Finding Hope amongst the Despair: My Journey back to my Homeland

Universal Arms Embargo against Burma

News Briefs
Due to the ongoing civil war between the Rangoon government, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and armed Karen rebels, I was forced to flee my home with my family in 1984, at the age of 7. I grew up on the border of Thailand and Burma with tales and memories from friends, parents and relatives who never ceased to talk about our homeland in Karen State.

Having worked as a Karen human rights activist for five years, I had a general awareness of the living conditions my people face every day. However after traveling for 45 days in northern Karen State, the true, harsh reality of life was still unexpected and shocking. Memories and stories from my youth told tales of something more beautiful.

It took 11 days for my team and me to reach the area we wanted to survey. After a day traveling by car and boat, I had to walk 10 days to cross through 160 kilometers of mountainous jungle, rapidly flowing rivers and deep valleys.

After decades of civil war between the Burmese army and the Karen National Union (KNU), more than 150,000 Karen people have been forced to flee their homes and become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in their own country. For 45 days, I traveled through these IDP areas in Toungoo and Nyaung Lin Bin District in northern Karen state. During this trip, I met with villagers who have been forcibly displaced by Burmese troops. I conducted interviews with them about Karen culture and the general situation inside Karen state. Most apparent were the deteriorating living conditions of the Karen people.

Toungoo district is structured into two townships; they are Htan Ta Bin and Than daung Township. Some parts of this locality are under the protection of the Karen National Union (KNU). There are 207 villages and about 38,556 villagers are resident in this area. It is divided into two zones, low land and high land. The low land is recognized by villagers as a “peaceful” area where both parties - SPDC troops and KNU- avoid gun battles as much as possible. The high land area is a free fire zone, where any villager can be shot on sight by SPDC soldiers.

Karen Culture

There are many different tribes of Karen people living separately in Burma. Although they speak different dialects, they practice the same culture. In Toungoo District, there is a tribe of Karen people called “Karen Mor Nay Pwa .” When I interviewed them, I realized that they strongly want to preserve their culture. It appears that all the villagers would sacrifice their lives if something harms or hurts their culture or village. They are worried that the SPDC government will eliminate their culture. The Karen
Mor Nay Pwa do not allow their children to marry with other ethnic groups, even other Karen from different regions. They are animist and believe in nature. They have a lot of taboos for their children to follow. The SPDC has tried to relocate them many times but have not succeeded yet. The Karen Mor Nay Pwa believe firmly in their culture and taboos and stand by them even today.

Karen villagers living conditions

Villagers living in war torn areas (high land) are still facing many difficulties and are frequently forced to leave their home and restart their lives elsewhere. The villagers have no sense of security despite the fact that the KNU verbally reached a ceasefire agreement with the SPDC in January 2004. The negotiation of this ceasefire does not stop the villagers being in fear of their lives when traveling and looking for food. Many local Karen leaders point out that the SPDC uses the ceasefire process only as another tactic to infiltrate more areas in Karen state and to counter KNU activity.

Looking at the lives of people in these areas of Burma, it is clear that they never have time to rest. Even if they manage to resettle or live in a lowland area where the ceasefire offers some protection, they still have to work hard for their survival. In the dry season (February-April) they prepare land for growing rice. In the rainy season (May-September) they grow rice. After the young plants of rice grow taller, they have to clean up the grass which grows alongside the paddy plants. From October to December, it is the harvest period, the time to gather the crops. Having sufficient food is a major issue that is constantly on their minds.

After the harvest period in December, villagers survive by hunting and searching for bee-honey. They get a small income from these activities. They raise pigs, chickens and ducks to solve the family’s financial problems. Some also grow vegetables and cardamom plant, a seed they use as a spice. The purpose of these income generating activities is to get enough food for the family and to keep their children in school.

In the low land area, the maximum family income in one year is approximately 100,000 kyat (Burmese currency), the equivalent of about 4,000 baht. But, in high land areas (the free fire zone), family incomes are significantly lower because of the unstable situation. When I talked with one of the IDPs hiding in the free fire zone, he said, “During my life, the maximum amount of money I have had in my hand was 1,500 kyat.” (about 60 baht in Thai currency). We can imagine how poor these people are.

