Burmese report released September 20, 2005 commissioned by Vaclav Havel and retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu has met with both criticism and support from within and outside Burma. What are your views on the report?

We've already responded to the report and shared our perspective on it through various media interviews. We expressed our concerns about the multiple crises facing Burma, which must be solved through a process of dialogue. Recently, we released a "Statement on Humanitarian Assistance for Burma," in which we clearly highlighted that the country's failed health and education systems have reached a level of national crisis. We noted that these specific issues were also raised in the report by Mr. Havel and Archbishop Tutu, and our own analysis of these issues is similar to those reflected in the report. We would like to mention that we've been trying to settle our country's crises among our nationalities for many years. For the time being, we warmly welcome the international community's offer of negotiation to assist Burma.

Some Burma watchers have speculated that the mounting crisis may result in a popular uprising. As a former student leader who took part in the 1988 uprising, what are your thoughts on the possibility of such a scenario?

A crisis leading to an uprising is not necessarily related to what we want or don't want to happen. Only circumstances, not individuals, can create the basis for an uprising. The consequences of such circumstances are what spark events leading to an uprising. Even if we don't expect an uprising to occur, we need to understand in advance how to handle such an event if it did happen, to be prepared to guide the situation towards the right track by ensuring that problems can be smoothly resolved. That means we should try to minimize casualties as far as possible. We view the current problems very seriously because the signs of crisis in Burma might be laying the grounds for an uprising.

If such circumstances took place, how could leaders like yourself and others working within civil society organizations provide assistance to the people of Burma, in addition to the responsibility of the Burmese military government and the international community?

We need to understand the root cause and immediate context of the problems. We need to clearly examine these two factors; we shouldn't pretend that we don't recognize these issues. It is important to accept the

reality of our country. Crisis has existed in this country for many years, which has delayed the process of democratic reform. All these things are related to international events. We will continue to endure the current crisis as long as Burma is rejected by the international community and in an economic context of non-cooperation. Consequently, we will see massive unemployment problems, people will lose their jobs and many will face everyday hardships. That is why I would like to urge the present government, the political forces and civil society to work together towards a common solution.

In view of your recent statement on humanitarian assistance, what are your ongoing plans on that issue? What kind of environment is required in Burma in order to receive humanitarian assistance from the international community?

Our opinion was clearly stated in our press statement. We need to establish some kind of system that is acceptable to the international donors. Therefore, the present government and democratic forces should discuss ways to build up such a system in accordance with international norms and standards. We need to prepare for that. It's not realistic to request humanitarian assistance from international donors unless we are prepared.

You were awarded the 2005 'Civil Courage Prize' and Rights & Democracy's 1999 John Humphrey Freedom Award. Can you tell us why you didn't go to receive these awards?

In Burma, it's not easy to obtain a passport to travel abroad for visits, work or study. It costs a lot of money. The background history of the passport applicant is thoroughly checked. In addition, applicants have to go through many bureaucratic stages. So, it's extremely difficult for me to go abroad to receive these awards related to democracy. The other reason I didn't leave is that if I go abroad, I may not be allowed to come back into the country, and I don't want to lose the opportunity to live with my own people. Moreover, there are already many students and democratic forces from Burma working abroad. I really want to work inside the country as long as people need me.

Some critics say Burmese democracy activists abroad are too far away from the country and its reality, to the extent of being out of touch and out of date. What is your reaction to that?

continued on page 8

GOOD GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN CANADA-CHINA RELATIONS

BY CHARLES BURTON PH.D., ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, BROCK UNIVERSITY

CANADA HAS LONG BEEN A STRONG proponent of encouraging the Chinese government to enact policies that will lead to better compliance with the UN Human Rights Covenants. The Canadian approach has been one of engagement through dialogue. The two main elements to Canada's human rights dialogue with China are:

BILATERAL: A "Joint Committee on Human Rights" meets annually, alternating between Canada and China. Both Canadian and Chinese delegations comprise mid-level officials from various ministries and agencies, NGOs and academics.

REGIONAL: The annual Plurilateral Human Rights Symposium in which Canada, Norway and China alternatively host a meeting of up to 20 North Eastern, Southern and Southeast Asian countries to exchange views on a range of human rights issues.

In addition, Canada's human rights programming with China is supplemented by Canadian International Development Agency projects which support legal aid centres in China, train judges, encourage the development of civil society in China by support for non-governmental organizations, etc. The Canadian government also addresses human rights issues relating to China through multilateral institutions, particularly the UN Human Rights Commission.

