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Some Acronyms in This Issue

IB -	Infantry Battalion (of
LIB -	Light Infantry Battalion
RTG-	Royal Thai Government
KPF-	Karen Peace Force
SP-	Secret Police
DKBA-	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
KHRG-	Karen Human Rights Group
VPDC-	Village Peace and Development Council

News

Cordless phone towers closed due to suspected media link

24 Mar 2010, Hong Dein

Mon State: Cordless phone transmitter towers all over Mon State have been disabled since the third week of March 2010, in an attempt made by Burmese authorities to stem the flow of information being sent to exile media groups based along the Thailand-Burma border.

A Mudon Township cordless phone owner informed IMNA, “the Burmese authorities have ordered the phone offices up on the mountains to close since last week.”

A second phone owner from Mudon Township elaborated that the Burmese authorities’ increased frustration with the amount of information being leaked to media groups lead them to order the closing of cellular phone towers in the Townships of Moulmein, Ye, Thanphyuzayart and Mudon.

Cordless transmitter towers inside Burma are typically owned and run by independent, private owners. The practice of owning a private tower is technically illegal inside Burma, and their owners must typically pay large amounts of money to Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) members in their villages, as well as various Burmese law



A villager from Hpa Ouk village, Moulimien Township, makes a call using a cordless phone in November 2009.

Commentary

Can Ethnic Problems Be Solved After the 2010 Elections?

In early March, Burma's ruling military regime officially announced an "Election Commission Law" and "Political Party Registration Law" and encouraged all political groups in the country to register as political parties in the elections, which will be held before the end of 2010.

The 2010 elections are mainly based on the State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) 2008 constitution, which allows military representatives to hold 25% of the seats in Burma's parliament, which is comprised of an Upper House and a Lower House. 75% of the Upper House is comprised of representatives elected from 14 regions and ethnic states, and 25% is comprised of military representatives selected by the Chief of Staff. The Lower house is similarly comprised, but 75% of its representatives have been elected from the entire Burmese population, and 25% are military representatives. Each of Burma's 7 ethnic states are allowed to have their own assemblies but they are only allowed to elect 66.66% of their representatives, while 33.33% are military representatives appointed by the Chief-of-Staff.

There will be fewer representatives of Burma's ethnic minorities in both the national state parliament and the ethnic states' parliaments, and over 50% of the power is controlled again by the military leaders and their political supporters.

The ethnic representatives have very little voice in parliament because of their low percentage of involvement. The ethnic states and their parliaments are not free, have less power, and they are under the command of military leaders appointed by the Prime Minister in their own assemblies.

There have been many problems in Burma's ethnic minority regions. Armed conflict is an on-going situation, and thousands of ethnic minority members have migrated to neighboring countries as migrant workers or as refugees. In the whole of undeveloped Burma, since the military took power in 1962, the ethnic minority areas are the country's least developed regions; the military government offers only minute amount of support for education, health and developmental assistance.

The ethnic minority groups in all regions of Burma need peace, and want the new government to solve their political problems and end armed conflicts through peaceful negotiations with ethnic minority armed groups. The people in ethnic regions need development to improve their livelihoods, education for their children and health care in their communities.

Since there is but little representation of ethnic minorities in Burma's parliament, and the newly elected military-mixed government has the intention of centralizing policies, the ethnic minority groups have little expectation of living in peace, and exercising their freedoms, even after the 2010 elections.

enforcement factions. Disgruntled tower owners informed IMNA that the recent crackdown on transmitter towers by these same authorities has dramatically impacted their incomes, already partially depleted by extortion fees.

"Most of my income [from the tower] was given to the sa-thone-lone [Burmese intelligent agency], policemen, village headmen, and the secret police, because they would often come demand money from tower owners, because the phone towers are illegal," an former tower owner, who asked to remain anonymous, complained.

A cordless phone owner in Moulmein explained that the crackdown on cordless towers is creating problems

for Burmese families with relatives employed as migrant workers in Thailand. These individuals, who use cordless phones to transfer money into Burma and communicate with their families inside Burma, are having great difficulties making contact.

According to a second cordless phone owner in Moulmein, cell phone usage in Burma is widespread largely because of its low cost; one minute of cordless phone usage costs 300 kyat per minute, as opposed to one minute of satellite phone usage, which costs 600 kyat a minute. This source complained to IMNA that cordless phone connections were highly insecure, and that private conversations can easily be picked up on radio transmitters, and played for all to hear.

News

Over 300 villagers flee from MOMC.7 offensive in Pegu Division

March 24, 2010, HURFOM

Pegu: Over 300 villagers have fled from assaults issued by a military column under the leadership of Military Operation Management Command (MOMC) No. 7 in Kyaukkyi Township, Pegu Division.

According a HURFOM field reporter in the area. MOMC No. 7's military column No. 1 began a fresh offensive against Karen National Union (KNU) battalions in the region around Kyaukkyi's Singa village, a Karen settlement comprised of 70 household. After the battalion began shooting villagers on sight on March 5th of this year, suspecting them of being KNU soldiers, a large portion of the village's population fled to the safety of the surrounding jungle, where they report that they are living without sufficient food or medical care.

According to a Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) captain who asked that his name be withheld, "the SPDC's [State Peace and Development Council] column No. 1, under the command of MOMC no. 7 which is based in Kyaukkyi, started actions in Singa village in early March. On March 5th, Column No. 1 troops started shooting inside the village with heavy weapons at 2:00 PM. As a result, about 314 villagers have left their homes [by the third week of March] and are hiding in the jungle."

KNU sources reported to HURFOM that the villagers are afraid to return to Singa village to access their food supplies, and currently are suffering from a dramatic lack of food supplies in their refuge in the jungle. Most Singa villagers own beetle nut farms and durian fruit orchards; the area contains roughly 117 farms. Fleeing to the safety of the jungle means that they have had to abandon their crops.

