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Networks of noncompliance: grassroots resistance and sovereignty in militarised Burma

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Networks of noncompliance: grassroots resistance and sovereignty in militarised Burma[1]

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This paper examines repression and state–society conflict in Burma through the lens of rural and urban resistance strategies. It explores networks of noncompliance through which civilians evade and undermine state control over their lives, showing that the military regime's brutal tactics represent not control, but a lack of control. Outside agencies ignore this state–society struggle over sovereignty at their peril: ignoring the interplay of interventions with local politics and militarisation, and claiming a 'humanitarian neutrality' which is impossible in practice, risks undermining the very civilians interventions are supposed to help, while facilitating further state repression. Greater honesty and awareness in interventions is required, combined with greater solidarity with villagers' resistance strategies.

Keywords: peasant resistance; humanitarian policy; Karen; Kayin; Burma; Myanmar

There seemed not the ghost of a rebellion anywhere; only the annual attempt, as regular as the monsoon, of the villagers to avoid paying the capitation tax. (Orwell 1934)

They can't call us to go [to state-controlled space] because we dare not stay there. If we go to stay there, they force us to be their slaves. ... So we were staying around our village, and if they came, we fled. Sometimes they came up to shoot us, but they failed. We fled and escaped from them, and we stayed in the jungle. (Karen villager, Karen Human Rights Group [KHRG] 2001, 77)

In the mid-1990s, working on human rights issues with Karen villagers in Burma, I began to notice something while translating written order documents sent to villages by the military regime demanding forced labour and enforcing restrictions. Very often, an order was followed in subsequent days by another, and another, reiterating the demand, complaining that the village had not complied, expressing greater exasperation and more violent threats as the days passed. In other words, these

villagers who could be killed and have their homes burned for the slightest noncompliance by a military with complete impunity were being consistently and brazenly disobedient. Suddenly, my interviews with villagers made more sense: their survival despite overwhelming demands on their resources, remaining on their land in the face of shoot-to-kill orders, and the military's frustrated attempts to take over their lives and livelihoods. It explained the Burmese military's violent targeting of Karen hill villagers, often avoiding armed resistance forces to attack civilians in what I began to realise was a furious struggle over sovereignty and control.

The Burmese military, the *Tatmadaw*, has been accused of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, even genocide for its systematic destruction of over 3,200 villages in the past twelve years (Thailand-Burma Border Consortium [TBBC] 2008), targeted destruction of food supplies, rape as a weapon of control, point-blank shooting of civilian women and children, and other crimes in its efforts to bring hill villages under control, into state-controlled spaces where they are treated as 'a free labour pool to be exploited by the military as needed' (Fink 2001, 123). Ignoring the villagers' side of this struggle, however, denies their agency and results in their exclusion from the political processes required to change their situation; for example, when only armed actors are invited to negotiations to resolve conflicts between state and society (Gilgan 2001, 2, 10).

This paper confronts this imbalance by examining repression through resistance. It also questions relief and development processes in Burma which exploit villagers' apparent voicelessness by speaking 'for' them using foreign frameworks, which can strengthen the military junta's control over people in the name of helping them. Thus far their reach has been limited by the regime's paranoia of their independence; but the harm often done to rural people in other countries by foreign development agendas invites speculation on the results should the political landscape change and outside agencies flood into Burma. The signs thus far are worrying.

The discussion below focuses on the Karen, an ethnicity comprising perhaps ten percent of Burma's fifty million people, because of my experience working with and among them over the past sixteen years with the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), but it places this within a broader Burma context to understand the connections between urban and rural repression and resistance.[2]

Context

In Burma[3] population figures are politically contested, but there is widespread agreement that it is ethnically diverse. The Burmans of the central plains and

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[2]The author worked with Karen villagers and refugees from 1991–2007, living partly in resistance-controlled conflict zones of Karen State and partly in Thailand. With no human rights background, he founded KHRG with Karen villagers and followed their vision of human rights, documenting their perceptions of the situation through interviews and participant observation, conducting advocacy and seeking ways to support villagers in their resistance strategies. This work has included several other states and divisions of Burma and regular interaction with people from urban areas and all ethnicities. KHRG now has over 40 Karen researchers in Burma.

[3]Burma was renamed 'Myanmar Naing-Ngan' by the ruling military junta in 1989. This name change has been rejected as illegitimate by the leadership elected in 1990 (but never allowed to form a government), and as assimilationist by most ethnicity-based opposition groups; this paper therefore retains 'Burma'. 'Burman' refers to the dominant ethnic group, 'Burmese' to their language and the nation-state.

valleys probably make up 50–60 percent of the population, balanced by twelve to fifteen other major ethnicities with many subgroups. The regions outside the central plains are dominated by these non-Burman ethnicities, each concentrated within loosely identifiable regions. The Karen and Shan are the largest, with the Karen numbering four to seven million of Burma's combined 50 million, concentrated in Karen State and Pegu, Irrawaddy and Tenasserim Divisions.[4] Over eighty percent of Burma's population, including Burmans, is rural and agrarian.

Though the modern world is divided into territorially defined states, this has only been the case since the colonial era. In Burma, Scott (1998, 185–7) has described precolonial states as consisting of royal courts controlling and taxing a sedentary population within a small radius of 'state space', surrounded by much larger 'non-state spaces' beyond central control; the best a regime could hope from non-state spaces was to neutralise them, exact tribute from them, or capture their farmers as slaves through periodic military forays. Most Karen people lived in these 'non-state spaces'. Unlike the Shan, they had no princedoms so they posed little threat to the Burman kings. Hill Karens frequently travelled to lowland markets to trade, but otherwise they 'primarily lived in small social units and had no involvement with the plains dwelling peoples'; while closer to state spaces, 'valley-dwelling Karen periodically sought refuge in the Irrawaddy delta or in the mountains along the Siam and Arakan borders' to escape onerous taxation and forced labour (Hayami 2004, 35–6). When kingdoms sent their armies, Karens evaded them as they could; some were killed or enslaved, some moved higher into the hills or paid 'tribute' to be left alone. Lowland Burmans considered Karen as forest people (Bryant 1996, 39), often treating them with 'unconcealed contempt as an inferior breed, the "wild cattle of the hills"' (Cady 1958 cited in Hayami 2004, 36).

British colonialists first defined 'Burma' as a geographic space in the mid-nineteenth century. Christian missionaries and colonial authorities, finding Burmans uncooperative, were keen to encourage the formation of non-Burman ethnic identities, and with their encouragement the S'gkaw, Pwo, Bwe, Pa'O and various 'Karenni' groups began to identify themselves as part of a larger 'Karen' people (Cheesman 2002, 203, Buadaeng 2007, 75). Central to this identity are a 'sense of oppression at the hands of their neighbors' (Keyes 1977, 51) and self-characterisation as 'oppressed, uneducated and virtuous' (Cheesman 2002, 204). In Karen folklore, the hero is often an orphan who overcomes the odds to achieve 'victory over persons wielding political power' (Hayami 2004, 176). To evade oppression and survive in non-state spaces, Karen social structure had developed a strong egalitarianism differing from their more hierarchical neighbours (Hayami 2004, 15, 27). They run their sovereign affairs at the village level. Village leaders are chosen by consensus, their authority is not absolute or hereditary and those

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[4]State censuses have set Karen population at 'between 2 and 5 million, whereas Karen nationalists claim between 7 and 12 million' (Cheesman 2002, 203). The current regime claims the population is almost 70 percent Burman with the remainder divided among 135 so-called ethnic 'races', using the skewed 1983 census which labelled everyone with Burmese-language names 'Burman' and classifying every small subgroup as a 'national race' in an apparent attempt to exaggerate Burman dominance while dividing the remainder into numerically insignificant polities (see Smith 1991, 30).

who become overbearing may wake up one morning to find all their villagers gone (Hayami 2004, 27, Marshall 1997, 143). Hayami (2004, 140–1) notes of the S'gkaw Karen term *gkaw* (land) that

> Although the same term *kàu* [*gkaw*] is used for countries such as *kàu Jâu Tâe* (Thailand) or *kàu Peu Zö* [*gkaw p'yaw*] (Burma), for the Karen, *kàu* does not designate a political unit. There are no indigenous Karen polities, permanent leaders, nor ritual units above the community level. For Karen, the community referred to as *zi* (or *hi*) is typically the largest autonomous unit, although a parent community and its offshoots often form a cluster [*gk'ru*, or village tract] . . . A community constitutes the basic ritual and moral entity that grounds a Karen person's sense of belonging.

