Time for You to Leave
A Soldier’s Escape
Fears of famine in Mone Township

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In 2002, Maung Lwin Soe (not his real name), who is from Bo Ga Lay town in the Irrawaddy Delta Division, visited his aunt who lives in Rangoon. When he arrived in Rangoon, he was stopped by a plain clothes Burmese soldier. The soldier questioned him and asked for his identity card. Maung Lwin Soe explained that he was going to visit his aunt and showed him his identity card. However, the soldier ignored the identity card and instead, set it on fire. The soldier tried to force him to join the army, but Maung Lwin Soe refused. Then he was confronted by police who threatened him with jail since he did not have his identity card. So at this point, Maung Lwin Soe had no choice but to join the Burmese army.

Maung Lwin Soe was sent to the Da Nyin Kone Military Recruitment Base. He stayed there for a week for initial processing and then was transferred to the Tha Hton Military Practical Base (9) in another town to undergo four months of basic military training.

After the four months of basic military training, Maung Lwin Soe was assigned and taken to the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 202, a unit of Infantry Division (IB) 22 in Hpa-An. Maung Lwin Soe served as a guard at the battalion's main checkpoint and welcomed senior military officers. While he was there, he saw three or four child soldiers. “I believe that those kids were under 18 years old and forced to become child soldiers by the army”, said Maung Lwin Soe.

Military Pay and Benefits

When he started out in the military, Maung Lwin Soe’s monthly salary was 3,500 kyat (Burmese currency equivalent to US$5) per month. At the time he made escape, his monthly salary was 45,300 kyat (US$68). While this was his official salary, he never received the full amount as the officers at the military base would make deductions from the soldiers’ salaries for reasons such as donations for the Dharma team, office stationery, and various social occasions of joy or grief. Often he only received about 41,000 (US$62) to 42,000 kyat (US$63) monthly because of these deductions. Whenever the soldiers broached the subject of the deducted money with their senior officers, they were told that the situation would be fixed, but that was never done.

According to Maung Lwin Soe, the salary scale for soldiers within the Burmese army was as follows: (Please see in the box below)

The salary for new and lower ranking soldiers is not enough to support a family. Consequently, some of the soldiers’ wives try to get jobs outside of the military base. This is not easy because, if they want to work outside the base, they must get permission from the military base authorities. Usually the military base authorities do not give this permission because the battalion officers want the soldiers’ wives to stay in the camp. Their reluctance is due to the fact that when the soldiers go to the frontlines, the soldiers’ wives are responsible for guarding five – six people per group on behalf of the battalion camp security. Also the soldiers’ wives do menial work on the military base, such as clearing weeds and cleaning. If a soldier’s wife becomes sick, the soldier of that wife is forced to work days without pay as compensation.

The military provides rations to the soldiers - rice, yellow beans, tinned milk, and sugar, but they are typically substandard. As Maung Lwin Soe experienced, the rice and yellow beans were often infested with worms; usually only the rice and beans in one of three tins was edible. “The salt that was provided was already moldy and as black as mud”. In the battalion base, the camp officer arranges the rations for the soldiers’ families. But this is not out of kindness since the cost of arranging the rations is deducted from the soldiers’ salary. In other words, the soldiers’ families’ rations are bought from the soldiers’ salaries.

The military base authorities provide very limited yearly support toward the soldiers’ children education. For example: 10,000 kyat (US$15) is given for a university student and 2,000 kyat (US$3) provided for primary or high school education. “It is simply not enough to provide a good education for a child”.

It is a well known fact that, in the schools in Burma, the teachers often collect money from the students for the general upkeep of the school. They use this
money for basics supplies, such as water pots and brooms, for the classroom. Therefore some of the soldiers’ children are unable to pay fully for school and end up leaving the military base to find a job on the outside; some even go to Thailand to work without finishing their education.

When a soldier is killed during military service, his family is officially entitled to compensation of a one year’s full salary of the deceased soldier. In reality, the military authorities do not pay out anything. In addition, the family of the dead soldier is evicted from the military base, leaving them homeless. This situation has led some of the dead soldiers’ wives to turn to prostitution as the only way of solving their family’s daily struggle for survival.