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**Child healthcare situation**

Another major cultural issue is that parents want many children. They believe that children are a gift from God and so some do not accept the concept of family planning. Although parents are not always able to take care of their children or raise them up effectively, they want many children anyway. It is common, that among a family which has six children, half may die for various reasons at an early age. Sadly many children die from curable diseases as they do not have access to healthcare. Lack of nutritious food and hygiene, cold weather and unsuitable clothes cause children to be unhealthy often leading to death. The most common diseases in this area are: malaria, skin itching and infection (caused by mosquito-like insects whose bites cause swelling and soreness) and coughing.

**IDPs children’s education**

The majority of IDPs children do not go to school because they have to take care of their siblings when their parents are working in paddy fields. They also have to take care of cattle, pound rice and look for vegetables.

The number of children going to school is dependent on their parents having sufficient food. If this is not the case, the children have to work in the paddy field with their parents.

Although the IDPs live in a difficult situation, the parents try to organize a primary school for their children in order to preserve their language. The aim of going to school is not to study for specific knowledge and skills but simply to be able to read and write. School teachers do not receive any teacher’s training and are unqualified. I learnt that teachers are willing to serve their people. But, they need more skills training in teaching methods, and building children’s political and cultural awareness. After talking with parents, I learnt that they are willing to develop their community through an education program. Today they have a much greater understanding of the value of education than before.

However, children have to stop school after they finish fourth standard as there is no secondary school in their village where they can continue their studies. Many go back to work in the rice fields to help their parents and therefore have no possibility of any further education.

**Eating for survival**

People in towns or big cities may imagine delicious food before eating and may have access to it. But, IDPs in a free-fire zone think differently. Rice and salt are the most common food for them. They have to eat for survival; they do not eat for flavour. Normally, they eat three times a day but owing to the instability of their living conditions and food shortage, often they have to limit themselves to two times a day.

IDPs dare not to store their food in the village as SPDC troops may take it or destroy it when they enter the area. To avoid this kind of trouble, they hide their rice in the jungle but may lose it if they have to escape approaching SPDC troops.

For IDPs fleeing SPDC troops, eating time is contrary to human nature. In some situations they have to eat at the time of cock-crow, before sunrise and late at night. It is mostly dependent on SPDC military activities and if they are forced to flee.

The night brings happiness for people in city to enjoy dinner with friends but for IDPs on the run the only matter is to find a place where they may sleep securely.

**Hopes of IDPs**

IDPs are the victims of war. When the SPDC
As the situation in Burma does not improve, questions of what the international community can do arise. It is important to keep communication channels with the junta open. However, it is essential to protect the people of Burma. One way to do this is by imposing universal arms embargoes against the Burmese junta.

Arms embargoes make it illegal for countries to sell weapons, ammunition and military technology to another State. This prevents the State from building up its military resources. As the arms stockpile is used, this supply should run out, and it should not be replenished. Thus, the state’s ability to inflict violence and death unto others is removed.

But while removing a country’s ability to build up its military, the imposing state still remains neutral in the conflict. Due to being neutral it means diplomatic channels stay open.

Nevertheless, despite all these difficulties and dangers, IDPs live in hope. One IDP expressed to me that “Firstly, we put our hope in God. Secondly, we put our hope in United Nations peace keeping forces to come and help to solve the problem in Burma and thirdly, we put our hope in our mother organization (the Karen National Union) to save us from tyranny.”

After observing the plight of the IDPs in northern Karen State, I still share this hope. However a true cease-fire between the KNU and the SPDC must be immediately enforced and respected by both sides. A stronger stance and greater involvement by the United Nations would definitely speed up the process of cease-fire negotiations between Rangoon government and all ethnic armed groups fighting in Burma.

For IDPs to rebuild their life in Karen State and all ethnic regions of Burma, peace is a fundamental necessity.

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**Universal Arms Embargo: Destroying the Junta’s Iron Fist**

**By Moo Ko Htee**

In the case of Burma a number of countries and coalitions of States have imposed arms embargoes against the regime. This action makes a statement, and a difference. The United States and the European Union, two of the world’s leading developers of military technology, have active embargoes against the junta. This means their cutting-edge, innovative, state-of-the-art military equipment is not being sold to the Burmese military.

