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## The Historical Contexts

### Conditions in Myanmar in 2000

Being assigned to Myanmar/Burma obviously meant being prepared to function as a diplomatic representative in a political, social, and economic context created by Burma's own history and its own actions or 'decisions'. One needed to be aware of the country's British colonial past as well as more recent events, not the least of which was the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, and the infamous and repressive military regime that followed, whose continued existence still dominated almost every aspect of life in the country for its own citizens and those foreigners living and working there. I quickly discovered that although Burma was a relatively small country with very modest impact on the outside world, for a variety of reasons it generated a wealth of scholarly and media attention, perhaps even to a disproportionate extent. There was not only a good deal of historical and other writing about Burma, which was of great assistance in carrying out my assignment, but there was also more media attention than one would expect for a relatively isolated country. Media attention could be a mixed blessing, requiring a great deal of care and alertness at all times, since as ambassador it would not always be possible to avoid it altogether.<sup>1</sup>

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1 In the early 2000s, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) was not as restrictive as it was to later become in regard to media contacts, allowing our ambassadors a small amount of leeway for factual comment to journalists. I found that, because there was not a large number of 'Western' embassies in Yangon, and because reliable sources of public information were scarce, I would often be sought out by journalists from other countries as well as from Australia. Indeed, Australia's ambassador seemed to be relied on by quite a number of foreign journalists to provide helpful and balanced observations.

One ongoing challenge, however, was the fact that much of the outside media and academic interest in Myanmar was to a greater or lesser extent influenced by political and/or ideological considerations. In other words, it was sometimes biased and not objective, responding to or reflecting a predetermined 'agenda'. For example, reporting in some organisations funded by pro-democracy institutions (such as the US government-backed National Endowment for Democracy or the private Soros Open Society Foundation) in outlets such as *The Irrawaddy* or *BurmaNet News* is always enormously valuable and fills very real gaps, but in its coverage, content, and choice of topics, it is never politically neutral. Outsiders did not always immediately understand this.

Two aspects of Myanmar's turbulent history probably stood out for their far-reaching consequences and impacts: one is the extent of its isolation, first self-imposed during decades of authoritarian rule, and lately reinforced by various political and economic sanctions imposed by 'Western' — or, more correctly, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) — countries; the other was the continued existence of martial law in the form of a military regime that had assumed power as a supposed temporary measure to restore 'law and order' in 1988, and then sabotaged the reconciliation process it had set up to transfer power to an elected government. While the 'disturbances' of 1988 are often characterised as a 'democratic uprising' against the (authoritarian but elected) government of the day, this is only part of the story.<sup>2</sup> Starting on 8 August, students and workers launched protests and demonstrations in Yangon that spread quickly to many other cities across the country. A general strike soon followed, and business conditions deteriorated. Between 8 August and 18 September 1988, there was a collapse of law and order, with indiscriminate mob violence targeted at the authorities, especially police, and public executions by civilians on the streets. The army's crackdown led to an estimated 3,000 people being killed over the period of the uprising, in incidents that are still seared in the minds of participants and observers, from young students to townspeople.

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2 Several accounts exist of the events of 1988–90. One of the most accessible is *Outrage* by the well-known journalist Bertil Lintner, then working for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. The most authoritative insider account is that by Dr Maung Maung, who as Attorney General was the only civilian in the Ne Win Government: U Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1999.

The 1990 election campaign itself was relatively peaceful, and resulted in the newly formed National League for Democracy (NLD) winning a majority of seats, with a voter turn-out of 72 per cent. However, the elections occurred without the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi, who had emerged as a leader of the protest movement in August 1988, but had been placed under house arrest by the military. When the military regime — the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) — proposed convening a National Convention to draft a new constitution rather than transferring power, there was understandably widespread disappointment, and a large number of activists left the country when warrants for their arrest were issued. Soon afterwards, in December 1990, a coalition government-in-exile was set up — the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) — led by Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin, Dr Sein Win, who was one of the NLD MPs elected in 1990. The NCGUB was based in Washington DC, and it engaged in continuous lobbying on behalf of the democracy movement in Washington and New York. But it always had problems communicating effectively with the NLD inside the country, essentially because of relentless restrictions on political activity under the military regime. The NCGUB deferred to Suu Kyi, but was not always well informed about Suu Kyi's thinking. Suu Kyi, for her part, sought to avoid opening gaps between herself and the NCGUB, but regarded herself and the NLD's Central Executive Committee as the decision makers. The NCGUB was never a serious alternative government; its political profile was effectively lowered after the Committee for a Representative Parliament (CRP) was established in 1998 by those 1990 MPs remaining inside the country. The NCGUB was formally abolished in 2011 after the new parliament, made up of MPs elected in 2010, was convened.

