"We have struggled for 50 years by force of arms to try to solve the problems of our country and that approach has failed. Now is the time for peace and reconciliation. The people are fed up and determined to have their rights and freedoms restored." - NLD executive officer Tin Oo.
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publicized and practically endless series of renovations and improvements since the Slorc government took power in 1988. The latest planned renovation: escalators at the northern stairway. Large financial donations to monasteries and pagodas are enumerated in the state media, and many of these donations come not just from Slorc generals, but from groups all over the country. One typical (relatively small) cash donation recorded in the state-controlled media, 456,913 kyat for the Sittway Lawkanaanda Pagoda (the equivalent of one month’s salary for about 380 government employees). More high-profile are the donations to the Buddha’s Tooth Relics, which were loaned, amid much pomp and fanfare, by China to Burma for an extended tour. During the tour in 1996 and 1997, the Tooth Relics inspired reported donations of well over 12 million kyat. These donations are usually publicly received by prominent generals or government officials in formal ceremonies, and though donations themselves are counted almost daily in the state press, it is not made public how any of the money is spent. Reports from abroad allege that large amounts of these cash donations are actually extorted from Burma's citizens who may well like to make merit, but are compelled to give far beyond their means. According to the state-run New Light of Myanmar, over 19,000 days of work have been “donated” to help build and maintain the new pagodas designed to house the Tooth Relics. The Tooth Relics are just one prominent example—there are reports throughout Burma of forced labor on building and renovating pagodas.

The latest Buddhist projects planned by the Slorc regime include several Buddhist universities, Buddhist missionary colleges, and a World Theravada Buddhist Missionary University. The latter is scheduled to open in 1998. Not surprisingly, the curriculum for the World Theravada Buddhist Missionary University will be heavily influenced by the ruling generals, as reported by the New Light of Myanmar: “The university is to be established in keeping with Chairman of [Slorc] Senior General Than Shwe's guidance on propagation of Theravada Buddhism world wide. He spoke of the need for setting up a university to be able to teach Theravada Tipitaka literature and carry out missionary work.”

Even while Burma’s government is showing interest in making it easier to become Buddhist, it is making it harder to become a monk. The government has indefinitely suspended the Payagyi Sangha examinations (a formal test which is required for entry into the Sangha), since late last year when many areas of Burma were disrupted by protesting students and monks. Meanwhile, a very worrying development for Burma’s religious minorities have been reports from all over Burma of apparently sanctioned persecution of religious minorities, or preferential treatment of Buddhists. There are reports of incentives offered to people willing to convert to Buddhism, including freedom from forced labor, special privileges and gifts of money. As perhaps indicated by new missionary universities, more institutional conversion efforts are likely underway as well. A document in Burmese, collected in Chin state and apparently created for use by such missionaries, entitled “Missionaries, Honorable Monk, Cleansing Organization”, listed 17 ways to confront Christians on their beliefs. One state-run media article even reported Hindus performing a Buddhist merit-making ceremony, under the “sponsorship of the Hinduism Teaching Central Committee of Thanantana Dhamma Palaka Organization”. The ceremony was attended by the Minister for Religious Affairs, Lt-Gen Myo Nyunt himself. It’s hard to understand the direct intention of such ceremonies, but clearly even those who haven’t officially converted to Buddhism nevertheless are being encouraged to make Buddhist merit.

Based on the volume and variety of ostensibly religious activity occurring in Burma, its tempting to guess that more is at stake here than just the control of the Sangha, or even a massive and expensive public relations effort. A Burma scholar who has studied the significance of various styles of Buddhist meditation has observed that the military rulers of Burma practice Samatha meditation, a study which has long been associated with law, medicine, alchemy, and magic. He cites an interesting book on meditation published in 1962, the year that Ne Win took power, which suggests that practice of “mental culture” is the solution to Burma’s problems. The author of the meditation book describes himself as the “Head of the Association of Weik-sa (wizard) Sects for the Propagation of the Buddhist Realm.” Certainly some people think that magic might be a motivation for Slorc. The Slorc has been accused of damaging Buddha image at Rangoon’s Payagyi Pagoda and plundering the sacred jewels stored in pagodas all over the country. Some have suggested that the Slorc are searching for a legendary ruby which brings war victory to whoever owns it.