Sadly, while some countries have embargoes against the regime, most do not. The junta can legally buy weapons, ammunition and military technology from many nations. Since 2002 the junta has been on a weapons shopping spree. Burma has bought eight 75mm Howitzers (a cannon artillery, known for its high angle trajectory) from India, radar systems, tanks and 500 armoured personnel carriers from the Ukraine, “Nora” self-propelled Howit-
zer and an upgrade of its fleet of Soko G-4 jets from Serbia and MIG-29 Fighter jets from Russia. The junta also has received unspecified cargo from North Korea, and it has a major arms deal with China. The army is estimated to have 400,000 soldiers, including people who were forcibly recruited and 70,000 child soldiers.

Undeniably, China is Burma’s leading arms supplier. China exports $6,372 million US dollars of military equipment to developing nations and has reportedly exported US $1.4 billion worth of military equipment to the junta since 1993. In 2004 the Burmese junta spent approximately $477.7 million US dollars on the military - nearly half its national budget. This amount is expected to increase as profits from recent “development” projects, such as the Yadan Gas Pipeline, run by French company TOTAL and US-based UNOCAL, start rolling in.

But the China-Burma relationship is not only about the sale of weapons. It is also believed to be the reason why there is no universal arms embargo in place against Burma. A universal arms embargo would mean that no country could sell weapons, ammunition or military technology to Burma. At present, the United Nations is the only institution with the power to impose a universal arms embargo. Unfortunately, for Burma they have failed to do so. China, a UN Security Council permanent member and therefore a country with the power to veto any motion before the council, is disinclined to impose any embargo. In particular when they are against a country that is such a good client of their arms industry.

Since 1992 the Security Council has imposed universal embargoes preventing the supply of weapons and military assistance to four countries: Somalia, Liberia, Angola and Rwanda. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter the embargoes were imposed against countries where there was an ongoing civil war, which led to a humanitarian crisis. With this as precedent in an ideal world, one would expect the UN Security Council would imposed a universal arms embargo against Burma.

Of course, as discussed previously, the lucrative arms relationship between China and Burma is the primary motivation for China preventing the UN from imposing such a sanction. There are further reasons for Chinese intransigence on this issue. Following Beijing’s crackdown on democracy and human rights protesters in 1988 in Tiananmen Square, many western countries separately imposed arms embargoes against China. Today the EU embargo is still active. The Chinese government’s recent request to have this embargo revoked was denied, because there has been little improvement in the country’s human rights situation. As China understands the repercussion of an arms embargo against a country, it is less likely to impose one. Especially, when it is against a regime that the Chinese government supports both politically and economically.

If China’s embargo had been revoked, the consequences for Burma’s people would have been disastrous. The EU would have implemented control measures to prevent their weapons being sold to EU embargoed countries, such as Burma. But anything in China is available - at a price. As the junta has money, it would have had access to nearly all of the world’s arms. An arms embargo does not only affect the State that it is imposed against. It also affects all the countries that the State would sell weapons too. With regards to China, this is a prevalent issue, and needs to be taken into account when considering lifting China’s arms embargo.

While countries incorporate control measures in their embargoes to prevent weapons being sold to embargoed countries through a third State, they do not always work. The EU has had an embargo against the export of arms and military equipment to the junta since 1996. All EU arms embargoes, including Burma’s, prohibits the export, directly or indirectly – through a third country – of all military items, including vehicles that have been manufactured or altered.
for military use. However, only last month an investigation began into a German engineering company, Deutz, for allegedly breaking the embargo by supplying weapons to Burma. Deutz supplied engines to a company in the United Arab Emirates. The engines were then re-sold to a Ukrainian company, who modified them and used them in armoured cars. The cars were then sold to Burma. A Deutz company spokesperson said their company acted legally in shipping the engines to the United Arab Emirates. The Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates do not have any arms embargos against Burma.

If there was a universal arms embargo in place, all countries would be bound by it. Consequently, selling arms through a third country could not happen. However, weapons would still be available through the black market. Today through this illegal channel, arms are smuggled into Burma. Currently it is opposition groups that benefit from this market but if the junta could not buy weapons legally from China, it would certainly turn to the black market. Weapon’s dealing is a lucrative industry that will exist as long as there is market for it. While dictatorships like the junta have money, they will be able to buy arms.

