

# Burma Issues



Providing analysis on the situation in Burma and a platform for the grassroots people to share their voices

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Saw Mort/Burma Issues

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# The Repatriation Issue

By Saw David

Rumours about the repatriation of the estimated 150,000 Burmese refugees based on Thailand's border with Burma have circulated ever since the Burmese government started peace negotiations with armed ethnic groups in January. Although the fragile peace-talks remain in their infancy, some contend that the plans for repatriation have progressed quickly. Without any detailed plans being announced by the governments and humanitarian agencies potentially involved, Thai authorities began informal surveys in March with refugees from a selection of the nine camps based on the border, and there are claims that the Burmese government's chief negotiator - U Aung Min - told the Karenni army that the repatriation process would start in June (a date that has since expired). Hearsay and Chinese whispers have followed, causing refugees to be fearful for their future in this very uncertain time.

When asked what stage she thinks the repatriation process has reached, Naw Ta Mla Saw, Joint Secretary 2 of the Karen Women Organisation explained, "It is difficult to say, as there are not a lot of facts that have been shared by all of the stakeholders involved in the planning. But from the information that we received, they are not in the planning stage anymore, they are in the preparation stage".

Vivian Tan, spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, told Burma Issues, "It's simply too soon to start voluntary repatriation to Myanmar. Like the refugees, UNHCR is watching developments inside Myanmar closely, but we are not yet ready to promote returns to the country".

However, sources inside Burma have told Burma Issues that relocation sites are already being prepared by the Burmese government, in areas such as Su Ka Lee in Karen State's Brigade 6, and that these often entail the confiscation of local people's land. Most refugees on the border are ethnic Karen, and violent human rights abuses by Burma's military in their homeland may have decreased but they have not ended, while those of a more exploitative nature - such as extortion, land confiscation and forced labor - continue unabated. With Burma's military still showing barbarous contempt for its nation's grassroots people, it would appear far too early for refugee repatriation. The

lack of troop withdrawal despite peace negotiations and the wars still raging in Kachin and Shan states say enough about the intentions of the Burmese military.

Ms. Tan continued, "Many things still need to be done to show the kind of progress that would help refugees to decide for themselves whether or not conditions are right for them to return. If and when the refugees decide they want to go home, UNHCR will support efforts to prepare for possible returns. It takes time to lay the groundwork for any voluntary return, such as collecting information on where refugees are from and where they eventually want to return. It will have to be a consultative process".

There are many other issues yet to be answered. Climate change and the lingering results of the government's scorched earth 'Four Cuts' policy have caused food scarcity problems in Karen State, and recent floods in the Irrawaddy Delta have inundated around 250,000 hectares of rice fields putting even more stress on already limited food supplies. The logistics of feeding an extra estimated half-a-million internally displaced persons as well as over 150,000 returning refugees are scary, and the displaced are quite rightly worried about the government's ability, and willingness, to feed them.

Burma's infrastructure also remains very weak, particularly in rural areas. The existing facilities for basic healthcare and education are below par by any nation's standards and fail to meet the needs of those already living there. Issues concerning refugee reintegration into local communities and resulting citizenship rights and job opportunities have yet to be addressed, and the ever-present danger of landmines forgotten about in the haze of Burma's 60 year old civil war is increasing rather than subsiding.

"Above all, refugee repatriation must be voluntary, based on the informed and free choice of each individual," said Ms. Tan, outlining some of the conditions that should be in place before repatriation can start. "Returns must take place in safety. This includes protection from armed attacks, public assurances of safety, freedom from fear of persecution or punishment upon return. Refugees must also be able to return in dignity, free from harassment, be treated with respect by national authorities and be able to enjoy their basic human rights. They should have access to land and a means of livelihood and support from the government, aid agencies and the donor community for sustainable reintegration activities."

Many say that the lack of answers for these lingering problems are evidence the Burmese authorities want to rush the repatriation process before 2014 to get rid of the smear of the refugee problem by the time their show-piece chair of ASEAN thrusts the 'formerly' pariah government into the interrogation spotlight of the international community. This may or may not be true, however the geopolitical implications of the repatriation process quite rightly mean little to the vulnerable; to parents who worry

about feeding their children; or to a youth who was born on one of the camps and hasn't known anything else but the security of rations. This is why Burma Issues felt it important to speak to refugee community representatives and visit Mae La refugee camp to find out the opinions of those to whom the process matters most – the displaced.

# Looking Forward To “Living In My Village Without Any Fear” By Saw David

Mae La refugee camp is not a fun place during rainy season. This became obvious as I clumsily tried to negotiate its muddy hills and gullies with my fancy hiking shoes, 'specifically designed' for this environment. I was full of admiration for the elderly women in sandals or wellington boots with huge heavy loads perched on their heads, serenely gliding through the bamboo huts and over the terrain that proved a veritable soggy obstacle course to me and my small laptop bag. It seemed as if this was their natural terrain; that they had been born to effortlessly grace the paths made muddy and dangerous by the estimated 50,000 pairs of displaced feet in residence. Yet, this is not their natural terrain. The refugees fled here out of necessity and desperately want to return to their homes in Burma - mostly in Karen State.

I was on my way to interview Saw De (a pseudonym), a farmer and father of two who sought refuge in Mae La in 1997 after atrocities were committed by the Burmese army in his village in Hpa-An District, Karen State. I wanted to find out his and his fellow refugees' views on possible repatriation and whether they thought the time was right to realise their dream of returning home.

**“What is the general view of repatriation among the refugees in the camp?”**

“If they repatriate the refugees suddenly, the refugees worry that it won't be easy as they won't have had enough time to plan properly”.

**“Do you trust the Burmese government?”**

“Me and my friends don't trust the Burmese government. The ceasefire is still very uncertain”.

**“In many ways, Mae La has become your home. What would you miss about it if you were repatriated?”**

“I cannot say. It'll be hard to go back but I won't really miss anything about Mae La”.

