Resettlement is the process of relocating a refugee from the country of asylum to another country so that they can build a normal life for themselves free from the problems that caused them to flee their home country. When it is clear that a refugee will not be able to return home and cannot be integrated into the country to which they have fled, resettlement is often the only solution left.

The United States has the largest refugee resettlement program in the world. To apply for resettlement in the United States, refugees must undergo a rigorous screening process. First, they must prove to the satisfaction of the US authorities that they meet the definition of a refugee as set forth by the United Nations. Then each refugee must be thoroughly interviewed and screened by the US Departments of State and Homeland Security. In 2002, the United States instituted substantially heightened background checks of all approved refugees. After successful background checks, refugees are then screened for active or communicable diseases, especially tuberculosis and certain venereal diseases. Persons testing positive for any of these conditions will have their admission to the United States delayed.

The final step of the approval process is sponsorship. No refugee may be admitted to the United States without the sponsorship assurance and support of one of the ten voluntary refugee resettlement agencies (VRRAs) that have State Department cooperative agreements to resettle refugees. These nine non-profit agencies and one state agency and their affiliate network guide refugees through the often difficult initial months of resettlement. These ten VRRAs are the:

- Bureau of Refugee Programs, Iowa Dept. of Human Services;
- Church World Service;
- Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society, Episcopal Migration Ministries;
- Ethiopian Community Development Council;
- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society;
- International Rescue Committee;
They are eligible for refugee cash and medical assistance programs for the first eight months following arrival. The level of benefits varies depending upon the state of residence. Following the first eight months, refugees are eligible for the same public assistance as other legal residents of the state. Refugees over 65 years old may be eligible for US government Social Security benefits.

- The refugee cash assistance program provides financial support for eligible participants while they are looking or preparing for work. Financially eligible refugees may start to receive cash assistance and food stamps within the first month after arrival in the United States, and continue to do so until the end of the eight month in the United States, provided they remain financially eligible. In addition, refugees who enter employment within four months after becoming employable (i.e., obtaining their Social Security card and/or Employment Authorization Document) may qualify for Early Employment Incentive payments.

- They are also eligible for refugee medical assistance for the first eight months after arriving in the United States. They will receive a monthly card that offers the same medical coverage as provided by the US government’s Medicaid program. After refugee medical assistance is no longer available, refugees may be eligible for health care coverage under Medicaid. As part of their initial resettlement, refugees must be screened for communicable diseases and other health problems within 90 days of their entry into the United States. The purpose of the screening is to identify, for treatment, any communicable diseases that may threaten public health, and other medical conditions that may act as barriers to a successful resettlement.

- All refugees under the age of 18 years old may attend primary or secondary public schools free of charge. Refugees have the same access to university education as US citizens and permanent residents; however in most states, there are tuition charges for public universities.

- All refugees are entitled to receive authorization for employment. They are protected by civil rights legislation and cannot be discriminated against in the workplace. They are not eligible to work for the federal government (except for service in the US armed forces) until they become US citizens.

- Refugees are eligible to leave the United States for up to one year provided they have obtained a refugee travel document which is valid for one year. Refugees must return to the United States within one year of their departure.

- One year after their arrival, refugees are eligible to adjust their status to permanent resident and get a green card. Five years after their arrival, they can apply for citizenship, provided they have become a permanent resident during this time and have continuously resided in the United States for the five years prior to applying for citizenship.

A request for sponsorship assurance for a refugee is sent to the US Government’s Refugee Processing Center and allocated to one of the VRRAs. The sponsorship assurance by the VRRA confirms that they are willing and prepared to accept the refugee for resettlement, and that all the necessary arrangements have been made at the local level to receive the sponsored refugee. The VRRA’s sponsorship assurance should be included in the approved refugee’s documentation packet. With this sponsorship assurance, approved refugees can then become ready to travel to begin their new life in the United States. The sponsoring VRRA facilitates the travel of refugees to their resettlement sites in the United States in coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Once refugees are cleared to travel, they are
entitled to interest-free travel loans to pay for the cost of transportation to the United States. After arriving, they have 42 months to repay the loan. Repayment of the loan generally begins within six months of arrival. The refugee repays the loan in monthly payments to their sponsoring VRRA. The VRRA reimburses the IOM to make the funds available for others seeking resettlement.

