Report: Voices of the Displaced Women and Children

Introduction

In April 2010, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) refused to transform their armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), into a State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) controlled Border Guard Force (BGF). During meetings regarding the BGF, Maj-Gen Ye Myint of the SPDC warned that if the NMSP did not accept the BGF proposal then the SPDC would regard the NMSP on pre-1995 ceasefire terms. Thus when the NMSP rejected the proposal, a return to open armed conflict was feared. In response, six hundred villagers from NMSP-controlled areas of Mon State, principally areas around Bee Ree and Tavoy districts, terrified by the possibility of violent conflict between NMSP and SPDC soldiers, fled to Halockhanee and Bleh-Donephia which are resettlement sites for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) near Thailand’s border. The fleeing population was mainly comprised of children, women, elderly people and disabled veterans.
The Woman and Child Rights Project (WCRP), southern Burma, was founded in 2000 by the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) in order to monitor and protect the rights of women and children and to focus international attention on Burma in order to pressure the Burmese military regime -- the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) -- to uphold the rights of women and children.

WCRP's main aim is to promote and protect the rights of women and children according to the CEDAW and the CRC, which were both ratified by the regime. WCRP implements various alternative activities to expose how the SPDC and its Burmese Army continually violate women and children's rights and ignore the CEDAW and CRC.

WCRP's objectives are:

- To monitor and protect women and children's rights by: collecting information, monitoring the situation inside and distributing information to the international community
- To strengthen women and children in their communities by teaching them about their rights, according to the CEDAW and CRC and encouraging them to protect these rights..

Once in Halockhanee the newly-arrived IDPs did not have regular access to basic necessities like food, water, housing, clothing, healthcare or education, and were unable to find daily work or any reliable source of income. This influx of villagers from increasingly unstable regions in southern Burma to the border area is only one example of continual displacement along the border. Throughout this report, WCRP will show the increasing need for a safe place for the IDPs from Bee Ree and Tavoy, either in specially constructed semi-permanent camps on the border in Thailand, or in existing refugee camps in Thailand currently inaccessible to the IDPs.

Methodology

Field reporters from WCRP interviewed 13 of the 26 families that were living in a Mon National Education Committee school in Halockhanee IDP resettlement site and 2 families from Bledhonnepai IDP resettlement site. 57 of the 74 people that we interviewed were children (18-years-old and under). The rest were women, disabled veterans and the elderly. Data was primarily collected through qualitative interviews and observations from field reporters.

Background

The SPDC and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs, or insurgent ethnic armies), which call for democracy and ethnic rights, and smaller insurgent groups that have splintered from NSAGs, have been engaged in a civil war since the 1960s. In areas heavily affected, like the southern part of Ye township in Mon State and Tavoy district in Tenasserin division, villagers regularly flee to the Thai-Burma border or illegally enter surrounding countries for safety. The IDP population along the border is in constant flux and resources are inadequate to properly support the regular influxes or even the permanent population.

In 1989, when Burmese troops attacked and overran Three Pagodas Pass, which was then the center of NMSP control, over 12,000 civilians from Mon State fled to Thailand. Villagers living in conflict areas throughout southern Burma also fled. To aid the fleeing villagers, the Royal Thai Authority (RTA) together with non-government and community-based organizations built new refugees camps on the Thai side of the border and gave official refugee status to already established but informal camps. This allowed organizations to deliver aid more easily and regularly. Refugees lived in these camps until the 1995 ceasefire agreement between the NMSP and the SPDC. After the ceasefire, RTA declared Mon State to be stable, closed or relocated many of the camps and pushed the refugees back into Burma.