**“What would you look forward to if you were repatriated?”**

“When I lived in my village, we always feared the Burmese army coming to take military porters. Here is more stable when it comes to being attacked, but if the army stopped doing this then I would look forward to living in my village without any fear”.

**“Do you have any fears about being repatriated?”**

“Firstly, one worry is that there is no real plan. We do not understand the process. Secondly, I cannot trust the Burmese government. At the moment, even though we live here, we've heard many times from people inside Karen State that the government is sending more troops to Brigade 5. They are also sending more rations and fortifying their military bases. It is not a real ceasefire. For me, if the government really wants peace they have to withdraw their troops. Because they haven't, we look at the circumstances and realise that we cannot trust them”.

**“Besides troop withdrawal, what would have to happen before you felt it safe enough to return?”**

“The refugees' security has to be guaranteed, as does our freedom to travel and work. These things cannot be controlled by the Burmese government. The first step has to be that the international community must recognise and sign an agreement to take care of the refugees, not just the Burmese and Thai governments. Our Karen leaders also have to become involved in the process. I worry very much that if it is just left up to the Thai and Burmese governments, there will be no opportunity for the returning refugees to flee again if the hostilities resume. The first time we had to flee was difficult, but the second time would be even harder, especially if the camps were closed. We would just disappear”.

**“How would you provide for your family if you were repatriated?”**

“I worry a lot as I've heard that it is already very difficult to find food, even before the refugees are sent back. In my area, there is hardly any jungle left to find wood for houses, or animals to hunt, and there aren't enough paddy fields to support returning refugees”.

**“Considering this, would you still prefer to be repatriated to a rural area or to an urban area where there are more facilities?”**

“Rural, not urban - we are Karen! We don't want to live in an urban setting; we wouldn't survive. There would be no jobs for us”.

**“Do you think you’ll have a choice?”**

“I don’t know as we’ve had absolutely no information. It’s too early to answer this as we don’t understand anything about the process”.

**“The voluntary repatriation process might require you to give your personal information to the authorities, including the Burmese and Thai governments. Would you feel secure doing this?”**

“The first thing I would ask would be for a guarantee for my family’s safety. If they cannot guarantee this, or



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I don’t believe them, I will not give them any information”.

**“Do you feel prepared for repatriation?”**

“No”.

**“Do you think the Thai government wants to get rid of you?”**

“Yes, they have wanted to send us back for a long time. We’ve known this for a long time. But I trust the international community to stand up for our rights. Due to this, they cannot force us to return, even if they want to”.

**“Why do you think the Burmese government wants the repatriation process to happen?”**

“It’s part of the Burmese government’s strategy. Before, they oppressed us to make us leave Burma and flee to Thailand. Now they want us back so they can destroy the Karen people. It is ethnic cleansing”.

**“In your opinion, what is the best way to carry out the repatriation process?”**

“First, we have to have our security guaranteed: both personal security and food security, so the international community, donors and organisations such as the Thailand Burma Border Consortium need to protect us

and look after us for at least 2-3 years. We also need the right to decide our own future. We cannot just be sent back to the Burmese government and have our futures decided by them”.

**“Is there anything else you would like to add?”**

“What I would like to say is this: the refugees themselves must have the right to decide when it happens. We don’t want to stay here forever, but we need to be sure that the situation is stable enough for us to return. Then we must be granted personal security and given donations of food until we can become self-reliant.

We fear that if we are sent back now we will be under the direct control of the Burmese government. We need to be granted the freedom to work and travel. I cannot trust the Burmese government as they are not truthful and are always lying. We have all experienced their dishonesty and have heard that it is still continuing. It’s far too early to repatriate. If they force repatriation, I will not be part of it. I will flee to somewhere else in Thailand - along the border or deeper inside. We hope that our leaders and

the international community are considering our hopes and fears in their plans. If our leaders don’t agree with the process, we will not be part of it. Even though our Karen leaders are having ceasefire talks, we worry that they are being tricked by the Burmese government. We worry that they are being friendly now, but that they will attack us again once the refugees are home and we will be in danger again with nowhere to flee to. The Burmese military is still attacking ethnic people in Burma and the ceasefire is just along the Thai-Burmese border where the refugees are. They are trying to trick us. We trust the international community, but not the Thai and Burmese governments. We need self-determination so we can rely on our own leaders. We cannot be controlled by the Burmese government”.

To illustrate Saw De’s point about the perceived untrustworthy nature of the Burmese government, one of his friends adds, “In Myawaddy, a lot of foreign NGOs are arriving and setting up offices. They are surveying the area for the repatriation of refugees then the government is confiscating people’s land to accommodate their plans so they look good in front of the international community. The government is also buying electricity from Thailand and has built cables to take it directly to the planned industrial zone. It’s by-passing the local people. They are not gaining anything from the government or the NGOs’ presence”.

Over the course of my interviews, Saw De's assertion that the Burmese government's intentions are not to be trusted was to be made time and time again, and his questions about what exactly will happen to the repatriated and how they will have their needs catered for were also running themes. The ceasefire negotiations alone have thrown up so many unanswered questions that the complexities of a repatriation process would be just too much to deal with at this confusing time, especially considering Burma's, and particularly Karen State's, fragile infrastructure. To many, the lack of Burmese troop withdrawal seems to be the first major hurdle to be crossed, and is causing much worry in the camps. This is little wonder considering their record of barbaric atrocities. They are, after all, the main reason why people like Saw De became displaced and stuck in the refugee camps in Thailand. It would seem that it is too early to repatriate Burmese refugees of any ethnicity, and the scramble to do so could cause a humanitarian catastrophe. It must be remembered that the refugees on the Thai-Burmese border are desperate to leave the muddy and crowded camps and return home, and would do so at the first true opportunity. However, as Burmese troops remain in strategic offensive positions in their homeland, this is not it.