Although refugees can indicate a preferred resettlement location, it is not always possible to honor their preferences. With almost 500 LRRAs nationwide, refugees can be resettled in any of 450 cities across the country. LRRAs try to place groups of refugees from the same country or region in the same resettlement locations.

Upon their arrival at the resettlement location in the United States, refugees are met at the airport by the staff from their sponsoring LRRRA. These LRRRA people should be able to speak the language of the refugee and take them to a furnished, clean and safe apartment which will become their new home in America. They will be taught how to use the various household appliances and other devices in the apartment. In most cases, the apartment is close to transportation to their LRRRA. Newly arriving refugees are also provided with an initial amount of food.

The next day, the refugees are taken to the LRRRA office to begin the resettlement process. A case person will be assigned to the refugee/refugee family to help them with their immediate needs for food, clothing, cash and medical assistance, and enrolling children in school.

The US government, as well as the local and state government of the refugees’ new home, provides certain benefits and rights to help refugees become successfully integrated into American life as quickly as possible.

The LRRRA assists the refugee/refugee family in obtaining these benefits and exercising these rights during their first five years in America. Through a network of staff members and volunteers, LRRAs generally provide the following services and support to refugees to help them build new lives in America and take steps to become US citizens:

- Case management services;
- Obtaining a follow-up medical examination, and necessary medical, dental and mental health services;
- Applying for Social Security cards as well as other necessary US and local government documents and social benefits;
- Local community and cultural orientation;
- Use of public transportation;
- Employment services;
- Vocational training;
- English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction;
- Translation and interpretation assistance;
- Accompanying refugees to various appointments;
- Store to purchase donated items such as clothing, furniture, and kitchen utensils;
- Mentoring on various aspects of American life;
- Financial literacy skills - learning US currency, how to use checking and savings accounts, applying for a loan and using electronic banking;
- Assistance with the preparation of tax returns;
- Computer literacy programs;
- Citizenship classes;
- Legal service toward getting a green card and subsequent citizenship.

Most of these services are made available by LRRAs to refugees who have lived in the United States for five years or less. Citizenship and some other social services may be provided beyond the five-year time limit. However, priority for services at the LRRAs is given to new arrivals within their first year in America.

The LRRAs strive to serve as a free, one-stop center for refugee needs during their initial years in the United States. They work to maintain regular contact with their refugee clients to review their situation and provide support.

Employment is crucial to successful resettlement of refugees and to ensuring they quickly become self-sufficient. Consequently, LRRAs work hard to promote refugees to local employers and offer training and counseling, including:

- Orientation about the American work culture;
LRRAs try to help refugees obtain permanent employment with reasonable pay and benefits—especially medical insurance. However, many placements of refugees consist of low wage, entry-level jobs in retail stores, hotels/motels, factories, warehouses and health care facilities.

While LRRAs provide a wide array of services to encourage the self-sufficiency and social adjustment of refugees, the refugees themselves are ultimately responsible for their own success in the United States. They are expected to become self-sufficient within their first year of arrival. They must rely on their own resourcefulness, skills, experience and determination to quickly become self-reliant members of their new communities.

The decision to resettle in America is not an easy one for refugees. They must choose between a new life in a new country and continuing to be a refugee in the country of asylum. There are many positive depictions of American life in the media and the movies, but these portrayals are not necessarily accurate and can encourage refugees to make wrong decisions.