A Singa villager named Saw Ru Bee (not his real name), 54 years old, told HURFOM's reporter, "The military troops have already commanded to the villagers that if they see the villager in either the jungle or on their farms, they will shoot them immediately [on suspicion of being KNU soldiers]. In the past, they have already shot four of our villagers because they mistook them [for KNU soldiers]. The villagers

do not dare to live in the village because the troops always make trouble for them, if they see the villagers in the village. I think, now they have already burned our home down."

"In the last three months, our family has already fled [from Burmese military battalions into the jungle] three times, including this time. I feel very sad for my children. They don't understand what is happening." he added.

Displaced villagers continue to struggle in Tavoy District

18 Mar 2010, Mehn Oa

Villagers fleeing abuse at the hands of Burmese military battalions in Tenasserim Division and Tavoy District's Khaw zar sub-Township are encountering a new host of problems after taking refuge in New Mon State Party (NMSP)-controlled territory in Tavoy District.

The residents of Tavoy Districts Jao Dein village, where the vast majority of the 200-plus displaced villagers have taken refuge, claim that they lack sufficient food, educational facilities, and medical care to see to the needs of the village's newest residents.

According to Kaowao newsgroup on March 11th of this year, during the first week of March 2010, over 200 villagers from Tenasserim Division's Yebyu Township fled to NMSP-controlled area, in order to escape forced militia training at the hands of Burmese Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) No. 282 and 273; IMNA has received information that similar abuses committed by Infantry Battalion No. 31, in the village of Mi Htaw Hlar in Tavoy District's Khwa zar sub-Township have prompted village residents to find shelter in NMSP area as well.

Currently, IMNA's sources report that well over 200 villagers from Mi Htaw Hlar, and the Yebyu villages of Kyauktalin, Kyaukkatin, Alaesakhan, Paukpinkwin have taken up residence in and around the small 200-household village of Jao Dein and pala tha rao, in Tavoy District. Unfortunately, the residents of Jao Dein earn their survival through highland rice cultivation, and many reported to IMNA that this means of existence simply does not yield enough rice to share with the newcomers.

"The people who have arrived in our village, we can only help them find shelter, because in our village, we have no more food to help them, but we try to help

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them while they are having these problem [no jobs or shelter], however we cannot give them food. We can help them with housing, and our village headman has plans to build houses for them" a villager from that area explained.

According to reports, Jao Dein's village headman has spearheaded efforts to provide aid to the displaced villagers that have arrived in his village, as well as those who continue to straggle in. Jao Dein villagers have been entreated to open their homes up to the new arrivals, and plans have been made to begin construction on temporary shelters. Long-term plans, to provide the displaced villagers with highland gardens and paddy farms, are also being discussed.

"We can help just with giving shelter in our village, because we do not have enough food for them, but now we are trying to build some houses for them. We will try to save all of the people who left from their villages," a village headman informed IMNA.

Pleas for assistance resulted in small donations of rice from a local Mon party, who asked that its name be concealed for political reasons. However, a newly arrived former resident of Mi Htaw Hlar reported to IMNA that food remains scarce, and that the small size of Jan Dein has resulted in shortages of other services and educational opportunities.

"We have no homes, no more food, and no school for our children to attend. Now the village headman is helping us by asking villagers to let us live in their homes, with their families. The village headman has made plans to provide all of the people who have arrived in his village with shelter, but the villagers can't give us food. We still have problems getting food," he told IMNA..

Villagers forced to live in hiding after 2 villages burned

March 15, 2010, HURFOM

In a recent raid, unidentified soldiers from a Burmese army column patrolling in Pegu Division, Burma, set fire to 2 villages in Nyaung Lay Bin district. The sweeping destruction has driven residents into hiding in remote and inaccessible areas, further threatening their quality of life.

After entering the Karen villages of Kadeemudaw and Heetoe Chaungwa on February 7th, Burmese soldiers from the column began torching homes. Residents have reported that it was unclear why their village had been targeted by the column, though a villager

commented that they are often accused by Burmese soldiers of supporting the Karen National Union (KNU). Between the two villages, more than 74 households were destroyed forcing over 200 villagers to flee and take refuge in the jungle.

The two villages are located approximately 25 miles from the KNU⁷ Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Brigade No. 3. The area is subject to intense militarization, and the KNU continues its insurgent campaign against the Burmese army, after 60 years of fighting. These villages have been burnt down before, one in 2004 and the other in 2006.

Since the raising of the 2 villages, residents who fled their homes told a HURFOM field reporter that, they have faced food and medical problems due to the inaccessibility of their position. They have not been able to receive help from other organization, specifically the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) because of their distance from the border, and report being short on food and basic household materials such as pots or any cooking materials.

According to one of the fugitive villagers, U Mu Tee, a 60 year old Kadeemudaw villager, Kyauk Kyi Township the refugee households also report not having regular household items, such as blankets or mosquito nets. Villagers have also reported problems with contracting malaria, suffering from diarrhea other illnesses.

He explains, "I just know they were Burmese soldier; I don't know their number and how many of them there are. Villagers got news of the Burmese soldiers entering in Nyaung Lay Bin District on February 5th, but they didn't enter my village until February 7th. When the soldiers arrived in the village they started to burn homes and villagers fled and got nothing from their houses".

While these less accessible fugitive settlements allow for villagers to begin rebuilding their lives to make a living, the homes are less permanent, made out bamboo and thatch, as compared larger better built wood homes.

As compared to other abuses that only disrupt village life with taxes increased work, or physical torture, the raising of villages is a decisive method of depopulating a region. Burmese army sources first began practicing its '4 cuts' policy in the 1970's against the then insurgent groups of the in eastern Burma, by specifically targeting civilian communities. The policy severely undercut the insurgent capacity to survive, and embodied severe human rights violations and repression.

Report

Cycles of abuse: How extortion of remittances from Burmese workers perpetuates worker migration

Introduction:

Announced in 2008 the Royal Thai Government (RTG) instituted a project of 'National Verification', intending to issue temporary passports for Thailand's estimate 1.8 to 3 million migrant workers¹. While migrant workers from Laos and Cambodia were able to register at offices provided by their home country within Thailand, the vast majority of migrants, of whom nearly 1.5 to 2 million are Burmese, were forced to travel back to Burma to either return home or register at offices in Myawaddy, Tachilek and Kawthaung.

