

## Interview with A.R.N.O.

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April 16th, 2006 at 2:41 am (Raluca Enescu, Weekly Editions, Special Contributors) Interview carried out by Raluca Enescu This week Burma Digest got a chance to speak with Mr. Nurul Islam, the leader of Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), who is going to give a speech in London to the British Conservative Party's conference on human rights situations in Burma. Mr. Nurul Islam He was born on 31/12/1948 in Kyuack Chaung village under Maungdaw township, Arakan State, Burma. He did B.A (law) and LL.B degrees from Rangoon Arts and Science University respectively in 1972 and 1973. Then he joined the Rohingya movement &ndash; now defunct Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) &ndash; in 1974. Currently he is the President of the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) that represents the interest of the Rohingya people of Arakan.

Burma Digest: First of all, could you please explain to us, in a few words: who are the Rohingya and what is their status as an ethnic group? Nurul: Rohingya are one of the two major indigenous peoples of Arakan. They trace their ancestry to Arab, Turks, Persians, Pathans, Mughals, Bengalis and some indo-Mongoloid people. They are an ethnic group that developed from different stocks of people with separate language, distinct culture and civilization of their own. The Parliamentary Government that ruled Burma from 1948 to 1962 had recognized Rohingya as an indigenous ethnic group of the Union of Burma equal to all other nationalities of the country. Burma Digest: We know that you will soon speak to the Tory Party's Burma conference. First of all, good luck! And please let us ask you a few questions about it. What issues are you intending to raise, exactly? Nurul: Thank you for your good wishes. I wish to raise the most serious situation of the Rohingya people in the Tory's Party's Burma conference. Burma Digest: What are your expectations concerning this conference? Nurul: We have a high expectation on this conference. I hope it will be directly helpful in advancing the Burma's democracy movement with increasing support from the people and the Government the U.K and the international community. I also hope the Rohingya problem will receive adequate attention. Burma Digest: The International Declaration of Human Rights states that every human being living on Earth has the right to a citizenship. But what about the Rohingya people? How widespread are the cases of Rohingyas being denied any citizenship? Nurul: The Burmese military regime has declared Rohingyas as non-nationals and deprived them of their Burmese citizenship in utter disregard of their history, glorious past and establishment in Arakan, with intention to destroy this particular community from their ancestral homeland. The Burma Citizenship Law of 1982, which violates several fundamental principles of customary international law standards, has reduced them to 'stateless within state'. Arbitrarily depriving the Rohingya of their right to nationality is a violation of the terms of Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Burma Digest: In fact, what are the human rights abuses the Rohingya people are subjected to? Nurul: The Rohingyas are oppressed and persecuted beyond all measures. They have been invariably subjected to criminal atrocities, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment, extra-judicial killing and summary execution, arrest and detention, rape, loot, destruction of homes, settlements, religious schools and mosques, forced labour, forced relocation, forced eviction and expulsion, confiscation of moveable and immoveable properties, relentless taxation and extortion, restriction on their freedom of movement and residence within the state, forbiddance on their right to marry and to found a family without permission, restriction on and/or denial of their right to education, right to work and to get access to food and other essentials, medical care and necessary social services etc. etc. Burma Digest: Do you think that, compared to other ethnic groups or to ordinary people living under Burma's military dictatorship, the Rohingya are more oppressed or more vulnerable to human rights abuses? Nurul: The Rohingyas are victims of institutionalized persecution by virtue of the fact that they have been rendered stateless by Burma's 1982 Citizenship laws. They are most oppressed and vulnerable to human rights abuses compared to other ethnic groups and ordinary people living under military dictatorship. Perhaps, they are the most oppressed people on earth. Medicines San Frontiers (MSF) has listed Rohingyas as 'one of the ten world populations in danger'. Burma Digest: Do you consider that the systematic human rights abuses towards the Rohingyas could be considered a case of genocide? Why? Nurul: The systematic human rights abuses towards the Rohingyas are committed with intent to destroy this particular minority community. Nearly half of their population has already been exterminated. So it could be considered a case of genocide. Burma Digest: Who do you think is guilty of the very inconvenient situation in which the Rohingyas are, now? Nurul: The ruling military junta is guilty of the very inconvenient situation in which Rohingyas are now. It is also regrettable that despite their aspirations and commitments to work together with the Burmese oppositions and countrywide movement for democracy and human rights, the Rohingyas are deliberately kept at distance and barred from united movements, democratic and ethnic nationalities forums. Their statements and attitudes towards Rohingya people are full of ambiguities and ambivalence. Burma Digest: At this moment, what are your views and feelings concerning Burma's democracy movement? Nurul: It is a good sign that Burma's democracy movement is now gaining increasing international support. This is time to forge strong and cemented unity among all the democratic forces and ethnic nationalities, on all issues and problems. The ethnic Rohingya should not be left out from the united movement. This is imperative that the Rohingyas are given due regards and justice is done to them, as one of the family members of Burma Union. Their rightful participation in all Burma's democracy and ethnic nationalities forums must be allowed with out further delay. The leaders of the Burma's democracy movement should bear in mind that democracy is directly linked to peace. Burma Digest: What are the main goals and objectives of the ARNO? Nurul: The main goals and objectives of the ARNO are: \* To achieve the 'right of self-determination' of the Rohingya people within the Federal Union of Burma. \* To work together with all democratic forces and ethnic nationalities of the country in order to establish genuine Federal Union of Burma. \* 'peaceful co-existence' with Rakhine people and all other communities in Arakan as well as in the whole of the country. \* Establishment of a welfare society