It is not easy to begin a new life in the unfamiliar US culture with few belongings, no friends, minimal English and work skills that are not easily transferable. Many families see resettlement as a way to improve the lives of their children. But this may come at a price as their children become exposed to an environment which may be in conflict with their family values and cultural traditions. Refugees from rural villages and remote places with less exposure to modern urban culture may have particular problems with adjustment to life in the United States. Also they do not have a village support structure to help them deal with their new lifestyle and any resulting day-to-day stress.

The most important challenge facing refugees resettling in the United States is getting and keeping a job, and earning enough money to survive. With a high unemployment rate and a sluggish economy, it is now taking refugees longer to get a good full-time, non-seasonable job. Also, if an employer needs to reduce staff because of declining business, they will dismiss those with low skill, entry-level jobs first as they are easier to replace once the business starts to grow again.

Refugees with trade or professional credentials have great difficulty working in their respective trades or professions, and need to be re-credentialed. Until that happens, they work in the same low-paying, entry-level jobs as other refugees without credentials.

Also the job must pay enough to cover expenses such as food, household supplies, clothing, laundry, rent, utilities, medical costs and travel loan repayments. Just going to and from work using public transportation adds to the refugee’s expense burden and takes a lot of precious time.

The other important challenge to refugees resettling in the United States is English literacy. Life becomes very difficult in the United States if one cannot speak English. As soon as they step outside their apartments, newly resettled refugees encounter the world of English—the grocery store, their children’s school, social services offices, doctors’ offices and hospitals, and the workplace. Poor English fluency makes it harder to get and hold a job, and keeps refugees in low paying jobs. The need for financial security and the squeeze for time pose additional problems to those who are working but want to improve their English fluency.
On the other hand, being able to live in peace and make choices for themselves can make it well worthwhile to endure the hardships involved in applying for resettlement and living in the United States. Many refugees are able to overcome the difficulties and are eager to build a better future in America for themselves and their families by working hard, saving money, buying a car, owning a home, going to college, and starting a small business. Successive waves of refugees have come to the United States over the past two centuries and realized their dreams.

I know... because my grandparents were among them...

The writer worked for two years in the 1990s as a volunteer with a local refugee resettlement agency in the United States. This article is largely based upon that experience and intended to offer only a very general sense of the US refugee resettlement process. For specific and more authoritative information about the US refugee resettlement process, readers are urged to contact refugee resettlement officials.

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**Stolen Youth: The Life Of A Child Soldier**

**By Naw Cha Mu**

In May 2010, the United Nations released its annual report identifying armed groups using child soldiers in conflicts worldwide. In Burma, three groups were singled out as persistent violators of international law: the Tatmadaw, the Karenni Army and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The junta-aligned Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) received scant mention, despite mounting evidence that it too recruits children. In July, Burma Issues made contact with Saw Lay Wah, a young DKBA deserter who fled across the Thai-Burma border to Mae La refugee camp and on to Mae Sot. His name has been changed to protect his identity. He told us his story – from the day the DKBA came to his village three years ago and forcibly recruited him, aged just 15.

It was May Day 2007. In 15 cars, DKBA troops from Battalion 907 rolled into Saw Lay Wah’s village, around two hours from the border town of Myawaddy in Kawkareik Township, Karen State. They ordered the villagers to gather. The troops had 20 rolls of paper. Ten were blank. The rest were marked with the word: ‘soldier’. Twenty parents with sons deemed old enough to fight were made to pick a roll. Those who picked ‘soldier’ were given the choice: “give us your son for three years or hire someone else to go in his place”.

Saw Lay Wah’s family were subsistence farmers. They grew no more rice than they needed to survive. There were six children: three boys and three girls. Their father was disabled, and Saw Lay Wah had left school after 3rd grade to provide for the family. “When I lived in the village, we hardly ever bought vegetables or meat. We went to the jungle... Sometimes we picked the vegetables that grew near our farm. Sometimes we trapped farm rats and cooked them for our meals.”