## “Not Ready To Return”

By Eh Klo Dah

In rainy season, farmers can happily cultivate their crops and children can have fun playing in the cooler air. However, in Mae La refugee camp some refugees have to live under leaking roofs, and students have to struggle along muddy paths in long boots in order to get to school. On the way to Naw Eh's (a pseudonym) house, I too had to struggle as it was very muddy and slippery. I had to try to balance my body and took off my sandals to get a better grip as I slowly made my way from Zone A to Zone B, all the time blaming myself for not bringing my long boots as when I arrived at Naw Eh's house my legs were covered in mud. Originally from Karen State's 6th Brigade, Naw Eh has been living on camps on the border for over 17 years. It is important to understand female concerns about repatriation because women play very crucial roles in houses. Mostly in our Karen society, men think that their responsibilities are earning money and putting it in the hands of women. Then, housewives need to manage the rest of

the needs: including housing, health, food, children's education, and so on. Women have to manage all of those things at home alone while the men are working outside to earn an income. I wondered, when she heard about repatriation, what might a young mother's thoughts be? Would she be willing to return home? Naw Eh has a son so I wondered, what is her plan for him should they have to return?

### “Why did you leave Burma?”

“In 1994 the DKBA and the KNU started fighting each other. The DKBA is a faction of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) which split off and aligned itself with the Burmese army at that time. During the conflict, we always had to run away and our lives became unstable. I have many siblings and my mother was pregnant. She was also very weak and the situation was in chaos. Can you imagine our situation at that time? What hardships we faced! Luckily we met with a female foreigner nurse and she helped my mother and us. So we came and stayed here with the help of a foreigner”.

### “How do you make a living in the refugee camp?”

“When I arrived here, I was only a 10 year old girl. All of my siblings were very young. We faced many difficulties but the camp committees helped and supported us by giving us things such as shelter, housing materials and some basic needs. Also, the houses in the camp were not crowded and the population was not as large at that time. However, we couldn't eat good food and just lived on camp rations. I cannot go outside of the camp as refugees without official identity cards worry about getting arrested by the police, so we don't have any extra income. I didn't even have a school uniform. After I passed ten standard, I couldn't continue at a post-ten school because there was only a limited number of students able to join. Without benefits, I just try to survive day-to-day. I got married and we have a son, but we have no hope and live in a cage”.

### “How do you feel being a refugee?”

“Being a refugee, it is very different from being a person who has their own state and their own country. It's like the difference between water and oil. Here, I have to live inside the camp and I don't have a chance to go outside freely. We don't have our own livelihoods and just live on camp rations. Now, our support is being reduced and we don't get as much as we previously did. Especially, I face charcoal problems and it is also difficult to find firewood outside so we have to use what we have wisely so our basic needs can be covered”.

### “Are there still arrangements for refugee resettlement in a third country?”

“I don't know anything because I spend most of my time living at home. Also, I'm not registered with the UN so I'm not interested and I don't ask my neighbors about resettlement in a third country”.

**“Have you heard the news about refugee repatriation?”**

“Once I had to fill a UN form which included questions about resettlement in a third country, returning to Burma and integration into local communities. For me, I could not decide which one I should choose so I could not answer those questions very well. If there is forced relocation, who will take responsibility for our safety? How about the Burmese government? What are their plans for us? I do not know anything about it”.

**“Do you talk with your friends or neighbors about it? What are their points of views?”**

“Yes, I do! But I’m not a social person so I don’t have many friends. One of my neighbors who is Kachin said, “If the UN arranges our return, and the conflicts persist in Kachin State, how can we dare to go back home? If I have a chance to continue to live here, I won’t return.”

**“In your mind, do you have your own personal plan to go back to Burma?”**

“I don’t have any plans to go back to Burma. We fled from Burma out of fear and we don’t have our own house and lands left there. For my little son, I worry very much about him, especially about his education. However, based on my experiences, I don’t know how to plan for the future and cannot think of anything to do other than stay here”.

**“So, what is your opinion about refugee repatriation?”**

“We are not ready to return I think. If we go back, where will our home and land be? How will we earn a living? Where is the school for my son? Then, where do we have to go to cure our health problems? I cannot answer these questions. If there are no detailed plans for us, I don’t want to go back and I dare not think about the future”.

**“Do you have something else you would like to say?”**

“For me, if the Thai government acknowledges us and provides us with a chance to live here, it will be better than arranging our return. As long as the Burmese military keeps fortifying their positions, we are not ready to return. I do not want to think about the future”.

We finished the conversation with a final pleasantry, then she introduced me to her lovely young son. Naw Eh worries a lot about the future, about how her family will earn a livelihood and how her son will receive an education, and this makes her very frustrated. She feels stuck and cannot plan for the future and decide good solutions for her problems and doesn’t want to go back to Burma where there are no detailed plans to enable them to continue their life without fear and concerns. Like many others, the young mother would be happier to remain on camp with her family where she believes there

will be fewer worries than in Burma.

# “If They Have No Plan For This, Many People Will Die Of Starvation”

By Saw David

Saw Thin Lwin graciously invited me into his hut so I could escape from the downpour engulfing Mae La. He was worried that I would catch a cold as I was soaked through to the skin so insisted on giving me warm cups of tea to raise my core temperature, as well as bananas freshly picked from a nearby tree. My legs were caked in mud, yet mosquitoes were still managing to find enough bare skin to drill for blood. An uncomfortable situation for me perhaps, but a minor hindrance to those hardy refugees who have become too used to such hardships. Although originally from Tee Lone Township, Hpa-an District, Karen State, Saw Thin Lwin, a grandfather and former village head, has been displaced since 1994 when hostilities broke out after the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army split from the Karen National Liberation Army. After finding temporary sanctuary in some of the refugee camps dotted along the Thai-Burmese border, he eventually managed to settle in Mae La with his family in 1999. I asked the farmer if he minded me using his name for this article. If so, I asked him to use a pseudonym instead. “No no, don’t worry, everyone knows me because I can’t stop talking and say too much. All the Thai security guards know me as I talk to them all on the way to my crop”.