based on equality, liberty, democracy, human rights and freedom for all peoples. \* Repatriation of Rohingya refugees from their places of refuge and their rehabilitation in their original places. \* Human resource development particularly in socio-cultural, economic, educational and technical fields.

**Burma Digest:** At this moment, how do you feel about your work at the ARNO?  
**Nurul:** I think it is now a very crucial time for the Burma's democracy movement. We are confident that democracy is in the offing and feel much better as the case of Burma is hoped to be formally discussed in the UNSC in near future, with the active support of the US, UK and their allies, for a binding Security Council resolution. But the proper encouragement and support of the neighboring countries towards movements opposing the military are very much important. In the case of Rohingya, the support and blessings of Bangladesh are essential and central, being a close neighbor who has to bear the brunt of the Rohingya problem. Unfortunately, during recent years we and our people with the Rohingya refugees, are in a very difficult situation in Bangladesh with the development of trade relations between Bangladesh and SPDC.

**Burma Digest:** In which way does the ARNO collaborate with others supporting organizations that support Burma's Democracy movement?  
**Nurul:** The ARNO collaborates with them in sharing information, creating public awareness and doing advocacy to enlist support of the international community.

**Burma Digest:** What would be the necessary conditions for reconciliation between Buddhist and Muslim, Burmese and Rohingya people?  
**Nurul:** Generally, I don't think there are Buddhist-Muslim conflicts in Burma and problems between Burmese and Rohingya. What have been happening is created by ruling military. They are preaching systematic hatred in the minds of the Burmese people against the Muslims. They are responsible for all anti-Muslim sentiments and frequent riots always resulting in the loss of Muslims' lives and properties. It is deplorable that the ethnic division between Rohingyas and Rakhines remains complex in Arakan. Large section of Rakhines are still hostile to Rohingyas. They are trying to exclude the Rohingyas from the Arakan state affairs. On the other hand, the military junta uses the existing religious and cultural hostilities between them to stir up clashes in Arakan and ensure that they do not unite. Therefore, we call upon our Rakhine brothers to sit together and kill the existing differences, through a meaningful reconciliation, for the future of our succeeding generation. We wish to remind our Rakhine compatriots that Arakan is our own where as Burma is for all of us. We must find ways and means to resolve every problem. For this, the only thing we need is WILL TO DO. Generally, the necessary conditions for reconciliation are respect for human rights and democratic principles. In the case of Rohingya they should be treated as one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Arakan, and therefore Burma, as recognized by the Parliamentary Government that ruled Burma from 1948 to military take over in 1962.

**Burma Digest:** Is involving in pro-human rights actions for you a moral duty? A destiny?  
**Nurul:** Of course, it is a moral duty for us to involve in pro-human rights actions. The UN Charter sets out that human rights are fundamental. The UN members have in virtue of their explicit acceptance of the Charter accepted this status of human rights. Human rights can be argued to be part of ius cogen, therefore universally binding. It is a destiny, because human rights could be generally defined as those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we can not live as human beings. It also helps to satisfy our spiritual and other needs. It is now universally acknowledged that the observance of basic human rights is the cornerstone of peace and security for all nations.