These widows are not the only ones who see prostitution as a means of survival. The wives of living soldiers have been known to turn to prostitution on the military base since they simply can’t survive on the meager salary their family receives from the military. They have children to support, debts, and other obligations. Nobody would willingly become a soldier in the Burmese army and put up with the living conditions. That is why the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) soldiers do not want to remain as a part of the Border Guard Force. “Nobody does,” says Maung Lwin Soe. The DKBA was a breakaway group of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), one of the larger insurgent armed groups in Burma.

**Treatment of the Soldiers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Monthly Salary (Kyat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Soldier</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant (1 chevron)</td>
<td>47,000 (US$70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant (2 chevrons)</td>
<td>50,000 (US$75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant (3 chevrons)</td>
<td>53,000 (US$80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Lieutenant (Du Bo)</td>
<td>100,000 (US$150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lieutenant (Bo)</td>
<td>120,000 (US$180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major (Bo Mu)</td>
<td>130,000 (US$195)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Battalion Commander</td>
<td>230,000 (US$345)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battalion Commander</td>
<td>over 230,000 (US$300)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The monthly salary for a new soldier may be higher because of prior experience*

When the army recruited Maung Lwin Soe, there was an agreement made that if the newly-recruited soldier was not happy in the military, he could resign and return to being a civilian. This was not the case - Maung Lwin Soe ended up serving with the Army for ten years. During this whole period, he was unhappy. After five years of service, he asked to resign. His senior officer told him, “You cannot resign from the army alive, but you can leave as a dead man”. In other words, once you were in the army there was no way out except death.

To deepen the threat, the officer gave him some anti-KNLA propaganda, saying, “If you escape to Nga Pway (KNLA soldiers), they will kill you and not in a quick way; they will slash you with bamboo and pour salt in the wounds”. Maung Lwin Soe did not believe that the KNLA behaved like that. However, the same could not be said for the Burmese army. Maung Lwin Soe said, “I know that if the army arrested KNLA soldiers, they didn’t feed them and tortured them in many ways”.

Sometimes soldiers try to escape from the military base. If they are caught, they are arrested and taken to the main military base where they spend two – three months in a military jail before being transferred to military prison. In the military prison, the soldiers are sentenced to [a punishment of] eighteen months in prison. After serving their sentence, the soldier cannot return to civilian life and must go back to the army where, upon their return, they will forgo their first three – four months of salary.

According to Maung Lwin Soe, most of the sergeants within his battalion were respectful, but some of the senior military officers did not treat
the soldiers well. They would often find fault with the soldiers, and yell or swear at them. These senior officers would often beat them with their edge of their guns and kick them with their boots. Maung Lwin Soe stated that most of the soldiers had not joined the Burmese army voluntarily and only followed orders because if they didn’t they would be punished. Maung Lwin Soe shared his experience about punishment in the Burmese army. “If a soldier did something wrong, they were not punished on the front line. They were arrested and taken as a prisoner to the military base where they would then be punished. They were also punished if they refused to carry out orders that they believed to be ethically wrong. Rather than question these orders, the senior officers simply punished the privates for not following them. Sometimes the more senior officers would make awkward orders that the private wouldn’t want to follow. The private would then be beaten by the officers and sometimes be put into a cell for a week or ten days.”

On the Front Line

After three months in the battalion, Maung Lwin Soe was sent on patrol on the front line at Tat Li Meh Poe Kay on the Thai – Burma border. During his time on the front line, his battalion was attacked by an insurgent armed group. He tried to open fire, but his rifle got caught in the mortar that he was also carrying. When he tried to solve this problem, his sergeant beat him badly. Maung Lwin Soe also shared his experience about an incident that occurred in 2009. His military unit was on a combined operation with DKBA soldiers under the command of Bo Chit Thu - one of the key DKBA leaders - on a month long offensive against the Myay Aye Gu KNLA camp. At that time, the Burmese army was supporting the DKBA’s battlefield offensive with long range heavy weapons. His memories of the operation were that both the Burmese army and the DKBA worked as a team to take the KNLA camp until one of the DKBA’s commanders, Bo San Pyoak, was assassinated. This relationship immediately degenerated between the two groups because of questions about who carried out the assassination. The KNLA denied involvement and suspicion hung over the Burmese army.

