

# The Mon Forum

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## Contents

### News:

- (1) Corruption enables illegal logging in Karen State
- (2) Mon State authorities accepting bribes in exchange for motorbike licenses
- (3) Landowners forced to donate to Cyclone victims, worry about the funds' destinations
- (4) Monasteries forced to bribe officials in ongoing attempt to control their land
- (5) Junta plans to extend agricultural land
- (6) Pirated CD's can be sold if authorities are bribed

### Commentary:

- (1) Another bloody month
- (2) Broken communities: Just what the junta wants

### Report:

Without a choice:  
Increased economic  
migration from Mon State  
to Thailand

## Some Acronyms in This Issue

- SPDC - State Peace and  
Development Council,  
KNU - Karen National Union  
DKBA- Democratic Karen  
Buddhist Army  
NMSP - New Mon State Party  
LIB - Light Infantry Battalion  
IB - Infantry Battalion  
PDC - Peace and Development  
Council  
MNLA - Mon National Liberation  
Army

## News

### Corruption enables illegal logging in Karen State

HURFOM, Three Pagodas Pass/Karen State, September 12, 2008

Corruption continues to make illegal logging possible in the Three Pagoda Pass area, on the Thai-Burma border. Competition has heated up over the last sixteen years as timber stands have declined, as have attempts to profit off the declining industry.

Although with declining activity, Three Pagodas Pass is still an important place for the manufacture and export of wood products to Thailand. Sixty truckloads of furniture and other wood products travel through Three Pagoda Pass into Thailand every month, says Nai Maut, a resident of Three Pagoda Pass who works as a logger, wood worker and truck driver. The Irrawaddy, in a recent article, reports a higher number, estimating the cross-border trade to be one hundred truckloads per month.

Seventy-five percent of forestland in Mon and Karen states has already been logged. Access to remaining harvestable areas remains strictly controlled, and timber companies must pre-pay ethnic armed groups or the SPDC. "We pre-pay both the SPDC and ethnic forces like the Karen National Union (KNU). If we do not pay, the KNU will seal off the forest for logging – you can only log in a place you've paid for," said Nai Maut, adding, "We pay the KNU by the ton – 100,000 baht for about fifty tons of wood." If a logging



Ironwood, logged in the Three Pagodas Pass area

## Another bloody month

September is a month with a bloody history in Burma. September 1988 saw thousands participate in pro-democracy demonstrations, until the military regime – then called the State Law and Order Restoration Council – responded with overwhelming force, killing at least three thousand people.

September 2007 saw more protests, and violent responses. Beginning in August, Buddhist monks and supporters took to the streets throughout Burma. The regime responded brutally – police, soldiers and armed regime-supported civilian thugs crushed the demonstrations. Monks and civilians were beaten and shot, monasteries were ransacked and scores of people were tortured and detained.

September 2008 has been quiet, but only because people are afraid, and the regime continues to bloody its hands every day. The people of Burma have sought help from the international community, especially the United Nations Security Council. But the UN and the international community have failed to end the plight of Burmese people. The regime stays strong, and it is clear that democracy activists, ethnic minorities and other Burmese people will continue to suffer in an oppressive system.

company harvests more, it pays extra. If less is cut, the KNU will refund some of the initial payment, although Nai Maut says this rarely happens.

Purchasing logging access is not, however, the only way armed groups profit off illegal logging in the area. Trucks transporting timber must pass through an extensive series of checkpoints, operated by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the Karen Peace Front (KPF), the KNU, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the SPDC.

“I’ve worked as a logger in Three Pagodas Pass since 1992, and know a lot about corruption in armed ethnic groups and the army. We have to pay a different amount at each checkpoint, depending on the type and amount of timber we are transporting. We have to pass through six or seven checkpoints to get from the forest to Three Pagoda pass, and each time they charge per vehicle – a four wheeled car costs between 500 to 1,000 baht, a ten wheel truck between 3,000 to 5,000 baht,” said Nai Nyunt, a logger from the area. KNU checkpoints charge by the ton, and the type of timber; one ton of ironwood costs 2,000 baht, a ton of teak 7,000.