Within villages, identities largely revolve around connections to the land and subsistence rice farming. Ties to the land are material (for production) and spiritual. Traditional Karen animism is based around forces residing in all things which must be appeased (Marshall 1997, 210–11), beliefs which have been partially assimilated into local Buddhism and Christianity. Many Karen people live in plains areas, practicing irrigated rice agriculture and interacting with Burmans and others through markets and state hierarchies, but even they relate to a perceived Karen heartland in more remote hills and forests, where people live in smaller villages of 5 to 100 households, practice rotational swidden rice cultivation and focus on subsistence and barter. These areas are commonly conceptualised as a homeland, a source of livelihood and sanctuary from politically stronger forces (Bryant 1996, 39). Plains Karen villages with a strong cash economy have significant vertical stratification. This decreases in hill villages where subsistence farming and barter are the norm, but there is still significant horizontal differentiation based on whether a family farms hillside, irrigated rice, or cash crops; owns an elephant, cattle, or a shop; or works as landless day labourers. Other important lines of differentiation include gender, age, education, civil status and religion.

Alongside Karen identity, Karen nationalism came into being:

> Burmese nationalism and Karen nationalism each emerged during the colonial period. For decades, they confronted each other politically, attempting to enlist as allies powerful agents such as the colonial government, missionaries, the Japanese occupation government during World War II, and the leaders and organizations of other ethnicities and political ideologies. (Buadaeng 2007, 86–7)

While encouraging Karen identity formation, however, British colonial authorities

> pointedly refused to entertain the idea of a separate Karen state. On the contrary, colonial rule clarified the territorial limits of a Burma[n]-dominated Burmese state. Hitherto fuzzy frontiers were replaced with precise borders that spatially defined 'Burma' – a political entity sanctioned by international law . . . As the new political contours of the region were mapped, the Karen found themselves under the jurisdiction of states over which they had no control. (Bryant 1996, 33)

With independence in 1948, the new state controlled by Burmans was keen to adopt colonial-style sovereignty and militarily extend its control over this new and bigger sovereign territory. Enter the civil war, as groups throughout Burma took up arms (learned from the British) to defend the local sovereignty of non-state spaces against state encroachment. By the 1970s the *Tatmadaw* was trying to fight

twenty to thirty regional and ethnicity-based resistance armies at a time, plus a large Communist insurgency (which metamorphosed into an ethnicity-based Wa army in 1989). The state urged Burmans to circle the nationalistic wagons against the dual threats of an ethnic takeover or federalism, and the military used this justification to seize power in 1962 – power which it still holds today. Most ethnic armed groups, however, were less interested in replacing the Burmese state than in ejecting the Burmese military from their homelands and re-establishing local sovereignty as 'non-state people'. Drawn from the civilian populations, these resistance armies were only the extreme end of a spectrum of civilian resistance against state control. Any resistance group that began mimicking a state was soon likely to find itself, like an overly authoritarian village head, facing mutinies and fractures.[5] Karen people still refer to the Burmese nation-state as *gkaw p'yaw*, literally 'land of the Burmans', and people still speak of 'going down into Burma'.

Burmese military rulers found themselves confronted with an uncooperative population even in the Burman heartland. Like most military regimes, they responded with intensified repression of civil, political, and economic rights, while the economy, formerly Southeast Asia's most vibrant, spiralled downward (Fink 2001, 32–3). Mass pro-democracy demonstrations in 1975 and 1988 were brutally crushed, killing thousands (Lintner 1990). This pushed Burman pro-democracy forces into engagement and alliances with ethnic resistance forces, leaving the regime with little support beyond the officer corps and its business cronies. Presently calling itself the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), the regime continues to expand the army to extend its sovereignty and intensify control through repression. It has difficulty finding voluntary recruits so it press-gangs people in the streets, many of them children, and posts them in regions far from home where they are unfamiliar with the terrain or the people. Morale is low, desertion rates are high, its soldiers are mostly driven by fear and hunger, yet the army continues to expand and extend its reach (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2007). Large parts of Burma are still controlled by ethnic armed groups, the majority of which have agreed to 'ceasefires' with the regime since 1989 (HRW 2002). In Karen-populated regions of southeastern Burma, the main armed group is the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA), still in low-intensity armed conflict with the SPDC. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and several smaller Karen splinter groups have agreed to ceasefires with the SPDC and sometimes work as proxies against the KNU/KNLA. The SPDC conscripts most of its troops in central Burma, but the Karen groups rely on local civilian support and recruits, sometimes voluntary, sometimes coerced (HRW 2007). Though grossly outnumbered and outgunned,[6] the KNU/KNLA survives through local civilian support, but more importantly through civilian non-cooperation with state forces (Malseed 2008). Most families have members or relatives in the KNU/KNLA ranks, which have downsized and become predominantly voluntary since 1995. Civilian support is also predicated on the KNU's health and education programmes, its fight against state encroachment, and its ongoing actions to protect displaced civilians, though it is

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[5]This happened to the Karen National Union in 1994, leading to mutiny and breakaway of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. A DKBA soldier interviewed afterward stated the group's objectives as first getting rid of the KNU, then driving the *Tatmadaw* out of Karen State (KHRG 1995, 18) – thereby reinstating local sovereignty.
[6]The *Tatmadaw* Army numbers approximately 350,000, the KNLA 3,000–5,000 (HRW 2002, 19, 121).

criticised for taxation and occasional forced recruitment. The DKBA has a smaller support base, because it has alienated many civilians through its heavy demands for forced labour, extortion, and forced recruitment; it seldom protects civilians against state predation, and its cooperation with the regime, though tense and reluctant, is seen by many as incompatible with the oppositional aspect of Karen identities. Other armed groups in Karen regions are small and localised, work with the regime, and focus much of their energy on extortion and business.[7]

The SPDC divides Burma into 'white' (state-controlled), 'brown' (contested), and 'black' (beyond state control) areas. Outside central Burma its control is often limited to the roadways and garrison towns, and walking just 300 metres from a road can place you in spaces where state control is tenuous to nonexistent. The *Tatmadaw* dares not enter such areas with columns of less than 100–200 troops, and when it does the villagers and armed resistance groups disappear, only to reappear once the column passes.

Repression

The *Tatmadaw* continues to place more bases throughout rural areas nationwide, including areas without armed resistance (Selth 2002, 35–6, 165–6). These bases radiate power over the surrounding villages, imposing restrictions on the activities and movements of civilians and extorting resources, crops, and labour, using human rights abuses as mechanisms of control. Skidmore (2004, 14–16) uses the term 'deterritorialisation' to refer to the SPDC's attempts to inflict fear and enforce control by encroaching into every sphere so people feel they have no sanctuary and must submit. Deterritorialisation operates physically, through the plainclothes intelligence agents patrolling urban streets and the *Tatmadaw* camps surrounding every rural village; spiritually, by spreading word that military intelligence has infiltrated the *Sangha*[8] and by usurping *Sangha* authority in forcibly defrocking dissident monks; temporally, by ordering so much forced labour that villagers have insufficient time for their own work; and economically, by demanding enough food and money to wipe out people's savings and force them into hand-to-mouth survival. The *Tatmadaw* and local SPDC authorities demand forced labour, food, resources, and money to support their operations, build state infrastructure, and enrich military officers and civil officials, but abuses are also used to engrain state–society hierarchy, such as pointless forced labour moving stones back and forth (Fink 2001, 121), summoning village leaders daily to military bases for no reason (KHRG 2003, 231), or using rape as a means of dehumanisation (Belak 2002, 63).