For a military operation in the Dooplaya District of Karen State, the operations commander ordered Maung Lwin Soe’s battalion to set up heavy weaponry, including mortars and machine guns, at various vantage points above the villages. Maung Lwin Soe said that sometimes the senior army officers would order the privates to open fire randomly into the villages to the point where some of the villagers did not dare to live in their houses,
choosing instead to live in the space under their homes. A common tactic used by the Burmese Army was the extortion of money from villagers. Maung Lwin Soe experienced this when the military front line base camp in Thay Baw Boh Operation Command (near the Thai - Burma border) set up a checkpoint and taxed the villagers for every truck (60 kyat/9 US cents) and small tractor (30 kyat/5 US cents) that passed the checkpoint. The soldiers promised that the collected money would be used to construct a better road and a bridge, and rebuild the local school, but this was clearly never their intention. Maung Lwin Soe insists that all of the money collected was used to line the officers' own pockets. When the operations command moved to a different military base camp, the promises they had made to the villagers disappeared along with them. However, the new operations command continued to impose the taxes on the villagers.

During his time patrolling on the frontlines, Maung Lwin Soe found that some battalions used porters and mules. However, when they were in Dooplaya District, they forced the villagers to carry their rations and took their tractors to transport their supplies from camp-to-camp. Sometimes the army used up to five tractors per day without paying anything to the villagers or even giving a donation towards petrol. Maung Lwin Soe said, “It should have been the responsibility of the operations commander to make these payments, but he did nothing for the villagers”. Maung Lwin Soe shared his opinion about the civil war, saying, “I don’t want fighting anymore between the ethnic factions in Burma. I just want us to live together in an understanding way”.

**Political Views**

“While in the military, we were allowed to listen to the radio,” said Maung Lwin Soe. “Some of the sergeants would say that the information we heard was true. However, the more senior officers said that the media was spreading propaganda that is not true, and that the media just want to create dissent between the military and the people of Burma.

Maung Lwin Soe’s opinion about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her politics is that, “she is doing everything right. If I had the chance to talk with her, I would stand by her side”. Maung Lwin Soe is also of the opinion that most of the private soldiers thought that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was right. On the other hand, the senior officers said that since she was freed from house arrest, she has been doing bad things. “For me though, I see her doing good things that no member of the current government would do such as consoling AIDS patients. The main reason that the senior officers don’t like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is that she married a Western man”.

**Escape**

The reasons Maung Lwin Soe wanted to leave the military were numerous. His military salary was not enough to provide for his family. This made him particularly unhappy as the more senior officers earned much higher salaries than the privates, but it was the privates who put their lives in danger on a daily basis. Also Maung Lwin Soe made the decision to escape because he wanted to work towards a better future for his family.

So at 10am on 11 June 2011, Maung Lwin Soe escaped from his military unit and stayed in the cultivation hut of a villager in Thailand. At 7am the next day, Lib-204 Captain Win Min Than and some soldiers came to Maung Lwin Soe to force him to come back to the military base, but Maung Lwin Soe ran and jumped into the Thaung Yin River to escape them. The soldiers opened fire on him, but he was not hit. Maung Lwin Soe feels it was inhumane of Captain Win Min Than to order his colleagues to open fire on him. They had both worked side-by-side for many years. Other privates and sergeants (some with as much as 20 or 30 years experience in the military) would like to escape like Maung Lwin Soe, but they can’t because they are too worried about the consequences for their families living on the military base.

**The Future**

“When I think about my future, all I can say is that I want to work hard and support my family. I believe that the Burmese army thinks they are doing the best for their country, but actually the opposite is true.”
Villagers in Mone Township, Nyaungliebin District, Karen State, from both the lowlands and the highlands, are facing an increasingly desperate situation caused by food scarcity. Unseasonable rains during the dry season have destroyed crops while soldiers from the Burmese army have been pillaging what little livestock and food supplies the villagers have. This is partly a result of the Burmese government’s ‘Four Cuts’ policy, but it is also a result of the Burmese military’s failure to feed their low-ranking soldiers.