When the SLORC announced in 1990 that it would not transfer power to the party that won the election, the international community reacted strongly to the human rights abuses of 1988 as well as this refusal to recognise election results, even though the world was preoccupied with the collapse of Eastern Europe and Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union. The initial reaction of the international community took the form of political sanctions organised by international assistance donors through the OECD: government-to-government relations were restricted, economic assistance (but not humanitarian assistance) was stopped, most defence relations were

suspended, and many governments issued statements criticising the SLORC. Developments in Burma were also raised in the United Nations: at the first opportunity, a group of mainly Western countries prepared a resolution for the 1991 UN General Assembly; in 1992, the UN Secretary-General appointed a special rapporteur (Professor Yozo Yokota of Japan); and later the United Nations Commission on Human Rights appointed a series of special rapporteurs on human rights. It was not possible politically to take the situation in Burma to the UN Security Council for the imposition of universal mandatory sanctions, because of the likelihood of a veto being exercised by China and the Soviet Union. The main thrust of the international response was to isolate and punish the Burmese military regime, with any form of engagement or consultation becoming a low priority. This stand-off would eventually provide the spark for a long-lasting debate about the merits of sanctions versus engagement.

These developments created a situation where the highly polarised domestic political situation in Myanmar was paralleled by a high degree of polarisation within the international community. Highly confrontational behaviour inside Myanmar was matched by hard-line ideological positions among Western members of the international community, the outcome of which was essentially a stalemate, with no substantive progress. Other key 'stakeholders' — such as China, India, or Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries — were virtually marginalised in the political and diplomatic negotiations that ensued, and neutral or 'third party' mediation was effectively ruled out. Inside Myanmar, other political parties and ethnic groups struggled to advance their particular interests under military rule, and by 2000 they too had failed to achieve any real impact. International opinion was seriously divided, with Myanmar's Asian neighbours and Third World countries not prepared to endorse sanctions against Myanmar, preferring instead various forms of engagement with the military regime, which equally produced little evidence of progress. After more than a decade, it looked as if this prolonged stalemate in Myanmar could continue indefinitely.<sup>3</sup> Given the circumstances,

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3 The best account of the protracted tensions between engagement and isolation in relation to Myanmar is Morten B. Pedersen's *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policies*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

it is not surprising that many observers were disposed to give up on Myanmar. Nor was there any obvious potential solution available that had not already been tried.

From around the mid-1990s, and especially after 1999, the military regime began to experiment quietly and gradually with its own 'reform' program. Initially, from 1995, the regime started to open its borders to humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) such as Word Vision, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), who were permitted to carry out humanitarian activities in different parts of the country. In 1997, Myanmar became a member of ASEAN and agreed to conform with ASEAN policies and procedures. In the same year, the regime self-nominated as a Least Developed Country (LDC) in the United Nations, and began accepting assistance from UN agencies. Between 1995 and October 2000, Aung San Suu Kyi was under restricted movement around Yangon and, while she could not carry out normal political activities, she would give speeches to her supporters across the wall of her residence. She continued to be harassed, was denied access to the media, foreign visitors, and members of her party, the National League for Democracy, and was often under house arrest.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in 1999 the regime had issued an order outlawing forced labour, although they did not implement this until after they signed a cooperation MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2002. In 1999 they agreed to an Australian proposal for human rights training preparatory to setting up an independent National Human Rights Commission (which they did not do until 2011). In the second half of the 1990s, relations with United Nations envoys and the World Bank were troubled, and the military regime was unresponsive to requests for visits.<sup>5</sup> However, from 2000, they agreed to regular visits by UN special envoys and special rapporteurs on human rights, and from 2002 allowed the ILO to open an office in Yangon. From May 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest and permitted to travel freely around the country for the first time since 1989, and she and her party were

4 Aung Zaw, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of The Irrawaddy magazine has published on-line a reasonably accurate summary of Khin Nyunt's role in his *The Dictators: Part 8—Khin Nyunt Overplays his Hand*, available at: [www.irrawaddy.com/feature/the-dictators-part-8-khin-nyunt-overplays-his-hand.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/feature/the-dictators-part-8-khin-nyunt-overplays-his-hand.html).