A typical village in rural Karen State may have to deal with two *Tatmadaw* camps within a few hours' walk, plus the SPDC township authorities further away.[9] These channel demands through the village head, who is responsible for allocating the burden among villagers. Township authorities send orders for rotating shifts of unpaid forced labour on road maintenance, and regular demands for extortion

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[7]Analysis drawn from my 1991–2007 field work and interaction with these groups; see also http://www.khrg.org.

[8]The association of monks. The 'Three Gems' of Buddhism providing spiritual refuge to the faithful are the Buddha, the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (Skidmore 2004).

[9]The following summary is synthesised from author's experience and KHRG reports 1992–2008 (www.khrg.org).

money, while *Tatmadaw* camps order whole villages to carry their rations from the roadhead each month, plus regular rotational shifts of forced labour as camp messengers, servants, and porters, seasonal forced labour growing crops for the soldiers on land commandeered from village farmers, building materials to 'maintain' the camps (but actually sold by officers for profit), and regular supplies of food, alcohol, cheroots, and dry goods. Travelling outside one's village requires a military pass, and many villages are forced to fence themselves in – ostensibly to 'keep out rebels' but actually to contain the villagers when patrols come to pillage and capture forced labourers. Village leaders must report any visitors or opposition activity. Failure to comply with any order is punished by arbitrary detention and torture until ransomed. Repeated insubordination results in threats to burn the village and forcibly relocate the population into forced labour 'relocation' camps sometimes called 'peace villages' (KHRG 2000). People cannot comply with so many demands at once, so children are sent to fill forced labour quotas while adults work the family fields. People sell livestock and other forms of savings to bribe their way out of forced labour. Eventually nothing is left to sell, and they face displacement or arrest.

Where villages are difficult to reach, noncompliant, or considered subversive, the *Tatmadaw* orders them to move to army-controlled garrisons along roadsides, where they lose access to land and receive nothing, while being used daily for forced labour. Since 1992, forced relocation has grown from a means of neutralising non-state spaces to a means of controlling their populations and land, and from a local military tactic to a policy of depopulating entire regions. The *Tatmadaw* shells villages without warning, then storms them with small arms fire; the houses are looted, any civilians found are killed or taken as porters, and the houses are burned. The crops and food supplies are destroyed, fields and food stores landmined, and orders issued that any civilian seen in or around the village is to be shot on sight.[10] Local organisations have documented the destruction and dispossession of 3,200 villages throughout Burma since 1996 through such unilateral *Tatmadaw* action (TBBC 2008). It must be emphasised that this has *not* occurred in the crossfire of combat; civilians are not 'collateral damage', they are the deliberate target, and there are usually no armed resistance forces around when villages are destroyed (Malseed 2006). In fact, actual armed conflict is limited to the occasional resistance ambush. The *Tatmadaw* usually avoids confrontation with armed opposition, preferring to attack civilians and then report to headquarters that they have 'engaged the enemy' (KHRG 1997). Though many evade them, the killings, rape, torture, destruction, and forced labour is extensive enough to be categorised as 'crimes against humanity' by Amnesty International (2008) and others.

Laws established in 1974 cede control over all land to the state (Hudson-Rodd *et al.* 2003). At present,

> The State controls all land. Farmers have rights only to cultivation, which household members can inherit if permitted by the authorities … The State can revoke landuse ownership rights if the farmers do not grow the crops specified by the authorities or use the land as specified. Land sales and transfers are illegal but tenancy and land sales and transfer of land to non-household family members do exist at the informal level. (Hudson-Rodd and Nyunt 2001, 6)

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[10]See KHRG (2007b, 2006b).

In most areas the state has decreed that villagers must grow paddy and maximise output; those failing to do so have been stripped of their land rights and/or jailed (Hudson-Rodd *et al.* 2003). Production increases are attempted through forced double- and triple-cropping schemes, which often fail when corrupt officials steal the required fertilisers and money for irrigation infrastructure, leaving villagers to pay quota penalties at harvest time (Thawnghmung 2004, 1, 156–7, KHRG 2007a, 43–5). Though the regime claims to have abolished in 2003 its paddy procurement system, which forced villagers to hand over roughly 20 percent of each crop at well below market prices (Fujita and Okamoto 2006, 9–10), Karen villagers in most areas say that this has only resulted in increased *ad hoc* demands on their harvests by local military officials.[11] Military and civil authorities routinely confiscate land for army farms, plantations, or bases which then use forced labour, and bulldoze new roads through farmers' fields with no compensation (KHRG 2007a, 20, 57–8). Trade in rice and other commodities, though no longer tightly controlled by state monopolies, is still crippled by restrictions on moving goods in contested areas like the Karen hills, and by the high costs of bribing officials and checkpoints to move produce to market.[12]

These policies place the state in direct conflict with villagers' traditional systems of land management. In Karen villages, some land around the village is communal while cropping land is held under traditional tenure within families; land allocation and disputes are handled by village elders, with inter-village issues handled by elders of the 'village tract', a unit of several linked villages. A 2005 study among Karen hill villagers found that only 23 percent held any government-issued documents granting them tenure over their land, while over 70 percent held land rights through customary ownership or the permission of village elders (TBBC 2005).

State land seizures, crop looting and forced cropping programmes combine with forced labour, extortion, and other demands to violate what Scott (1976) called the 'subsistence ethic'. He defines this as peasants' concern first and foremost with having enough to live on, including food, clothing, shelter, and needs for social and spiritual obligations 'to be a fully functioning member of village society' (Scott 1976, 9). People discern justice or injustice based on whether they are left with enough, rather than what is taken from them. Everyone has a 'right to subsistence' (Scott 1976, 11), and therefore when times are hard people are expected to help one another and the state is expected to make allowances. This combines with the 'norm of reciprocity' (Scott 1976, 167), by which peasants accept authority as legitimate to the extent that its demands are balanced by its obligations; peasants willingly give surplus in good times for the security of knowing that the state will help in hard times. Together, the subsistence ethic and the norm of reciprocity form part of the peasants' 'moral heritage', and when these norms and values are violated the result is a commonly-felt 'moral outrage' (Scott 1976, 167).

My experience in Karen regions suggests that this way of thinking grounds village conceptions of human rights. Villagers are not adamantly opposed to all forms of state taxation or predation, but primarily to those which threaten their subsistence. The theft of a cookpot can thus be seen as a worse human rights violation than an incident of torture, depending on the circumstances. Forced labour, an abuse that steals time from subsistence activities, consistently tops the list

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[11]Author's interviews with Karen health workers, September 2005, unpublished.
[12]See World Food Programme (2007).

of village grievances, surpassing even killings. The state's economic predations are accepted if minimal, but are listed as serious abuses when the same demands occur in times of shortage. Village perceptions of human rights focus on how forms of repression combine to create vulnerability, hunger, and death, rather than on specific abuses; and this helps us to understand the response strategies that people devise.

Responses

Reports on Burma often document repression and suffering without exploring civilians' responses, but a growing literature has shown in other contexts that recognising and acknowledging responses and the agency behind them is crucial if people are to have a role in negotiating their own political, social, and economic future. Michel Foucault (1994, 339–41) insists that power relations by definition include the possibility of resistance; otherwise the relationship is not power, which seeks to influence behaviour, but simply administration. He suggests that power is best understood by starting from resistance,

> in using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used. Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies. (Foucault 1994, 329)

'Power' exists not in the abstract, but only as 'power relations'; 'Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action' (Foucault 1994, 340). While a superficial look at Burma suggests that the state has power through territorial sovereignty and civilians are powerless, a Foucauldian perspective suggests that the state only has territorial sovereignty to the extent that it can enact a power relation in any particular place, and that doing so automatically entails resistance. Territorial sovereignty is thus not a given, but an objective of the state which it has great difficulty producing and reproducing in many places. Violence against civilians is not power, but a confrontation of strategies which the state seeks to transform into a power relationship; 'every strategy of confrontation dreams of becoming a relationship of power' (Foucault 1994, 347). To properly understand repression in Burma, then, it is important to study how people respond to it.