**“In many ways Mae La has become your home. Would you miss it if you were repatriated?”**

“If they close Mae La, I will move to somewhere else along the border. I will miss the camp as I’ll be separated from my friends. Even though I do not have the right to travel freely here, I feel more free here than in Burma”.

**“Do you think the situation is stable enough for repatriation?”**

“I know why you ask this question, because I think about this a lot. I worry about the Burmese troops. They were the biggest problem where I lived before and I still fear the army. I was very unlucky and was always being taken as a military porter, my wife too. We’re very old now and can’t do this anymore. They hit us and tortured us

a lot. When I was young I never saw the soldiers. I want these days back but know that things haven't changed yet".

**"What would have to happen before you would feel safe enough to return?"**

"There has to be no more war. I cannot trust the army. We hope that the situation gets better as we really want to return to our homes but I have no faith in the ceasefire because the Burmese government is very clever and plans to destroy us, so we don't trust them".

**"In Mae La you have shelter and are provided with food. How would you cope without these provisions?"**

"If there is security and we are sent to an area with resources we would be able to look after ourselves. We know how to use the jungle - how to hunt and find vegetables. We will survive as the jungle will provide. However, my home area is now a forestry area and farming is restricted. If they repatriate us to an area without jungle we will struggle as we won't be able to fend for ourselves. If everyone is repatriated together in one area and they don't provide us with rations we won't survive. If they have no plan for this many people will die of starvation. I worry that this is the Burmese government's plan".

**"You say that your home area is now a "forestry area". If you moved back there how would you provide for your family?"**

"I would go back to my life as a farmer, cultivate crops in the mountains and start a small business. But I would have to travel outside of my home area as our land has been taken and Burmese people have been settled there by the government. Now, when we go back to our village we have to speak Burmese instead of our native Karen. It used to be a communal area where anyone could grow crops, but now it's private. I owned land in Karen State but it has been confiscated from me and sold and I can't prove it's mine because I inherited it and don't have any documents".

**"It sounds like if you had the chance you would prefer to be relocated in a rural area rather than an urban one?"**

"No no, not an urban area! I wouldn't know what to do and would have no job. I would not want to go. Even now, as a refugee in Thailand, I can live off the land. I rent land off local people and

grow corn to pay for it. If I was repatriated to a specially designated location where I could not farm, I would not go".

**"Do you think you'll be given a choice?"**

"I don't know. I don't understand the process. Nobody has told us anything. We do not understand what's going to happen to us and worry about it a lot".

**"Do you think the Thai government wants rid of you?"**

"Yes, they do. They want to close the camps. We've been here for a long time and they do not want to take care of us anymore. They've never taken care of us. They've exploited our cheap labour and taken our charcoal and crops".

**"Why do you think the Burmese government wants the repatriation process to happen?"**

"It doesn't matter to me. I don't trust them and won't go back until I think the conditions are right. If the international community can honestly tell us that conditions are right, I might think about it then".

**"In your opinion, what is the best way the repatriation process can be carried out?"**

"A detailed plan has to be made and we have to participate in making it. Otherwise, it will not work. I want to go home and I do not want to be resettled to a third country, but there has to be peace and no more fighting. I'm too old and there wouldn't be an opportunity for me to be resettled even if I wanted to".

Karen society is predominantly agrarian. For centuries, if not millennia, Karen people have enjoyed tending their paddy fields, living off the land and hunting and gathering in a sustainable way. Any repatriation process



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that did not allow for a return to this way of life would be doomed from its inception. However, the bountiful jungle and way of life that many people of Saw Thin Lwin's age remember has been systematically eroded by the government's scorched earth policy, land confiscation and subsequent privatisation, the forced settlement of people from other areas in Burma, and poor industrial practice, not to mention climate change. To return vast numbers of people to designated location sites would be a disaster as too much pressure would be put on local resources and ecosystems and the pursuing scramble for sustenance would exceed their maximum yield and cause them to collapse. At the same time, giving large communities food rations is also unsustainable - both from a repatriated refugee's, and a donor's point of view. Karen people know this well and should be included in preparing and implementing any plan for their repatriation, as well as being given the right to decide where they want to be repatriated to. After all, as a people, they have vast experience of living off the land and, sadly, living off food rations, so know the implications only too well.

## “I Dare Not To Go Back Home As Long As The Burmese Army Still Fortifies”

By Eh Klo Dah

Sixty-four year old grandmother Naw Mu Thwe lived in Myawaddy District and had to flee two times from Burma. She doesn't have any desire to go back and dreams of living in her own garden with her family happily and freely without dread. Missing her grand-daughters makes her want to resettle to the United States of America where they now live as she has a strong desire to take care of them. She showed me photographs of her grand-daughters wearing nursery graduation suits and said, “I miss them so much! My poor daughter is always busy with her studies and jobs so she cannot spend much time with my grand-daughters. I don't want to go back to Burma. I really want to resettle there and just take care of them. I feel so desperate.” She touched my hands and said, “My daughter! Help me to resettle.” There was an awkward moment of silence. I was touched by a sense of missing my own parents who looked after me as a child but could not think of any words of encouragement to give her. I was gazing at her pitiful face and her tearful eyes. I just gave her a smile and wished for her that she would have a

smile on her face always without any concerns as I didn't want all her family members to be apart because of conflict and financial problems. Afterwards, I raised some questions about her life and the current situation in camp.

### “Why did you leave Burma?”

“My daughter! I had to flee two times. During the period that the Burmese army ruled, I had to flee to Nu Par Doh camp in 1984, which was located in the northern part of Myawaddy on the bank of the Moei River. However, the camp was destroyed in December 1989, and all the people had to move to Doh Par Khin camp, Mae La Ma Township, Thailand. For me, I didn't want to go and live in a Thai village and work as a daily worker. After many years, I heard that the DKBA, which split from KNLA in 1994, ruled the village again. I thought that if they were the same religion as me they would be kind and humanitarian. I went back and lived for over four years. However, they were very cruel and serious and the reality was really different to how I thought it would be. I remember two villagers were suspected of contacting the KNU and were killed on the way back from the forest where they were collecting conima leafs. There was a lot of bombing so we had to run and hide under a big tree every night. The DKBA said, “If you want to live in the village, you have to pay money. You all align yourselves with the KNU and you are all KNU people.” Every day we had to live with the fear of being suspected of supporting the KNU so I didn't want to live in the unstable area and came to the refugee camp with my 4-months pregnant daughter and another girl during the muddy rainy season, walking all the way through the forest to get to the refugee camp. My husband followed after he harvested his crop”.