The promotion of human rights in China is characterized by the Canadian government as being in Canada's national interest. The rationale for this is based on the assumption with countries that respect human rights have a culture of respect for law and are more politically stable. In such countries, Canada can do business more easily, as contracts are protected thanks to an impartial justice system. A politically stable nation is also a more viable destination for longer-term investment. But an arguably more salient factor is that most Canadians find the rule of illiberal regimes deeply repugnant. Canadian governments are expected by Canadians to act in support of foreign citizens denied social justice because of bad government in foreign countries.

There is much criticism by Canadian NGOs of the Canadian government's "Good Governance, Democratic Development and Human Rights" programming. Many NGOs see this programming as ineffective in bringing about progressive change and greater democratic justice in China. There is a common perception that while the Canadian public wants its government to take a lead in proactive activities to promote human rights and justice



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throughout the world, the Government of Canada is more beholden to corporate interests, some of them multinational. These corporate interests are alleged to have effectively lobbied the Government not to undertake any activities that might alienate the Communist government of China and thereby interfere with the profitable China trade. So it is argued that due to the pressure of monied interests, the Government of Canada has de facto determined not to undertake any policies that might effectively induce democratic political change in China. Some NGOs suggest that the Government of Canada has sold out sacred Canadian liberal deals in favour of the bottom line of international business. Overall they tend to characterize the Canadian government's Human Rights strategy as naïve and pandering to corporate interests.

Certainly it is very difficult to measure the success of the Canadian government's strategy in this area. There are no objectively verifiable indicators to measure whether Canada's policy of engagement has made any difference to the furtherance of the cause of human rights in China. Nor is there any evidence that countries which speak more loudly and frankly on human rights abuse in China suffer economic consequences by embarrassing and thereby incurring the displeasure of the Chinese ruling elite in this way. [ℓ](#)

INVESTMENTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS: CASE STUDY IN THE PHILIPPINES

BY CAROLINE BRODEUR, MASTER'S STUDENT IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AT UNIVERSITÉ DE SHERBROOKE

TWENTY YEARS AFTER the end of the Marcos dictatorship, the Philippines is still struggling through a difficult political transition. The democratic revolution that should have taken place in this Asian archipelago after years of dictatorship has been timid and marred by ongoing human rights violations.

As the Philippines grapples with political and institutional crises, it must find a way to steer this transition toward the democratization of economic policy and investment practices that will benefit its population. But foreign investment, which should be helping to bolster the country through economic development, sometimes has perverse effects by contravening international human rights standards and local populations are seeing their rights violated. While many of these violations are exposed by civil society organizations, NGOs too often have limited means and their ability to take concrete action is restricted.

Human rights impact assessments are therefore generally geared toward making companies more responsible for their actions, while also enabling strong economic and democratic development over the long term. The Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) initiative developed by Rights & Democracy, intended primarily for civil society players, provides the necessary tools so that organizations can respond more effectively to the threat foreign investment can represent to the rights and freedoms of the communities involved in the project.

One of the five case studies conducted by Rights & Democracy is currently underway in the Philippines. The Philippines case was selected following public hearings held by the Sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development on the activities of a Canadian mining company, TVI Pacific Inc. The study began about eight months ago and is now in the interview phase. Since the end of March, dozens of interviews and numerous consultations have been held with various players. Through formal interviews with government and business as well as consultations with the populations affected (including farmers, fish farmers, fishers and the Muslim community), the case study team is currently attempting to document as comprehensively as possible the effects of this mining company on human rights in the Philippines.

With special attention being paid to the rights of indigenous peoples, the project in the Philippines will document the potential effects on the civil, social, political and economic rights of local populations as well as on issues of workers' safety and rights. The project will also focus on the cultural rights of the Subanons, the indigenous people living in the Siocon region where the mine has been operating.



Data collection will continue over the next few months, and a preliminary report will then be presented to the various players who took part in the study in order to ensure greater transparency during the process. Each player will then have an opportunity to comment on the information gathered and the analysis conducted by the research team. Once the preliminary report has been presented, a second phase will begin in order to complete any missing elements and to validate the information gathered. The project will conclude by the publication, in 2007, of the results of this case study as well as a model human rights impact assessment methodology for civil society groups.

The author was on a six-week mission to the Philippines accompanying the partners involved in the project.

For more information on the Philippines case study or on the *Human Rights Impact Assessment*, please visit Rights & Democracy's website: www.dd-rd.ca/hria

Time to Recognize the Canadian Diaspora¹

BY YUEN PAU WOO, PRESIDENT & CO-CEO, AND KENNY ZHANG,
SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST AT THE ASIA PACIFIC FOUNDATION OF CANADA

WITH MORE THAN 18% of its residents born outside the country, Canadian politicians and publics routinely speak of diaspora communities in Canada. Rarely acknowledged, however, is the community of Canadians living overseas - the "Canadian diaspora" - and its implications for public policy.