We begin with the urban context. During the mass urban uprisings in 1988, the state pulled the police and military off the streets, sure that chaos would ensue so they could step back in to 'save the nation'. Instead, communities formed committees that maintained order, while monks directed traffic and controlled food distribution. The state then opened the prisons to flood the cities with criminals, many of whom they paid to create chaos. But the civilian committees arrested troublemakers, and still there was no chaos. Finally, the army had to *proclaim* chaos and deployed to mow down thousands of people with machine-guns, arresting and torturing thousands more to end chaos and declare the nation saved (Lintner 1990). The community networks which had been formed, and the memory of them, did not die – they simply vanished underground. Today, most resistance takes the form of the covert and everyday – evading taxes, misreporting resources, grumbling and joking about junta leaders, spreading subversive news and rumours, leaking information to outside agencies (Fink 2001, Skidmore 2004). People bribe officers and civil servants, undermining their authority. Civil servants drag their feet; even the junta's

propaganda writers pen statements and stories *so* outlandish that they are patently unbelievable. State news reports celebrate the 'voluntary contribution of labour' by tens of thousands (with exact numbers given) of farmers to infrastructure projects, thus providing activists with detailed statistics on forced labour. The texts of pro-democracy pamphlets are reprinted in state media in articles condemning them as 'subversive'.

Then there is the semi-covert, or semi-overt. Anyone expressing anti-government views is imprisoned, so in 2006, word circulated that wearing a white shirt on Mondays represents opposition to the junta. The state then prohibited white shirts on Mondays. Then people gathered at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon on Tuesdays, wearing yellow (representing the opposition National League for Democracy) and praying silently for political prisoners. The state sent thugs to douse them with hoses as they prayed. In 2007, petitions circulated condemning the junta, and thousands signed them (Shah Paung 2006).

Then the overt: in August–September 2007, Buddhist monks marched to protest the suffering created by SPDC economic policies. After they were attacked by state-supported thugs they imposed a religious boycott on military families and marches grew. Civilians formed human chains to protect the monks' processions, and in several cases civilians armed only with sticks and kitchen knives successfully repelled army battalions attempting to sack monasteries and arrest monks (Than Win Htut 2007). The state's attempts to achieve 'deterritorialisation' (Skidmore 2004), consolidating control by infiltrating spiritual sanctuaries, were physically resisted by human walls of civilians. Even after the monks' processions were violently crushed, new forms of semi-overt resistance kept appearing: stray dogs ran city streets with junta leaders' names hung around their necks, and people boycotted forced-attendance pro-state rallies, or attended but sat inert and expressionless, frowning resolutely at the ground instead of shouting slogans (Yan Naing 2007, Kristalis 2007). Urban civilians have seized the offensive in this struggle of contending strategies, with the state on the defensive, forced to respond to every new subversion.

In rural areas, the frequency and scale of demands sent to village heads from several sources at once make it almost impossible for any village to fully comply while still producing enough to survive. Village heads must therefore be adept negotiators in order to evade some demands while bringing others down to manageable levels. Many orders are sent in written form, and extensive sets gathered in different regions (KHRG 2003, KHRG 2002) demonstrate that village heads routinely ignore demands until they are reinforced by threats of violence; orders are followed in subsequent days by second, third, even fourth and fifth notices summoning the village head to explain the lack of compliance, and gradually becoming more threatening. Village heads interviewed describe strategies such as ignoring first requests, then pretending absence from the village, feigning illness, sending a spouse to report, or pleading poverty and inability to comply. While complete evasion and noncompliance can be dangerous, demands for 20 forced labourers within 24 hours might be 'obeyed' by sending five forced labourers a week later, plus a bottle of rice whisky. Meanwhile, officers falsely report completed objectives rather than admit their inability to coerce villagers into timely compliance. This greatly weakens the military's ability to establish and maintain infrastructure and administrative mechanisms of control. The motivations village heads state for this noncompliance straddle the boundary between the need to survive and moral

perceptions of just versus unjust demands – reflecting the 'subsistence ethic' already discussed.

Village heads routinely underreport the village population, acreage tilled, crop harvests, population of draught animals, and other resources to reduce compliance with material demands, while villagers position hidden storage barns in nearby forests to conceal food and resources and as caches in case they flee state control. They devise rotating duty rosters to spread the burden of forced labour, asset pooling systems whereby larger or wealthier families subsidise poorer or smaller families to cope with extortion and forced labour, and even communal fishponds to finance the bribing of officers (KHRG 2006c). Some village heads evade demands by telling officers that other authorities made the same demand, even if they did not, thus pitting officers against each other in turf battles. In 2005–6, *Tatmadaw* forces in Papun district used bulldozers to rebuild a road because village heads had convinced them that demanding excessive forced labour would cause villagers to flee into the surrounding hills, leaving no population to tax (KHRG 2005a).[13]

To turn 'deterritorialisation' back on the regime, some village heads tell officers their abuses are being reported to armed resistance groups and human rights organisations, making them fear armed retribution or war crimes charges. In 2006, for example, a village headman welcomed a Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) researcher to conduct interviews, then reported the visit to the local *Tatmadaw* camp in compliance with standing orders to report all visitors. As he later related, the officer had demanded to know what the researcher had learned. The village head replied, 'Well, we were afraid of them so we told them everything you've done to our village'. Though clearly flustered by this, the officer couldn't legitimately punish the headman because he was reporting as ordered.[14] Yet he had effectively served warning to the officer that every abuse he commits is reported to the outside world. Some officers appear to modify their behaviour in fear of this. As one elderly woman described, she was so surprised when SPDC soldiers passed by without looting that she called, 'Aren't you going to steal my chickens?' They answered, 'No, grandmother, you'll report us to the BBC'.[15]

Contrary to tradition, elderly women are now commonly appointed village head. Exploiting the reverence for mother-figures in Burmese cultures, they scold or challenge the young military officers who give the orders, and whose sense of power and authority becomes confused in their presence. In written orders it is very common for *Tatmadaw* officers to address village headwomen as 'Mother' and refer to themselves as 'Son' (KHRG 2002, 2003). In late 2005, a village headwoman in Papun district confronted an officer who had ordered her to send villagers as 'guides' for a military patrol. She told him, 'You know I cannot ask my villagers to walk in front of your troops to step on mines'. He replied, 'It is my duty and these are orders from above, you will have to do it or your village will be punished'. She said, 'Then take me instead. I will go. But on one condition. I'm afraid of mines, and I'm sure you're afraid of mines too. So let's walk in front together, hand in hand. If I step on

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[13]Karen villages are seen as anti-government so almost no *Tatmadaw* recruitment occurs here; officers and soldiers, predominantly Burman, are recruited and sent from cities and towns elsewhere, and officers try to profit from their postings and send money home.
[14]From author's interview with KHRG researcher, 2007.
[15]From author's interview with KHRG researcher, 2007.

a mine or you step on a mine, we'll both die together. I can be content with that'. The officer eventually responded, 'I'll think about it, go home Mother and I'll tell you my decision later'. The demand didn't come again.[16] She knew that the officer had impunity to kill her on the spot or detain her indefinitely without charge, yet she was confident enough in her maternal authority to gamble against this possibility. Such examples are remarkably common.

Village heads act as tacticians and coordinators of village noncompliance, with widespread consensus and support because villagers are fully aware of the necessity and justice of evading excessive demands, thus creating the 'supportive subculture' that Scott (1985, 35) noted was crucial to the sustainability of everyday peasant resistance. As explained by a woman in southern Karen State,

> Village heads ... are elected by the villagers themselves. They are usually women, because men cannot survive the repeated beatings and punishments by the soldiers. Therefore, nobody wants to be a village head throughout the whole region. Some villages operate a rotation system for the position, and change the village head as often as every two weeks or every month. As a result, even 17- or 18-year-old girls sometimes act as village heads, but they can control the villagers and will be obeyed because everyone knows that they are being instructed and guided by the village elders, usually monastic leaders, and so they never misuse their powers. (KHRG 2006a, 68)

Some villagers choose to evade the state completely. Two weeks before the October 2005 rice harvest, over 300 *Tatmadaw* soldiers came up the Shwegyin River to force several Karen villages to move to state-controlled areas to the west. About 1,000 villagers fled as the troops approached. On 19 September the column shot dead a villager in the ricefields, then began shelling Ler Wah and nearby villages with mortars. The 35 Karen resistance soldiers based nearby harassed the column briefly and then withdrew as the *Tatmadaw* targeted the villages, tearing down and burning houses, slashing the villagers' winnowing trays and puncturing their water tins to prevent them living there. The villagers had suffered this before: the *Tatmadaw* first burned their villages in 1975, when they dispersed into smaller forest-based settlements where they keep working their land but disappear whenever the columns come, usually once or twice a year. They prefer this to the forced labour and repression they say they would face under state control.