### “How can you make a living in the refugee camp?”

“My neighbors and the camp committees help us a lot. They have supported us with shelter and some provisions. Sometimes my husband sneaks out of the camp to go to a Thai village and works as a daily worker, doing jobs such as picking the corn. We borrow money from Thai money lenders and pay it back to them after we harvest the following year so we can save some extra money. Recently, we planted some corn and sugar cane in the backyard”.

### “Are there still arrangements for refugee resettlement in third countries?”

“I don't know the up-to-date information. I've been applying for 3 years but nothing has changed for me. I really want to resettle in a third country and take care of my grand-daughters who need looking after. Could you help me to resettle?”

### “So, have you heard the news about refugee repatriation?”

“Ah! I heard the Burmese army is still fortifying its bases and we cannot go back home. I dare not to go back!



Otherwise, they will ask for taxes and fees and I don't have any money to pay them".

**"What are those taxes and fees for?"**

"Paddy field fees, porter fees, security fees and a lot else! Sometimes they demand rice when the soldiers have nothing to eat".

**"Do you talk with your friends or neighbors about repatriation? What are their points of view?"**

"I asked my neighbors if they want to go back. They said, "We would like to go back but we are afraid of the Burmese soldiers." Sometimes we talked with each other and shared our feelings that we were going to spend the rest of our lives living in camp! One person said, "I want to go back." Another person said, "I also want to go back home." As for me, I don't want to see the Burmese soldiers' faces as many experiences have made me fearful of them".

**"Why are you so afraid of the soldiers?"**

"When I lived in Burma, I had many chickens. As the Burmese troops entered the village, they command-

ed, "Ah Moe [mother]! Give me a chicken." "No!" I replied. "If you don't want to give me one now, I'll take all of your chickens and then there will be fighting." "Take them all including the baskets" I replied fearfully. You know, some were very rude and some said, "You all have smiles on your faces when the KNU come, and you welcome them warmly." How I could know, my daughter? I was not watching who the KNU soldiers were and who the Burmese soldiers were. I was never beaten by the Burmese soldiers but I was scared when they shouted at me. Their voices were really different with villagers and they also had guns. I don't want to see them anymore".

**"Aren't you afraid of the KNU soldiers?"**

"Not at all! We all are from the same ethnic group. They understand our situation better than the Burmese soldiers. If we don't have to pay taxes and fees, they don't ask for them".

**"In your mind, do you have your own personal plan to go back to Burma?"**

"Living in camp is less scary than living in Burma. We don't need to be scared. In Burma, when the dogs were barking, my eyes were bigger than normal as I watched for the soldiers coming. That's why we moved here. Some neighbors who recently moved to camp asked me, "Haven't you gone back to Burma? Other people are seizing your property and you have lost your cultivation land. " I told them, "I'm getting old and it doesn't matter whether they seize my land".

**"What is your opinion about refugee repatriation?"**

"In my opinion, it is not easy to go back now and I don't want to think about returning to Burma. The Thai government might want us to go back. But if we rush to go back, how will we survive? The Burmese government might not support us if we don't have our own money. Anyway, I won't go back. If there is forced relocation, I'm going to live in a Thai village and work as a daily worker in paddy fields. Then, I will send my grandson to where there is a school".

**"So, what's your feeling now?"**

"I just want to live with my family in our own garden peacefully".

Based on my interview, grandmother Naw Mu Thwe is very scared to go back and her bad past experiences of conflict always frighten her like a reoccurring nightmare. She cannot forget her past experiences, which differs from the saying: 'time heals all wounds.' The Burmese army fortification is one of her reasons for not returning. Her life would be a real challenge if there was

forced relocation as the conflict is very bitter for her. She didn't have a chance to live peacefully everyday and had to run every time there was conflict. In her mind, was she going to be in trouble and lose her property when the soldiers came? Her every thought relates to the soldiers and the conflict. She cannot forget her past experiences and even if time is healing her trauma slowly, she still doesn't want to see the soldiers' faces. There's no need to rush the repatriation process and she wants the government to make sure the plan for repatriation is detailed and coherent. She doesn't want to worry about earning the livelihood she needs to survive, she only wants to live without fear so wants the Burmese army to stop fortifying their positions and withdraw their troops.

# “Perhaps I will Run Away!”

By Saw David

While sheltering from the rain in Mae La I met Saw Mu La (a pseudonym), a 19 year old grade 12 student. He was born on one of the refugee camps on the Thai side of the border with Burma. He then moved to Mae La in 1999 and has lived with his parents and grandparents ever since. I was drawn to his fashionable hairstyle and clothes. The holes in his ears suggested that he at one time had earrings, which may or may not have been removed af-

ter parental or grandparental objections. Due to the protracted nature of the refugee situation on the border, there are generations who were born in the camps and have known little else other than confinement and living off provisions. Their limited experience of the outside world is often influenced by Thai and Korean pop culture which can put them at odds with the older and more traditional generations. I wanted to know this younger generation's views on the possible repatriation process, and how they felt about potentially being removed from the only lifestyle they've ever known and dumped in an unfamiliar setting where they'll have to quickly adapt to a harsh reality and use skills known only to their ancestors.

**“Do you think it is safe to return?”**

“It depends on the repatriation process. We need safety and security”.

**“Have you ever visited your family's village in Karen State?”**

“No, I've never been to Burma”.

**“Would you miss Thai pop culture?”**

“Yes, I particularly like football, but worry that there will be no pitches or TVs to watch matches and movies on”.