While the ceasefire gave autonomy and control to the NMSP in certain regions of Mon State, conflict persisted in many areas. Regions where fighting continued (either between the SPDC and NMSP or between the SPDC and splinter groups) were deemed by the SPDC to be “black areas”. These areas are still heavily militarized and human rights abuses persist within them. The SPDC considers these areas “free fire zones” and SPDC soldiers are ordered to shoot at will.
NEWS:

American Specialist Children’s Hospital in Moulmein Overflowing with Patients

July 28, 2010

WCRP: More children in Mon State are getting sick this year than last year and hospitals are struggling to keep up. The American Specialist Children’s Hospital in Moulmein was full in May. Since June, patients have been sharing beds and sleeping on the floor. The hospital, which mainly treats children from the Thanbyuzayat area, has two hundred and fifteen beds. Children are sleeping three to a bed and patients continue to arrive.

“Even though the hospital has a lot of beds, there aren’t enough for my child and he has to sleep on the floor,” said one patient’s mother.

“Last month there were over seven hundred patients in the children’s hospital. This month that number has increased to over one thousand,” said a nurse from the Children’s Hospital. Neighbors living near to the hospital have seen many new children arrive daily, but very few leave.

The nurse added, “During the months of June and July more than twenty children have died from influenza and other contagious diseases.” This month is expected to be worse for all patients, as influenza and other contagious diseases are spreading quickly among the children in the overcrowded hospital.

Patients who need blood transfusions told WCRP’s field reporter that the hospital’s supply of blood is very low and that blood had to be obtained from Moulmein Hospital.

It is not only patients in Moulmein that are suffering due to overcrowded hospitals. Myawaddy and Kawkareik Hospitals in Karen State have also reported that they do not have enough beds to keep up with the influx of patients. With illness expected to increase as the rainy season continues, there does not look to be an end to this problem in the near future.

When the RTA tried to push refugees back to Burma, many opted not to return to their native villages deep in Mon State (which were in black areas) because of the continued conflict. Instead they moved to Halockhanee, Bee Ree and Tavoy IDP resettlement sites.

Halockhanee is situated in Burma on the Thai border. Halockhanee IDP resettlement site was founded in 1994, and it includes Baleh-hanee, Kyaiksoimon, Baleh-Donphia, Hteewadoh, Kyaungkwee and Chedaik villages. The area between and including Balehhanee and Kyaiksoimon villages is often also referred to locally as Halockhanee, close to Ban Don Yang, the refugee camp on the Thai side of the border in Sangkhlaburi District. The resettlement sites are clusters of villages, and often resemble the native villages of their inhabitants.

Bee Ree IDP resettlement site is next to NMSP headquarters, and was founded in 1996. It includes Johaprao, Pananbein, Suwanaphum and Burksurk villages. The Tavoy IDP area was also founded in 1996 and it includes Meipzeip, Kronebaing, Jaodon, Wengnaike and Torlawi villages.

A July-December 2009 programme report by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) estimated that there were 41,000 IDPs in the ceasefire areas of Mon State and 6,700 in Tenasserin Division. These numbers are acknowledged by TBBC to be lower than the actual population as they do not include those in hiding, only those in IDP resettlement sites. Additionally, not reflected in the estimations are children under 5, families who reside in the resettlement sites for short spans of time, and new arrivals.

Article 338 of the 2008 Burmese constitution states that “All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services”. Following this stipulation, the SPDC attempted to convert all NSAGs into a Border Guard Force (BGF), which

2 Constitution of the Republic of Myanmar, Article 338
would put soldiers from NSAGs under the control of the SPDC. The regime underwent several rounds of negotiations with the NMSP and several other NSAGs, in hopes of converting troops into the BGF before the 2010 elections. The NMSP’s final rejection of the BGF was on April 22, 2010. Before the NMSP’s final rejection of the BGF, the leader of the SPDC’s Southeast Command announced that NMSP-controlled areas would return to “pre-ceasefire conditions” or “free fire zones” if the NSMP refused to join the BGF.

In response to the NMSP’s rejections of the BGF, SPDC troops began repositioning and hundreds of people, remembering and fearing a return of the fighting, abandoned their homes in NMSP-controlled areas and fled to Halockhanee.

**The Threat**

The majority of those interviewed by WCRP were originally from conflict areas in Mon State, like Ye and Tavoy Townships, before moving to the NMSP-controlled areas. Many of them had already lived through years of war before they relocated.