This time they headed eastward, the men up a nearby mountainside from where they monitored *Tatmadaw* movements, the families higher into the hills. Adults built shelters while teenaged students were dispatched to retrieve rice from hidden storage barns. Schoolteachers leaned blackboards against trees and immediately resumed classes to maintain a sense of community continuity. Village elders contacted Karen resistance forces to obtain information and a few homemade landmines to defend their hiding places should the Army attempt pursuit. The Army never came up the hill, probably afraid of ambush, and withdrew a month later without having captured a single villager. People immediately returned to their fields near the river to begin the overdue harvest, while Karen resistance forces swept the villages and fields for any landmines planted by the departing column.[17]

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[16]Author's interview in November 2005 with Karen human rights researcher who had interviewed the headwoman.
[17]From author's interviews with villagers and soldiers in the area, November 2005. See also KHRG (2005b).

Meanwhile, villagers in 20 state-controlled villages to the west – where the Ler Wah villagers had been ordered to go – were doing unpaid forced labour upgrading a military access road. Through organised flight and evasion, the Ler Wah villagers had retained their harvest and their land, while evading unpaid forced labour for the state. This was the second attack on their villages in 2005, and in early 2006 state troops came and burned their villages again. The *Tatmadaw* then established a permanent post nearby, creating a food crisis because farming became too dangerous and causing many to head for refugee camps in Thailand; but large numbers remain, monitoring *Tatmadaw* movements while encamped in the forests to continue farming their land.

To drive people out of the hills, the *Tatmadaw* landmines fields, snipes at villagers harvesting, and seeks out and burns hidden food caches. People respond by hiding plantations in forest clearings, and harvesting open fields by night with Karen soldiers as sentries. They grow cash crops like cardamom, then contact villages in state-controlled areas to plan covert one-day markets deep in the forest to barter forest products and cash crops for rice, oil, salt and dry goods. After a few hours, these markets disappear as though they had never existed (KHRG 2006a, 80–1). They plant root crops that can remain in the ground until needed, for years if necessary, and forage in the forests. They send out unarmed patrols to monitor *Tatmadaw* movements, and swap intelligence with Karen resistance forces. They exploit their connections to armed resistance groups for protection and information, while retaining self-identification as 'villagers' rather than combatants, but as villagers engaged with their context, not bystanders. They refer to themselves not as 'refugees' (*bgha gkaw bgha gkeh*, suggesting people who have fled), but as '*bgha khay gk'mwee*' – literally, people who move/run around the area. The 'area' means within walking distance of village and fields. This displacement is more temporal and psychosocial than spatial. Temporally, villagers reclaim village sites whenever *Tatmadaw* units are absent; psychosocially, Karen refugee Tha Lay (2003, 7–8) explains,

> Movement basically erodes the simple social fabrics of everyday life…Some of the more negative aspects … are the erosion of structures that constant movement causes, the erosion of ideas of familiarity; having familiar things around you is a common way that human beings cope with trying situations.

Displaced Karen villagers therefore expend great effort continuing primary schools and religious practices while hiding in the forests, working to preserve a sense of community and continuity which defies assumptions that displaced people reduce their existence to bare survival. Displacement causes women to expand their leadership roles in families and communities, and to engage in traditionally male activities like building and trading; they have 'transcended many traditional restrictions … and thereby altered local understandings of appropriate gender roles' (KHRG 2006a, 6). However, this has increased their exposure to landmines and violent abuse by roving forces, placing a heavy price on empowerment.

The SPDC refers to these people collectively as '*ywa bone*', literally 'hiding villages' (KHRG 2000), seeing them as active state-evaders rather than passively displaced bystanders. The SPDC calls them to come and live a 'peaceful' life under the state (in 'peace villages', the SPDC term for relocation sites and garrison villages), but displaced Karen villagers more commonly request, *inter alia*, (1) food so we can continue evading them; (2) weapons/radios to defend ourselves or stay ahead of them; and ultimately (3) for the SPDC authorities and military to leave our area. As stated by displaced Karen villager David Loo, 'People can't go back

because the SPDC has taken all the land. If the SPDC does not withdraw, the villagers cannot go home' (Elmore 2006).

When the state orders you to move to an area they control, it means that you have succeeded in keeping your *own* area beyond their control. Surviving in such an area despite search-and-destroy operations requires cooperation and systematic strategies. It is not 'panic displacement' but 'strategic displacement'. Displacement is often portrayed as a sign of weakness, as people's final desperate option, but in this context displacement requires great strength, greater than submitting and moving to the relocation site. Adas (1986, 68–9) labelled such displacement 'avoidance protest', noting that it is 'perilous and thus more rarely adopted by hardpressed peasants, usually when everyday defences are not sufficient to hold elite exactions at a tolerable level'. It requires coordination, mutual understanding, resourcefulness, and incredible resilience, and it has succeeded (I would argue more so than the armed resistance) in denying the hills to the Burmese state.

While the September 2007 demonstrations were ongoing in urban areas, the *Tatmadaw* was destroying crop fields in the upper Yunzalin valley in Karen State, establishing permanent posts to make it impossible for villagers to continue hiding. At a meeting, even Karen resistance officers told local village leaders they should abandon the area, but the leaders of four villages refused, saying, 'If we move to another area the KNLA cannot secure it for us, and the SPDC will make bases around our villages so we won't be able to come back'. They said they would rather stay on their land and flee when necessary, and that they were banding their villages together under the name '*Gher Der*' ('Defend [our] homes'). Their explanation expressed the desire for justice that motivates many village response strategies, and articulated resistance beyond rational self-interest or 'coping strategies':

> We don't want to go. If we are told to go to another place we won't go. If we are told to go to a place under SPDC control we also won't go. Whether we live or die, we will fight back. They burned our villages and our paddy barns, and also ate our livestock and killed our villagers. The SPDC is a bad government, so we won't go to stay under their control and we won't work with them.[18]

Through fear, 'deterritorialisation', and control over all civilian activities, the SPDC tries to cast everyone as '*homo sacer*', people whose lives are to be administered and taken from them on the whim of the state with no possibility of resistance or protest (Agamben 1998). People can resist by publicly daring the state to enforce its claim, offering up their bodies for slaughter (as monks did in September 2007) and thus forcing the state to choose between killing them or addressing the issues they are protesting; 'faced with the naked life of the subject, sovereign power has a choice: it can either respond politically or it has to reveal the relations of violence on which it depends. Whichever route it takes, it can no longer conceal its violence under the pretence of politics' (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004, 17–18). Violence usually comes into play when a power relationship has been unachievable in other ways (Foucault 1994, 340); thus, state violence in different regions of Burma is inversely proportional to the degree of state power over the local population. Just as displacement represents resistance and not submission, violence against civilians reflects not control but an absence of control, a will to power rather than power itself.

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[18]Translated from field report of KHRG researcher who was present. Village names are omitted to protect them.