5 See Anna Magnusson and Morten Pedersen, *A Good Office?: Twenty Years of UN Mediation in Myanmar*, New York: International Peace Institute, 2012.

allowed to carry out limited political activities (and open party offices) around the country. All of this came to a brutal end in May 2003, when the regime instigated an attack on Aung San Suu Kyi while she was travelling around Myanmar, and she was again placed under house arrest.

Why abandoning the quest for an internationally assisted solution in Myanmar was not really an option is not hard to see. First, serious human rights abuses represented ongoing problems that could not be ignored, especially when prominent political prisoners such as Aung San Suu Kyi were part of the equation. Second, the socio-economic conditions for the people of Myanmar were manifestly disastrous and could not be allowed to drag on because of the enormous human costs. Third, the destabilising regional and strategic forces could not continue to be downplayed or denied — whether it was the spill-over into regional neighbours of transnational crime effects (refugees, people trafficking, narcotics trafficking) or the unhealthy and distorting strategic and military competition between China and India over Myanmar. So whether the outcomes of any initiatives in relation to Myanmar would be worthwhile or sufficient to justify the further efforts, and whether they might need to be contested or warrant subsequent confirmation would probably remain to be seen. At the same time, given the amount of misunderstanding or ignorance of other parties that was objectively prevalent regarding the situation in Myanmar/Burma, missteps and miscalculations might have contributed to the lack of progress. So it might always be worth another try, a slightly different approach, or better coordinated arrangements.

However, the level of mistrust and suspicion from the population towards the authorities (military and non-military) was massively deepened in later years by the ineptitude of the government's handling of fuel price increases in 2007 and its response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which inevitably spilled over into attitudes between the two opposing political groups. Most of the military and civilian figures responsible in the government at the time of the 1988 uprising had long since moved aside, leaving successor generations to manage the consequences. Economic and social damage to the country was long-lasting and severe. Unsurprisingly, this extreme political confrontation and polarisation was very apparent even more than a decade later, when I took up my position as ambassador, and has still not been fully overcome.

## The state of Australia–Myanmar relations in 2000

Australian ambassadors represent the Australian Government in the countries to which they are appointed or accredited. They are formally in charge of all embassy staff, whether they are from DFAT or other departments, and whether they are posted to the country from Australia — ‘Australia-based staff’ — or whether they are recruited in the country — either nationals of the country, or third-country nationals: ‘locally engaged staff’. Managing the embassy, which involves both overseeing its administration as well as providing leadership for the whole embassy, is the single most important role and responsibility of an ambassador. In the Australian foreign service, for many decades the ambassador’s role and responsibilities have been spelled out formally in a letter of appointment (the ‘Head of Mission Directive’), which also represents the statement of expectations against which an ambassador’s performance is to be measured. But, of course, ambassadors are inevitably representatives of their country as well, not just the government. There are, however, no structured ways for this wider representative role to be monitored or assessed. An ambassador is meant to be an advocate for his own country, and an interpreter of the country to which he is assigned.

Operationally, ambassadors are regularly sent instructions to convey messages from the Australian Government to the government to which they are accredited. But they are also expected to use their own initiative to routinely convey generic messages or relevant policy statements to the government to which they are accredited, without specific instructions. To be an effective and objective interpreter of the country to which they are accredited, ambassadors are expected to develop a wide range of well-informed and influential contacts inside and outside the government to which they are accredited, and to send assessments and reports to Canberra from time to time to assist the process of formulating well-focused Australian policy towards the country to which they are accredited. Obviously, all of this requires frequent and effective communications — formal and informal — with relevant staff in the Australian Government. One of the underlying objectives in all of this is to avoid either government being ‘surprised’

by developments; but another important — absolutely normal and well understood — objective is to influence the policies of the government to which ambassadors are accredited. Surrounding this role is, of course, the routine requirement to engage in appropriate public relations activities of all kinds, both in Australia (although only occasionally) and in the country to which an ambassador is accredited (pretty well all of the time). It goes without saying that ambassadors are expected to be impartial and of the highest personal integrity. Nowadays, ambassadors are required to attend special ‘head of mission’ training programs in Canberra before they take up their assignments.