As farming is the major source of food and revenue in Mone Township, people are heavily reliant on working the earth. Those who do not have their own farms, or equipment to use on other peoples’ farms, have to rely on subsistence farming and work long and arduous hours of manual labour for as little as 1500 kyat (40 baht) a day. They have to struggle very hard for their family’s daily survival.

Their agricultural work is very dependent on the seasonal weather. In the rainy season villagers tend their paddy farms and in the usually dry summer months they grow beans and go fishing. Any surplus to their dietary requirements can then be sold at the market. However, any deviation from the expected weather patterns can cause food shortages and financial woes.

This year during the dry season the lowland area experienced unusual weather with long and sustained periods of rain. The beans which normally grow in summer in Burma perished in these wet conditions meaning that they could not be eaten or sold and had to be thrown away.

This is the continuation of a worsening trend. From 2010 onwards farmers from Ta Khaw Bwar and Wai Soai villages have only managed to harvest thirty percent of the rice from their paddy farms. The other seventy percent was destroyed by the unseasonable weather.

The villagers from the highland area are also facing difficulties due to the unexpected summer rains. The villagers there depend on trees from the forest to create step farms. This is a traditional farming method where lumber is collected in April, dried and then burned in May in order to make the forest ground fertile for the planting of crops.

Step farms are vital to local communities as they allow villagers to grow not only paddy rice, but other vegetables as well; such as cucumbers, chilli, gourd, long bean and pumpkin. This year however, the trees could not be prepared as normal as they had been soaked by the rain.

A villager voiced his concerns about the current weather conditions, “We could not start a new step farm for this year’s planting season because of the unusual weather. Therefore we will face food shortages as the farms are our livelihoods. We will not have another chance to work on them again this year.”

Adverse weather conditions are not the only thing threatening the villagers of Mone Township’s food supplies. The Burmese army often pillages their livestock, fish and grain. The soldiers also extort whatever they can from the villagers. This happens regularly as there are military camps close by. Villagers cannot do anything because they are, quite rightfully, scared of the soldiers.

The villagers in the lowlands are under the control of both the Burmese government and the ethnic armed groups so are paying double rates of
tax and are being forced to serve both sides. Association with the insurgents, however involuntary, causes major problems for the villagers.

In early 2011, some of the villagers were travelling to work on their bean farm with limited rations of rice, fish paste and cooking oil. The villagers deliberately carried only small rations as they were scared that if the Burmese military saw them with more than their allowance they would accuse them of supplying rations to Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers. Unfortunately they were caught in transit by Burmese soldiers, who deemed the paltry rations to be excessive.

The villagers were forced to send their rations to the Burmese military camp. The soldiers then sent a message to the village chairperson ordering him to come and meet them and their commander. The Burmese soldiers interrogated the village chairperson about the rations. They then went back to the village and searched a villager’s tent and found supplies which were deemed to be in excess. The soldiers beat him, threatened him with a gun and then destroyed his kitchen.

The villagers who live in the high region in Mone Township also face difficulties due to the fighting between the Burmese military and ethnic armed groups. They too have to live under the constant threats of the Burmese soldiers.

The Burmese military based in that area have their camp close to the villages and use the fighting as a pretext to oppress the villagers. They also often accuse the villagers of giving information and supplies to the rebels. This means that the soldiers can enter the villages and take the villagers’ animals and rice to eat, and also extort money through the village chairmen.

A major reason behind the soldiers’ behaviour is the government’s infamous ‘Four Cuts’ policy. This was originally developed in the 1970s to weaken the resolve of ethnic insurgents by cutting off their access to funds, information, recruits and, of course, food. Earlier in 2011, the War Office in Naypyidaw initiated a new phase of the ‘Four Cuts’ with an extra ‘cut’ aimed at breaking communication links. This is specifically targeted at the ethnic armies which have refused to sign up to the Burmese government’s Border Guard Force initiative.