On the day the DKBA came for their recruits, Saw Lay Wah’s father picked the wrong roll. Saw Lay Wah knew he would have to go. “I was young, but I took my own decision to become a soldier because there was no-one else to go. I didn’t want to do it but I had to. I was fulfilling my duty. When I made the decision it upset my mother so much she fell unconscious. My father had to send her to the hospital in Myawaddy, two hours away. She was desperately against me becoming a soldier but she had no choice. If I didn’t go we would have to hire someone else. We would have to pay 500,000 kyat and 30 baskets of rice. We didn’t have that much money.”

The ten recruits were given ten days to prepare for the military camp. When Battalion 907 returned, the recruits weren’t ready. The DKBA arrested 13 of the village leaders, including the village chief, and took them to the Battalion 907 base camp in Myawaddy. They were forced to work on the camp farm without pay until the DKBA received its new men.

Three days later, the ten recruits drove from the village to the camp. At 15 years old, Saw Lay Wah was the youngest of the group. They were joined at the camp by 29 others: two groups of ten forced recruits from other villages and nine volunteers. The two commanders of the camp, Kyaw San and Moe Kyaw, called out the names and ages of the new troops. A 13-year-old boy and four 14-year-olds were among them.

The recruits spent three months training at the camp. They were taught how to fire weapons and set land mines. Discipline was tough.
“The commanders kicked us with their jungle boots. It hurt so much,” Saw Lay Wah said. They were shown propaganda, and told that the Karen National Union (KNU) were their enemies. “I just listened. But I never considered the KNU to be enemies.”

In August, the group was transferred to the Battalion 999 base, 30 minutes away in Miyalay Myiang. The group spent the next five months training to march. After Karen New Year in December 2007, Saw Lay Wah’s training was finished, and he moved back to Battalion 907 to commence duties.

Saw Lay Wah was stationed at a checkpoint in Luh Kho Hta under Commander Saw Wah Poe. His job was to take money from people who wanted to cross the border to Thailand. He didn’t experience any violence directly during this time, but he witnessed a DKBA commander beat a 17-year-old friend five times on the back with a two-by-four for falling asleep on duty.

After around two months, he was transferred to P’lu, south of Myawaddy, to work on the DKBA camp farm without pay. In May 2010, when his contract was finished, he tried to leave the DKBA and returned to his village. The DKBA caught him and made him continue work as a soldier. He returned to the village three times. Every time, the DKBA knew where to find him and brought him back.

In 2009, he had married a girl from his village. He could not provide for her – in three years with the DKBA, he received just one payment of 5,000 baht. After five months of marriage, his wife went to Mae Sot to find work. He has heard nothing from her since.

In July 2010, he was working on the front line in the forest near Oe Kree Hta just north of Myawaddy. Lay Wah surrendered to the KNU and was taken to Mae La camp over the border. He spent one night in the camp before he was moved to Mae Sot on July 11.

Lay Wah has been left with few options. “I just want to be a simple villager, but I have no choice now. I am illegal in Thailand.” He feels he has spent too many years out of education to go back to school. He remains estranged from his wife, and he cannot return to his village. Lay Wah is a deserter. If the DKBA catch him, they will kill him. Even in Thailand, he is under threat from DKBA agents. So, at 18 years old, Lay Wah is returning to a life he knows. He is joining the KNU as a soldier.

MOVING TO AMERICA: FROM MAE LA OON CAMP TO A NEW LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

By Saw Dar Wee

The resettlement of refugees has been an ongoing challenge for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) since its establishment on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. Originally founded to aid those displaced during the Second World War, the UNHCR began with a three-year mandate, after which it was meant to disband. However, due to continued conflict and humanitarian crises across the world, not least the 700,000 refugees relocated during the Vietnam war, the UNHCR continues its work today.