The SPDC’s policy of transforming ceasefire groups into BGFs and the threatened consequences of non-compliance with the policy created instability in NMSP-controlled areas and threatened border stability. When the NMSP refused to comply with SPDC’s proposed BGF, it started preparing for an attack from the SPDC. During negotiations regarding the BGF, the SPDC increased counter-insurgency activities against all of the splinter groups in Ye and Tavoy Townships. These attacks, while targeting splinter groups, were viewed as a warning to the NMSP. Further, as the deadline of April 22 approached, battalions from the SPDC’s Southeast Brigade repositioned closer to NMSP-controlled areas.

Three SPDC battalions, which were assumed to be from the Southeast Command, were reported by other villagers and by the NMSP to be heading towards NMSP central headquarters and surrounding areas. This information quickly trickled down to villagers by means of radio reports from exile media, village headmen and warning calls from family members. In response, the villagers prepared to vacate all target areas.

In NMSP-controlled areas, villagers are provided with some security but resources are insufficient to extend this guarantee to periods of live conflict. Taking their cue from the warnings of their neighbors and NMSP leaders, villagers decided to go to Halockhanee to escape potential fighting. A 28-year-old woman explained her reasons for fleeing: “I am afraid. I heard they [NMSP and SPDC] will fight soon. I am afraid of war. If war happens I can’t run with my two daughters. NMSP is certain of fighting, because they did not agree to the Border Guard Force.” Her 40-year-old neighbor expressed similar sentiments: “After the NMSP told the SPDC that they would not agree to the BGF, we thought the ceasefire was broken and fighting would start immediately. At that time, the situation was very unstable. We were afraid.” A 30-year-old Mon woman said, “I heard that the situation was not good in my village. The headman told us that the NMSP did not agree to join the BGF, so they [SPDC and NMSP] will start fighting. I was so shocked ... that I forgot I was pregnant for a couple hours. All I cared about was leaving, running and escaping the fighting.”

Families with children were particularly worried that if they did not leave immediately, they would not be able to escape with their children once the fighting had commenced. A 36-year-old mother of three said, “I am afraid because I heard they [SPDC and NMSP] will start shooting each other on the 27 or 28 [of April]. If I hadn’t moved I would have been left there [in Chaik Daik]. If they are shooting it will be difficult to run with my children.”

Traveling to Halockhanee from Bee Ree and Tavoy is difficult to navigate by car during the rainy season because of the flooding, which washes away the dirt roads on the steep mountain passes. A 36-year-old mother from Bee Ree explained this:

“I plan to stay here [Halockhanee] for raining season because if they suddenly start fighting, I won’t be able to run with my children during the rainy season. I will wait until the situation is calm, before I try to move again. If the situation continues like this, I will not return home, I don’t know where I’ll go but I will not return to Chaik Daik.”

Strategically, SPDC troops can come from battalions stationed in Three Pagodas Pass or from those in Ye township. Bee Ree and Tavoy districts are located between these points, and would be caught easily in the middle if troops advanced from both stations. Baleh-Donephia IDP resettlement site was also considered by the villagers, but it is in a similar position, as well as
being located very close to NMSP headquarters, the likely target for any SPDC attacks. If the troops moved, the villagers would be trapped in Baleh-Donephia just as easily as had they remained in Bee Ree or Tavoy. A 42-year-old woman from Tavoy explained her feelings of defenselessness:

“We are afraid to die. We are scared of war. Although we don’t have our property, we are putting our lives first. They [NMSP members] did not decide for us, but they do not want us to go back. Many people after they come here went back. They were worried about their houses and their property. The NMSP will not take responsibility for the people who went back. When they [NMSP and SPDC] start shooting, villagers have to run and hide by themselves.”

Property

The villagers explained to WCRP field reporters that when they fled, they put their safety first and were too scared and worried to think about their property. Most of the fleeing villagers had only had enough time to pack small bags of clothes. At the time of WCRP’s visit, approximately half of the villagers had returned because they could not afford necessities such as food and medicine in Halockhanee. The remaining people spoke of how their safety and the safety of their families is more important than the things they left behind. One mother explained her feelings: “I am afraid and worried, but I do not think about my property first. I think about my life and my children. If I lose my property it’s okay, because I will still be alive. If I am alive I can survive.”