One of the ways that the Burmese army seems to be implementing its ‘Four Cuts’ policy is by failing to feed their low-ranking soldiers, many of whom have been forcibly recruited. By feeding them just a portion of rice a day the army is all too aware that the soldiers will need to pillage villages in order to get the sustenance they need.

It is a cruel twist of fate that the renewed ‘Four Cuts’ policy has coincided with unusual weather patterns, which could well be the result of climate change, to cause what is growing into a food security emergency. It is also cruel that the tactics being employed to harm the ethnic armies are actually harming innocent villagers.

Recently Saw Friday, a member of Burma Issues’ field staff, visited Mone Township on a trip to collect information on post-election human rights violations. He says that he was worried about the condition of the villagers he met, “They were ill and hungry. They had a little food and medicine, but nowhere near enough. The SPDC attacked them and stole their animals. Then the rains spoiled their crops so they couldn’t grow any vegetables or rice.”

This is a problem that is going to get worse. Climate predictions indicate that instances of severe and unusual weather are going to increase. Oxfam, the famine relief charity based in the United Kingdom, has also recently warned that crop prices could rise by 120 – 180 percent by the year 2030. A repeat of the unseasonable rain would prevent farmers from growing crops, which in turn would deny them the revenue needed to buy rice and vegetables from those who have some to sell.

Famine resulting from food insecurity seems to be one of the biggest global issues on the horizon. Due to the adverse effects that unusual weather and the Burmese government’s ‘Four Cuts’ policy is having on farming and resulting revenue, the people in the ethnic areas of eastern Burma must prepare to be particularly harshly affected by food shortages. Without being able to sell and grow crops for their own sustenance, the future for the innocent and vulnerable people of Mone Township looks increasingly precarious.

Their current situation is critical, especially as
they have no means of communicating with the outside world and with people who might be able to help them. As perhaps one of the few, if not only, people to reach this desperate place, Saw Friday was very reluctant to leave and remains haunted by the plight of the people he had to leave behind. He says, “I felt sad as I wanted to help them. The villagers said that they hoped I would return in the future with food and medicine. I hope to do this - I will do this.”

Saw Friday’s determination now needs to be matched by the international humanitarian agencies, international non-governmental organisations and community based organisations which have the access and the means to help the starving people of places like Mone Township. If help is not forthcoming, famine, caused by unpredictable weather and the government’s ‘Four Cuts’ policy, seems to be inevitable.

Top officials of the Thai government and the governor of Tak Province, which hosts most of the Burmese refugee camps, have made frequent public statements over the past year about the closing of the camps housing Burmese refugees. The call to close the camps has become louder since the installation of the nominal civilian government in Burma. This message has been consistent and would seem to indicate that a decision has been made by the Thai government to close the camps in the very near future. Unsaid, but probable, is that the Thai’s will also use this opportunity to sweep up and deport illegal migrants, political exiles, and others without official documents back to Burma. It would also be logical to conclude that an underlying plan has been formulated with tentative target dates.

Thailand has hosted refugees and political exiles for over twenty years. As a result, there are nearly 150,000 Burmese refugees living in camps along the border with thousands more unofficial refugees, illegal migrants, political exiles, and ethnic insurgents also scattered near the border. Thailand’s attitude towards the nine camps of Burmese refugees has been changing more over past years, especially with the closure by Burmese authorities of the Friendship Bridge in Mae Sot – the major Thai land trade route into Burma – and the change to a civilian government in Burma. Many Thai senior authorities have publicly expressed the government’s desire to see the camps closed and the refugees returned to Burma.

One Thai public official was quoted as saying about the Burmese refugees, “They have been in Thailand for more than 20 years and it became our burden to take care of them. I cannot say when we will close down the camps, but we intend to do it. We are now in the process of discussion with the Myanmar government”. He further said that Thailand has been in discussions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) about returning the camp residents to Burma. In April 2011, a Thai government spokesperson mentioned in a Time magazine article that the then Prime Minister was considering the closure of the refugee camps pending a survey by security officials.