“We have to pay the authorities and armed groups at small check-points run by the DKBA, the KPF and SPDC authorities like police, metro police, people’s militia forces and other kinds of authorities founded by military regime. From Chaung Zone to Three Pagodas Pass, we have to pass through fourteen gates, each charging between 1,000 to 1,500 baht per ten

wheeled truck and 500 to 700 baht per four wheeled car,” said Nai Maut.

From Magata, fifteen kilometres from Three Pagodas Pass, a single ten-wheeled truck of hard wood must pay 10,000 to 15,000 baht to the army, KPF and DKBA each, as well as 3,500 baht per tone of teak and 2,000 to 3,000 baht per ton of ironwood to the KNU. These fees are not set in stone, said the loggers, and depend on who is working the checkpoints.

The NMSP, however, cannot levy taxes on timber from Magata because it does not control the area, and would risk conflict with Karen groups. Though not explicitly about logging, district level NMSP and KPF authorities disagreed about territorial claims as recently as two years ago, and the NMSP and KNU engaged in armed clashes over control of Three Pagodas Pass in 1989. The NMSP can now only tax logging in the Chaung Zone area, seven kilometres from Three Pagodas Pass, where there are few remaining stands of teak and ironwood. Other tree species remain, and the NMSP is able to levy taxes of 700 to 2,000 baht per ton.

Timber harvested from the Three Pagodas Pass area is processed into furniture and other wood products for export to Thailand. In order to cross the border, Thad Zin Tun, commander of Light Infantry battalion No. 20, must be paid 35,000 to 55,000 baht per ten-wheeled truck. This nets him a monthly small fortune, in a place where the average income hovers around twenty five hundred baht. Officially, the border has

## News

been closed since the DKBA abducted two Thai policemen in 2006.

Though logging activity has declined in the Thai-Burma border area, elsewhere in Burma timber continues to be extracted at an astonishing rate. Global Witness, an international NGO focused on natural resource exploitation in conflict areas, estimates that timber is the SPDC's second largest source of foreign exchange, and growing. Though officially restricted by the Forest Law of 1992, trade in forest products netted the SPDC \$427.81 million USD in 2004-2005 alone.

### Mon State authorities accepting bribes in exchange for motorbike licenses

HURFOM, Moulmein, September 15, 2008

Authorities of Mon State's Road Transport Administration Department (RTAD) are accepting bribes in exchange for licensing illegally imported motorcycles, report bike owners in Moulmein. Officers of RTAD, "Ka-Nya-Na" in Burmese, began accepting bribes at the start of September and, depending on the officer, are asking between 50,000 and 300,000 kyat.

Drivers caught at frequent checkpoints face heavy fines if their bikes are unlicensed. The bribe costs are significant, placing people who need to drive frequently, especially business owners and transportation workers, in a difficult catch-22.

"The size of the license fee depends on how much the officers want. For my bike's licenses, I arranged it through an agent and both license and agent fees cost 200,000 kyat. That's my income for four months, but there is no choice," said Ko Tun Oo, 35, a shopkeeper who works inside the Moulmein's bus station.

Another source reported that the licenses were only available for a short time; the Moulmein RTAD office stopped issuing licenses on September 9<sup>th</sup>, forcing bike owners to seek licenses from township offices. Licenses from these offices are usually more expensive, says Thar Gyi, a technology student from Thaton Township studying in Moulmein. "One of my friends had to get his motorbike licenses Thaton Township, and it cost him about 250,000 kyat for the agent and license fees."

Other sources report the authorities in Chaung Zone Township also stopped issuing licenses after two

weeks, while licenses are still available in Thaton and Ye Townships. The recent wave of licensing follows an earlier batch of licenses, issued in July 2008.

Most people purchase the licenses through agents with connections to RTAD. "People can try by themselves without the assistance of the agent, but they have to wait many days to get the licenses," said the student, adding, "If they try by themselves, they cannot be sure the license will be issued. So people apply through the agents who have close relationships with the Road Transport Administration authority."