The difficulty of the return journey, made under the threat of extortion and detention by the Burmese State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) administrative and military bodies, as well as mistrust and fear of the SPDC's reaction to registering migrants, are key reasons cited why an estimated 1 million Burmese migrant workers have refused to register for the temporary passport. Subsequently, the deadline for registration, which passed initially on March 3rd, has led to the arrest or flight of what HURFOM estimates to be at least 100,000 Burmese migrant workers thus far.

In the majority of cases, Burmese migrants work in Thailand to send money home to families still in Burma. These remittances often form a significant portion of a family's income and are crucial in paying for basic daily costs. With the disruption caused by the RTG's policy of deportation, the money used to sustain the livelihoods of many families in Burma will be cut.

Whether arrested by Thai immigration authorities or choosing to return due to the threat of arrest, non-verified Burmese migrant workers now find themselves in the precarious position of being without any protection or rights in both Thailand and Burma.

This insecurity makes them primary targets of travel restrictions, extortion and theft by individual Thai police officers, Burmese government administrators and military, their ethnic proxy forces, and corrupt brokers. Migrants make relatively little by Thai standards – an average salary of 3,500 baht a month – yet money taken from migrants through extortion during their return trip quickly compounds into large sums, benefiting Burmese military and civilian forces as well as pro-government ceasefire groups.

Once returned home, many migrants have reported that there are few jobs available to them in Mon State. The few opportunities to earn income available in the consistently stagnant Burmese economy have since been filled by the increased number of returning migrant laborers. Often originally driven to seek an income abroad due to the economic system formed decades of mismanagement, migrants find that the situation has not improved, and again have little choice but to return to Thailand.

Inspired by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)'s February report, *Abuse between borders*, HURFOM has documented the extortion efforts conducted against migrants along the length of their return journey, and their experiences once they have returned home. HURFOM hopes to highlight the issues of insecurity migrants face during their journey back to Burma, the loss of crucial remittance money, and the negative impact these issues will have on migrant livelihoods, and the overarching immigration goals of the RTG.

These personal accounts drawn from Mon and Karen State are representative of other undocumented occurrences of abuse and extortion, as migrants return to Burma from Thailand. Due to the difficulty of approaching and interviewing migrants in the process of returning home, as there is a very great risk to the migrant's and field worker's security, the accounts documented here have been gathered from migrants who have since returned home, brokers who have assisted migrants in successful navigation of checkpoints on their journey, or migrants who have again returned to Thailand due to the severity of unemployment after returning to their villages.

¹ From the Tiger to the Crocodile, Human Rights Watch, February 2010.

Background:

At the time of the National Verification's initial deadline on March 3rd, nearly 1 million Burmese migrant workers remained in Thailand. These workers make up a key component of the country's labor force, performing the most basic jobs within Thailand's economic system. Yet, since January 2010 Thai authorities have been pressuring Burmese migrant workers to either register for temporary passports, or return to Burma.

Immigrating from a climate of economic stagnation, Burmese migrants enter the Thai work force not seeking excess financial gain from a more dynamic economy, but instead out of a need for basic survival. Sending crucial remittances home provides for families that often have no other financial option for their survival. According to a survey conducted for the report *Migrant Worker Remittances and Burma*, by Burma Economic Watch, 96% of migrants affirmed that the primary use of remittances was to fund basic survival.

The process of verification in Thailand, though slated to provide more legal transparency for registered migrants, has been criticized for an overly complicated application process, with inaccessibility for the majority of non-Thai speaking Burmese migrant workers, and the absence of any provision to protect Burmese migrant workers against the widespread fear of extortion from family back home who receive remittance money. Often as a result, migrants have remained unregistered, and thus susceptible to economic and financial abuse inside the country. By remaining unregistered migrants are also targeted for deportation by the RTG immigration police.

Burmese migrants end up returning to Burma through 3 methods. The first, and least desired by migrants is through actual arrest by Thai Immigration police. Migrants are ultimately deported, but not before facing detention of 3 to 6 months², work release to pay off arrest and loss of belongings and money to pilfering by individual officers.

As an alternative, thousands of migrants from locations all over Thailand are now opting to return home with the money they have thus far made, rather than facing the risk of remaining unregistered and being arrested. The second method is to use the Thai immigration framework, and pay immigration officers money, in order to be transported to the border checkpoints on immigration trucks, listed as arrests but without spending time in jail. The third method used is to employ a broker who can transport and guide migrants to the border, and potentially across, easing potentially hazardous encounters with Thai and Burmese government agents or soldiers.

Key checkpoints extorting money from migrants:

Through research HURFOM field reporters found that the two primary border crossings through which migrants return to Burma are at the Mae Sot-Miawady crossing over the Thaung Yin (Moei) river, and at Three Pagoda Pass (TPP) in west-central Thailand.

In many cases the distance separating these two border crossings from the common destinations for many migrants is quite small. For example, from Myawaddy to Moulmein is only 200 km, while TPP is 96 km from Thanbyuzayat town and 72 km to Ye town. Yet despite these relatively short distances, between their initial border crossing and arrival home migrants encounter between 30 to 50 checkpoints. The majority of these are informal, assembled



A checkpoint is seen in Anankwin village, operated by TC No.3 in Kyainnseikyi Township in February 2010.

² The time migrants are detained varies considerably based on their ability to pay for their release and depending on when vehicles are available to deport the arrested migrants.

ad hoc by different pro-government and ethnic forces, and inconsistent in whether they extort money. The key gates that often take the most of migrants' remittance money, and are perpetually manned, are noted below.