Despite their clear priorities, the concern of the villagers for their houses and plantations is obvious. The villagers fled at the time of year when much work has to be done in preparation for monsoon season. Thatch roofs must be repaired, food must be stored for the following year, rice paddies must be planted and properties must be readied for the rains. The houses and properties they have left behind are not prepared for the relentless daily downpours, and if and when they return, they will find their plantations overgrown, and houses destroyed. Jobs and livelihoods will be lost.

Some of them had to sell their livestock and other property in a hurry and for lower prices, while others just left their belongings. A 42-year-old Karen woman said, “Before we came here, we sold our property for very cheap. Pigs are normally sold for 30,000-40,000 kyat. We sold them for 20,000 kyat each.” Another woman explained, “I would have preferred to stay in my village. We left our home and our rice plantation.” A younger woman was visibly upset: “We have lost everything that belonged to us.”

Employment

Reliable work is very difficult to find in Halockhanee and permanent residents struggle to find work and feed their families. Most villagers that fled to the IDP site from NMSP-controlled areas are having a hard time finding jobs and food in this already impoverished area, prompting some more desperate villagers to risk being caught in battle and return to their villages in NMSP areas.

A 37-year-old mother and grandmother spoke of her frustration: “When I lived in Bee Ree resettlement site, I wove sections of thatch roofs and worked on a rice paddy ... While we are here [Halockhanee], we have no job to do and it is very difficult to get a job. I want to work, if there is work, I will work.”

A 30-year-old Mon woman said, “When we lived in our village, we cut grass and tapped rubber trees on a plantation. I have been looking for similar jobs in Halockhanee but I cannot find any. I liked living in my old village. I want to have a job in Halockhanee, continued report on Pg. 8
Early in the morning on June 19, more than ten girls wearing red Mon longyi (sarong) ran out of our house and piled into the car waiting outside. After five minutes driving through the village, we arrived in front of the compound where celebrations were underway for Aung San Suu Kyi’s 65th birthday.

When we got out of the car and walked through the gates, we can see a house made of black wood. The surrounding area is hilly and green, and over to our left we can see the roof of the monastery above the trees.

In front of the house there were two tables. One table displayed a statement issued by Women’s League of Burma for Daw Suu’s birthday, a signing book and posters of Daw Suu. On the other table was a ballot box and postcards with an image of a voting ballot on the front with the options of “Daw Suu’s Real Election” or “Than Shwe’s Military Selection”. On the back of the cards were calls from the organizations of Burma’s democracy movement to international governments. I asked the woman behind the table about the cards and the ballot box. She explained that people can mark the cards and send them to Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, the Secretary-General of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). A member of the ceremony committee said that, “The objective of the postcards is to communicate our refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the 2010 election or to acknowledge the results. The people of Burma want to draw the attention of the international community in the hopes it will pressure the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) into entering discussions with the ethnic minority groups.” I asked a Mon medical nurse about how she marked her card. She said, “I support Daw Suu because she is trying to bring about democracy in Burma and she is a representative of ethnic communities. That is why I voted for her.”

The 2010 election will be neither free nor fair. The SPDC refuses to release over 2100 political prisoners including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, launches frequent attacks against the ethnic communities, and attempts to force ethnic armies to join the new “Border Guard Force”. The regime has not reviewed the 2008 constitution, widely recognized to be undemocratic, and it has not engaged in a dialogue with the organizations of the democracy movement or the ethnic minorities. Rather than providing an opportunity for the Burma’s citizens to make their voice heard, the 2010 elections will merely perpetuate and consolidate the military’s stranglehold on the nation and ensure the continued repression of its people.

