

Burma's future generation at 'stake': ITUC

Report by Mungpi
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New Delhi (Mizzima) – Lack of investment in education has resulted in millions of school drop outs among Burmese children leaving the future generation “at stake”, an international labour organization said.

The International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC), a global network of workers, in a recent report titled “Burma’s Children, a Generation Sacrificed” said with the military rulers having no intention of investing in education and health, Burma’s future generation is at “stake.”

The report said, the Burmese junta while spending 40 per cent of its total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the military, invests only 0.9 per cent on education and 0.5 on health.

“As long as they [the junta] spend peanuts for education and dedicate a huge part of the government’s budget to the army, there is no reason to think that the Generals wish anything good for the Burmese people and future generations,” Samuel Grumiau, author of the book told Mizzima.

Grumiau said, though Burmese people have always given a high value to the education of their children, the high levels of school drop-outs and the bad quality of education, which are direct consequences of the lack of investment in this sector, are producing generations of illiterate people.

The lack of investment in education, the poor living standard, failed economic situation and child labour have forced millions of children in Burma to the workforce instead of going to schools, the report said.

Grumiau said millions of Burmese children, who do not have the possibility or cannot afford to attend school are ending up in child labour and, in some cases, in the worst forms of child labour, such as begging, prostitution and work in hazardous conditions.

“Thousands of them are also recruited by force into the various armed groups, including the Burmese Army,” he added.

Speaking to Mizzima from Brussels on Tuesday, Grumiau said there is a direct connection of child labor with the junta’s determination to remain in power, as it is the junta, which is responsible for the uplift of the education and the livelihood of the people.

He said, with no labour or worker’s associations, employees have no rights to demand or negotiate with their employers for better wages. This results in extremely low wages, forcing parents to send their children to the work force to help them make a family living.

An example, Grumiau said, is the teachers’ wage, which is below subsistent level. This forces teachers to seek extra income by giving private tuition classes and asking pupils for extra fees for the classes. While those pupils that could afford to pay the fees receive high marks in examinations, those who could not afford it are failed, which then encourages them to leave

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school and go for work.

"This system is close to buying diplomas. The teachers I met are very sad at having to use this system, and they would never do so if they would get decent wages," Grumiau said.

According to the ITUC's report, 25 per cent of the total population of an estimated 57 million is below the age of 14, while 40 per cent are below the age of 18. Out of this population, the report estimates that at least 4 million children, aged between 5 to 13, were not attending schools in 2006.

Burma's successive military governments' economic policies have pushed the country into severe poverty. Over 95 per cent of the population lives on less than 1 dollar a day, while 90 per cent lives on less than 65 cents a day, the report said.

Though in theory, the Burmese law provides compulsory and free schooling for children up to primary school, or fourth standard, with families living below the poverty line, most parents often rely on their children to work, as a helping hand to run the family, the report said.

Children are used in various fields of work, including street work of collecting rubbish, waiters in teashops or restaurants, at farms, domestic work, small scale industries and crafts, mine constructions and even prostitution, the report said.

Besides, the report said, children are also often used as forced labour for authorities, particularly in the absence of adults to work for them. And they are also recruited as soldiers in army camps.

Burma has an estimated over 70,000 child soldiers. But the New York-based Human Rights Watch, said the number of child soldiers could not be accurately estimated and that the numbers may differ, as the junta always makes information flow difficult.

"But what is more important is that the trend of recruiting children in to military services remains," David Scott Mathieson, HRW's Burma researcher told Mizzima earlier.

Grumiau said, the only way to save Burma's future generation is to restore democracy and human rights, including trade union rights.

"A democratic government would invest in the future of the nation, in the children, by providing a decent budget for education," he said, adding that if the Burmese workers have the right to negotiate with their employers, they would have a chance to obtain better wages.

But with Burma's military rulers determined to maintain their rule, the international community must keep up economic and political pressures on them so that they are forced to implement changes, Grumiau said.

The international community should also "support the ILO's action to combat forced labour and recruitment of children into the armed forces. True pressure on the junta from the powerful

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countries in the region [including China, India and Thailand) could harm the generals and push them to reconsider their bad policies," he added.