In this context even apparently constructive uses of state power, such as the construction of schools and clinics in state-controlled villages, can be seen by civilians as abuse of power. The SPDC makes great fanfare over such projects, but any budgets allocated usually disappear through corruption; local civilians are then forced to provide materials and labour at their own expense, and to donate money amounting to double or triple the actual project cost (under the SPDC euphemism 'self-reliance'). Grand openings, at which villagers are forced to feast and entertain visiting dignitaries, present the project as a gift of the state, but the clinics are then left without medicines, the schools without books. State-assigned medics and teachers must be paid through local collections and sometimes disappear within a few months, leaving the empty shells of clinic and school buildings (KHRG 2007a). Even in towns, perceptions of corruption and bureaucratic inertia undermine or erase any goodwill generated by services provided.

The struggle for spaces

This paper refers to state and non-state spaces as ideal types, but the examples already presented show that neither of these is fully achievable. Rather than mutually exclusive categories, state and non-state spaces form two ends of a spectrum, with reality always falling between. The state aspires to create pure state spaces, which the examples show is never wholly achieved (like territorial sovereignty); even in the SPDC-defined 'white areas' of the cities, the state is not fully in command. Conversely, the state can penetrate non-state spaces with military columns at any time; people evade the columns and the administration, reflecting an aspiration to non-state space,[19] but it is not a pure non-state space. Moreover, the 'space' here is not necessarily geographic. A state or non-state space can be a temporal space, such as a period when a place, institution, community or family is *temporarily* within or outside state control. It can be a social space, such as a group gathering or 'jungle market', or even a psychological/spiritual space, particularly important in urban areas, existing in mind and action; for example, people attending forced-attendance state rallies sometimes turn these into non-state spaces by calling out opposition slogans in place of SPDC slogans. The state uses 'deterritorialisation' to encroach on these spaces, but never fully succeeds. References to state or non-state spaces merely represent who has the upper hand for the moment in a specific case, while the tug of war continues.

This struggle is enacted as a broad state–society conflict to which most people respond in their own ways – and it has created an implicit consensus in support of noncompliance, a 'supportive subculture' (Scott 1985, 35). Many of these responses could be classified as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), forms of everyday resistance carried out without direct confrontation. To this we can add mutual support networks which do not resist in themselves, but which help villagers to evade the state or mitigate the effects of abuses. Anderson (1994) includes these in formulating his 'political ecology of the modern peasant', noting that responses to vulnerability tend to combine rational self-interested behaviour with community-oriented behaviour. The lines between these,

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[19]This aspiration to non-state space rather than just a more accommodating state is evidenced by Karen society's aversion to hierarchical structures through history, and by the 1994 creation of the DKBA, which was largely driven by public perceptions of KNU behaviour as increasingly state-like (taxation, forced recruitment, etc.) in areas it controlled.

and between resistance and self-preservation, are usually unclear, and both undermine state control over non-state spaces.

> The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual, autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and inflect the visible facts of overall domination, and whose purposes and calculations, desires and choices resist any simple division into the political and the apolitical. (Foucault 1980 cited in Turton 1986, 36)

On the ground, the specific intentions of any response strategy become secondary to its impacts on the state–society struggle over lives and livelihoods.

Here there is no simple dichotomy of 'combatants' in armed conflict while civilians suffer as 'collateral damage'. The conflict is society-wide: the vast majority resent the current state and resist its predation however they feel able. Anderson (1994, 5) has noted that civilian responses elsewhere occur 'along a wide spectrum, from quiescence to rebellion and including collective nonviolent tactics in between these two'. This fits the Burma context, though in Burma apparent 'quiescence' is misleading, often better described as 'veneers of conformity' (Skidmore 2004, 7); as noted earlier, in rural areas complete quiescence or compliance can be incompatible with survival. At its most subtle, resistance consists in *not supporting* – people don't report things they see, don't give as much food as they could, and exaggerate their resource poverty. Further along the spectrum, strategies actively undermine – hiding resources, ignoring orders, packing road embankments with sticks during forced labour, informing human rights groups but not the military. Becoming more overt, people evade state control, choosing displacement over state spaces. Then there is active material support for armed groups, and finally, at the extreme end of the spectrum, active participation in armed resistance.

Rather than civilians being on the margins of the armed conflict, this perspective sees them at the heart of a state–society conflict, with the armed combatants at its margins; yet they still retain identity and rights as civilians. It is arguably civilian noncompliance more than armed resistance that keeps spaces beyond effective SPDC and *Tatmadaw* control. Whether living under nominal state 'control' or in a condition of strategic displacement, people struggle for sovereignty, not just over territory but over lives and livelihoods; sovereignty as Agamben meant it in his use of the term 'sovereign power' (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004, 15–17). From this perspective, the exclusion of civilians from political and aid negotiations appears counterproductive and unjustified.

Outside responses

Despite their well-developed response strategies, many villagers throughout Burma are on the brink, struggling to survive and dying in thousands from human rights abuses and their ripple effects. Malnutrition and treatable diseases are endemic (Backpack Health Worker Teams 2006), and villages are disintegrating as poorer farmers flee ever-increasing demands for forced labour and money (Bosson 2007). A Karen villager in the hills adjacent to central Burma explained,

> Along the road down in the plains there used to be many villages, but the big villages have become small and the small villages have become forest. Many people have gone to the towns or come up here, because the SPDC demands so many taxes from them and forces them to do all kinds of labour. (KHRG 2005b)

An estimated one to three million people are internally displaced nationwide (see Bosson 2007, 8, 42, 54), villages continue to be destroyed and hundreds of new Karen refugees arrive in Thailand each month saying increased *Tatmadaw*

encroachment in their home areas has made survival impossible. The humanitarian crisis cries out for international help, but how can outside actors engage with the context already described?

Relief and development

Relief and development aid to Burma takes on two (often contentious) forms: assistance 'via Rangoon' (via state spaces) and 'cross-border' assistance (via non-state spaces, sometimes partly controlled by opposition groups). The former is implemented by engaging the state to gain access to the people, the latter by circumventing the state to access the people.

'Engage the state to access the people' is the norm among UN agencies, big international NGOs, and most governments. Mandates prohibit many of them from operating any other way, and there is no other way to reach some areas of central Burma. This requires a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the military regime, in which aid agencies agree to comply with restrictions which the junta regularly alters. At present restrictions include hiring only junta-approved staff, travelling only where and when they allow, working only with state-sanctioned organisations, and being accompanied by 'Liaison Officers' from Military Intelligence in the field (at the agency's expense). Agencies complain that they are frequently denied access to their project sites for monitoring, and are sometimes forced to hand over resources to state-controlled entities who may or may not deliver. Some, including Médécins Sans Frontières (MSF)-France and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have withdrawn or slashed operations, stating that the restrictions make it impossible to work according to their minimum standards (MSF 2006, ICRC 2006). The UN Global Fund to combat malaria, tuberculosis and HIV withdrew its 98.4 million dollar project in 2005 on this basis, but donors quickly rallied to replace it with the '3D (three diseases) Fund', raising almost 100 million dollars in aid without any specific plan of how it could be efficiently spent on the ground (Lynch 2006). Throughout 2007, the SPDC increased restrictions on humanitarian access and local hiring, and in March 2008 new restrictions decreed that agencies could only implement rural HIV programmes with the Ministry of Health (Cho 2008b), possibly aiming to divert 3D Fund money into state coffers.

Accounts from local people suggest that despite the restrictions some projects have managed to achieve positive results on issues like local water supply and small clinics; generally this has occurred when agencies have 'scaled down' to local level, engaging the population directly in places where local authorities are relatively cooperative. Unfortunately, large agencies often find it difficult to break up large budgets into many small local projects which require extensive local capacity building and monitoring. Meanwhile, larger-scale national level projects have regularly been implicated in land confiscation and forced labour, like the UN-funded Asia Highway, the UNDP-supported Loikaw-Aungban railway, and most other infrastructure projects (KHRG 2007a);[20] while internationally funded vaccination

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[20]State media reported in 1993 that 'over 800,000 farmers' had 'contributed labour' on the Loikaw-Aungban railway, admitted that 'people are dying every day', and noted UN support (KHRG 1994). UNDP refused to comment on its involvement, but was soon ordered by donor countries on its Board of Governors to restrict its Burma interventions to local water and health projects, with no major infrastructure. Since then UNDP Rangoon has lobbied for a resumption of infrastructure aid, falsely claiming that it was stopped by Western economic sanctions imposed much later; see for example UNDP Executive Board (1999).

and health projects implemented by SPDC ministries have involved coercion, extortion, and intimidation, not to mention the 'leakage' of resources common to such projects worldwide (KHRG 2007a). Unfortunately, most agencies gloss over these issues because it could affect operations and funding if such information went public (Terry 2002, 229), while SPDC restrictions block independent investigations by keeping other actors away from project sites. Instead, the overarching problem is recast as one of poverty, and agencies call for increased foreign investment and aid and 'humanitarian access' to larger areas of the country (see Refugees International 2008), without much consideration of the political context.

