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Myanmar/Thailand: Nowhere to run

Today Amnesty International expressed grave concern about recent attacks by the Myanmar army on a settlement of internally displaced Karen civilians. In late November the army raided Htee Wah Doh, just across the border from Thailand, burning and looting houses, a hospital, and a school, and arresting 15 Karen villagers.

The previous month, 63 Karen asylum-seekers took shelter in Htee Wah Doh after being forcibly returned to Myanmar by the Royal Thai Army. They joined other internally displaced Karens who were living there temporarily.

"Both the Myanmar and Thai governments are at fault. These people should never have been sent back to Myanmar in the first place, and the Myanmar army should have protected these internally displaced people rather than attacked them," Amnesty International said. This is a clear case of *refoulement* by the Thai authorities, which is in violation of international customary law.

After the attack, over 700 Karen civilians fled to Halockanee, a nearby area controlled by the New Mon State Party (NMSP), an ethnic minority armed opposition group who agreed a cease-fire with the Myanmar government in 1995. Yesterday, Myanmar's military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), gave the Karen civilians in Halockanee the choice of remaining near Htee Wah Doh or going to Three Pagoda's Pass, an area further north controlled by the SPDC. The Thai authorities have refused to allow them to re-enter Thailand.

"Neither option is secure for these people, who are literally caught between two countries, with nowhere safe to go. It is imperative that the Thai Government immediately allow them to return and to enter a Karen refugee camp for protection," Amnesty International said.

Of the 15 people who were arrested, some were interrogated and others were forced to act as porters for the army. Most of them either escaped or were released, but several are still missing amid fears for their safety. One member of the group was later found with a bullet wound in his leg, which was eventually amputated.

The Myanmar army attack on Htee Wah Doh was reportedly provoked by the presence of a Mon armed group who had broken away from the NMSP and started fighting against government forces. They had set up a base close to Htee Wah Doh, resulting in increased SPDC troop presence in the area.

The group of 63 Karen asylum-seekers had crossed the border at Kanchanaburi Province, western Thailand on 25 October, but the 9th Infantry Division of the Royal Thai Army decided to send them back without proper consultation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In spite of the fact that this group had fled because they had been forcibly relocated by the Myanmar army, the Thai army claimed that they should not be allowed to remain in Thailand because they were not "fleeing fighting". However, reliable reports indicate that they were fleeing from serious human rights violations, including forced labour and relocation.

Background

Over 120,000 Karen and Karenni refugees from Myanmar are currently living in camps in Thailand near the Myanmar border. Some 100,000

Shan refugees, another Myanmar ethnic minority group, are not allowed into camps by the Thai authorities.

For the last several decades Thailand has been host to hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries. In general they have shown tolerance and compassion in allowing most of them to stay until a durable solution was found for them. However on several occasions in the past they have forcibly returned refugees from Myanmar and Cambodia.

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