Whatever the motivation, the Slorc on one side seems to be encouraging Burma to make merit at a desperate pace, while simultaneously working to manage, and even rewrite, the role of Buddhism in what is a powerfully religious country. In spite of forceful efforts to suppress the Sangha, there are still many Burma, monks and citizens alike, who are clearly not convinced that making merit is enough. Without significant political change in Burma, it is indeed hard to see how anything but incredible good luck or magic could improve the situation for a country still damaged by years of war, repression and poverty.

Friend: For the endnotes, please turn to page 7.
WHERE TO GO? NEW ARRIVALS IN THAILAND

In the past, Thailand has often been praised for granting asylum to the refugees from Burma who for decades have been fleeing warfare and human rights abuses. These days, the message from the Thai authorities seems clear: go back home. New arrivals have been forced to wait for longer periods before being allowed to move to refugee camps, if at all. As a result, thousands are now squatting wherever they can in the jungles on both sides of the border, hiding from authorities due to a well-justified fear that they will be repatriated as illegal immigrants. The following report is about a group of 127 people, twelve families including babies and the elderly, who recently arrived in Thailand from areas in Kayahkrek township; Kaw Hser, Kleet-Pho Hta, Meh K'taw and Pnweh Poo.

They began their journey together on 2 October, setting out from two adjacent villages. It took almost a month to reach the border. They stopped in Ta Uht Hth region in the mountains before arriving at the border on 26 October. They had a difficult journey, having to pass the Burma Army, DKBA and "Peace Front" soldiers. The children especially suffered, getting sick along the way with fevers, low blood pressure, flu, etc., having no medicines with which to treat them. Nevertheless, they managed to overcome these obstacles and reached the border without any of them dying along the way.

The group said it had become too difficult to stay in their own villages due to the activities of Thut Mu Heh, leader of the "Peace front" soldiers. Thut Mu Heh has forced conscription to his group upon all residents of Nga Khin Gyi to leave their homes for the Burma Army to take action against the local populace. The Burma Army demanded that all villages throughout Ta Uht Hth district (totaling about 30 villages of 5 to 30 houses each) relocate to a single site at Ta Uht Hth village, where they will be tightly controlled by the soldiers.

At the relocation site people are required to labor for the army (such as portering food supplies) three days week, permitted to do their own work three days per week, and to rest for one. When people have time to go and do their own work, they must pay another 10 kyat. In fleeing, these people have left behind their property, cattle and livestock, even unharvested rice — everything. The refugees brought only a few basic possessions for the journey. One elder among the group explained how they didn't like to have to come to another country, as they always stayed in their own villages and on their own land, but now they have had to flee because of all the difficulties. Most of the rice crop is ready for harvest, but they made the difficult decision to leave before harvesting.

One elder described how relieved they were when they reached the border. However, getting into a refugee camp was also a danger for them. They had been told to stay until 4 pm, and left. Throughout that night and the next morning, the families dispersed to various locations.

CHUMPHON CAMP

Refugee sites within Thailand exist under a range of conditions. For many of the well-established sites (called "temporary shelters" by Thai authorities), residents still have limited options to work outside the camp, are usually permitted to forage in the forest for additional vegetables and have access to markets within the camp where they can buy other necessities brought in from outside. By contrast, the newest camps often begin as squatters' sites, where people who have crossed the border settle down to wait for the authorities to decide what will happen to them. They often spend months in uncertainty, knowing that at any time they may be told to move to a more established camp, to return to Burma, or simply be permitted to stay a bit longer. At these sites, people often receive only the most basic food and medical aid, and are allowed no access to the outside. With an extremely limited diet and often overused water sources, many refugees are suffering from health problems which indicate poor nutrition and sanitation.

267 refugees currently live under these conditions in the Chumphon area in far southern Thailand. From NGOs, they currently receive basic foodstuffs: rice, salt and fishpaste. As the site is remote, the roads are bad and access is restricted, there is no market and there are currently no Thai vendors who come to the camp to sell meat or vegetables. The few gardens that have been planted are not enough to supplement the diets of all the residents, and hunting and fishing are prohibited. According to a trained medic in the camp, out of nearly three hundred residents, 13 children have died in Chumphon between March and October 1997. Only one of the thirteen children was over a year old. In the same period, it was reported that there were eight births. The medic who recorded these deaths wrote, "There are not enough medics qualified to look after the patients. We need help." NGOs are currently attempting to address the issue.

November 1997
The following details of incidents in Papun Township, Karen State, are edited extracts from two reports by a Burma Issues Human Rights Documentation fieldworker, who investigated conditions for over two months, interviewing civilians who had suffered abuses by the Burma Army. All personal details have been removed to conceal the identities of the victims.