Research by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada puts the number of Canadians overseas at about 2.7 million. Equivalent to 9% of the resident population, the proportion of Canadians residing overseas is larger than similar overseas populations of Australia, China, the US or India².

Canadian expatriates, both Canada-born and foreign-born, leave the country permanently or temporarily for many reasons: better opportunities, weather, education, careers, business, family life, etc. Unlike other typical diaspora communities, Canadian expatriates do not share a common ethnic background, but many of them still feel and think of themselves as Canadian, regardless of where they live.

Canadians overseas can be a key element of international business strategies and public diplomacy. There is a growing body of anecdotal evidence that return migrants to China and Hong Kong facilitate trade and investment with Canada, through taste and technology transfer, as well as human networks.

Traditionally, public policy discussion of overseas Canadians has focused on consular services, taxation and voting. This is a very narrow set of issues that does not do justice to the Canadian diaspora, which is expected to grow in size and importance. There has been little thought given to how this human capital can be identified, cultivated and mobilized.

At the very least, we should be as ready to speak of a Canadian community overseas as we are about the multiplicity of ethnic and religious communities in Canada. Yann Martel once quipped that Canada is the world's greatest hotel. In fact, the world is Canada's hotel, and Canadians are among its most frequent guests.

Yuen Pau Woo and Kenny Zhang are with the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, a think-tank on Canada-Asia relations based in Vancouver. ℓ

¹This piece is abridged from an op-ed special for the *Globe and Mail*, March 28, 2006, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20060328.wcommento328/BNStory/National>

²APF Canada (2006), "Recognizing the Canadian Diaspora," *Canada Asia Commentary*, No. 41, <http://www.asiapacific.ca/analysis/pubs/pdfs/commentary/cac41.pdf>

www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com

FOUNDED IN PEKING 10 YEARS AGO by a former British journalist, *China Development Brief* is an e-newsletter for international development professionals working in China. The publication contains a wealth of information on government reform and the emergence of civil society in China. The newsletter promotes constructive and non-conflictual involvement of international NGOs with Chinese institutions and government. Its editorial heartily encourages the Chinese authorities to trust in the talent and capacity of their citizens and to strive for a more open and equitable society. The newsletter is also available in Chinese with different content and specific focus on the training of local consultants. *China Development Brief* is an invaluable tool for anyone whose work requires a better understanding of China today. ℓ

continued from page 5

I don't see any difference between activists abroad and those inside the country. Actually, we share the division of labor. Even though we might have different tactics, we are working towards a common goal. All of us need to contribute in whatever way we can—wherever we are. On behalf of the forces inside the country, I would like to say that I do really recognize our forces abroad, what they are doing and [that they are] playing a very important role.

You were in prison for almost 16 years, and you were not allowed to read any books during your imprisonment. What are you doing now for your self-improvement and what kind of books are you reading?

I was in prison for 16 years without seeing, studying or reading anything. To catch up with the outside world, I have started taking computer courses and studying the English language. I am trying my best. Sometimes I find it hard to digest everything, I feel as if I'm suffering from a bout of excessive eating, when I re-study things that happened in the past. I am trying to understand these things. At the moment, I am working based on my own intuition and common sense. I would like to say thank you to all of my colleagues inside [Burma] and abroad who have provided opportunity for me to redevelop the skills that I lost for many years. ℓ

The Irrawaddy

Established in 1992 by Burmese citizens living in exile, not affiliated with any political party or organization, the Irrawaddy is a publication covering Burma and Southeast Asia that seeks to promote press freedom and access to unbiased information: www.irrawaddy.org

@ LINKS

ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (AHRIC)

Regional organization based in Hong Kong. Protects and promotes Human Rights by monitoring, investigating and taking solidarity actions. www.ahrchk.net

ASIA PACIFIC FORUM ON WOMEN, LAW AND DEVELOPMENT (APWLD)

Regional organization based in Thailand committed to enabling women to use law as an instrument of social change for equality, justice and development. www.apwld.org

CANADIAN FRIENDS OF BURMA (CFOB)

The CFOB's objectives are to raise awareness about the situation in Burma and encourage Canadians to take concrete action to promote democracy and human rights in Burma. www.cfob.org

NATIONAL COALITION GOVERNMENT OF THE UNION OF BURMA (NCGUB) AND MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT UNION (MPU)

Website of Members of Parliament elected in the May 1990 elections and who are in exile. www.ncgub.net

SUARA RAKYAT MALAYSIA (SUARAM)

Activist movement for human rights and democracy in Malaysia. www.suaram.net