The governor of Tak Province has been very vocal about the closure of the camps. In April 2011, he said that the Burmese refugees should be voluntarily repatriated to Burma because they posed a threat to the natural environment in his province and incurred the jealousy of local Thai residents because of support received from international organizations as well as from Thailand. But as one looks closer at the issue, what emerges from under this rhetoric is the desire by Thai authorities to enhance their relationship with the Burmese government to protect and enhance their business and national security interests.

It should be also noted that during both 2009 and 2010, the UNHCR conducted workshops in Burma in co-operation with the Burmese government about the return and reintegration of refugees from Thailand. The participants assessed the refugee situation, developed scenarios, and considered policy and operational assumptions.
Participants included members of various Burmese government ministries, United Nations agencies, and other international organizations. Absent from the workshops were representatives from the Thai government and the refugees themselves.

Even to a casual observer, it is easy to see that the closure in July 2010 of the Friendship Bridge connecting the Burmese town of Myawaddy to the Thai town of Mae Sot is a major factor in driving the closure of the camps. The governor of Tak Province, where Mae Sot is located, has said that his provincial government has been pressured by the Burmese to close the refugee camps and evict the anti-Burmese government political activist groups and insurgents in Tak Province, and in return, Burma would open the bridge again.

The Tak provincial governor has reported to have further commented that the refugees’ presence on Thai soil complicated the political relationship between Thailand and Burma in that Burmese officials see Thailand as hosting anti-Burmese government armed and political groups, especially members of the Karen National Liberation Army and its political wing, the Karen National Union. In March 2011, the Burmese Information Minister accused Thailand of “not being a friendly neighbor” by promoting instability in Karen State through its providing a sanctuary to insurgent groups. It is also felt by Burmese officials that the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in Tak Province are indirectly “supporting insurgents” through their supplies to the refugee camps and implicit anti-Burmese government advocacy.

The Thai-Burma Friendship Bridge is a key trans-Asia trade link on Asia Highway 1 from Vietnam to India. The bridge is also the main overland route for the movement of consumer goods between Thailand and Burma, consisting of an estimated 60% of the trade between the two countries. Thailand is the number one trading partner of Burma followed by China. With the continued closure of the bridge, Thailand stands the chance of losing this trade position to China as imports of Chinese products have increased in Burma. Thailand’s Foreign Trade Department estimated in October 2010 that around $US2.5 - 3 million was being lost each day due to the closure of the bridge.

Coinciding with the closure of the Friendship Bridge are the delays in the building of the second Friendship Bridge in Mae Sot and the creation of a special economic development zone in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy area. A looming com-
Tavoy deep-water port project which will open up a major new trade corridor between Thailand and Burma. This project will allow goods to traverse an excellent land route, and a possible rail transportation corridor, over flat land in contrast to the mountainous land route through Tak Province to Burma. Additionally, Thailand is working with the Burmese on hydroelectric dams and other joint economic projects.

The heightened conflict in Burma along the Thai border has resulted in frequent influxes of noncombatants escaping the fighting. This has placed a strain on resources of the local Thai communities as well as on the Thai military. The Thai military has needed to reallocated thousands of additional soldiers and millions of baht to address these ongoing displacements of people as the result of the fighting inside Burma along the Thai-Burma border and their assessment of threats on their border with Burma. This is happening while they are also confronting hostilities on its border with Cambodia and an Islamic insurgency in its south.

Combined with all of this is that the likelihood of a regime change in Burma appears highly improbable over the near future. The regime has a very strong hold over the country and permeates all key aspects of Burmese society. Anti-Burmese government opposition groups are not united, lack effective leadership and a sense of urgency, and have no strong bargaining power or realistic plan for regime change.

With all of this said, it seems evident that Thailand’s strategic economic, political, and security interests are best served by the closure of the refugee camps. And it is highly probable that Thailand will protect these interests by implementing a plan for the closure of the camps and at the same time, to deport political exiles and others without proper documents back to Burma or third counties. These affected individuals, families, and groups will face live-changing, and in many instances, life-threatening circumstances.

