



Highlights of [GAO-07-457](#), a report to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Burma is one of the world's most impoverished and isolated countries. The United Nations (UN) and other international organizations have become important sources of outside assistance to the country. In recent years, UN entities have increased their funding for activities aimed at addressing Burma's problems. However, Burma's military regime has imposed restrictions on international organizations' activities in Burma. GAO (1) identified principal efforts of the United Nations and other international organizations to address Burma's problems and (2) described the impact of the regime's recent actions on these efforts. We reviewed UN, U.S., and Burmese official documents and interviewed UN, U.S., Burmese, and nongovernmental organization officials in the United States and Burma. We also visited UN project sites in Burma.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-457.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Thomas Melito at (202) 512-9601 or melitot@gao.gov.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Assistance Programs Constrained In Burma

What GAO Found

The United Nations and other international organizations have undertaken numerous efforts aimed at addressing Burma's most pressing problems, which include forced labor, harsh prison conditions, ethnic conflict, an HIV/AIDS epidemic, and poverty. The International Labor Organization (ILO) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have sought to monitor forced labor and prison conditions in Burma by allowing victims to voice their complaints without interference from the regime. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and ICRC seek to assist populations in conflict areas near Burma's border with Thailand. International organizations also attempt to provide food to vulnerable populations, promote local economic development, improve health conditions, and strengthen the Burmese educational system. For example, several UN entities provide assistance to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, and drug abuse, as well as to improve reproductive health.

Burma's military regime has blocked or impeded activities undertaken by many international organizations in Burma over the past 3 years. In 2004, the regime distanced itself from these organizations and began adopting increasingly restrictive policies. In 2006, it published formal guidelines to restrict international activities in Burma. These guidelines, which have yet to be fully implemented, contain provisions that UN officials consider to be unacceptable. The regime's restrictions have had the greatest impact on international efforts to monitor prison conditions, investigate claims of forced labor, and assist victims of ethnic conflict. The regime has blocked ICRC efforts to monitor prison conditions and, until recently, ILO efforts to address forced labor. The regime has also restricted UNHCR and ICRC efforts to assist populations living in areas affected by ethnic conflict. To a lesser degree, the regime has impeded UN food, development, and health programs by restricting their ability to (1) move food and international staff freely within the country and (2) conduct research needed to determine the nature and scope of some of Burma's problems. Despite these restrictions, several international organization officials told us they are still able to achieve meaningful results in their efforts to mitigate some of Burma's humanitarian, health, and development problems.

We asked the Department of State and officials of international organizations to comment on a draft of this report. State commented that the draft report was thorough, accurate, and balanced. The United Nations' country team for Burma did not dispute our specific findings regarding the regime's restrictions but expressed concern that that we had not noted that it had achieved "a significant opening of humanitarian space on the ground." We believe that this statement is not consistent with information provided to us earlier by UN officials, who stated that conditions in Burma had deteriorated since the 2004 purge within the regime. Other comments and our responses to them are contained in appendixes II, III, and IV.