

beyond the gate

Mardi Gras Returns to New Orleans

BBC News Press Release

Tens of thousands of revellers are gathering in New Orleans for the climax of the first Mardi Gras since Hurricane Katrina struck six months ago.

The festivities reach their height on Tuesday when tourists and locals line the streets to cheer on the parades. The mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, says the carnival is a chance for the city to lift its spirits. Some residents see it as an opportunity to publicize ongoing problems in poorer districts still largely in ruins. But others have criticized the decision to go ahead - the carnival has been cancelled before in times of national emergency. Fewer tourists are attending this year, and some carnival groups are not taking part. The financial crisis has also forced

New Orleans to suspend its search for bodies from Hurricane Katrina, with as many as 200 corpses possibly still trapped in homes. The city may also have to release thousands of remand prisoners because it has no money for jury trials.

Still partying

Local agencies have put the number of Mardi Gras visitors at about 400,000 - less than half the normal number. The city's population fell from nearly 500,000 to less than 200,000 after Katrina. The city authorities believe the party is delivering a much-needed boost. Sandy Shilstone, the head of New Orleans tourism, said the visitor numbers were unexpectedly high. "What Mardi Gras has done is really spearhead production and development here in this

city," she added. The party is due to centre on the French Quarter on Tuesday but the parades have passed through areas devastated by the flood such as the Lower Ninth Ward. Jess Niederer, who works with aid group Common Ground Relief, said the carnival highlighted continuing difficulties. "It brings awareness,

not just that it looks like this, but about how it's still looking like this after six months, and why that is," the aid worker told Reuters news agency. Snooky Meyaski, a retired refinery

worker and member of carnival group the Endymion Krewe, saw his St Bernard Parish home swamped after Katrina but he was all for the carnival. "To pass it up would be to just tell

the world, 'Hey, we're down for the count', he said. "And we're not down for the count."



Courtesy of BBC News

BURMA: Atrocities Continue as Mutilated Body Is Found

Voice of the Martyrs

Fresh attacks have been carried out by the Burma Army against Karen villagers in Taunggoo district, resulting in several killings, arrests and the use of forced labour.

On February 15, the mutilated body of an unidentified person was found in Bla Khi area, according to the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP). The victim's throat had been slit and left hand cut off, in an area where the Burma Army had been operating.

Between February 8 and 14, at least 135 people were taken from Kaw Thay Der, Kaw Law Kar, Ku Thay Der and Sar Bar Law Khi villages for forced labour, CIDKP reports. On February 6, three men were arrested from Pau Pa and Yer Loe villages, and on February 14, Burma Army Infantry Battalion 35 arrested a further five men from Pau Pa. Reports have also been received of looting and extortion.

Reports emerged from Karenni State of continuing offensives in January. Three Karenni families fleeing for their lives from the Burma Army were interviewed by the Free Burma Rangers. One of those on the run said: "The Burma Army and their helpers ... were on their way to kill me. They had already killed one of my friends and cut off his head ... At that time they captured me and three others from our village ... as well as three from other villages. We were gathered together from ten surrounding villages for a prayer meeting when the Burma Army forces appeared and captured some of us.

"We were tied up, beaten, punched then we were given electric shocks to our body. They struck us with rifle butts and one of them used a pistol to beat us. One man's jaw was broken, one man's skull was broken and for me I was not able to endure the torture. They did this to us one by one. One of us was then

forced to go with the soldiers and my friend ... was killed. I may have been killed just as my friend was but I managed to escape ... I do not want to take revenge. I am just a villager, I will move away from them."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "We receive reports on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis of continuing crimes against humanity in Burma. The attacks are sickening - not only the use of forced labour, but rape, killings, beheadings and the grotesque mutilation of bodies. For far too long the world has failed to pay enough attention to the ongoing atrocities in Burma. The United Nations Security Council, the Association of South-East Asian Nations and others in the international community must make it a priority to bring an end to the genocidal dictatorship in Burma this year. We will be working tirelessly to help make that happen."

For more information, please

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CSW is a human rights organization which specializes in religious freedom, works on behalf of those persecuted for their Christian beliefs and promotes religious liberty for all.

NOTES

Burma has been ruled by a military dictatorship since 1962. Elections were held in 1990 and won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest. Over 1,100 prisoners of conscience are in jail in Burma.

The current military regime, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is perpetrating gross violations of human rights, particularly against the ethnic nationalities, the Karen, Karenni, Shan,

Mon, Chin, Kachin, Arakan and Rohingya. Over one million people are internally displaced, and since 1996 over 2,500 villages have been destroyed in eastern Burma alone. Evidence of widespread, systematic rape, forced labour, forced conscription of child soldiers, use of human minesweepers, torture and killings continues to be reported regularly.

In September, 2005 the international law firm DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary published Threat to the Peace: A Call for the UN Security Council to Act in Burma, commissioned by former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Nobel Laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu. A briefing was held at the UN Security Council in December, 2005. CSW is calling for a full UN Security Council discussion on Burma, leading to a resolution. For a copy of the report see <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/unitednations.php>