On March 8 this year, the military government passed new election laws. The groups who want to establish and register as a party must endorse the 2008 constitution. The constitution ensures that the armed forces will automatically hold 25% of the seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate, and guarantees 33% of the seats in all state or division parliaments for the armed forces. As such, many ethnic groups refuse to endorse the constitution and are barred from establishing or registering as a party in the 2010 elections, thus leaving many ethnic minorities without a chance for representation.

Standing on the stage beneath the banner, the committee member spoke to the more than seventy people from New Mon State Party and other border organizations:

Despite the obstacles DawSuu must overcome as a woman in a conservative society she never gives up fight...
Committee members gave every person a candle and then a communal prayer was said for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s long life and health. The official celebrations ended with a high school student role-playing as Daw Suu cutting the birthday cake. As is traditional in Mon society, the celebration committee provided lunch for everyone who attended. As I opened my lunch box, the smell of delicious chicken curry and rice came wafting out. Sitting and eating this meal with my friends, I was reminded of many times spent eating spicy Mon Curry in the rice paddy with my family in Burma.

During lunch, I chatted with some students about the celebration. One young man said that he was inspired by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: “I have learnt a lot today. I didn’t know so much about Daw Suu before, but now I do and I’m so happy and proud of her work for the people of Burma.” A Mon girl chimed in agreeing, “She is a brave woman. We should try to be more like her, and to encourage others to be like her.”

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s 65th birthday was celebrated not just along the border, but in other towns and cities in Thailand and all around the world. While all these people celebrated her birthday with parties and celebrations, Daw Suu herself spent her 65th birthday under house arrest. The most recent term of her house arrest was supposed to end on May 27, 2009. Despite this, however, her sentence was unlawfully extended after more false charges were brought regarding the American man who swam across Lake Inya to arrive at her compound uninvited. After a short period of detention at the notorious Insein prison, she was once again placed under house arrest and there she remains for an indefinite period, until the military regime sees fit to grant her freedom.

The chairman of the celebration committee praised Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for her commitment to the goals of freedom and democracy: “Daw Suu and the National League for Democracy decided to boycott the 2010 elections, because they will not be free or fair. We support Daw Suu’s decision and we have hope and faith that she will continue to fight for the people of Burma and against our military oppressors.”

At the end of the day, after the celebrations were over, I got to thinking about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the example she sets. I think that Mon women should try to be more like Daw Suu, to bring about freedom for the Mon people through bravery and sacrifice. I hope that Daw Suu can spend her 66th birthday among friends and relatives. I hope she can spend it free.

Fleeing Prying Eyes; A Mothers Search for Safety

June 16, 2010

WCRP: Mi Cho*, a 40-year-old Mon woman, was born, married and gave birth to her six children in Alaesakhan village, Yebu Township, Tenasserim Division, southern Burma, however, because of increased instability throughout Mon state, she was forced to migrate to an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) area near the border of Thailand.

In January, three village militia soldiers unexpectedly paid a visit to Mi Cho’s husband. Thinking it was a friendly visit, her husband let the militia soldiers into his house without hesitation. Once inside the soldiers said, “We are here to arrest you,” not taking the charge seriously, because all previous encounters had been social, her husband did not resist the arrest. The soldiers then drew a knife and took him into custody.

Alaesakhan village is deemed a conflict area or “black zone” by the SPDC because of active splinter groups in the area. The SPDC mandates that all villages in conflict areas have militias, called Pyi-thu-sit, and villagers are seasonally forced to join through a lottery system. Village militia soldiers are used to fight armed splinter groups, arbitrarily arrest villagers, and patrol their village or surrounding areas.

After the arrest, Mi Cho’s husband was given to SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 282. He was then accused of being in contact with the Mon National Defense Army (MNDA), an active Mon splinter group.
in the area, and sending them food. “My husband has not contacted any splinter group. I don’t know why they arrested him,” Mi Cho proclaimed.

According to Kaowao, LIB No. 282 is a special battalion that guards the Yadana Gas Pipeline, and surrounding area. In the past, LIB No. 282 has been ambushed by the MNDA which is led by Major Jalon Taw who broke away from the New Mon State Party (NMSP) last year.