Countries with a resettlement program include those with a long-standing history of accepting relocated people, such as Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States of America. More recently, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, France, Iceland, Ireland, Paraguay, Portugal, Romania, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and Uruguay have been added to the list. These countries volunteer the number of placements they can accommodate each year. Currently, by far the most generous in terms of numbers is the United States, which offered 56,750 places in 2008. When compared to second-placed Australia with 6,500, this may seem disproportionately generous at the global level.

One of those whose fortunes the UNHCR
hopes to improve is Taw Tha Ner, a Karen refugee I had the pleasure of meeting in April. As a 23-year-old migrant, he has spent 10 years living on the border as a refugee, and is currently living in Mae La Oon camp, to the southwest of Mae Sariang in Thailand’s Mae Hong Son province. With 16,000 registered residents, along with potentially thousands more who are not registered with the UNHCR, it is a camp of not insignificant scale. Taw Tha Ner has been selected for the UNHCR resettlement program, giving him the opportunity to start a new life. This new life will start some 8,000 miles from home, in the United States.

He lives at the camp with his parents, who unlike him have no wish to be resettled. With ten years of camp life already behind them, that is where they feel at home. Despite the prospect of leaving his family, Taw Tha Ner began the application process for the program in May 2009. He expects to be resettled around May 2010, although confirmation has not yet been made. The process of moving a stateless person without documentation - even of his birth - is lengthy.

In fact, this is a bureaucratic exercise of some complexity. Resettlement in the United States begins with an application to the UNHCR, which checks names and registry information. Once completed, the information is passed to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which processes the information on behalf of the US government. The IRC checks family details, conducts a preliminary interview and records the history of the individual or family. The US government’s designated Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) and the US Citizenship and Immigration Service (CIS) conduct more interviews. This information is then given to the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which conducts a further interview. If the DHS establishes that the refugee could face persecution if they returned to their homeland, the procedure continues. Here, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) steps in to arrange the practicalities: transportation, basic “survival English” training, a three-to-five-day cultural orientation course, the overseeing of medical check-ups and numerous other necessities.

Taw Tha Ner has seen this procedure through almost to the end and will leave the camp along with his sister. However, as she is married and her husband is also leaving, it is likely that on arrival in the US they will be separated, leaving Taw Tha Ner without family or friends in an environment very different to what he knows. He is remarkably pragmatic about the whole situation, and although he is without any formal qualifications or work experience and has a limited English vocabulary, he is convinced that a productive life in the US is well within his reach.

Taw Tha Ner is but a drop in the UNHCR’s ocean of resettlement cases, and the ocean is getting larger every year. In 2010, the UNHCR estimates that globally 747,000 refugees are in need of resettlement; this figure represents an increase of almost 200,000 over the previous year. However, only 79,000 places are offered in total from all resettlement states. In 2008, from a total of over 120,000 submissions made for resettlement, only 65,000 were granted. Of those who were successful, the primary country of departure was Thailand, which accounted for over a quarter of the global total. Needless to say, those who departed were almost all Burmese.

However, departure from Thailand is by no means the end of the story and is no guarantee that life will improve. According to Refugee Resettlement Watch, Burmese are being “resettled in crime-ridden neighborhoods” - in what is already an alien culture. The IRC adds that of all resettled nationalities, the Burmese are the least prepared for the transition. It is easy to understand why many refugees are ill prepared. Although the IOM tries to ready them through cultural orientation, they face an uphill struggle. Considering that around half of resettlement cases are people under the age of 18, many of whom have spent their whole lives in camps, moving to one of the world’s most open and free nations can result in culture shock.