"I think the authorities increased the cost of the motorbike licenses due to the large numbers of illegal bikes imported from neighboring countries like Thailand. Everyday, about one hundred to one hundred and fifty motorbikes cross the border from Mae Sot in Thailand into Karen State. The bikes cross the border by bribing Burmese army officers and ethnic armed forces," reports source in Moulmein who wishes to remain anonymous.

Illegally importing a bike at Three Pagoda Pass requires a bribe of at least 10,000 kyat, reports a source in Karen State, which is still cheaper than paying official taxes to the SPDC.

### Landowners forced to donate to Cyclone victims, worry about the funds' destinations

HURFOM, Mudon/Thanbyuzayat, Sept 13, 2008

Authorities in Mudon and Thanbyuzayat Townships are collecting another round of forced donations for Cyclone Nargis victims, report villagers, who express suspicion about the funds' actual destinations.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, U Kyaw Kyaw Aung, chairman of the Mudon Peace and Development Council, instructed the township's Forest and Land Records departments to collect 3,000 to 5,000 kyat from landowners in the area.

"This time they forced us to donate 3,000 kyat – some land owners had to pay 5,000 kyat, depending on the size of their land," said a farmer in the area who wished to remain anonymous.

"We are happy to donate as much as we can, but we don't like being forced by the authorities," said Nai

Yae, a 50 year-old villager from Mudon, who was ordered to donate 3,000 kyat.

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, the land record department and troops collected from rubber plantation owners in Kamawet village. The collection marks the fourth time the authorities have issued such a donation order in Kamawet.

According to another source close to the township's land record department, the authorities have collected "donations" from five hundred landowners in Mudon. In Thanbyuzayat Township, headmen called for cash donations. "The township authorities already did this in June, and we donated cash and clothes," said a local source.

"In my view, the government shouldn't force us to make donations for the victims," added Ko Naing, another source from Thanbyuzayat. "We would like to donate by ourselves as much as we can, but the people don't trust the authorities to be honest with the moneyf."

## **Monasteries forced to bribe officials in ongoing attempt to control their land**

IMNA, Thanbyuzayat, September 19, 2008

Monks are being forced to bribe SPDC authorities in Mon State in order to gain access to land for monasteries. The monks seek to make the monastery's land grant official, in the hope that doing so will avoid confiscation by the army.

According to a senior monk from a monastery in Kyonekaroat village, Thanbyuzayat Township, his monastery had to pay 70,000 kyat to get a signature from the chairman of the Mon State Peace and Development Council in Moulmein.

The monk said that, despite the payment, the chairman – who is a retired army major – has delayed signing. The struggle for monastery land has been protracted, and the monk reports that they monastery made a formal application under a senior monk, who has since died.

"We applied last November and were told by the higher ups in the Religious Affairs Department that we did not need to pay bribes at the state level. But given the delay in the arrival of the proposal we gave money to the vice chairman of the Religious Affairs Department to have the proposal passed," said the monk.

The monastery then went to the Moulmein District Peace and Development Council (DPDC) and then back to the Religious Affairs Department in Mon State.

It is not clear whether the proposal will be cleared, the monk added.

To get Buddhist land, the monasteries need to negotiate with the Village Peace and Development Council, Township Peace and Development Council, Land-surveying Department and DPDC, before the proposal can even reach the state level. The state must then report to the central office of the Religious Affair Department (RAD) in Kabaraye.

A monk who used to stay in Rangoon said Kabaraye center decides issues relating to monk, such as criminal trials and land problems. On land cases, the monks have to go to the officers in Kabaraye, who tell the monks where to go and how much to bribe. Only then to the RAD officers help.

According to monk, other monasteries are watching what happens to monastery in Kyonekaroat village. If Kyonekaroat monastery gets what it wants, other monasteries will follow suit.

## **Junta plans to extend agricultural land**

IMNA, Mon State, Sep 15, 2008

The Burmese Army Southeast Command plans to extend agricultural land by up to one million acres in Mon State, says the government controlled newspaper *The New Light of Myanmar*.