Mi Cho was not home during her husband’s abduction, but for weeks after, militia soldiers regularly visited her house in the middle of the night. During the visits, the soldiers would threaten her, frighten her family and accuse her of also supporting the Mon splinter group. Commonly, after the man of the family is killed or goes missing, their wife and children are the next targets.

Two weeks after the abduction, a SPDC soldier from LIB No. 282 informed Mi Cho that her husband was still alive, “If you want to see your husband, you can look for him in Tavoy town,” said the soldier. She however does not think her husband will ever be free.

By February, about a month after the abduction, Mi Cho could not handle the harassment any more. With no support or belongings, Mi Cho and her six children fled to Panan pain hakot village; an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) area within the NMSP controlled area of Mon State. Her youngest son was 6-months-old when they fled.

Upon arrival in Panan pain hakot, Mi Cho reconnected with Mi Khing, a neighbor from Aalesakhan village who had fled a couple weeks before Mi Cho. Mi Khing, had not yet secured a job, but she shared her food with the newly arrived family anyway. “When I saw her, I was so sad. She was so disappointed in her life and cried to me. They have many problems, now they live in a small hut made of bamboo, the neighbors help them but they cannot find enough food,” said Mi Khing.

Before Mi Cho fled, she worked at a small rubber and Betel nut plantation, and seasonally cut grass at a neighboring farm. In her old village she could earn enough to support her family, but jobs are scarce in the IDP area. Additionally, food, healthcare, education, land rights, employment and travel are a constant struggle.

Of her six children, the oldest is 16-years-old and the youngest is now 6-months-old. Her two middle children were in 2 standard and 0 standard at a Mon National school before they migrated. In the IDP area none of her children have the opportunity to attend school.

Mi Cho confided in Mi Khing, “I am so depressed, I am also afraid to go back to my village. I am worried they [SPDC soldiers] will kill us [if we return], but our property is there [in Aalesakhan village].” Mi Khing explained that SPDC Soldiers had a meeting on the 25 February and later that day they announced, to the village, that those who had fled or plan to flee are not allowed to return.

Mi Cho does not know how long her family will be able to survive in the IDP area or where she will head next. Unfortunately, Mi Cho’s story is identical to so many in the IDP area. Over the past 4 months, 100s of residence from NMSP controlled areas have fled to IDP areas because of increased instability in Mon State and Tenasserim Division. Recently, because of the NMSP’s refusal to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF) for the SPCD, mass fleeing has increased and rumors continue to circulate about the longevity of the NMSP’s 15-year-old ceasefire agreement with the SPDC.

According to WCRP field reporters, most villagers flee because of village militias (forced conscription and harassment), forced labor, accusations of contacting or supporting a splinter group, and death threats from SPDC soldiers.

*(Editors Note: All names have been changed for security reasons)*
here [Halockhanee] we have to worry. I liked living at my old home. Now if we don’t have money, we can’t buy food and there is no plantation”, explains one woman.

Food and Resources

Food and resources were already scarce in this IDP site, and the new arrivals have struggled to sustain themselves. Villagers were supplied with limited amounts of rice, oil, vegetables and eggs, but the supplies are barely enough. Mothers complained that their children are hungry and that they have no milk or meat. One mother spoke of her struggles: “The amount of rice we receive from the organizations is not enough for us. We have to ration the rice each day. We are given a very limited amount and I try to give my children the biggest portions.” A younger woman explained, “They [MRDC] supported us; they gave us 2 kilograms of rice, and other organizations supported us with oil and other food. I am not starving, but I do not really have enough. I do not have any meat or fish to eat.”

Another young mother described her difficulties: “My child has been sick, she has a cold. I want to buy food so my child will have energy but I do not have any money. The supplies the organizations provided are not enough for us. We ration the rice and save some for when our children are hungry later. When they are hungry, we have to feed them.”

In addition to the absence of food, other basic implements are lacking. There are insufficient pots to go around, which causes problems as water from the nearby stream cannot be boiled to purify it. A 42-year-old woman said, “When I first arrived, I wanted to drink boiled water … but we didn’t have a pot to cook with.”

