

The Annotated Unocal: Notes on A Burma Booster

After more than a year of sloth, the Clinton administration has finally imposed economic sanctions on the military regime in Burma, which rules by terror and keeps opposition leaders under virtual house arrest. But the sanctions are limited. Clinton banned new US investment in Burma but did not require the US oil giant Unocal to withdraw from a huge natural gas pipeline joint venture it has undertaken with the Burmese junta, which is known as the State Law and Order Council, or SLORC.

Unocal has been lobbying fiercely in Washington to protect its 28 per cent stake in the pipeline. The company's hired helpers include lobbyist Tom Korologos, an adviser to Bob Dole's presidential campaign, and such beltway think tanks as the Burma/Myanmar Forum and the Asia Pacific Exchange Foundation, which use money from Unocal to sponsor carefully controlled junkets for members of Congress to Burma (see **CounterPunch**, Feb. 1-15, 1997).

Now **CounterPunch** has learned that Unocal has retained the PR firm of Edelman Worldwide to help put the best possible spin on its relationship with the Burma thugs. It seems that Edelman has been writing letters to college professors in the hopes that it can induce them to write friendly op-eds and newspaper articles supporting Unocal's participation in the pipeline joint venture. Below we annotate a letter that Edelman associate Katie Connorton sent earlier this year to an Asia specialist at West Coast University (who did not want to be identified). Note that the letter refers to Burma as Myanmar, the name preferred by the SLORC.

Dear [name deleted],

Knowing of your interest in foreign affairs and international trade issues, we are writing to you on behalf of Unocal, the California oil company which has a large investment in a natural gas pipeline project in Myanmar. (1) As you may know, Congress has passed legislation which would allow the President to impose economic sanctions and ban new U.S. investment in Myanmar if certain conditions are met. Recent actions by the military regime in Myanmar have led some in Congress and human rights activists to call for enactment of these sanctions. (2)

If you have been following the sanctions debate, or are interested in writing about this issue in the future, Unocal would like the opportunity to provide you and your colleagues with an overview of how the Yadana Project is helping Thailand meet its growing energy needs while it brings high-paying jobs, economic development, and socio-economic assistance to the people of Myanmar. (3)

Unocal's 30 years of experience operating in the ASEAN region have shown that continued engagement and economic investment, not diplomatic and economic isolation, is the best way to work toward positive change in countries like

Myanmar. Given the limited amount of U.S. investment in Myanmar and the unwillingness of Asian trading partners to support economic sanctions against the country, Unocal does not think sanctions would be an effective tool to change the behavior of the current regime. (4)

Unocal believes that a better way to seek positive change is for the U.S. government to keep the door open to continued diplomacy and dialogue with Myanmar and to work with its Asian neighbors on a multilateral strategy to affect positive change. In addition, we think that Unocal and other U.S. companies should continue to lead by example through responsible investment in quality projects that lead to continued development and higher living standards for the people, the country and the region. (5)

I hope you will keep these views in mind should you decide to opine on the situation in Myanmar in the future. Edelman would be pleased to arrange for you to meet with one of Unocal's principals to discuss these issues in greater detail. In the meantime, please let me know if you have any questions or would like additional information on Unocal and its operations. (6)

Sincerely,

Katie Connorton (7)

(1) Unocal's investment is large indeed. The total value of the pipeline project, whose other partners include the SLORC, the government of Thailand and the French firm Total, is \$1.2 billion. Burma is as desperate as Unocal to ensure that the project move forward. The SLORC is practically bankrupt and the pipeline, which will move natural gas from the Andaman Sea through Burma to Thailand, is seen as the primary means by which the military can drum up the cash reserves it needs to maintain itself in power.

(2) This letter was written before Clinton imposed sanctions last month. In seeking to prevent such a step, Unocal's lobbyists have claimed that the human rights situation in Burma has been improving. This portrait bears no relationship to reality. During the past year, the SLORC has imprisoned thousands of student demonstrators, waged war on the Karen, an ethnic group that lives near the Thai border, and outlawed almost any form of opposition. Amnesty International rated 1996 as the worst year for human rights since 1988, when the military imposed martial law and killed thousands of people.

(3) Unocal's claim that the pipeline project has brought "socio-economic assistance" to Burma's people is particularly gross. The SLORC has forced peasants to labor on a railroad that supplies the pipeline, forcibly relocated villages lying in its path and murdered peasants who oppose the project. The Center for Constitutional Rights filed a lawsuit against Unocal earlier this year on behalf of a number of Burmese peasants who live in the pipeline region and were forced from the area. The lawsuit charges the company with forced labor, crimes against humanity and torture. One of the Burmese plaintiffs—all whom are identified only as "John and Jane Does"—is a woman whose home was invaded by government troops as she nursed her month-old baby. "SLORC Officer 1 kicked her with his booted foot, and she and the baby fell into the fire where Jane Doe became unconscious," reads the lawsuit. "When she awoke, dizzy with pain, SLORC officer 1 was beating and kicking her sister-in-law, and a villager was holding her baby." The child died a few days later.