In Australia, foreign policy is not the exclusive preserve of DFAT, but is the product of a collective political process, which assumes considerable public acceptance of the central direction and the main content of the policy.<sup>6</sup> Ambassadors are expected to be conversant with all aspects of policy and mindful of opportunities or risks for Australia wherever they might arise. They might hope to influence the various elements of policy towards another country, region, or organisation, but are not expected to ‘play favourites’ by giving preference to one aspect of relations over others.

While it was not the accepted view at the time, it is clear now that by the end of the twentieth century Australia’s relations with Burma/Myanmar had more to look backward on than to look forward to. It could reasonably be seen as a situation where all concerned were under-achieving and accepting missed opportunities, as was inevitable in the circumstances. There is no one in particular to blame for this; it arose primarily out of conditions in Burma that were not promising in terms of normal international relations.

One important exception to this general lack of interest in Myanmar was the fact that Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, in the Liberal–National Party Coalition Government of Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007), showed considerable interest in Burma, and met his Myanmar counterparts (Ohn Gyaw and later Win Aung) reasonably regularly at ASEAN-Plus ministerial meetings between 1996 and 2007. While not changing Australia’s political sanctions against

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6 The most authoritative account of how Australian foreign policy is practised is still Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley *Making Australian Foreign Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.



Myanmar, in 1999 Downer showed considerable political courage and an innovative approach by launching Australian engagement initiatives with Myanmar in the field of human rights, police-to-police training, and — in 2002 — agricultural research collaboration. These were conducted by Monash University, the Australian Federal Police, and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) respectively. These initiatives — each successful in its own way — added interest to my otherwise low-profile assignment. Downer himself made a short ministerial visit to Yangon in October 2002 during my period as Australian Ambassador, but unusually did not wish to receive a debriefing from me as outgoing ambassador at the end of my assignment in June 2003.

Trade between Australia and Myanmar, officially ‘neither encouraged nor discouraged’ since 1988, was minuscule by 2000, Australian exports averaging a mere \$17 million per year between 1998 and 2003.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with this, Austrade withdrew its trade commissioner from the Australian Embassy following the imposition of commercial sanctions from 1988, after which trade commissioners would occasionally visit from the Australian Embassy in Bangkok, but really could do little more than maintain a ‘watching brief’. Austrade never really reconsidered their position, and when their only long-serving Myanmar trade assistant died in 2002, they were (unsurprisingly) not especially concerned about having nobody to cover Myanmar. Larger Australian companies such as BHP had closed their Yangon offices, and one private Burmese trade consultant was able to represent the Australian Wheat Board, mining companies, and still take on other Australian clients. A small number of small-scale Australian companies were operating in fields such as environmental engineering, water treatment, and were making their mark in a tiny market. Mining support services for the large-scale copper mine then operated by Ivanhoe Minerals near Monywa in central Myanmar were coming from Western Australia on an entirely commercial basis.

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7 Australian Bureau of Statistics figures. This figure was probably inaccurate, however, as it apparently did not include Australian goods shipped through Singapore but destined for Myanmar, where, by the early 2000s, newly opened supermarkets sold items such as King Island cheeses and Australian wines. There was no way to determine the size of entrepôt trade through Singapore.

The other significant Australian investment was in the *Myanmar Times* newspaper (see Chapter 8). Such people made up what was only a small community of individual Australian business people, but they were perhaps a sign of what might happen in the future.<sup>8</sup> The data on Australian trade with Myanmar is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Australian exports to Myanmar/Burma, 1991–2011

Year	Value (\$AUD)	Including Wheat Exports (Australian Wheat Export Board data — no value given)
1991 <sup>1</sup>	\$3m	
1995 <sup>1</sup>	\$9m	
1999 <sup>2</sup>	\$14m	
2000 <sup>2</sup>	\$22m	56,331 tonnes
2001 <sup>2</sup>	\$38m	116,535 tonnes
2002 <sup>2</sup>	\$14m	73,140 tonnes
2003 <sup>2</sup>	\$10m	60,850 tonnes
2004 <sup>2</sup>	\$28m	69,600 tonnes
2005 <sup>2</sup>	\$38m	157,150 tonnes
2006 <sup>2</sup>	\$34m	139,500 tonnes
2007 <sup>2</sup>	\$34m	n/a
2008 <sup>2</sup>	\$33m	34,258 tonnes
2009 <sup>3</sup>	\$60m	n/a
2010 <sup>3</sup>	\$80m	n/a
2011 <sup>3</sup>	\$70m	n/a