Health and Sanitation

Health and sanitation, already a problem in the IDP site, were particularly difficult for the Bee Ree and Tavoy residents, as they were overcrowded in the MNEC school building. Halockhanee medical facilities were also unable to provide proper aid to the sudden influx of people.

Despite the fact that at the time of WCRP’s visit, over 150 people originally living in the school had left, conditions were still very cramped for the 105 people who remained. The area was partitioned using movable blackboards and the wooden floor was caked in dirt. Children slept five or six to a wooden table, with many more on the floor.

Mothers reported that many of their children had diarrhea (from drinking un-purified water), malaria, severe coughs, fevers, injuries and skin infections. The interviewees felt these health problems were from the result of their unsanitary living conditions in the cramped quarters of the MNEC school. The lack of pots to boil water with caused major problems for health and hygiene. One mother explained her situation: “My youngest daughter had diarrhea for almost a week, I think because of the water. When we first arrived here we could not boil water because we didn’t have a pot. So we just drank the dirty water from the stream.” A mother of five, originally from Tavoy District said, “After we arrived here, two of my sons had diarrhea for a couple days and one of my children has malaria and a cough.”

New arrivals to Halockhanee did not have access to sufficient healthcare or treatment for their diseases. The clinic set up by the Mon National Health Committee (MNHC) did not have enough supplies to support the sudden influx of people from Bee Ree and Tavoy and they could not properly treat patients or handle emergency situations. Health workers tried to share supplies but they
had a limited amount of medicine. Many children had severe cases of diarrhea for many days. When children went to the MNHC clinic in Halockhanee, health workers could only give them small dosages of anti-diarrhea medicine.

A 34-year-old mother of five said, “We went to the clinic but they didn’t have any medicine and we didn’t have any money to buy medicine from the private pharmacy.” Another mother described similar problems: “When my son got diarrhea and was sick for a week, I didn’t have any money so I couldn’t by medicine, and I didn’t know how else to care for him.”

In addition to the numerous physical ailments, many women spoke of suffering depression in the struggle to settle into their new and difficult environment. One woman said, “My life is so depressing because I had to leave my home and everything I worked for. Halockhanee is new to me. I have never been here before and I am not happy here.” An older woman described her feelings of shame and desperation: “We are like beggars, if they support us we can eat, if not then we will starve.” A mother of six said, “In my village I can work daily and support my children so they can go to school. Here, everything is different.”

The majority of the new arrivals to Halockhanee were mothers and children of all ages who had fled during the annual school holidays. At the time of the interviews, school was scheduled to resume in June after the holidays. The children were enthusiastic about returning to school and most seemed to understand the importance of education. A 12-year-old girl said, “If I do not study at school this year, I will fail the standard. When I grow up, I want to be a teacher. I want to teach my sister, brother and other students.” An 11-year-old boy said, “I want to go school, if I can’t go to school, I can’t read literature.”

Parents are committed to their children’s education and felt that it was very important that they continue to go to school. A 34-year-old mother of five children of school age explained this: “I have been thinking about my children’s education. If they [MNEC] allow them to attend school, where ever they send us, I will register them. I don’t want them to stop learning, education is very important for their future.”

A Karen mother with seven children said emphatically, “Wherever we end up, if there is a school, I will register my children.” Another mother with four children explained, “If they [MNEC] allow my children to study at the school in our new village [Halockhanee], then I will make them continue their education even though we are very poor.”

While this is the hope of all the mothers living in the school, some are not as confident. A 42-year-old woman expressed her concern:

“If we keep moving like this, I am afraid my children won’t be able to regularly attend school, and they will miss out on a proper education. I was not able to finish school and I am worried they will end up like me but I have no money to pay their educational costs. MNEC schools are free, but I cannot afford the books, clothes and other school supplies.”
Invitation for Feedback to Our Publication
“The Plight”
of Women and Children in Southern Burma

Dear Readers,

In 2000, with objectives to monitor the situation of women and children in Southern Burma and to empower
them with the rights described in CEDAW and CRC, which are both ratified by the current military regime,
our “Woman and Child Rights Project (Southern Burma)” came into existence.