Departing from Myawaddy towards Moulmein, the first checkpoint encountered is Tingan Nyi Naung "economic zone", and it is administered by a DKBA and SPDC force. The second major check point is near Tha Piq, also manned by a SPDC and DKBA combined force. There is a third at Kawkareik town run by the SPDC, State Police and immigration officials, and a final 3 are located at the bridge crossings, of Kyaing Kawkareik, Kyaing Zartapying, and Artaran bridges; each is administered by the municipal authorities.

From TPP migrants often travel to two primary destinations, Thanbyuzayat and Ye towns. Outside of TPP migrants encounter the first two major checkpoints in Chaungzone, one administered by the DKBA and the other manned by a force containing combined troops from the NMSP, KPF, SPDC and DKBA. A third is encountered at Myaing Taryar and is manned by forced from the Karen Peace Force (KPF). A fourth run by the Karen National Union (KNU) is crossed at Yaeda Youk or Meslie Village depending on KNU troop movements, and a fifth and sixth at Taungzon and Anankwin respectively, both administrated by SPDC soldiers. At Anankwin the road splits, with one route taking migrants towards Thanbyuzayat and the other taking them to Ye. Finishing the journey to Ye, migrants encounter 3 more checkpoints at Yaetagon, administered by the SPDC, DKBA, NMSP; another is at the start of Thanbyuzayat/Ye highway; and the final large checkpoint is encountered entering into Thanbyuzayat, and is manned by SPDC police force from the Immigration, Traffic and Secret Police branches.

Heading towards Yeh, migrants cross a checkpoint administered by the KNU near Anankwin or in Baelamu depending on KNU troop movements. The next checkpoint is encountered in Mawkanin and administered by local Burmese Secret Police (SP) and soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 106. Extortion reaches an extreme pitch as migrants enter Ye township, where they encounter a larger checkpoint that is manned by a combined group of Special Police, Immigration police, local militias and Infantry Battalion (IB) No. 61. Extortion is so high and unpredictable for migrant workers that some trucks carrying migrants are unwilling to enter into the city. To disguise their status, migrants must disembark and instead finish their journey on a bus coming from another direction to obscure the fact that they are returning from Thailand.

Departure and extortion of migrants at Three Pagoda Pass:

A HURFOM field reporter interviewed numerous migrants who have returned to Burma between the second week of January and March 2010, and reported that large number of interviewees paid Thai immigration officials to transport them to the border so they could return home. Depending on the distance from their original workplace to TPP, they paid from 4,500 to 6,000 baht for transportation to the border crossing. In many other cases, migrants returned home with the assistance of a broker. Often beginning with a broker in



Burmese migrant workers seen with Burmese officials after just crossing through the checkpoint into Three Pagoda Pass town, Burma during the 1st week of March, 2010.

Thailand that is able to get the migrant to the TPP, contact is made by the Thai broker with a Burmese counterpart, who will find the specific migrant worker, after the worker's passage through the migration checkpoint at TPP.

At Three Pagoda Pass, migrants must cross through a single immigration checkpoint to enter Burma. While alternative illegal

crossings are available, each one is staffed by an immigration department official who will demand 300 baht, even if the migrant is not officially noted as having returned to Burma. Administered by the SPDC Immigration Department, authorities require migrants to identify themselves so that they can be charged a 300 baht reentry fee. Often immigration authorities are able to draw the distinction between TPP residents and migrant workers by sight alone, so that very few migrants are able to escape paying immigration fees. By being identified as migrants re-immigrating to Burma, they face a greater likelihood of increased arbitrary taxation by border agents.

According to research conducted by a HURFOM field reporter, between January and March 2010 passenger lists registered by truck drivers at the immigration border crossing station indicated that around 50,000 workers crossed into Burma to return home along the Three Pagoda Pass to Thanbyuzayat motor road. Given even this estimate of remigration, the border crossing would make a profit of over 15 million baht (468,750 USD).

Once through the immigration gate, migrants are approached by Burmese brokers, provided the migrant is not already affiliated with a broker, and various services are proposed, such as accommodation and truck transportation. Beyond the immigration gate, migrants must travel into TPP town to reach the truck station to continue their journey.

According to one broker, the vast majority of migrant workers cannot expect to successfully return home unaided due to the large volumes of taxation and extortion encountered along the way. After paying the immigration fee, HURFOM has found that the average price brokers in TPP will charge for a trip home is approximately 1,000 to 1,500 baht for every migrant worker who is returning home. This ends up providing brokers with a profit of just 100 to 300 baht for each migrant who hires the broker's services for returning home, as the 1,200 remaining baht is used for extortion and bribe costs encountered along the road.



HURFOM

Burmese migrant workers cross the border from Thailand into Burma at Three Pagoda Pass town during the 1st week of March, 2010.

One broker from the TPP area broke the above-mentioned costs down for HURFOM's field reporter, illustrating how the amount charged of each migrant worker was distributed between different authorities. To immigration officers, migrants must pay 500 Baht, to local police 50 baht, to traffic police 20 baht, to local militia 20 baht and to the fire brigade 10 baht.

For the truck rental, migrants pay between 30,000 and 50,000 kyat, though the driver only retains about 8,000 kyat per person per person.

With no guaranteed system of security for migrants' personal belongings during the return trip, these items placed in barrels on trucks. Each barrel also requires a payment of 1,300 to 1,500 to the broker, again to cover taxation and extortion costs. "For one plastic barrel that contains around 50 kilograms, they have to pay truck drivers 1,500 baht," explained a broker. "For smaller ones, around 30 kilograms, [they pay] 800 baht and for electric products they pay depending on their size."

Ko Minn Thein, a 29 year old migrant worker originally from Khayar village, Kyaikmayaw Township in Mon State, lived and worked in Nakhon Prathom Province, Thailand for 3 years. He was arrested in the second

week of February for having remained in Thailand on an expired work permit. He was detained in jail for a week, after which he was able to bribe a police officer to be freed before his term ended.