Sources: (1) *The New ASEANS*, East Asia Analytical Unit, DFAT, 1997; (2) Australian Bureau of Statistics, Column 5368.0; (3) *Australia's Trade with East Asia 2011*, DFAT, August, 2012. Available at: [www.dfat.gov.au/publications/stats-pubs/Australia-trade-with-east-asia-2011.pdf](http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/stats-pubs/Australia-trade-with-east-asia-2011.pdf).

Australian trade was not only small, but was also dependant on a single commodity: wheat. Myanmar was a regular buyer of Australian wheat.

<sup>8</sup> Austrade would not reopen an office in Yangon until early 2013, after the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Government lifted all economic sanctions against Myanmar.

## Australia's aid program: Present and past

By 2000, Australian aid was also running at a very low level, restricted as it was to humanitarian and relief assistance, and with no funding of scholarships for training in Australia. By 2003–04, Australia's total aid flow would be only \$7.8 million. This was not only a historical low level, but it did not by any measure reflect the needs of a least developed country with the lowest socio-economic data in ASEAN — lower even than Cambodia and Laos, countries with tiny populations compared to Myanmar's 50 million.

Australian aid to Myanmar by the year 2000 was not only minuscule, and deliberately styled 'humanitarian assistance', but it was also directed mainly through UN agencies, such as the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), to avoid any suggestion that it was being channelled through the illegitimate military regime. After the military crackdown against the 1988 uprising, all Australian aid — with the exception of humanitarian assistance — to Myanmar had been halted as part of a concerted approach by Burma's traditional aid donors, namely the OECD countries, including Japan and later Korea. AusAID annual reports of this period ritualistically began their section on Burma by pronouncing that Australian aid to Burma was suspended after 1988. Even in 2001–02, when AusAID acknowledged that Burma was 'on the brink of a humanitarian crisis',<sup>9</sup> Australia's bilateral 'country program' for assistance to Myanmar was a mere \$1.6 million. Throughout my term as ambassador, there was no appetite in Canberra for any expansion of the aid program (apart from the 'courageous' initiatives of Alexander Downer) and even my representations (along the lines of similar representations by my predecessors) for a resumption of Australian Government scholarships for individuals from Myanmar went without response. Yet, astonishingly, Australia was the only aid donor that completely stopped official scholarships: the United States continued its Fulbright scholarships, and Japan, the UK, and Germany continued their scholarship programs.

The data on Australian aid is summarised in Table 2.

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9 AusAID Annual Report for 2001–02.

**Table 2: Australian aid to Myanmar, 1999–2010**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount (Bilateral/Regional)</b>	<b>Percentage of total Australian official development assistance to East Asia</b>	<b>Total</b>
1999–2000	A\$0.8/NA	Not reported	Not reported
2000–01	A\$1.4m/NA	Not reported	A\$1.4m <sup>1</sup>
2001–02	A\$1.6m/NA	Not reported	A\$1.6m <sup>2</sup>
2002–03	A\$3.0m/A\$3.2m	Not reported	A\$6.2m <sup>3</sup>
2003–04	A\$2.9m	Less than 2%	A\$8.7m <sup>4</sup>
2004–05	A\$3.1m	Not reported	A\$11.3m <sup>5</sup>
2005–06	A\$3.4m	Less than 2%	A\$12.2m <sup>6</sup>
2006–07	A\$ 2.6m	2%	A\$11.3m
2007–08	A\$7.1m	2%	A\$17.9m <sup>7</sup>
2008–09	A\$6.9m	4%	A\$44.9m <sup>8</sup>
2009–10	A\$20.7m	3%	A\$29.2m <sup>9</sup>

Sources: AusAID annual reports.

Notes: Since AusAID reports do not always disaggregate country program data and specific funding under cross-cutting programs, it can be hard to identify specific funding.