The financial situation upon arrival in the United States is as problematic as the cultural barrier, and as the global recession continues to bite, the situation shows no sign of improvement. Arriving in Houston, Texas, the refugee used to receive financial assistance from the government for 36 months. This has gradually been reduced to 22, 18, 12 and today only

"Cultural isolation combined with the difficulty of finding paid employment inevitably leads to problems of integration, which then runs the risk of creating “ghettoized” communities living on the fringe of society. "
eight months. For the first month the amount received – to cover rent, utilities, furniture and so on - is $900, half of what experts recommend. Then comes the task of finding paid work. Privately funded agencies that are staffed with low-paid or voluntary workers try to orientate the new arrivals, helping them integrate and get jobs. Historically these agencies were successful, finding work for around 80 per cent of refugees after six months. However, this number has fallen dramatically as economies have slowed down. Now the IRC expects the success rate to be closer to 20 per cent across most agencies.

Cultural isolation combined with the difficulty of finding paid employment inevitably leads to problems of integration, which then runs the risk of creating “ghettoized” communities living on the fringe of society. The situation is not dissimilar to the border camps themselves, where refugees live segregated from the rest of society. This benefits neither the newly resettled refugee nor the receiving nation, and if the receiving nation can see no benefit, placements may become a politically sensitive issue.

Various organizations and agencies have been created to tackle this problem. For example, the UK has the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES), which is funded publicly by the UK Border Agency. Its aim of facilitating a smooth and quick integration identifies “suitable and sustainable employment” as one of the key elements to achieving this. Employment offers much more than the reward of payment - in fact many of us do it voluntarily. The difficulty lies in finding suitable employment for refugees, the majority of whom lack the skill sets required by most employers.

The solution? Language, and specifically the English language. The multitude of English teachers in the Thai border town of Mae Sot is testimony to the international community’s feelings about this. Teaching English to the Burmese in Mae Sot will probably not bring about revolution, and may do little to improve the immediate needs of those who are learning. But with only a basic command of the language there will always be job opportunities in English-language countries, should a student be lucky enough to be selected for relocation.

We therefore need to ask why funding only comes when people have already been moved. Is this too little too late? Would funding not be better spent on supplying paid teachers to educate refugees before they are relocated? After all, one can only afford to volunteer for so long - perhaps not long enough to create the successful student-teacher relationship that comes with continuity. Moreover, for the cost of one member of staff in the UK or US, maybe four can be paid elsewhere in the world. Western staff also bring Western culture. If the refugee is familiar with the cultural traits of their receiving nation prior to departure, they can more quickly and successfully integrate on arrival, finding employment and becoming a fulfilled and productive member of their new society.

As for Taw Tha Ner, one can but wish him the best of luck and hope that a new life of freedom, something most of us take for granted, can be achieved.

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**DEADLY GROUND: COUNTING THE COST OF LANDMINES**

**BY SAW DA NE EALA**

On an overcast September morning in Mae Tao Clinic, in the Thai-Burma border town of Mae Sot, Saw Htun Htun is testing the socket for his new prosthetic leg. He paces up and down the plaster-spattered workshop, passing tables strewn with tools and half-finished limbs. When the socket fits perfectly to the stump that is all that remains of Saw Htun Htun’s lower leg, the clinic will make him a new prosthetic, and the 25-year-old will return to Burma to eke out a living as a farm laborer. Life will be tough. “I can’t work as much as before... but I can eat,” he says. Saw Htun Htun, whose name has been changed at his request, is one of hundreds of Burmese who cross the border to receive artificial limbs – free of charge – at Mae Tao Clinic’s prosthetics workshop every year. For around 85% of patients, the cause of their disability is the same: landmines.

In April 2005, Saw Htun Htun stepped on a mine while logging in a forest in Pa’an District, Karen State. The device was rudimentary. Little more than gunpowder stuffed into a plastic pipe, it was still powerful enough to blow off part of
his foot. Within hours, he had been referred from a clinic in Burma to Mae Tao Clinic, and on to Mae Sot General Hospital. He was handed a release form to sign in Thai, a language he does not understand. “I didn’t want to sign. But there was no-one who could tell me what it meant,” he said. He was given a general anesthetic. When he awoke, doctors had sawed his lower leg off. The shock was dizzying. There was horror at seeing a stump where before was a leg, and there was fear: as a laborer, how could he make his living now?