I was arrested and paid money after I was detained in small cell [in a small jail at Nakhon Prathom Province's police station]. When the police force transferred me to the Immigration Bureau, I paid 2,000 baht to avoid from being detained for 2 or 3 month like others those who could not afford to pay... On the 23rd of February, I was transferred along with 60 other arrested migrant workers, to the border town of Three Pagoda Pass (TPP). A group of authorities from Thai Immigration Bureau took all of us to the border of TPP....When I got to Burma (TPP Burma soil), all of us were required to register with the SPDC Immigration authorities and ordered to pay 300 baht per each person. There were 130 migrant workers [that had arrived] carried by two 10 wheels trucks that belonged to Thai Immigration Bureau. The Burmese Immigration locally known as *Lawaka* usually earns a lot of money per week. Can you imagine [how much they make when] they take 300 baht pay deported worker. There are thousands of illegal workers like me deported from Thailand to this TPP crossing every month.

Ko Minn Thein reports that he was able to hire a truck for a negotiated price of 35,000 kyat (Bt 1,093). Along the trip, the truck encountered 28 checkpoints each of which took a portion of the transportation fee he had paid to the driver. However, because he was able to hire the driver who took responsibility in facilitating the payments to checkpoints, he was able to return home without additional trouble.

Upon returning home, Ko Minn Thein encountered other migrants who had returned because of the national verification policy. He describes his feelings regarding the registration process for the temporary passport:

I got home on the 4th week of February. I met a lot of friends who had gone back before me. Some of them had been arrested – deported by the Thai police – and some of them had decided to go back with brokers before the authorities cracked down at their work places and residences. Most of the people who I talked with were not willing to make temporary passports as ordered by the two governments [RTG & SPDC]. I also felt insecure about the passport because I don't trust the SPDC authorities. They never fully fulfill what they have promised. So, I didn't want to fill the form and apply for the passport. During my time working in Nakhon Prathom, Thailand, more than 6 agents came and tried to persuade us to register for passports by using their assistance.

With the sudden influx of migrant workers into Burma, securing some means of income at home has become difficult. Ko Minn Thein noted to HURFOM that by the time of his arrival home, migrants had already begun to return to Thailand:

Life in the village without a job is very difficult to survive. People have started to go back to Thailand illegally already day-by-day. I would say that there are approximately 500 villagers [most of them are men] that have already left my village in the last 30 days, to seek the jobs in Thailand. My parents asked me to stay with them and work with them on the family run farm. But I don't want to stay under a bad government and work as hand-to-mouth worker. I will go back and work in Thailand again when the situation becomes more stable....The local authorities announced that in this year, there will be a democratic government after the authorities held the general election nation wide. However, people who know the political situation have said the new government will be of the same members from this government and the situation will not change very much. This information makes me want to go and work in Thailand again. I will wait until the end of water festival and for now, I am going to find temporary jobs and save some money for reaching the Thai soil again.

Departure and extortion of migrants at Myawaddy:

At Mae Sot, while a Friendship Bridge exists, the vast majority of migrant workers, both under their own power, or via deportation by Thai authorities, cross the river by boat as most migrants do not posses either Burmese or Thai identification. 11 gates are available where migrants can disembark, though most enter Burma at gate no. 10. No. 10, locally known as "zero" gate, is controlled by Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Brigade No. 999, which has a permanent camp built at the gate. No. 10 gate is most frequently used due to its immediate proximity to the truck station. The result is an immediate financial benefit to DKBA forces, as immigration fees and the illegal sales of Thai products, such as noodles, and shampoo, go directly to DKBA coffers.

A February report by Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) entitled *Abuse between borders* highlights the ongoing economic exploitation at the Mae Sot to Myawaddy border crossing. Targeting three checkpoints operated by the DKBA, KHRG shows how even relatively small amounts of money taken for a border crossing quickly build into significant funds. They note that at just one checkpoint, DKBA forces are likely earn nearly 200,000 baht a week, which extrapolates to nearly 10.5 million baht per year.

Taking this data into account, it is important consider the both the losses suffered by individual migrants, and the larger economic impact, of draining this remittance money from communities in Burma.

Nai Wengtamoi worked in Thailand as migrant laborer for 8 years before returning to Burma by crossing the river at Mae Sot-Myawaddy. On January 19th he decided to go back home after Thai authorities refused his attempt to extend his work permit and insisted he register for the temporary passport. He recounted to HURFOM that he did not want to apply for the passport but was told by his boss that if he refused, he should

go back home, since immigration police would arrest him if he continued to live at the work facility.

Nai Wengtamoi explained about how fears arose amongst migrant workers as they learned about the national verification policy:

The news spread, all migrant workers will be arrested who do not have passports and who do not register for the passport. Most migrant workers were worried for their relatives who still live in villages [in Burma] that the local authorities would come and make a profit collecting money from



A truck transports Burmese migrant workers from Three Pagoda Pass to Ye town, Ye Township at the end of December, 2009.

families personally, and having to pay more arbitrary taxes. I was also worried about that so I decided to go back home.

On January 22nd Nai Wengtamoi began his return trip, paying 6,500 baht to get from his work place to Myawaddy. The broker he hired initially told him and the group of migrant workers he was traveling with he would provide them with brokerage services until they got home. However, when Nai Wengtamoi and his 5 friends arrived at Mae Sot the broker asked them for an additional 500 baht per migrant, and to pay for the cost of his food as well.

On January 23rd they crossed from Mae Sot to Myawaddy. They could not travel legally over the friendship bridge due to the expiration of their worker ID's. Instead they were transported down the river on floating tires till they reached the DKBA No. 10 gate. At the DKBA checkpoint, they had to pay 100 baht per person to the checkpoint authorities, and were able to cross into the truck station in Myawaddy where they planned to hire a truck that would send them back home.

At that point, Ma Khin Aye, their 44 year-old broker, abandoned them at the truck station, taking the 7,000 baht each migrant had given him to cover their complete trips home. As a result, the group had to make the return journey on their own. During the return journey, the group was forced to pay off a series of Burmese authorities such as immigration officials, traffic police, national police and local militias, as they had no broker to assist in the crossing process. Each migrant had to pay additional fees to pass checkpoints, ranging between 5,000 kyat, 3,000 kyat and 1,000 kyat.