Under this project, “The Plight” Newsletter is produced quarterly and focuses on the general situation of
women and children in Burma and how their human rights are violated by the ruling regime and its army.

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With regards,
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Another mother, a 30-year old woman, explained her situation: “If I have an opportunity to register my son for school, I will, but
right now I don’t have enough money to buy his school uniform.” A 15-year-old girl spoke matter of factly: “I want to continue my
education but we do not have enough money. I need to work to help my mother earn more money, so I can’t go to school.”

Even those parents who are able to afford their children’s education are facing problems. At the time of the interviews, it was
unclear whether Nai Aung Kyaw, who is in charge of organizing the new arrivals for the MRDC, would be able to arrange for the
children to attend the school. The schools in Halockhanee are already overcrowded and could barely support the population
before the influx of arrivals from Bee Ree and Tavoy.

Whether the children can attend school or not, the beginning of the school term poses another problem: as the new arrivals
currently reside in the school building, they will have to move somewhere else, and no one knows where that will be. They were
placed in the school building in the first instance because of the serious lack of housing, and that problem has not been resolved
since their arrival. A 30-year-old woman said simply, “We just don’t know where we’ll move next.”

Hopes for the Future

All of the villagers said when the situation was safe they would return home. If the instability continues however, they will stay in
the IDP area for the entire rainy season. While they hope to return home, they cannot be guaranteed safety or stability. A 37-year-
old woman said, “If we went back, they [NMSP] would not provide us with safety.”

Interviewees stressed that they prefer to stay in Burma, and in their own village, as they believe in a traditional Burmese saying
that means, “leaving the home land is not good to do.” The interviewees explained how much they believe this, and stressed that
they want to stay in Burma, and in their home villages. A 36-year-old of mother of six said, “I am upset about leaving my life and
I am not sure where they will have us move next ... but if I hadn’t moved from my village no one would protect my children and
mother.”
Another saying is that *ones dignity resides in ones home*. One woman explains how fervently she shares this belief: “I want to go back, even though I might die, I would rather die in my village. I do not want to die while I am searching for a new home.” Families repeatedly stressed that they wanted to return home as soon as it was safe, the situation was calm, and their villages were peaceful. A 39-year-old woman said, “If the NMSP and SPDC do not start shooting, I will go back and live in my house.” A younger woman described her eagerness to return: “Now, I am waiting for the situation to calm down. If it is peaceful in our village tomorrow, I will go back tomorrow.”

**Conclusion**

In cases of conflict and displacement around the world, it is the women and the children who are the most affected. In this case, vulnerable people fleeing from the threat of violence arrived in an IDP site already overcrowded and lacking in basic supplies. There is insufficient food, cooking utensils and housing. There are insufficient medical supplies and an increase in disease due to poor sanitation and overcrowding. The already strained education system cannot cope with the increase in children, and parents cannot find work to pay for any of a number of basic needs going unmet. It is unclear when the villagers will be able to safely return to their homes. The Thai government has blocked access and will not allow them to enter Thailand to go to Ban Don Yang refugee camp, just across the border from Halockhanee. The Burmese military junta engages in continual persecution of Burma’s ethnic minorities and was the major factor in causing this internal displacement. The feeling of hopelessness on the part of many of Halockhanee’s new arrivals is understandable.

A safe place for these people needs to be either created or made accessible. Thailand’s existing refugee camps can provide safety from conflict, access to humanitarian aid and the possibility of earning money. Newly constructed semi-permanent camps on the Thai side of the border would also serve these needs. The IDPs from Bee Ree and Tavoy have emphasized their desire to return to their villages as soon as they are safe and stable and at this point it seems likely that the worst-case situation of a return to pre-ceasefire open conflict may not eventuate; a temporary solution is all that is required. WCRP argues that the RTA must take the necessary action to provide this solution and protect these and other vulnerable people, and thus meet its humanitarian obligations as a regional power.