**“You'll have to learn new skills such as farming and hunting. Do you think you'll be able to do this?”**

At this point, his grandfather, who was sitting next to him listening to our conversation, nodded and gave me the thumbs up. This was obviously an important question.

“Yes, because I will have to survive. I will have to do my best to learn”.

**“Do you think other people your age will struggle to learn these skills?”**

“We have been to school so if we can't learn these skills we will be able to move to a city and find other jobs, like in a factory”.

**“Do you fear being repatriated?”**

“I close my eyes and hope that everything will be planned and perfect and they will be able to accommodate us. I don't think that all Burmese people are bad, it depends on their leaders. I don't trust any politician, particularly Burmese and Thai politicians, but I think the situation is improving and they are trying to do good things.



Saw Mort/Burma Issue

The Burmese and Karen are both human and I hope they can do good things so we can go back safely - I don't want to have to become a soldier".

**"What do other people your age think about being repatriated?"**

"People my age have not heard any information about this, only *gah lah wah* (white foreigners) and the media are talking about this. People my age don't know anything. I've only heard that they might send us back in the next 3 years, but I want to be resettled to Australia".

**"What do you think are the main problems that young people who are repatriated to Karen State will face?"**

"Mostly income problems caused by a lack of job opportunities. If there are no jobs for the young people, there will be problems".

**"What would you do if you weren't resettled and were repatriated to Karen State?"**

"Here we have a chance to watch TV and listen to music but there's no electricity in my family's village. Perhaps I will run away! It depends on the individual person, I cannot say. Young people will have to learn from their parents and grandparents. They will need to learn how to survive from them. They grew up with nothing and we can learn from them".

**"If you were asked to be involved in making the repatriation plan, what would you suggest young people need most?"**

"Before we were consulted, we would need to be given some information as we don't know anything about this. If we do not have the information, how can we stand up for our rights? But I would suggest that young people need more education like critical thinking. They also need vocational training so they can get the jobs they need to survive, but I plan to resettle to Australia. Everyone needs to learn to rely and depend on themselves".

During the interview, it became clear that Saw Mu La was unsettled by the uncertainty of the repatriation rumors that must be sweeping the camp. This would suggest that the organisations who are involved in the repatriation process have a duty to quickly and reliably inform those who will be greatly affected. He also seemed to have a fear of the unknown which, for someone in his position, is completely natural. Having never set foot in his homeland, his perception of Kawthoolei (the Karen homeland) will be shaped by romantic stories of an Arcadian paradise which requires skills that he does not possess or even have experience of. Conversely, his perception of his homeland will equally be shaped by grotesque stories of military oppression and resulting murder, rape and torture. Due to this, the contrast between him and his grandfather is one much deeper than fashionable appearance. The older generation of Karen in Thailand miss the peaceful rural idyll that they remember from hap-

pier days gone by. However, if repatriated, the younger generation may well miss and romanticise about the time they spent in Thailand with its mod-coms and pop culture. Resettlement and a rural-urban migration of the Karen youth may well follow. The attraction for youths of the bright lights of the city is a world-wide phenomenon, and not always a particularly good one given pitfalls such as drugs and the sex industry. This obviously has worrying ramifications for the social cohesion and preservation of the beautiful Karen culture, ramifications which may well suit the Burmese government who has been systematically attempting to erode it by brut force for decades. To prevent this, it is necessary that repatriation plans include economic stimuli for rural areas in order to create vital job opportunities, as well as vocational training for the youths who have no experience of the hunter-gather subsistence way of live yearned for by the older generation.

**"Just Words, No Action Makes Us Distrustful"**

**By Eh Klo Dah**

Saw Lwe Doh, a section leader, came from Kyeikayeik Township to Mae La with a family and helps the section security to maintain safety, solve family domestic problems and support the section's people's needs such as shelters, bamboo and other provisions. One of the local community workers introduced me to him. He loves freedom and likes betel nut. He was very nice and explained to me what I wanted to know since we had gotten to know each other. As we are working on refugee repatriation, he is one of the leaders in camp and I thought he might know more information about the situation in camp than normal refugees. He also has contact with other section leaders and camp committees and is working together with them so I wanted to know how the camp situation is and his opinion on repatriation.

**"Why did you leave Burma?"**

"I was afraid of being taken as a porter".

**"Could you tell me more?"**

"In my village, after hearing the Burmese troops were coming, women would tell their men to run away and hide. We ran away every time we saw soldiers. Otherwise, if we were caught by the Burmese soldiers we would

have to carry their supplies to the places where they wanted to camp. Sometimes we were ready to run away when we heard the sound of the dogs barking. However, I was never caught by the soldiers because I was clever. Sometimes the women, including my wife, were arrested after all the men ran away. "All the men" does not include elderly people and young children for whom it was not possible to carry the supplies".

**"Why were women arrested and what did the soldiers do?"**

"Because the soldiers wanted all the men to come back and carry their load. The women were asked, "Why did all the men run away? Didn't they want to carry our supplies? Does your husband make contact with the KNU?" Women were threatened and kept until all the men came back. They threatened, "If your husband doesn't come back, we will not let you go free." However, they let the women go free after they thought their threat didn't work".

**"How long were the women kept for?"**

"Sometimes they were kept for four or five days, but my wife was kept for only one day".

**"You mention that you were never caught by the soldiers so why were you afraid of being a porter?"**

"I heard other villagers' experiences. They were taken for a few days and some villagers were beaten to death when they couldn't carry the soldiers' supplies on the way. When they came back, they were sick because no soldiers gave them medical treatment. One of our villagers was taken and he tried to run away. Unfortunately, he stepped on a landmine and died. The day before we left, one villager was killed after being accused of contacting the KNU, and his wife was also raped by a soldier. I don't remember the battalion of the perpetrator. Then, our family decided to come to Mae La and so walked to here. At that period, some of the families had already moved to this camp so we had contacts here".