Nai Win Tun a 25 year old migrant from the group complained, "When I worked in Thailand [I] was not free, but now we arrive in our own country and [we are] still not free or safe from threats."

Upon arriving home they were also met with efforts to extort the money that they had earned while working in Thailand. They reported to HURFOM that the headman and local Burmese battalion soldiers living in the village came and requested fees, and threatened the migrants if they complained. When the returning migrants informed the Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) of their return, for the purpose of residence registration, they also had to pay fines to the VPDC office.

Nai Wengtamoi complained to the HURFOM field reporter, frustrated that “The VPDC also demands money – they think that we earned a lot of money from [working in] foreign countries. They never think of the difficult lives we are living in Thailand...”

Mi Kon Aye, a 32 year-old from Nygan village, Kyaikmayaw Township told HURFOM how after her work permit expired her boss refused to accept her employment anymore, fearing the reprisals from a potential police arrest of an illegal migrant at his facility. As a result of the expiration of work permits, around 40 workers had to quit their jobs at the facility. Their Thai employer suggested to them that they go back to Burma to apply for the passport. He told them that after they received passports they could return to Thailand and work for him again.

Mi Kon Aye hired a broker for 5,000 Baht, to get to Mae Sot. In Mi Kon Aye’s case, 5,000 baht is what she would earn if she saved her Thai income for two months.

She reported that on the return trip they encountered many checkpoints, most of which demanded money. While the broker had initially promised her that after using her 5,000 baht to pay for passage, he would take responsibility for the travel costs, but instead she reported that she had to take full responsibility for her traveling costs. At some checkpoints she was threatened and in some cases arrested and put in jail, with checkpoint authorities demanding more money for her release. By the time she arrived in Moulmein, she had paid an additional 30,000 kyat (29 USD³), as opposed to conventional passengers, such as traders or citizens with Burmese ID cards, whom a HURFOM field reporter has found to pay an average of 10,000 kyat for the same travel costs.

Mi Kon Aye’s case specifically highlights the inconsistency returning migrants face as people with no real legal support or status. Though informal structures exist to provide migrants with support, inconsistency is pervasive, without accountability, and a migrant’s status is likely to ensure they will be targeted for extortion.

Mi Kon Aye explained the difference she observed between crossing from Thailand to Burma:

When we lived in Thailand we didn’t need to be afraid of others except the Thai police, but they did not demand money like Burmese authorities do. They did not threaten us and did not say bad words [to us] like the Burmese authorities do. They do not care about us [by causing trouble]. It was difficult in Thailand but the Burmese [authorities] don’t care.

When she returned home she was required to visit the VPDC office to sign documents in which her mother had to come and make a guarantee for Mi Kon Aye to live in the house and she had to re-register as a resident. As noted in previous HURFOM reports from December 2009 and February 2010³, due to the widespread collection of house lists by Burmese authorities for election preparations, many migrants returning to work in Burma were stricken from registration lists. As a result, the VPDC ordered her to pay 5,000 kyat for registration.

Mi Kon Aye has reported that since her arrival home around two weeks ago, she has endured many extortion attempts, purportedly to pay for costs such as village militia fees and fire brigade fees. She estimates she and her fellow villagers pay about 5,000 kyat a month to various extortion efforts. She has told HURFOM that she now wants to return to Thailand due to the exorbitant extortion costs and the lack of any jobs or potential income in the village.

“When I lived Thailand I didn’t need to worry about getting food because all money I earned was mine, but when I arrived home all the money I saved I used there [at home],” explained Mi Kon Aye. “I have to provide [money to] them [Burmese authorities] monthly. I can’t spend any of my money for myself.”

Mehm Win Tun who is 25 year-old, and originally from Damatha village, Kyaikmayaw Township, worked in Thailand for about 6 years. On January 22nd he and his 14 friends were arrested by Thai police at his workplace.

³ “We have to try”: Mounting pressure in election preparations and responses from the Mon State community, December 2009, and Burmese government pressure on communities for support in 2010 election, February 2010.

After he was arrested, Thai police detained him at a local police station for week before he was sent to a jail. He reported that the jail was not large, but that Thai police nevertheless detained about 200 inmates in the jail. He reported overcrowding, and that the prison population was comprised of arrested migrant workers, and actual convicted criminals. He faced difficulties such as finding food, shelter and a place to sleep. After two weeks he was sent to Mae Sot, but found that the police only returned 1,000 of the 3,000 baht he had been arrested with.

He and another 75 migrants were sent to Mae Sot in Immigration Authority vehicles which did not directly cross the Friendship Bridge linking Mae Sot to Myawaddy. Instead, they took all 76 people to a processing center in Mae Sot, where Mehm Win Tun and 6 others hired a broker for 3,000 baht per migrant, to cross with them by boat into Burma and take them home. Once in Burma, they had to immediately cross through a DKBA Brigade No. 999 administered checkpoint. When they crossed through the DKBA camp, a DKBA soldier pointed a gun at them and demanded money from all the members of the group. The broker paid the DKBA soldiers 100 baht per member of the group. Mehm Win Tun reported that the DKBA forces seized personal belongings from migrants crossing the checkpoint. In some cases soldiers took migrants' best clothes, one took a watch from a member of Mehm Win Tun's group and some took shoes from other migrant workers.

According to Win Tun, the trip went relatively smoothly, due to their use of a broker to negotiate the checkpoints on the return trip, "On the way to Moulmein there are about 50 check points were controlled by different ethnic soldiers. We all arrived in Moulmein smoothly because of the broker."

When he arrived home, he paid the broker approximately 3,000 baht (10,000 kyat). Upon his return, he had to inform the village headman and the local militia. He had to re-register for a residence record and make a new identity card. He was charged 5,000 kyat by the VPDC.