Since 1962 when the military seized power, the people of Burma have been living under one of the world’s most oppressive military dictatorships. The situation is far from improving. During the latest offensive in Southern Karenni State in February there were allegations from Karenni rebel soldiers that the junta used chemical weapons. These reports were collaborated by defectors from the Burmese army. Landmine use is prevalent, with one civilian landmine amputee per day in Karen State alone. Earlier this year during military offensives in Karen and Karenni States approximately 8,000 villagers became internally displaced persons, and 20 tonnes of rice were destroyed. The Burmese military systematically uses forced labour on development projects and during military offensives, including using people as human mine sweeps. Such oppression and human rights violations are possible through the junta’s strength of arms.

But a universal arms embargo is something that the Burmese people want. In 1990 Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest and the junta denied the National League for Democracy (NLD) the opportunity to form the government. Since then the NLD have been calling for the international community to impose economic sanctions including a universal arms embargo against the regime. From interviews BI field staff have carried out with the grassroots people, they too have reiterated the need for an embargo. And they want it to be enforced now, as each day Burma becomes more militarised.

A universal arms embargo will not solve all of Burma’s problems. But without a doubt it is part of the solution. Imposing an arms embargo is an achievable goal that could be the first step in creating a true peace in Burma. In October, the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Burma, Professor Paulo Pinheiro, will report to the United Nations General Assembly. Following his report, the General Assembly will discuss the situation of Burma. This is an opportunity to get the question of an arms embargo on the agenda and, to try and get a motion passed. Every person can write a letter to his or her government and politicians asking for action.

Our apathy to the oppression of the Burmese people is as bad as the junta’s guilt. There has been a call for action from the people who are suffering in Burma. We have ignored their voices for long enough. A universal arms embargo will make a difference.

Isn’t it time we made it harder for the Burmese army?

Endnotes:
1 Child Soldiers are anyone serving in the army under the age of 18
2 CIA World Fact Book
3 “The Applicability of International Standards to United Nations Economic Sanction Programmes”,
4 “EU arms embargo fail to prevent German engines being incorporated into military vehicles available in Burma/Myanmar, China and Croatia”, Amnesty International, September 2004
Nobel Peace Prize Nominations for Burmese Women: Four Burmese ethnic minority women living in exile are among 1,000 nominees worldwide for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. The women include Cynthia Maung, a Karen medical doctor who since 1989 has run a clinic treating Burmese refugees, migrants and orphans in Mae Sot, on the Thai-Burma border, and Charm Tong, a leader of the Shan Women’s Action Network. The other two Burmese women nominated for the Nobel prize are Naw Zipporrah Sein, secretary of the Karen Women’s Organization, and Naw Paw Lu Lu, who runs a home for Burmese refugees in the Sangkhlaburi district of Thailand’s Kanchanaburi province.

No Go for Burma on UN Security Council: The United States failed to put political repression in Burma on the U.N. Security Council’s agenda because Russia and China argued the issue was outside the council’s international peace and security mandate. By blocking the topic, it is assumed that Russia and China are protecting their own interests. China has reportedly exported US $1.4 billion worth of military equipment to the junta since 1993, while it is understood that Moscow is helping to build a nuclear reactor in Burma.

Girls gang-raped in Mon State: Two girls were raped by the Burma Army while guarding the motor road in southern Mon State. According to a witness who recently fled to refugee camp across from the Thai-Burma border, Mi Mon (not her real name) was taken away from her position and gang raped by Burma Army Battalion No. 61 on June 14. On June 7, a 14-year-old girl was raped by Private Yan Naing of Light Infantry No. 587, Burma Army division while she was staying at her family farm.

Lawsuit against Burmese Oil Giant Dismissed in Belgium: The highest Belgian court of appeal has dismissed a lawsuit against TotalFinaElf brought by Burmese nationals. It recalled that, in 2002, four Burmese nationals, one of whom had refugee status in Belgium, filed a lawsuit against the oil company for “complicity with the Burmese junta in crimes against humanity in Burma”. One month ago the arbitration court ruled that the Burmese plaintiffs were able to proceed with their case under Belgium’s universal jurisdiction law, but the Court of Cassation overturned this decision late June.

Rise in rice prices could lead to unrest: The price of rice in western Burma has jumped phenomenally in couple of days early July, and community leaders are worry that it could lead to social unrest in the region. “This price rise is a great strain on the daily budget of the people.” a community member said. Such a price rise has never been seen. A famine and some severe social unrest could occur in the region.