The recent public statements by senior Thai authorities are believed to be designed to get the refugees, political exiles, insurgents, international community, United Nations agencies, and INGOs familiar with a policy decision which has been made and will be implemented in the very near future by the Thai government. These statements are also thought to assure the Burmese government that the Thailand is serious about addressing the issues of the refugee camps and the use of Thai territory by anti-Burmese government armed groups and political exiles.

The Thai government can logically be expected to leave it up to the international community to primarily deal with the repatriation issue with the Burmese regime so as not to be tied-up with gamesmanship by various anti-repatriation actors. Also Thai authorities will pressure relevant INGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) to wind down their support operations in areas hosting refugees to minimize “pull factors” that might hamper repatriation. The international community, especially Burmese activist groups, will protest this Thai initiative, but lacks any leverage to prevent its implementation. Also the international community has a very short memory.

Because of its high impact upon the lives of hundreds of thousand Burmese people, immediate attention and action is need by Burmese community-based organizations in Thailand, United Nations agencies, INGOs, and potential resettlement countries. More specifically:

- Organizations must engage all available contacts within the Thai government to immediately obtain the details of the Thai’s repatriation plan, especially the dates targeted for the closing of the camps and any sweeps of political exiles and other.
- Project teams/clusters must be established to plan, initiate, and oversee all necessary actions in respect to refugees and others, subject to repatriation, in Thailand.
- Strong negotiating positions must be formulated on the reasonable terms, conditions, ceasefire agreements, international monitors, and Burmese territory acceptable for any mass repatriation. This is especially important in respect to the termination date for the closure of the refugee camps.
- Every person who would face “forced” repatriation by Thailand, not only the “official” refugees, must be addressed in respect to:
* **Individual vulnerability:** Political/military activities, livelihoods, etc. A vulnerability scale should be established.

* **Third Country resettlement priority:** A resettlement priority scale should be established.

* **Individual/family personal repatriation and resettlement assessments and plans:** Vulnerability rating, third country resettlement priority rating, skills, repatriation possibilities, training, and other support needs considered in the assessments and plans.

* **Burma repatriations:** Targeted populations are surveyed to obtain numbers for repatriations. Acceptable repatriation locations and related location issues are identified. Affected people are prepared with skills, livelihood opportunities, financial and material support, requisite community infrastructure and services, civil administration, and other relevant repatriation aspects.

* **Third country resettlements:** Targeted populations are surveyed to obtain numbers for resettlement to lobby for increased quotas for resettled people in third countries. Support networks of those already resettled in those countries are setup to facilitate resettlements. Affected people are prepared for resettlement with language, livelihood, and other skills, and other relevant resettlement aspects.

Advocacy campaigns against this Thai initiative will not delay nor change the Thai decision to close the camps. Thailand will soon close the camps - it is in their self-interest. With the closing of the camps in Thailand, it can be expected that similar Burmese refugee camps in Malaysia and Bangladesh will also be closed and their inhabitants repatriated back to Burma. People and organizations must realize and accept this situation, and act now to minimize its impact upon the lives of the affected populations. Not to do so will place the lives of these vulnerable people in peril and be irresponsible.
News Brief

Talks between Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein

The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in a press statement released on 23rd of August said he was encouraged by a meeting on 19 August between President Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the banned national League for Democracy.

The meeting between the Ms Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein was the second in recent weeks. It came about after political parties including ethnic nationalities took part in a Burma economic development forum held on the 19 and 21 August in Naypyidaw.

The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “Whether these and other recent developments will move Burma forward depends on how all parties choose to work with each other. It is in the national interest that they seize the opportunity to extend and accept conciliatory gestures to achieve durable peace and unity.”

The forum was held in Naypyidaw at the Myanmar International Convention Center (MICC) and three representatives from each political party were invited. Regarding the attendance of the forum, U Nyan Win, spoke-person for NLD party confirmed to media that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has received the invitation letter on August 17 in her house.

Politicians, business people and selected individuals from government institutions, attended the three-day forum.

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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