Agencies claim that despite the restrictions, their aid observes the core humanitarian principles of being 'neutral', 'impartial', and 'apolitical'.[21] Griffiths *et al.* (1995, 78) define humanitarian impartiality as 'provision of relief solely on the basis of need' and neutrality as 'refusal to take sides in a conflict'. 'Apolitical' aid is supposed to be politically neutral, suggesting that it can occur with no political ramifications. Handcuffed by their MOUs with the regime, however, agencies restrict their operations to state-controlled spaces, thereby contravening neutrality and impartiality. To be 'apolitical', agencies often downplay or ignore the political context and possible political ramifications, turn a blind eye to human rights abuses, or deny aid to those perceived to have any direct role in conflict or politics (thereby contravening 'impartiality'). In Burma, many international agencies refuse to work in non-state spaces because resistance forces are active there, yet have no qualms about working in state spaces where the *Tatmadaw* accompanies and interferes with their operations. This is sometimes rationalised by accepting conditions on one's operations, then claiming neutrality and impartiality *within* those limits, though the limits themselves violate humanitarian principles. For example, agencies accept conditions limiting where they can deliver aid, then claim impartiality of distribution among that population. The biased application of humanitarian principles has led writers worldwide to question their applicability in intrastate conflicts, and to call for acknowledgement that all humanitarian assistance is political and cannot be neutral (Barnett 2001, 270, Schafer 2002, 31). Operating under a Memorandum of Understanding with the state in a place where most people are opposed to the state may be necessary in a humanitarian sense, but it is certainly *not* neutral or apolitical, and presenting it as such creates a blindness to its real impacts. Interventions can still be beneficial, but only by discarding the fantasy of neutral, apolitical aid can we see potential pitfalls and adapt accordingly.

In Lesotho, James Ferguson documented how the 'development apparatus' acts as 'an "anti-politics machine", depoliticising everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power' (1994, xv). In Burma, the call for greater 'humanitarian access' by foreign agencies operating under MOUs equates to a call for expansion of state spaces, because they cannot or will not operate elsewhere. It therefore requires expanding the state's reach and hold over people who, as shown earlier, are struggling to remain beyond that

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[21]See *Joint Principles of Operation of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) Providing Humanitarian Assistance in Burma/Myanmar, June 2000* [online], agreed by international agencies in Rangoon. Available from: http://burmalibrary.org/docs3/ Joint_Principles_of_Operation.htm. [Accessed 11 April 2008]. Ironically, this document includes several principles, such as freedom of access and hiring, which directly contradict their MOUs.

reach. Ferguson argues further that agencies need to move large sums of money, which is most easily done through 'standardised "development" packages'; 'It thus suits the agencies to portray developing countries in terms that make them suitable targets for such packages. It is not surprising, therefore, that the "country profiles" on which the agencies base their interventions frequently bear little or no relation to economic and social realities' (Ferguson 1994, 176). Former MSF coordinator Fiona Terry (2002, 226) agrees, noting that one way humanitarian workers deal with the frustrations of working in intractable situations is 'reality distortion' to create 'false illusions of success'. This can include self-deception that humanitarian neutrality, apolitical aid and impartiality are possible in a context like Burma, or project plans that assume the government will act in the public interest despite evidence to the contrary. In Rangoon, Skidmore (2004, 43–6) has described how fear, paranoia and self-censorship tend to infect even expatriates who have little to fear from the regime. In combination with pressures to 'distort reality' when handcuffed by restrictive MOUs, this helps explain the improbable success stories coming from some international agencies, such as claims following Cyclone Nargis.

Cyclone Nargis, which left 140,000 dead or missing and affected an estimated 2.4 million people in the Irrawaddy Delta and other coastal areas in May 2008 (Human Rights Watch 2008), brought out some of these issues. The Delta is half Karen and half Burman, and has been a site of tension since an abortive Karen uprising in 1993 led to intensified state repression and movement restrictions that still apply. The SPDC knew the cyclone was approaching but gave no warning, then in the aftermath it blocked international aid and observers, insisting that any aid supplies be routed through the *Tatmadaw* (Associated Press 2008). Days after the cyclone the World Food Programme (WFP) admitted that the military had confiscated an entire food shipment (Reuters 2008, Mydans and Anon 2008), but the 'anti-politics machine' soon kicked into gear and cries of obstructionism were replaced with calls for funding backed by reports of success. Within two weeks, while admitting that the food shipment had not reappeared and that negotiations had not allowed for on-the-ground monitoring, WFP was nonetheless claiming to have reached 250,000 people with food aid (Solomon 2008). By August, humanitarian agencies were lauding the 'unprecedented' cooperation and access granted by the SPDC and the success of their efforts, while nonetheless acknowledging that the SPDC had maintained the suffocating restrictions in their nationwide MOUs (Refugees International 2008, Head 2009). Meanwhile, Burmese citizens who had tried to deliver aid without giving it to the *Tatmadaw* were being sentenced to prison terms (Awzar Thi 2009, BBC 2008, Yeni 2008, Cho 2008a) and refugees escaping cyclone-hit areas were reporting that the *Tatmadaw* was controlling and delaying relief distribution and withholding supplies specifically from Karen communities (KHRG 2008).

Distortions also include representations of Karen and other non-Burman villagers as people living in 'border areas', though most of them live closer to the central plains than to any border. This terminology prevails in the state's 'Programme for the Development of Border Areas and National Races', among others, and is also common in relief and development agency jargon, differentiating events 'in Burma' (i.e. state spaces) from events in 'border areas', which sound remote and peripheral (and, significantly, where international agencies operating under MOUs are denied access). Ironically, those favouring this language would probably insist that Karen villagers are 'Burmese' citizens subject to the Burmese state, a double standard that validates Burmese authority over people like the Karen

while simultaneously categorising them as marginal quasi-foreigners 'on the border'. Even agencies working with refugees in Thailand, though not bound by SPDC restrictions, consistently use this terminology.[22] In Thailand, Buadaeng describes how foreign donors have tried to 'reduce the nationalist content of the curriculum' in Karen refugee camp schools, insisting that 'any Karen history suggesting antagonistic relations with the Burmans be glossed over' (2007, 90). This extremely political intervention has been performed in order to declare educational aid to the camps 'apolitical'.

Ongoing calls for 'humanitarian access' via Rangoon to Karen and other internally displaced people (IDPs) are based largely on moral imperatives laid out in the UN-adopted Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.[23] These frame internal displacement as a spatial phenomenon to be resolved by 'emplacement' (Malkki 1995, 515) – fixing people to locations where they can be controlled and cared for by a sovereign state with outside help. In Burma this ignores the role of displacement as a state-evasion strategy and threatens to undermine the survival of the very people it aims to help (Malseed 2006). The negative effects of aid interventions on IDPs and villagers in state–society conflicts when their multiple (including political) identities and resistance strategies are ignored has been well documented in the Sudan (Duffield 2002), the Peruvian Andes (Stepputat and Sørensen 2001), Colombia (Fagen *et al.* 2003), Thailand and Laos (McCaskill 1997, 42–6), Lesotho (Ferguson 1994), Rwanda (Terry 2002), and elsewhere.