Mehm Win Tun encountered changes that had happened in his absence, and noted how the local economy has been affected the significant drop in remittances:

When I got home there were many people who had already back home because Thai bosses did not allow them to continue working. Some came back to make a passport. Many of the people in the village had become regime informants. They would give all information on what happens in the village to local authorities [in exchange for money]. Life in the village is not easy because there are many cases of extortion, such as militia costs and other fees [arbitrary taxes, cost for local ceremonies, VIP costs, etc.] Villagers are facing a very difficult situation for payment to regime servants. In the past most villagers relied on money from outside [Thailand], but now many of them are back and no money is being sent back.

Win Tun told HURFOM's field reporter the experience of a migrant worker relative who had come back from Three Pagoda Pass via the motor road to Thanbyuzayat. At a Burmese military checkpoint in Anankwin, his relative was detained and had to pay 5,000 kyat because of he did not have his identity card. At the check point, staff members also seized the property this man was bringing back from TPP, such as Thai noodles, sweet juice, and other products from Thailand.

"At those check points, instead of helping their people who suffer from different kinds of difficulties, they are making a profit from them," said Win Tun. "When they see [people's] weak points they only want to get more money. They don't care what happens to others."

Mi Mow Win, a 33 year old from Kyaik Pow village, in Pegu Township was arrested in Mae Sot.

After I was arrested by Thai authorities they sized my 1,200 baht and cell phone. They took me to near the Thaung Yin River – I had to cross that river by a floating tire. There are some men who helped me to cross and I had to pay them 50 Baht for their services, even though I had no money at that time.

When she arrived at the DKBA checkpoint soldiers detained her and she had to make a phone call to her relative and they gave her names of brokers to contact. When she got a broker, soldiers asked the broker for 800 baht for her release. After this, the broker demanded 3,300 Baht in exchange for taking her home.

I did not want to go back to my hometown yet because I already knew there were no jobs for me, on the other hand I also could not work in Thailand because of not having a passport. However my boss

persuaded me to do a passport. At that time I had not enough money yet. I was still thinking to register for it but I and another of my coworkers, and about 45 people, were arrested first.

"Along the motor road from Myawaddy to Moulmein, there are many check points –among them there are about three check points that are very strict on travelers," she described. "Authorities checked travelers to see about identity cards, and for any other reason." Migrants unable to meet demands at checkpoints were detained, and their personal belongings seized, a process Mi Mow Win reports having seen many times during her return trip. She reported that while on her journey home, she saw many people detained. She recounted an incident when after seeing other migrants arrested, she asked her broker why those people were stopped. He told her that those people had not paid the amount authorities demanded, and explained his net income was 500 Baht per migrant he transported back, having had to spend the majority of her original brokerage fee on extortion.

Mi Mow Win described her experiences once she arrived home, and her difficulties re-entering her community:

I didn't know what to do after I got to my village. I already knew there are no jobs for [me] in the village. I did not want to stay yet I had to apply for a passport. After I got to my village, I saw that my [fellow] villagers faced many different kinds of hardships in their lives. They faced many different types of extortion for many reasons, such as militia fees, security fees and sentry duty fees. Villagers had to spend about 10,000 kyat a month [on these costs]. At my grandparent's house they had to sell their rice to pay for those fees. They are so old – their ages are about 70 years old – but they still had to pay for those fees.

Mi Mow Win said to the HURFOM field reporter, "I don't want to live in this village any longer, I've already decided to leave village as soon as possible after I get my temporary passport to work [in Thailand]."

Conclusion:

The current crisis of rapid expulsion of migrant workers, through fear or forced deportation, is likely to have a severe impact on the economies of both Thailand and Burma. Thailand, whose economy is heavily supported by low-cost labor performed by migrant workers, will not find these jobs filled by Thais. As noted in the personal accounts gathered by HURFOM, Thai employers are already working to bring their laborers back.

The effect of such a sudden loss of remittance money for Burma's local economy will likely be catastrophic for an economy already plagued with inflation, and with nearly zero job availability. With the vast majority of remittance money sent home from Thailand to be used for basic survival, the forced return of migrants will remove remittances, a key financial pillar and possibly the only source of reliable income available to sustain their families' livelihoods in Burma. For migrants that must return home, either permanently or to produce a temporary passport, a significant portion of money is directly funding both administrators and soldiers from the Burmese government, as well as the newly formed pro-government cease fire groups. These groups, tasked with acting as proxy border guards under the April 2009 SPDC border guard proposal, receive most of their financial benefits from local economic kickbacks by demanding taxes, extortion, seizure of goods, and operation of illegal black market trade gates.

HURFOM believes that this policy of returning migrant workers to Burma works directly counter to the primary interests of Thailand's financial and political sectors. By deporting large numbers of migrant workers over a short time, Thailand is creating a system that is neither a permanent solution to illegal migration, nor one that will promote economic stability in the region.

The departure of migrants immediately cuts off crucial remittances sent home. Though this may benefit the few corrupt officials along the border, the larger and more lasting negative impact of these deportations is that hundreds of thousands of families in Burma are denied a significant means of income that is crucial for survival. By further destabilizing the Burmese economy in this way, it is likely that Thailand will in fact perpetuate a climate of economic instability in Burma, increasing the likelihood that migrants will eventually return, and in even greater numbers, to try and live through worse economic conditions than those that had initially driven them to work in Thailand in the first place.

Even as this report is published, HURFOM field reporters have observed 700 to 1000 migrant workers gathering on the border, preparing to reenter Thailand. Without a more long-term worker registration plan in place, and pressure by the RTG to the SPDC to address the issue of checkpoint corruption and remittance theft, migrants from Burma will continue to try to enter Thailand illegally, under increasingly desperate conditions.

News

Extortion efforts against residents near Kanbauk to Myinkalay pipeline expanded

March, 2010, HURFOM,

Mon State: Residents along the Kanbauk to Myain Kalay gas pipeline have reported increased efforts to extort money by Burmese government State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) forces.