**Burma Digest:** It may be quite hard for people outside Burma, and for governments, particularly, to understand exactly what is happening inside the country. How do you think the international community can judge about whether and by what means there is a chance to reform?  
**Nurul:** It is really encouraging that we have today more international friends creating awareness and advocating for Burma's democracy movement. For the first time, the UNSC held a discussion of human rights and drug trafficking problems in Burma on 16 December 2005, after months of pushing by the United States and Britain. This UNSC's direct involvement on the issue of Burma is an achievement despite initial opposition especially from the China. Even the ASEAN is now raising its concern about the deteriorating situation in Burma. Of course, the role of the media is great to understand exactly what is happening inside the country. In this connection, Burma Digest is playing a highly appreciable role. We thank you so much for this service.

**Burma Digest:** After quite a long period spent abroad from your country, may be you could tell us: how do you think what is happening in Burma is seen from outside? Do you think people from the UK and from other democratic country are aware and able to understand what's going on in Burma?  
**Nurul:** For many years the people from outside were of the opinion that the problems in Burma are democratization issues only. It means that when democracy comes to Burma all existing problems would be automatically resolved. But, now the international community gradually recognizes that the problems include ethnic and constitutional issues, which are of great importance. There are some serious but unreported cases. For example, the sub-human condition of the Rohingya, their case and cause remain unrepresented. Their case has gone by default. Therefore, for lack of information, many people still do not understand all the issues and problems in Burma the way they should be understood. For this vigorous awareness campaign are needed with strong media support.

**Burma Digest:** Thinking about the future, how do you think the situation in Burma will be like in, let's say, ten years from now on?  
**Nurul:** First of all, the most important is to bring the military rule to an end with the concerted efforts of all peoples of the country in order to firmly establish Burma Union under federalism that will ensure human rights and democracy, justice and equality for all and 'self-determination' of the ethnic nationalities. Only then it will be a land of peace and prosperity with sustainable development.

**Burma Digest:** You know there are quite a lot of people now, all around the world, who are trying their best to get involved and help Burmese people in their struggle for democracy; Do you think that we can say there is a global movement for democracy in Burma?  
**Nurul:** Yes, we can.

**Burma Digest:** What can we, citizens of the world and readers of the Burma Digest do in order to help Rohingya and Burmese people in their struggle for freedom, justice and rights?  
**Nurul:** The citizens of the world and readers of the Burma Digest can help Rohingya and Burmese people in their struggle for freedom, justice and rights in a number of ways. You can continue to strengthen Burma's democracy movement, create public awareness and international support for it, and mount effective pressures on the military SPDC to bring about democratic changes, through national reconciliation, as mandated by the United Nations General Assembly. Meanwhile, the international community may be gracious enough to find a permanent

solution to the longstanding Rohingya problem. Burma Digest: Many of the readers of our Burma Digest are worldwide campaigners for democracy in Burma. Is there any advice or suggestion you could give them, concerning the action they should take?Nurul: The situation of human rights in Burma is very deplorable with extreme poverty, political and economic problems. The humanitarian crises need to be addressed. Still good sense does not prevail in the minds of the generals. They do not try to hear the clarion calls of the international community and reject to listen to the outcries of the Burmese people. Targeted sanctions should be put on the ruling SPDC while exploring all possible way and means to end the military rule in Burma. Burma Digest: Is there anything you would like to say to the readers of Burma Digest?Nurul: The Rohingyas are in dilemma. The ruling military regime has totally rejected them; most of their Rakhine compatriots in Arakan are hostile to them while the leaders of the Burma's democracy movement are ambivalent towards them. Still the Rohingya are not formally accepted and accommodated in the country's democracy and ethnic nationalities forums, despite the fact they are an integral part of them or Burma's society, who had duly exercised their right to vote and right to be elected in all elections held in Burma during Colonial Period 1946-47, Parliamentary Rule (1948-62), Ne Win Era and the last General Elections held in 1990 by military SLORC/SPDC. They should try to understand that the Rohingya problem is a manmade tragedy, based on racial and religious discrimination, created by the military and vested interest groups, to rid Arakan of the Muslim population. The Rohingya problem is a forcible dispossession of their land and their expulsion from their hearths and homes in the most inhuman manner. The serious situation being faced by the Rohingya today is unacceptable for any living creatures on earth. They have been denied to have a peaceful living in their ancestral homeland. They have virtually become living dead and are dying alive. To this fact I again invite the attention of the readers and international community.Source:  
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