In Burma today, landmines continue to shred flesh, blow off limbs and kill. The Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, an independent landmine research and monitoring body, has identified at least 2,587 casualties in the country between 1999 and 2009. Of these, there were 183 deaths and 2,207 injuries. Many more casualties go unreported. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines estimates that around 1,500 Burmese are killed or injured by mines every year.

**Weapon of war**

This is a country which has seen 60 years of civil war. In the ethnic states, where rebel groups fight the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the use of landmines is endemic. Karen State contains some of the worst affected areas. In this mountainous strip of territory sandwiched between Thailand and the Gulf of Martaban, most people make their living from the land. Landmines have turned that land deadly. Here, the rebel Karen National Liberation Army continues to fight the SPDC and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a KNLA splinter group that has allied itself with the junta. According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, all three groups use landmines – and their use is increasing.

Saw Albert, a field worker for the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), knows more than most about why landmines have become such a grim constant in the lives of the people of Burma. He has returned to his homeland several times over the past two years, spending weeks inside Karen State documenting human rights abuses, at considerable danger to himself.

Each group has its own reasons for using landmines, he says. The KNLA mines the areas around its camps and villages to protect them from attack. Its landmines are mostly improvised: plastic pipes or bamboo stuffed with explosives and linked to tripwire. Saw Htun Htun believes it was a KNLA mine that cost him his foot. The Burmese army’s mines are manufactured in factories – either in Burma or imported from abroad. Usually made from non-perishable waterproof materials, they can remain active for more than 50 years.

One of the junta’s most infamous tactics is to force people to flee their villages by burning down their homes, then lay mines in the villages to stop their occupants from returning. According to KHRG’s latest report, Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State, “no warnings or information about mined areas are provided to civilian communities in hiding.” Sometimes, driven by the need to retrieve food or possessions, villagers have no choice but to go back. “They cannot avoid their family’s needs,” says Saw Albert. “So they have to go. They have to take a big risk for their family’s survival.”

Other SPDC tactics have reached shuddering heights of perversity. One of these is “atrocity demining”: the use of human beings to remove landmines. The SPDC rounds up villagers, forcing them to walk in front of troops to trigger any mines which may lie under the road or path. According to the Landmine Monitor, “In mid-2003, a community leader witnessed..."
people dragging a tree trunk by ropes ahead of a unit of Army soldiers in order to detonate landmines on a path outside Papun town in northern Karen State.” In a BBC radio interview in September the same year, a man told of “being forced to walk in front of Army units and being left for dead after he detonated a landmine.” A survey in Burmese refugee camps conducted by a humanitarian organization showed that more than seven percent of refugees had been forced to walk on minefields. The SPDC has also been known to extract fines from people who have stepped on mines “for destroying state property”. If the victim dies, their grieving family is made to pay instead.

**Village protection**

In the face of the threat from the SPDC, villagers themselves have turned to landmines to protect their families and livelihoods. “We know mines are horrible things... but on the other hand, by using landmines, the villages can protect themselves from attack,” says Saw Albert. The KNLA supplies villagers with homemade landmines which they deploy to protect their homes, fields and hiding sites. As Saw Yo—, a 50-year-old villager, told KHRG, “If the SPDC army withdrew from our area, we wouldn’t use weapons such as guns and landmines any more. We’d use muskets as usual for hunting animals. We use weapons because the SPDC army oppresses us. The usage of weapons for protection is needed and very essential for our civilians in order to be able to live and survive.”

Villagers say they let each other know when and where they plant mines, but accidents cannot be prevented. In March 2009, the Free Burma Rangers, a Burma-based relief organization reported that a 22-year old man had been blinded after a landmine exploded in his face. He had been searching for vegetables in an area of Karen State where, unknown to him, local resistance had placed mines to protect a group of displaced people from SPDC attack. “Despite efforts of the resistance to inform all locals of areas that are off-limits because of mines, villagers often live in remote locations and information is sometimes slow to arrive,” the FBR report said. “People must also search wide areas of land to find sufficient food, and during this movement they sometimes fall victim to mines laid by the resistance or other villagers.”