In March, Burmese soldiers in areas along the pipeline stepped up extortion efforts, making demands for money more frequently, using the new justification that the funds cover the costs of “the general military spending”.

The Kanabunk to Myaing Kalay gas pipeline, which was completed in 2002, was constructed through Tarnissarine Division, Mon State, and Karen State. Detailed in HURFOM’s 2009 annual report, Laid Waste: Human Rights along the Kanbauk to Myaing Kalay gas pipeline, the construction and operation of the pipeline have brought extensive human rights abuses to the area.

Highlighted in the report are countless instances of extortion committed in areas located close to the pipeline such as Tarnissarine Division, Thanbyuzayat, Mudon, Moulmein, Yebyu, Ye, and Kyaikmayaw Townships in Mon State, and Pa Ann Township in Karen State, by local military battalions.

A source from the SPDC Artillery Battalion (AB) No. 318, based Abit village, Mudon Township, described how in the beginning of March that the local authorities have, been expanding their justification for extortion of villagers, from “gas pipeline security and repair costs “ to also include “the general spending for the military service.” According to residents in the area, prior to this new cost, local authorities would collect 2,000 to 3,000 from each household every month.

The justification for an additional monthly costs, appears to arbitrary, as no significant changes have been made to either the pipeline or the methods by which Battalions operate in the area.

Residents have told HURFOM that they see no way in which there is any justification for the extortion money they have paid, even when the government troops claim the costs go towards maintenance of the gas pipeline and for security against potential attacks from splinter groups. Villagers subject to the new cost, though unable to confirm how much more is money is take, have expressed concerns that local military authorities will continue to create additional justifications for further extorting money.

Ko Nge, a Kawkhapon villager, explains how the amounts of money extorted by local battalions have slowly increased, “We have been paying the pipeline’s extortion money every month since the pipeline started. Sometimes the pipe leaks or explodes near your farm and you have to pay the military for repair costs. But, we don’t know if they [actually] use our money to repair their pipeline or not. If not, we also don’t know what the money they charged us is being using for. No one dares to ask them. Before 2003, the military authorities collected 1,500 [kyat] per month. Now, they have increased it up to 3,000 kyat a month. Sometimes, we have to pay twice, for example, after the military collect the extortion money, the village headman would collect it again. Even though they change the reasons for why they are collecting, we have to pay them. We just worry that the military will increase the extreme amount extortion cost, if they are going to add the justification ‘general spending for the military’.”

Even though Ko Nge described to a HURFOM reporter that some areas have to pay 3,000 kyat per month for the current pipeline security cost, some residents around northern Yebyu and Ye Township have been paying over 3,000 kyat to gas pipeline and security force costs in the area.

Nai Phoe, a 45 year old of Kaloh villager, talks about how extensively extortion efforts and other abuses have disrupted villagers’ lives, “In my village, it is a free-fire place for the SPDC – they call it a black area. I

**Information on HURFOM and
Invitation for Feedbacks from Readers**

Dear Readers,

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995 by a group of young Mon people. The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- monitoring the human rights situations in Mon territory and other areas Southern Burma,
- protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma

In order to implement these objectives, HURFOM produces the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletter. If publication is delayed it is because we are waiting to confirm information, and it comes with our heartfelt apologies.

We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or if you know someone who you think would like to receive the newsletter. Please email or mail a name and address to:

HURFOM, P. O. Box 2237, General Post Office
Bangkok 10501, THAILAND
E-mail: hurfomcontact@yahoo.com
Website: <http://www.rehmonnya.org>

With regards,

Director
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

mean, they can enter into our village whenever they want, kill our farms, and [take] whichever food they would like to eat. The gas pipeline runs near my farm. Because of the pipeline, we have lost part of our farm and [must pay] monthly pipeline security extortion money [to the authorities]. Sometimes they [SPDC] force us to build a hut and conduct security for the gas pipeline at either day or night. Our situation is very different if we compare it with the situation in Mudon and Thanbyuzayat Townships. We have pay over 3,000 for pipeline security. Sometimes they charges up to 5,000 kyat. "

Residents have described how the money that soldiers collect every month from villagers is being used for personal expenses by military officials and local authorities. According to Nai Kan (not his real name), a 36 years old Waerat villager, in Thanbyuzayat Township, "Even though they claimed [the costs] were for gas pipeline security and maintenance of the gas pipeline, they always collect extra extortion cost after a gas explosion. It seems like to me that the

monthly extortion cost is just for the military and local authority's income.

Now, they have started adding the additional cost for, "Military general spending" and are trying to make more extra money their [local authorities and military] pockets."

With over 50 villages in close proximity to the gas pipeline, an estimated 90% of the resident who live along the gas pipeline have faced this abuse by the local military units based around the area. Due to the extent of extortion efforts, residents believe that the monthly payments are systematic, and are ordered from the highest-ranking Burmese military authorities. In a unique interview, a HURFOM field reporter was able to speak to a retired member of the SPDC military. This person, whose name is concealed for security purposes, had 30 years of military service, and has since retired to Mudon township. The retiree describes how, "there are many things that the resident

News



HURFOM

Soldiers from LIB No. 106 in Mawkalin, Ye Township, are seen raising the Burmese flag at their base in 2009.

residents is only shared between the upper ranks of the military forces. The normal soldier get nothing from these efforts. So that's the reason why when the normal soldiers are collecting the extortion money from the resident, they are collecting extra cost for themselves. These kind of abuses are always happening between the local residents and troops.”

Nai Khun Kaluh, a rubber plantation worker from Kwan Hlar village, Mudon Township said, “We have to pray that the pipeline will not explode again, [or that] others groups [or] people don't come and blow it up. We always have to be responsible for the gas pipeline; they always blame the residents whenever the pipelines explode.”

do not know, about what happens in the military community.

The soldiers are not getting enough income to feed their families. As a result, they are abusing their power and giving different reasons for collecting money from the residents. Now collecting monthly costs for the gas pipeline is just ordered from above [from high ranking military authorities].

The money that the soldiers get from the

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