**"How do you make a living in the refugee camp?"**

"When we arrived, it was really difficult for new arrivals. We had to register to get rations and waited at the IOM office the whole day. For my two children's education, the ICS (International Christian Aid) supports clothes and stationary. We just continue to live with camp support and live under the camp rule of law. There is a limited area that we can't go outside of without an official identity card. Currently, I'm working as a section leader".

**"Have you heard the news about refugee repatriation?"**

"Earlier this year, I heard the Thai and the Burmese governments were arranging our return. This information spread throughout the whole camp. The camp committees and section leaders held a meeting and explained to refugees that they need keep calm. But the

refugees didn't completely believe the information given to them. In the meeting they were told, "Refugee repatriation needs to be inspected and approved by UNHCR and NGOs, and also there should be UNHCR implementation for refugees' needs inside Burma. But the Burmese government does not agree with this. You all can go back when UNHCR and NGOs make detailed plans for you." So nobody has any trustworthy information. Now, it's all rumors".

**"So, what is your opinion on refugee repatriation?"**

"As for me, I don't believe that the situation in Burma is stable enough and that we would be able to live peacefully in this transitional period of democracy. Maybe the reason the Thai government wants to arrange our return is because the Burmese government is pressuring them or offering economic incentives to align their neighboring country. As I know in my old village, the Burmese government allows the Burmese people from Mandalay and Pakokku to cultivate our lands which were given to us by our ancestors. After we left, there was no-one working on them. But now we don't have a chance to reclaim our lands. The political situation is very complicated".

**"Do you have your own personal plan to go back to Burma?"**

"I always think about returning. I heard the Burmese government signed ceasefire agreements with ethnic groups, but there is no action in actual implementation. Peace? The government said that we could return, but why does the fighting still persist in Karen State? During the peace-building period, the Burmese army is fortifying their bases and sending more rations and supplies. How I know this is because some villagers can manage to come and go from the camp and they told me about the real current situation in Burma. In addition, even though the government has ceasefire agreements, there is still fighting in Shan and Kachin states. I don't trust them. It is very obvious that this is not the right time to return".

**"How do you feel being a refugee?"**

"I'm not happy being a refugee. No-one wants to be a refugee and neither do I. Here, we cannot go anywhere freely and I am really sad without freedom. I have to live under the care of the Thai government. It is different from living in my motherland".

**"If you face forced relocation, what would be your difficulties and what are your plans?"**

"Currently in camp, the rations, education support and teachers' subsidies are being reduced. But in Burma, we might face many difficulties such as earning a livelihood, security, refugee dignity, education and will we have equal rights and freedom? Anyway, if we cannot live and survive here and we have to return to those difficulties, I will find a good place on the Thai-Burmese border where my family can survive".

**“Do you have anything else you would like to say?”**

“Being a human, I want freedom, including for my family. I don’t need to live a wealthy life. It is enough if we have freedom and equal rights”. He then asked me, “Is refugee repatriation a rumor? Can it be confirmed?” I admitted to him honestly that I didn’t know too much about whether it is a rumor or real and I also didn’t want to give unreliable information.

He was really curious to know the local people from Burma’s points of views on refugee repatriation. How will those people welcome their return in terms of refugees’ living standards and acknowledgement? From his perspective, even though the government welcomes migrant people or refugees back to Burma, the current political situation and no detailed plans for repatriation make him distrustful to return. The lack of reliable information and plans that cannot give guarantees for the refugees’ future is creating an unwillingness to return to Burma. Refugees are more than willing to return home when there is no civil war and no discrimination. They also demand equal rights and equal protection under the law and a democratic federal constitution which will guarantee the fundamental human rights of all of Burma’s citizens.

# Karen Women Organisation’s Opinion

By Saw David

Refugee return could affect different demographics in many different ways. As such, Burma Issues felt it important to get the concerns of an organisation representing a demographic that could face some of the severest of the process’s consequences - Karen women.

Traditionally women play a respected central role in Karen culture; a role not limited exclusively to the domestic realm. As well as taking care of children, Karen women also readily take on agricultural, educational, healthcare and administrative roles in society. In fact, Karen women have taken up front-line positions during

battles with the Burma Army, and continue to assume positions at the top of the Karen political hierarchy.

However, in many ways their indefatigable courage is most impressively displayed at the village level where, in the absence of men who may have fled out of fear of being summarily executed or taken as military porters, Karen women have formed a last line of defense between Tatmadaw troops and young families and have had to directly endure decades of systematic abuse of the most repugnant types by the Burma Army, yet have always stood strong and managed to ensure social cohesion. With continuing reports of abuses by the Burma Army against Karen Women, any repatriation process must learn from their experiences and address their fears.

Formed in 1948, The Karen Women Organisation (KWO) now has over 49,000 members and is actively involved in development and relief projects in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border as well as with internally displaced persons inside Burma. The organisation takes a leading role in the raising of awareness of women’s rights so we felt they would be best placed to articulate their concerns on the repatriation issue. KWO Joint Secretary 2, Naw Ta Mla Saw, took the time to answer our questions.

**“What is KWO’s position on repatriation?”**

“KWO believes it is not time yet for refugees to return because there are necessary conditions not in place such as: safety and security, a political settlement, landmine removal and a way to support ourselves once we are there. Refugees fled horrible abuse and fighting and we need to know it is safe and the fighting won’t just start again once we are back”.

**“What stage do you think the planning for repatriation is at?”**

“It’s difficult to say, as there are not a lot of facts about the planning that have been shared by all of the stakeholders. But from the information that we received they are not in the planning stage anymore, they are in the preparation stage. We have been told by many sources that Thailand will not force refugees to return and that they realize the conditions are not yet right. This is a tremendous relief for us and we hope that position does not change. We do think that more refugees should be involved in the planning and preparation as it is central to our survival”.

**“Did your meeting with UNHCR satisfy your curiosity and answer your questions?”**

“Our meeting with UNHCR was not like a formal meeting. It was part of our Refugee Return Exchange that we organized together with Burma Partnership and we invited UNHCR to be part of the exchange. We felt we were not getting enough information from them. This meeting is more like the first step and we hope this leads to a wider formal information sharing.