The question of relief to forced relocation sites incorporates many of the above issues. These are garrisoned state spaces where the *Tatmadaw* tries to gather and confine hill people from non-state spaces, and then uses them for forced labour. The state provides no food or medical aid so people starve, creating a clear need for relief, and foreign agencies in Rangoon have been requesting access for relief aid (South 2006). But here it is important to understand how such sites operate and fit within villagers' strategies. Many Karen villagers have lived in such sites repeatedly and know the conditions there, so they only go if it is impossible to evade the intense military presence around their home villages. Most sites last only a year or two because when people begin to starve, the commanders, not wanting hundreds of corpses on their hands, relax movement restrictions so people can forage. One by one, families escape and return to their home areas, by which time the *Tatmadaw* unit that displaced them may have rotated out of the area, leaving them to re-establish their village or survive in hiding nearby. People use the relocation site as a temporary refuge to outwait the *Tatmadaw* occupation of their village until they can escape and return home. The best thing about these sites is their very lack of sustainability. As a Karen human rights researcher described in Toungoo district,

> They forced the villagers to move to the relocation site many times. They forced them to relocate one time in 1991. Then they forced them again in 1997. They went for a month and then they were allowed to go back and stay in their own villages. In 1998 they were forced to stay until now. The soldiers haven't allowed them to come back.... Recently, they made many relocations in the Leit Tho area, but it didn't work. The villagers went to stay for a while, but then they ran back and disappeared. (KHRG 2000, 18)

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[22]Witnessed through author's participation in UN/NGO meetings in Thailand from 1992–2007.
[23]Available from: http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html [Accessed 11 April 2008].

Aid to these sites enables the *Tatmadaw* to confine people without allowing them to forage or escape, and provides incentive to create more such sites because aid supplies can be stolen or extorted from beneficiaries. Aid can actually undermine the villagers' possibility of escape and their strategies to evade state predation. In this context, ignoring 'politics' creates blindness to the actual impacts of relief. On the other hand, food slipped through the back fence without the *Tatmadaw*'s knowledge prevents starvation without reducing the villagers' options; they can hide the food, feign hunger, and plead for a right to forage. This can and has been done successfully in many cases. The line between beneficial and harmful aid is seldom clear, but one important consideration is whether it increases people's options – like food slipped through the fence – or reduces them, like formal aid to relocation sites. Both are political, neither is neutral. In this context, any form of action or inaction brings the outside actor into the state–society conflict.

This brings us to the second broad category of intervention, 'circumvent the state to engage the people'. This is also political and partisan, often unabashedly so. In Burma, much of this takes the form of cross-border aid from neighbouring countries, such as relief and medical aid to help displaced villagers in non-state spaces to survive in hiding rather than flee across the border to become refugees.[24] Delivering such aid is covert and dangerous, often requiring night marches through heavily landmined mountains with armed resistance forces as escorts. While distinguishing civilians from combatants, it accepts civilian links to armed groups as legitimate survival strategies and delivers aid based on need rather than political identity. Some international donors refuse to fund cross-border aid because some of it might be diverted to resistance forces or people with political links, so most cross-border aid is under-resourced, supplied only sporadically and in small quantities by local organisations. Forced to be efficient, it is run by villagers and refugees themselves and responds to needs expressed by beneficiaries. This bolsters their strategies and broadens their options, leaving them the decision to evade or submit, remain or flee. As with aid via Rangoon, the most positive results tend to come from those initiatives that are locally designed and controlled.

Human rights interventions

If the voices of villagers are to influence political and aid processes, human rights work has its own role to play in recognising their agency. To this end, the Karen Human Rights Group organises what it calls 'human rights workshops' in villages. Instead of beginning from international human rights norms, these workshops probe villagers' perceptions on human rights and their experiences. Next, participants are asked to discuss the strategies they already employ to prevent, avoid, mitigate, and resist the injustices they have identified. Initially many people respond, 'we can't do anything, we're helpless' – which they also tell the military, as a defence strategy, and relief and human rights workers who expect them to fill that role. When asked to recount how they have responded to specific problems, however, strategies begin to emerge. These are compared with strategies used in other villages, and people are asked to brainstorm on ways to improve them. These can be entirely new or very small enhancements to

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[24]Groups providing such aid include Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD), Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), Backpack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT), and Free Burma Rangers (FBR).

strategies they already employ – for example, an inter-village agreement on mutual support with food or shelter when one village has been attacked, assignments of rotating responsibilities for village guard patrols, or arrangements between village heads to always confront SPDC officers as a group. The results are entirely dependent on the participants' ideas and on limitations or opportunities present in the local context. This is not 'community organising' but simply encouraging local discussion to strengthen the strategies people are already employing. Over time, enhancements lead to further discussion and further enhancements, a process which quickly becomes difficult for any armed actor to stop or control. The 'Gher Der' village leaders mentioned earlier had attended these workshops, but the 'Gher Der' idea was entirely their own. Many villages and displaced people are requesting these workshops, which are unabashedly political and partisan within the state–society conflict.

Conclusion

A fresh perspective emerges by examining repression through people's responses and resistance. Conventional armed conflicts become broader state–society conflicts, displacement takes on shapes that defy international assumptions, and responses that appear to an uninformed observer as compliance or panic reveal sublayers of resistance and well-developed strategies. From this perspective, 'ethnic' conflicts in Burma are not simply combat between armed actors, but broader struggles pitting a predatory state against both rural and urban people. While the state seeks to enforce territorial sovereignty and totalitarian control, people disobey and resist to retain control over lives and livelihoods, develop mutual support networks and a 'supportive subculture'. They are the central actors in this struggle while the armed groups, though important, are an extreme expression of it which is only feasible with civilian cooperation.

These struggles call for new ways to look at human rights, conflict, displacement, and other issues. This is not a call to replace modern states with localised sovereignty, but for the voices of villagers to be heard on sovereignty and its encroachments on their lives and their subsistence ethic. This voice speaks clearly through their actions and their resistance. To ignore it is to undermine their aspirations while legitimising the will to power of others. They are not bystanders to their context: their role is political, they are partisan, and they have ideas about the future. Rather than victims, they need to be accepted as agents of change, political actors; otherwise, outside intervention can support state efforts to cast them as subjects of administration, dehumanised, apolitical, *homo sacer*. Some may argue that acknowledging villagers' struggles encourages the state to target them, or erodes their status as 'civilians'; but they are targeted regardless, as any villager will tell you. The alternative of falsely denying their struggle defies their wishes, demeans their existence and empowers the state.

Many outsiders continue to claim expert prescience of 'solutions' or 'ways forward' – usually without ever discussing these with a villager.[25] The discussion above on outside intervention is motivated by concern that pretensions to neutrality, impartiality, or apolitical intervention in a context like Burma can lead to responses

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[25]See for example Refugees International (2008), which recommended massive increases in aid based on interviews with 'the staff of over forty humanitarian organisations' but none with civilians on the ground; or International Crisis Group (2004), which outlines the 'way forward' without consulting rural villagers.

that are partisan, non-neutral and politically favour the state. Blindness to history, civilians' political identities, political context and ramifications almost ensures that harm will be done, and political ramifications will be magnified. This can occur through relief and development projects, but also through human rights work or any intervention.

This paper does not oppose humanitarian aid or the calls for increased humanitarian access through Rangoon. But agencies should realise that in such a repressive context, doing more good than harm requires scaling down to local level, not the usually preferred scaling-up to national level. It requires recognition of the political ramifications of aid and the impossibility of complete neutrality. Examples of such honesty include the ICRC's recent statement on Burma's humanitarian situation (2007). As MSF-France and ICRC have recognised, the most courageous action sometimes takes the form of inaction, i.e. withdrawal (Brauman 1998, 192, Terry 2002). Terry (2002, 242) argues that a primary need is to create a

> humanitarian space in which the spirit of humanitarian operations will be respected. Such a space entails the freedom to forge a relationship with the people we are there to help – to listen to their stories and discuss their predicament as the first step to really respecting their dignity. Without this connection, we reduce human beings to their biological state, defined and represented by what they lack to stay alive.

Karen villagers and others in Burma certainly deserve better, and when Burma's political situation eventually 'opens up', it can only be hoped that they will be in a position to impose their own vision of the future.

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