A free fire zone has been established in Papun Township, Karen State, where the Karen National Union (KNU) is still active. Early in March, the Burma Army launched a major offensive against ethnic hill Karen civilians in an attempt to cut their connections with KNU personnel. After the fourth unsuccessful round of cease-fire talks, Burma's military regime has been systematically trying to press the KNU, vis-à-vis Karen civilians in KNU active areas, to surrender or, as they put it, return to the "legal fold". The current offensive is part of this broad 1997 Burma Army strategy for the eradication of the KNU, code named Operation Moe Taing ("Operation Storm").

Summary forced relocation, forced laboring and portering, extra-judicial execution, torture, land confiscation, arbitrary taxation, destruction of village property and food, and general ill-treatment have all occurred when the Burma Army troops have encountered civilian populations.

**Forced Relocation**

The Burma Army has been forcibly relocating villages, especially hill Karen villages in the mountainous areas where the KNU is active, in an effort to weaken the connections between the KNU and Karen civilians. For example, in March 1997, Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) 356, 546 and 548 commenced operations in Papun Township (as part of a regional operation combining troops of Divisions 22, 77 and some from Southern Command). They ordered all the villages around M. village to gather their food stocks and possessions, and relocate to M. village within seven days. If villagers failed to follow this order then they would be treated as the enemy.

The population at the relocation site totaled about 2,000 people. Each household received a 20 x 20 foot plot upon which to build a house. The land had been confiscated from local villagers without compensation. There was a clinic at the relocation site but not enough medicines were available for the villagers, as the army had confiscated them for their own use. The most common diseases suffered by the population in that area are malaria and cholera.

Villagers had to serve as porters for 15 days periods upon demand and also cut bamboo and timber with which to build an army camp. In addition, villagers had to undertake roadwork around the site. Food shortages occurred as a consequence of the amount of looted all rice stocks they saw. Rice and livestock not taken were simply destroyed. The porters only received a rice meal twice a day, and were not given water – they could drink only when crossing rivers and streams. No medicines were offered to sick porters. The porters were threatened repeatedly, prodded with knives, and told that anyone attempting escape would be shot to death.

Another unit from LIB 548 was employing a group of 15 porters around the same time, including a 30 year old woman who was at first accused of having a husband in the KNU. The soldiers tied her hands behind her back and threatened to kill her in three days unless her husband surrendered to them. Two days later she was forced to carry mortar shells, in spite of not having been released from the ropes. She was subsequently interrogated by military intelligence. The soldiers kicked her in the face with their boots causing her to bleed from both ears. No treatment for this injury was given. She was forced to serve as a porter for about a month. She wandered around in the jungle for about six days after being released, until she was able to locate her family who had fled from their village.

**Torture**

During March 1997, LIB 548 troops arrived at T. village and arrested a male villager, accusing him of collaborating with the KNU. Although he denied their accusations three soldiers took turns at standing on his neck and pushing his head into a river. On the third occasion he virtually suffocated, after which they proceeded to question him.

They dragged him away from the river and into the rice fields, and covered his head with a plastic bag continuing to suffocate him. They removed the plastic bag and again questioned him. They stabbed at his ear, jaw and ribs with the knife, accused him of lying and threatened to kill him. His head was then covered with cloth and water was poured over it until he was again suffocating. He begged the soldiers to kill him as he could not suffer their torture any longer.

That night the soldiers tied his hands behind his back to a bamboo rod and dragged him along the ground for about 80 feet. They rolled another bamboo rod over his shins and interrogated him again. His legs were

Continued on page 7

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THAILAND: VIOLATING THE RIGHT TO NON-REFOULEMENT

The internationally recognized principle of non-refoulement forbids the forcible repatriation of any person to a country where he or she would be at risk of serious human rights violations. There have been recent acts of refoulement by the Thai authorities which highlight Thailand's policy of temporary refuge and limited protection. Two instances clearly illustrate concerns regarding current Thai policy: the repatriation of a group of 400 Mon people from Prachuap Khiri Khan Province, and their subsequent return to Thailand due to continuing human rights violations; and the impending repoulement of more than 3,000 recent Karen arrivals in Tak Province.