1. Funding for education support for 1,000 Burmese on the Thai–Burma border may not be included.
2. Funding for returning Rohingya refugees in Rakhine State may not be included.
3. Includes an amount for a bilateral child nutrition pilot program as well as funding for returning Rohingya refugees in Rakhine State.
4. Includes an amount for the 2003–06 Asian Regional Project Against People Trafficking, as well as funding for avian influenza prevention programs.
5. Includes funding for regional HIV/AIDS prevention program for intravenous drug users.
6. Includes funding for regional foot and mouth disease eradication programs as well as additional support for food and shelter for 160,000 Burmese living in camps on the Thai–Burma border.
7. Includes funding for humanitarian relief following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. Also includes funding for livelihood support in Rakhine and Shan states.
8. Australia aid for Cyclone Nargis relief and recovery totalled A\$55 million in 2008.
9. A new commitment to capacity building assistance in health, education, and agriculture announced by Foreign Minister Stephen Smith in February 2010.

It is sometimes not realised that in the post-war years, and after independence in 1948, Myanmar was more dependent on Colombo Plan technical assistance from Australia than from other donors. Myanmar came after Indonesia, India, Malaya, and Pakistan in the number of awards received for study in Australia, and was ahead of Sri

Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries. Burma was the fifth (out of 16) largest recipient of Australian Colombo Plan funds in the first eight years of the program.<sup>10</sup>

So it was not really surprising that, even in 2000, many Burmese still remembered Australia for the Colombo Plan — under which relatives might have been trained in Australia — whose passage into history was widely mourned, although not understood. Many Burmese openly wished for the return of those days. Even ministers and senior officers in the government would ask if Australia would resume aid along the lines of the Colombo Plan. For them, this was the single most perplexing anomaly in Australia's post-1988 policies. Scattered around the Myanmar civil service were senior technocrats who still traced their skills back to their education in Australia under the Colombo Plan. Thus the mining engineer who devised Myanmar's off-shore gas policy had a master's degree from Monash University, and a prominent Australian-trained doctor became Deputy Minister for Health in 2005 (he was the only Deputy Minister standing for the government Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) slate in the 2010 elections who was defeated).

Evidence of Australia's past extensive aid program surfaced from time to time even in the early 2000s, sometimes in unexpected situations. The north-south gravel road west of the Irrawaddy River, from Patheingyi to Monywa, which was built by the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation, was still referred to as 'the Australian road' or the 'Western Highway'; it was used mainly for transport of goods to markets, and was still in relatively good condition in 2000, although it was still unsealed. U Than Aye, the Minister for Education in the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Government for many years, was formerly the manager of the Australian Dairy Corporation's notorious Mandalay Dairy Project. When I visited water and sanitation projects on a UNICEF up-country trip in Sagaing Division in 2002, we saw a solar-powered village water supply system donated by Australia around 1988 — which was ahead of its time in operational

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10 David Lowe and Daniel Oakman (eds), *Australia and the Colombo Plan 1949–1957*, Canberra: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2004; 'The Colombo Plan's First Six Years: Australia's Part', (Doc. No. 299, Paper by the Department of External Affairs), 23 August 1957, p. 638.

simplicity and the way it became enmeshed in village life — still working as a village's principal source of safe water, and managed by local residents themselves.

By 2000, Australia was no longer seeking 'big-ticket' aid projects in Myanmar, and it was sometimes even difficult to ensure that Myanmar was included in Australia's capacity building programs with ASEAN well after Myanmar's admission into ASEAN in 1997. (Whenever Myanmar was included in such programs, it worked hard to ensure it was not a 'drag' on such regional programs because of its own backward arrangements.) Meanwhile, from the mid-1990s on, the Australian Embassy actively implemented a grass-roots assistance program for small-scale community projects, which were highly successful in their impacts, and were meticulously implemented by local groups across the country, including in areas where it was not always possible for diplomats to travel, such as Northern Chin State. The Direct Assistance Program (DAP) was the only program directly under the control of the embassy, rather than being run out of Canberra, and reports of some of its achievements made their way into AusAID annual reports. The Japanese and British embassies had similar schemes that had similar excellent results. But all of these community-based programs fell far short of helping Myanmar develop its national infrastructure and national institutions to the desired level.

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