**Mine ban**

This has made areas of Burma some of the most heavily mined in the world. Little is being done to decontaminate the land. Unlike countries like Cambodia and Sri Lanka, there are no humanitarian mine clearance programs in Burma. Armed groups clear mines when they need to. The SPDC, when not forcing villagers to act as human minesweepers, has been known to clear mines itself to facilitate commercial ventures. The KNLA sometimes clears mines for villagers. Otherwise, villagers have at times resorted to sending precious livestock over mined areas or sweeping the ground with extremely long bamboo rakes.

Burma has refused to sign the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, which bans the use, stockpiling and production of landmines. It has also consistently abstained on UN General Assembly resolutions to universalize the ban. In April 2010, following a rise in the number of mine-related deaths, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy opposition party called for an end to the use of landmines. Ohn Kyang, the party spokesman, said the NLD would sign the Mine Ban Treaty – if it had the power to do so. “It is no strange thing that armed personnel involved in the fighting are being hit by landmines,” he said. “However [the NLD] is sad to hear that innocent civilians become victims and live their lives in danger because of leftover landmines.”

**More victims**

Treatment for victims, most of whom are very poor, is frequently inadequate and usually expensive. This is a country that devotes as much of 60 percent of its national budget to the military – and just 3 percent to healthcare. Some patients can afford treatment in Burma’s hospitals. The ICRC funds the Hpa-an Orthopaedic Rehabilitation Centre in the capital of Karen State. It provided services for 1,194 patients in 2008, according to Landmine Monitor. But there is scarcely enough high-quality, affordable care available. And rampant corruption means much of the care that is supposed to be free is anything but.

Until that situation changes, people like Saw Htun Htun will continue to cross the border into Mae Tao Clinic for genuinely free treatment. On November 7, 2010, Burma will hold its first elections in 20 years. Rather than being a step on the road to democracy, they show every sign of being a sham designed to cement the military’s brutal rule over the country. They will not be free or fair. As long as ethnic minorities feel they are denied genuine representation and autonomy, there will be no end to conflict in Burma, nor an end to the use of landmines. Until Burma finds a genuine and lasting peace, civilians will continue to be maimed and killed by the very ground they walk on.
This year's elections, Burma's first in 20 years, will take place on November 7. They will be contested by 37 political parties. Campaigning has already begun, and the first party announcements have been broadcast on state radio and television.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has urged Asean nations to take a tougher line on Burma ahead of elections widely regarded as a sham designed to cement the military’s rule. The UN chief expressed his mounting “frustration” with the Burmese government.

The junta has announced that Aung San Suu Kyi will be allowed to vote in the polls. An aide to Suu Kyi dismissed the move as a ploy to confuse the public. Suu Kyi has already announced that she is boycotting the elections. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate is due to be released from house arrest on November 14.

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) has become a border guard force officially under the command of the Burmese military. At least one faction has broken away from the DKBA in protest at the plan. Some observers expect more dissent in the ranks when the DKBA loses its valuable business concessions and is used to wipe out remaining Karen National Union forces.

Cyber attacks shut down websites belonging to exiled Burmese media organizations on September 27, the anniversary of the 2007 anti-government protests known as the 'Saffron Revolution'. The websites of The Irrawaddy, Mizzima and the Democratic Voice of Burma were hit by distributed denial-of-service attacks. Observers said the attacks may be a test run for further attacks on media organizations during the elections.

Amnesty International has called on the Burmese government to release all political prisoners in advance of the elections. The London-based group said more than 2,200 dissidents are still in detention in the country.

We would like to request our readers to kindly notify us of any changes to your mailing address. You can inform us at burmaissues@burmaissues.org

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