During April 1997, a group of some 800 Mon crossed into Thailand to a site near the border in Ban Sa Pan District, Prachuap Khiri Khan Province. The group consisted of civilians attached to an armed Mon group, the Mon Army Mergui District (MAMD) a splinter group of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) which had agreed to a ceasefire in 1995. The Burma Army's recent offensive swept into the Tenasserim Division in April, and the group's village of Chaung Kyi had been captured on April 27.

Thai authorities settled the new arrivals in a very small site, one kilometer from the border, where they stayed for two months. They were permitted only plastic sheeting for shelter and were not allowed to build platforms off the ground, although it was the rainy season. The MAMD surrendered on May 25, 1997, and were told by Burma Army officials to organize the group to return. Officials from the MAMD told the group (now numbering around 400, the whereabouts of the others is unknown) that the SIcor had promised their area near Chaung Kyi would be developed, and education and health assistance would be provided. However, the group was afraid to return to Chaung Kyi as the Burma Army had created a base close to the village.

On May 30, a brigade from the Burma Army met with military officials from the Thai Army 9th Division. The Thai military representatives agreed to send the refugees back. Both Burmese and Thai officials visited the temporary shelters several times following this agreement, pressuring the refugees to return. The Thai authorities insisted they would not continue granting sanctuary, and the refugees should return to their "peaceful" homes. After several such visits, the refugees believed they had no choice but to return.

On June 6, the group was repatriated directly into the hands of a local Burma Army commander. The Thai authorities overseeing the repatriation procedure invited both Thai television news and the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to observe the repatriation. In spite of observation, it appears they did not take adequate steps to ensure that official basic standards of voluntary repatriation were met, namely: were the refugees subjected to pressure to return? were they provided with information regarding the conditions they will be returning to inside Burma? were systematic interviews of individuals about whether they wanted to return conducted, and, if any, alternatives to repatriation were offered?

The group's fear of continued human rights violations upon return were realized. After reaching Chaung Kyi, the returnees were forced to work building the local Burma Army base prior to constructing their own dwellings or planting crops. Forced portering, forced conscription, inadequate food provisions, and severe punishment for any non-compliance led to this group fleeing to Thailand again in July. However, Thai authorities refused to grant them sanctuary, and on July 18 the Thai border police arrested more than 200 members of the group and handed them over the Thai Army 9th Division who transported the group to the border. The group remained on the Thai side, but the site was close to a Burma Army outpost and therefore accessible to attack. Apparently, the Thai authorities informed the Burma soldiers stationed that the group was there, and most of its members have dispersed - their current status and whereabouts are unknown. A UNHCR official visited the site on July 23 and interviewed the main families. The Mon National Relief Committee (MNRC) alleges that border authorities misinformed the UNHCR official by saying the group was not part of the original group repatriated in June.

The original group who sought sanctuary in Thailand, and subsequently returned, are believed to have fled further inside Thailand seeking work from local farmers. Thai authorities claim these people are not refugees, "displaced persons fleeing fighting" (the authorities' new criterion for refugee status) but are illegal immigrants who are only seeking economic hardship, and are deported upon arrest. This does not take into consideration the reasons behind the search for refuge, as most are fleeing from the various human rights violations perpetrated by the Burma Army. The immigration detention centers in Bangkok and along the border are severely overcrowded. At present around 400 people per week are being deported to border areas. The refusal of the Thai government to provide and allow adequate protection has escalated the number of illegal migrants, who will try again and again to seek work in Thailand, until there is a change in their situation in Burma.

The role of the UNHCR during this repatriation is of major concern. It has stated it had no formal role in the repatriation, acting only as an "observer." It also acknowledged that a number of the standards which should apply in any voluntary repatriation were not applicable.
met. This is not surprising considering the questionable "voluntariness" of the repatriation, and the impossibility of monitoring the returnees situation upon their return. However, the UNHCR has not released a public report of its observations. The lack of transparency, information sharing, and silence about this kind of repatriation process is tantamount to complicity and effectively legitimizes whatever repatriation procedure Thai authorities wish to use. It sets a dangerous precedent, especially given fears of mass repatriation during the coming dry season.

The second alarming instance is of impending repatriation. Approximately 2,000 new Karen arrivals from Burma crossed into Thailand at the end of September and early during October in Umphang District, Tak Province. Thai authorities denied these people entry into nearby Noh Pho camp, on the basis that these people have not fled fighting. They were allowed to camp temporarily in the surrounding jungle area and receive relief aid from the Burma Border Consortium (BBC) as well as other quasi- formal assistance.