To answer your question about whether we are satisfied with the meeting or not, it was a good start. We learned from this meeting that many things are going on that we are not aware of and that worries us”.

**“What information can you give to refugees who are concerned about repatriation, especially women?”**

“This is a very good question. We are working on providing information to our community by using our KWO position and concerns on the refugee returns. Some camps are issuing restrictions on talking to refugees about return issues. That makes our work harder. So we are focusing more on our KWO members and other women who are interested in this issue in the camps. We always believe we have the right to talk to our members about any issue. We have projects working with a variety of vulnerable people like our special education program and elder care project. We will be sharing information about refugee return with them and advocating for their needs as any process goes forward. We also want people to hesitate before reacting to every rumor. We think real information would help calm people’s fears, so we are encouraging people to come to us and discuss any rumors they hear. If UNHCR will work more closely with CBO’s and others it will help with the rumors as well.

This is not yet the time for refugees to return. People need information about what is happening in the place where they will return so they can make informed choices for themselves. If they are still afraid to return they have the right not to be forced to return”.

**“How can KWO help women prepare for the repatriation process?”**

“Through sharing information and raising awareness about refugee rights, international standards and principles for refugee return, along with lessons learned and best practices from other refugee return experiences”.

**“What role can women play in the planning and decision-making process?”**

“Women are capable of being part of the whole process of the refugee return, as it will affect their lives. The obstacle to women being part of the process is the recognition by others of women’s involvement in the planning and decision-making process. Women should be deeply involved at every level”.

**“For women, what are the right conditions for repatriation, and who should decide they have been met?”**

“The right conditions for women are the same as for all refugees. They include things like a political settlement with a ceasefire agreement, clearance of landmines, withdrawal of the troops, opportunities to support ourselves, access to basic social services like healthcare and education, protection from human rights abuses and some kind of mechanism that will uphold and give proof

that all of these are in place”.

**“What are the main fears that women have about repatriation?”**

“From KWO’s perspective, women fear that the situation on the ground has not changed enough for safety and security. There are still land mines, human rights abuses and no way to support ourselves. We worry that people will be forced or encouraged to return before conditions are in place. We also are afraid people will not get enough information to make good choices for themselves”.

**“Do you have a plan in case there is forced repatriation?”**

“Our plan is to resist any forced repatriation, not make a plan for it. It would violate international standards and so far the Thai government has said they will not force us to leave. We plan on doing international and regional advocacy including working with supportive Thai organizations about the return process and conditions. Karen Community Based Organizations will all work together to resist any forced return”.

**“When it comes to repatriation, how are women’s needs and considerations different to men’s?”**

“We believe that women have different experiences and suffering than men particularly around safety and protection. Women are always also concerned for their family’s protection and livelihood. We will focus on safety, access to education and healthcare particularly for our children, and our ability to support our families”.

**“What will women need both during and after repatriation?”**

“We need recognition and acceptance of women’s participation and involvement in the whole process. If we can be directly involved we can all do a better job making sure all refugees’ issues are addressed”.

**“Can women trust the Burmese military after decades of systemic rape?”**

“We do not look for trust. We want a meaningful mechanism in place to enforce a ceasefire code of conduct and to deal with human rights violations including cases of rape and other violence against women. It isn’t only systematic rape we have suffered. We have been killed, tortured, seen our families killed and tortured, our villages destroyed and we have been forced to flee by these same people”.

**“How will you help women after the repatriation process?”**

“We will keep our organization running as we have in the refugee camps and in Karen State KWO will support a government in the future to create a civil society and practice real democracy and self-determination in

Burma and in Karen areas. We will be continuing to build women's leadership and help both women and our community based on our organizational aims and objectives".

It is clear from talking to the Karen Women Organisation and from our interviews in Mae La that there are fears about repatriation shared across all demographics of refugee communities on the Thai-Burmese border. Females however have specific concerns which increase

in importance when their integral part in society is taken into consideration. As women are central to Karen communities, it is of the utmost importance that they are central in planning for repatriation and its consequences. This entails that organisations such as KWO are given current and reliable information on which they can formulate policy. It also entails that female representatives' decision-making roles are recognised and respected so they might implement such policy.

### News in Brief

- **On 18th August 2012, the opening ceremony of the ceasefire liaison office of the Karen National Liberation Army's 6th and 7th Brigades was held at section (3), Thirimingala Street, Myawaddy Town, in Karen State. In April and May, KNU liaison offices were established in Karen State at Kyaunggyi, in Pegu Division, at Dawei, in Tenniserrim Division, and in Three Pagoda Pass town.**
- **Even as the Burmese government promises to continue to implement community development, one-third of the families in the Karen State region reported experiencing abuses such as evictions, forced labor, restricted movement and sometimes physical attacks - including rape and torture - according to the Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) report "Bitter Wounds and Lost Dreams: Human Rights Under Assault in Karen State, Burma."**
- **The Karen National Union (KNU) and government negotiators verbally agree on a ceasefire code of conduct after meeting in Hpa-an, Karen State, on September 3rd and 4th, for their third round of peace talks.**
- **The Burmese government has removed 2,082 names from its blacklist that has blocked Burmese dissidents living in foreign countries from entering the country, the Information Ministry's official website announced on Tuesday 28 August. However, a total of 4,083 people are still blacklisted.**
- **The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees screened Mae La refugees whose relatives have resettled in third countries in order to see if they too are eligible to be resettled. UNHCR's screening process will include refugees who are under Thailand's Provincial Admissions Board (PAB) and refugees who hold ration documents, but have to be officially registered by UNHCR or the Thai government.**
- **Another clash occurred between government troops and the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) in Kachin State barely days before the head of the group will meet with the government for the first time in Myanmar for talks on a peace agreement, news report from UCAN.**

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](mailto:burmaissues@burmaissues.org)

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