(4) Unocal's strategy of speaking only in vague terms about the supposed benefits of "engagement" is a wise one, since it's hard to see how participation in a huge joint venture with a cabal of military gang-

sters could possibly enhance the cause of democracy. Unocal also prefers to avoid discussing the messy details of its involvement in Burma, such as the company's decision to provide the cash-strapped SLORC with a \$7 million fertilizer credit. The letter mentions that US investment in Burma is limited, while discreetly failing to note that this is so because a number of big firms, including Disney and PepsiCo, have withdrawn from Burma under pressure from US solidarity groups. Edelman also notes here that some Asian countries have been unwilling to support sanctions against Burma. That's hardly surprising since Burma's prime allies on this front are Thailand, one of Unocal's partners in the pipeline joint venture, and Indonesia, headed by the Suharto dictatorship and itself targeted for sanctions by US human rights groups.

(5) Unocal's call to "keep the door open to continued diplomacy" can be translated as "keep the door open to the pipeline project", with this, not "positive change" for Burma, being the company's only concern. Unocal's call for "responsible investment" in the region is also hard to stomach. This is the company that has emerged as the firmest US friend of the fanatical Taliban in Afghanistan. Unocal has another big project brewing in that country and it has straightforwardly said that the deal can only move forward if "political stability" comes to Afghanistan. The Taliban, Unocal believes, is the only faction which can produce that precious commodity, even if it does so by imposing a fundamentalist Islamic regime that executes petty criminals, veils women and imprisons them in the home, and rules by force.

(6) While the professor who received this letter turned Edelman down, the PR firm has surely been contacting many others. For those who accept, Edelman's promise to arrange for a meeting with a Unocal principal will no doubt be accompanied by provision of first class travel and lodging, as well as other perks. **CounterPunch** readers who spot pro-Burma op-eds in their local newspapers written by university types might wish to contact the authors to see if Unocal had a hand in prompting them to "opine on the situation" in Burma.

(7) It's easy to see why Unocal selected Edelman for the sordid task of selling Burma. The company's other clients have included such human rights abusers as

India and Mexico. Here at home Edelman shills for UPS, a company with one of the worst records on worker safety, and Charles Hurwitz, the S&L looter who is now seeking to pillage the Headwaters redwood groves he owns in California. Needless to say, Edelman's efforts have paid off handsomely. It is one of the fastest-growing PR shops in Washington. ■

More Sleaze From Babylon

Ronald Kessler's new tell-all book *Inside Congress* has barely been commented upon by the press. That's somewhat surprising as Kessler is a former reporter for the *Washington Post* and big name author of several bestsellers. On the other hand, Kessler tells such sordid tales of congressional sleaze that few family newspapers would dare publish his findings.

By Kessler's account, some of the heaviest drinkers in the nation work in the Capitol building. Joseph Schaap, a retired Capitol policeman, told Kessler that on one occasion a conservative Republican was so drunk he fell asleep on the street near his office. "He was a mess. He had vomited on himself... I put him in the car. We took him to the Cannon Building and washed him off with a hose in the car wash." Another cop, Rodney Eades, recalls that a drunken Ted Kennedy once nearly ran him over in a car and then screamed at him, calling him a "stupid son of a bitch".

Inside Congress also offers squalid stories about little known congressional sex scandals. Some of these stories are dated but amusing. One Capitol Police officer, Gregory Lacoss, recalled making his rounds at 3 a.m. back in the days when Lyndon Johnson was majority leader of the senate. When he opened the door to LBJ's office, the future president was on top of his secretary, Carole Tyler. "I took off running because I knew that man's temper," Lacoss told Kessler. "I ran to the other end of the Senate building... He was running after me." Lacoss finally found refuge in Capitol Police offices, where he hid inside a locker, emerging only after LBJ made a cursory search of the room and then continued his hunt elsewhere.

Martin Lobel, a former aide to Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire, told Kessler the story of one female senate staffer who had little trouble seducing members of the upper chamber. "[She] tried to bed every member of the senate," he said. "She almost had a majority."

Then there's Frederique Sandretto, a 27-year-old French woman who won a Fulbright Scholar fellowship to study in the US and ended up as an intern at the office of California Rep. Sonny Bono. When Sandretto was hired by Bono, his staffers—one of whom asked during her job interview if Charles de Gaulle was president of France—told her she would specialize in terrorism.

Bono had other ideas. He soon assigned her to escort him on his daily rounds, where he would ask Sandretto about her relationship with her boyfriend and make clumsy come-ons. On one occasion, Bono was so busy trying to seduce Sandretto that he forgot to vote on a crucial appropriations bill. When Sandretto rejected Bono's advances, she was stripped of most of her duties and quit in frustration. ■

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