A Thai military source, quoted in The Nation on November 4, said "They came here for work because the economy is going downhill in their country... [and] All of them will be sent back because they are illegal immigrants, not displaced people as they claim." Contrary to this statement, the latest arrivals tell a litany of human rights abuses endured - forced labor, forced portering, extortion of porter fees, extralegal executions, and forced relocation. People hid during the day, moving at night in an attempt to return to Burma. The Burma Army has reportedly closed access to the border, leaving many families trapped.

The refugees who managed to cross were pressured by Burma Army officials to return. They refused as their request for the army not to use force once returned was rejected. Apparently a Burma Army spokesman said words to the effect that "We are the army and we do not listen to civilian demands." However, on October 29, soldiers from the Thai Army 3rd Division arrived at two villages, Kwe Le Taw and Htee Saw Hgee, around Noh Pho camp where the new arrivals have been taking shelter, and told the groups there that they could no longer stay in Thailand, and must return to Burma. Apparently the order came from their superior officer.

At the date of writing it is unclear what measures will be taken to enforce this order. An organization providing basic medical aid has been told to stop, and there are ongoing meetings between Burma Army officials and Third Division Thai Army officials. The group has been isolated by rainy season road conditions and a Thai policy of denying access to independent third party monitors. If this group is repatriated it will constitute an act of repatriation as these arrivals have sought sanctuary in Thailand on account of well-founded fears of persecution by the Burma Army. The local Burma Army battalion has refused to promise that force will not be used if these refugees return to their village. Thai authorities are planning to consolidate the refugees in another location. The site is close to the border, and the refugees do not want to go there as it is close to a Burma Army outpost. As in other consolidations, no doubt people will be "lost." The Thai authorities’ policy of denying access to refugee camps, and pressuring refugees to return, is alarming.

Equally alarming is that these new arrivals may be forcibly repatriated, contravening the principle of non-refoulement, without widespread knowledge among the international community.

No refugee should be returned to Burma until it can be independently verified that there has been a fundamental improvement in the human rights situation causing such outflows. People do not leave their homes, property and villages unless life has become unbearable. Returning these refugees to a territory where they face persecution constitutes a breach of customary international law. Thailand should afford refugees effective and durable protection against repatriation, and base any repatriation program it undertakes in accordance with the UNHCR’s handbook on voluntary repatriation. Unless there is a change in the human rights situation in Burma, outflows will continue and the refugees will disperse further inside Thailand looking for work by which to survive. International pressure needs to be sustained to ensure protection of these refugees and for Thailand to look to durable long-term solutions in order to curb the cycle of exodus.

V.J.C.
"There is no government restriction on her movements. The authorities concerned only requested her... to conduct political activities within the framework of the law... so that peace, tranquility and stability will not be disturbed." – A Burmese military spokesman denying that there are any restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi.

"The EU is demanding to see Burma's plan for moving toward democratic development." – Ex-Thai foreign minister Prachuab Chaiyasarn explaining the EU's expectations on Burma before they will allow Burma to be part of any Asean-EU cooperation agreements.

"Who is she and who am I? I'm a foreign minister and she is a government opposition leader. She would have to make the request if she wants to see me." – Ex-Thai Foreign Minister Prachuab Chaiyasarn explaining why he has not visited Aung San Suu Kyi while in Burma.

"Indeed, with nine members, Asean is confident that its 'flying circus' will continue to perform with greater vitality and enthusiasm." – Dr. Termsak Chalermpananupap, the Assistant Director of the Asean Secretariat's Bureau ACU and Dialogue Relations, in a report on Asean expansion.

"When they start releasing political prisoners and removing the barricades then we'll know there's been real progress." – A Rangoon-based diplomat commenting on the Slorc's more cooperative treatment of the NLD.

"This unsubstantiated accusation by A.I. is nothing surprising. During this time of the year, the anti-Myanmar Government elements routinely, through the A.I., fabricate such stories. Actually, it has been deliberately created to influence the UN Secretary General's report to the 3rd. Committee on Human Rights Situation in Myanmar. ... These anti-Myanmar government elements have [been] playing this game very annoyingly, but if somebody takes the time to really look into their strategy, one can read their true nature." – Slorc response to an Amnesty International report that was released prior to UN meetings.

"Who says that strict laws are Asian values?" – Aung San Suu Kyi commenting on Asian values and the Slorc.

"Burma is an interesting market for businessmen, and a large market with nearly 50 million population." – Brig. Gen. Maung Maung while on a trade promotion visit to Bangkok.