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**BURMA: THE SOUTH AFRICA OF THE NINETIES  
ROUNDTABLE REPORT**

Carleton University  
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**BURMA: THE SOUTH AFRICA OF THE NINETIES  
ROUNDTABLE REPORT**

The conference entitled "Burma: The South Africa of the 90s" was held on Saturday, Nov. 16, 1996, at Carleton University, funded in part by the John Holmes Fund of the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development. Over 40 students attended, including many Burmese, representing university and high school groups from across Ontario, the Maritimes and British Columbia. The focus of the conference was to establish strategies for implementing selective purchasing legislation in educational institutions, compare student-led consumer activism campaigns in other countries and give the participants the basic analytical tools to allow them to launch an effective campaign.

A portion of the conference was allotted to discuss Canada's policy on Burma and to make recommendations. Some of the participants have worked on the Thai-Burma border, travelled within Burma and followed Burma issues extensively. The following items reflect what top recommendations were made:

1) Canada has to become more outspoken on Burma and put action to our words of condemnation. Though the reference to Burma is appearing more frequently in public speeches by the Foreign Affairs Minister, words will not help Burma gain democracy. Canada has a responsibility to follow the mandate of the elected democratic party within Burma. The National League for Democracy, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been repeatedly calling for an immediate and complete withdrawal of companies from Burma as foreign investment is merely entrenching the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and providing them with a false sense of legitimacy [Ed note: In 1998, the military regime changed its name to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)]. This call cannot be effectively answered unless the international community imposes trade sanctions on Burma. The hard currency gained from foreign investment is buoying the SLORC and allowing it to remain in power through force. The peoples of Burma are not benefiting from this trade but merely undergoing further oppression. This financial crutch needs to be removed immediately.

The international community is being hypocritical if it repeatedly condemns the SLORC for its brutal form of rule and voices its support of Suu Kyi without respecting the wishes of her party, the NLD, and taking some form of concrete economic action. Words will not hurt the SLORC but the removal of hard currency will. SLORC will only react to harsh action and not merely by harsh words. It must be remembered that unlike other countries, a democratically-elected government exists in Burma and is ready to take over if SLORC can be removed. The existence of this elected body separates Burma from other countries where the international community feels helpless to do anything. The NLD needs to be supported in every way possible and their wishes abided by.

Constructive engagement does not work Burma. Burma is being used as a clear example where trade does not encourage human rights. Canada, not having a large amount of investment in

Burma coupled with its reputation for being a respected leader on human rights issues, is in a well-placed position to take a lead in international fora on Burma through the United Nations, G-7, Commonwealth and La Francophonie. Canada should begin serious dialogue with the Scandinavian countries and other like-minded nations and lead a coordinated group of countries to push for multinational sanctions. Someone needs to take the lead, other countries would be measured up against Canada's position and the pressure would push the US and the EU, who are "sitting on the fence" to cross over and join forces.

2) Canada should immediately issue a strong command to Canadian importers not to buy products that are "Made in Myanmar." While Canada's exports to Burma remain minimal, Canada is closely linked to Burma through its imports of foods from that country. Canada has imported over \$7 million worth of garments from Burma in this year alone and the figures are rising. One-sixth of the profits from Burma's garment industry goes directly to SLORC's arms procurement agency. The imports and purchases of these clothes are directly linking Canadians to the regime. This link must be severed and the most effective way to do this is for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) to issue a demand to all Canadian importers to stop sourcing from Burma's garment industry.

3) The Thai-Burma and India-Burma borders are excellent points of entry to give financial assistance to the democratic movement inside Burma and along its borders. Canada should allocate a respectable sum of money for humanitarian assistance to the 100,000 refugees on the Thai-Burma border via Canadian NGOs and their partners on the border. Funding should also be funnelled through NGOs for human rights and civil disobedience training. Unlike inside Burma, the border areas give the international community an excellent opportunity to provide technical and academic training to thousands of people who, when they can return to Burma, would have the skills to assist in the proper development of the country.

Through contacts, Canada should investigate with Daw Aung San Suu Syi what kind of financial assistance Canada could contribute and ways to give it. But Canada should *not* give financial assistance to the NGOs already existing in Burma as most are forced to work with SLORC-run organizations and are providing SLORC with a false sense of legitimacy while being allowed to provide only the most rudimentary form of humanitarian assistance to a minute portion of Burma's population. The health and education disaster that exists today is due to the political situation and the sooner the SLORC can be removed, the sooner the repairs to the basic foundations of life for the Burmese people can begin.

4) Canada should investigate into the idea of imposing a federal selective purchasing ordinance. The federal government should not issue contracts to companies that are in Burma.

5) SLORC should not be recognized in the United Nations but rather removed and have the elected members of the NLD who are living in exile replace them.

6) Strong attempts should be made to bring ASEAN on side. Suu Kyi has stressed that she does not want a dichotomy to exist between Western countries and ASEAN. Efforts should be made to find common understanding with ASEAN on the issue of human rights being seen as a "western" concept.

7) Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy's proposal of a contact group has potential but it should not be the only Canadian contribution. It should be part of a series of steps that Canada will take to help bring democracy to Burma.