The Southeast Command Commander Maj-Gen Thet Naing Win has told the Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS), Myanmar Land-surveying Department and Irrigation Department to try hard to complete the project.

According to a former MAS manager, Mon State increased arable land by seven hundred thousand acres in 2008, six hundred thousand acres of which was cultivated.

"It is impossible to reach the target in a year," the former MAS manager said. "It is difficult to fulfill the target, including the rainy season and summer paddy. Mudon and Kyaikmayaw Township have already extended paddy lands." He said that they could extend paddy field in deep water fields and in some land in Kyaikmayaw.

The authorities reported to senior officers that two hundred thousand acres was cultivated this summer, well below official government targets, because it is difficult to get water from dams and canals.



## News



**An irrigation cannel from Win-pha-non Dam, Mudon Township**

Kyaikmayaw could cultivate more summer paddy than other townships because it gets water resources from Gying and Attaran Rivers. Farmers in Thaton Township can also get small amounts of water from a nearby dam.

But according to a farmer from Winphanon Dam area, about two hundred acres around the dam site at Winphanon and fields around Kataik Dam in Paung were damaged by building, digging the creek and flood waters from the dam.

The government plans to get six hundred thousand baskets of paddy in Mudon, two hundred thousand in Thanbyuzayat and Ye Townships, four hundred thousand in Chaung Zone and three hundred thousand in Kyaikmayaw. It is also pushing for planting paddy in Shwe War Tun, Manor thukha and Shwe tasoat to harvest in time for two crops a season.

“Most farmers didn’t grow what they said they would. We grow Kyaikgyi paddy over one hundred and forty days because it gives good yield,” said a farmer from Young-doung village, Mudon.

On the other hand, the district authorities had ordered farmers to grow a third crop in a year and two crops a season since 1993 as a government policy.

According to government statistics, Burma has about 16.434 million acres of arable land and about 3.4 million acres of summer paddy.

## Pirated CD's can be sold if authorities are bribed

IMNA, Rangoon, September 2, 2008

SPDC authorities have been cracking down on the sale of pirated media in Rangoon, unless vendors pay bribes.

The seizures were made by policemen, Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) and market authorities from August 29<sup>th</sup> until September 2<sup>nd</sup>, in the Nadar Wun market festival.

Sellers were able to sell pirated CD's freely if they paid about 30,000 kyat a day to the authorities. “Ko An and A Tay Lay, who sent the pirated CD's to me, were not affected and not put in jail even though the authorities caught them with the CD's because they paid up. I invested 60,000 kyat in the business, that's why I could not pay tax,” said a woman who sells CD's at the Bayinnaung traffic point. Her husband's wares were also seized in Nandar Wun market.

Even though some people were released after paying bribes and the cases were closed, her husband is still detained, she said, adding that they sell the pirated CD's for survival. She felt it was not a big enough crime to merit a jail term.



**A video CDs shop in Moulmein**

## Report

# Without a choice: Increased economic migration from Mon State to Thailand

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## I. Introduction

Thailand is home to an estimated 1.2 million migrant workers from Burma, though the percentage of this number made up of ethnic Mon has never been surveyed. If Mahachai, in southern Thailand, is any indicator, the number should be quite large, for the city is home to 400,000 Mon workers. The migration of workers from Mon state is not a constant stream, and is affected by a variety of factors. Though not strictly seasonal as can be, for instance, the movement of undocumented Latino agricultural workers in the United States, the number of workers crossing from Mon state is still affected by the seasons. Travel difficulties, as well as agricultural opportunities, associated with heavy rainfall mean that migration typically lulls during the rainy season, and rises through the cold and hot seasons until peaking during the forty-five day period following mid-April's Songkran festival.

Though one of Burma's smallest states, Mon State shares a relatively long border with Thailand. Much of this border is mountainous, making overland crossing into Thailand difficult, and doubly so during the rainy season. Few migrant workers, then, choose the overland path into Thailand; most opt to use the Zemi River, which flows from central Mon State, through the southern end of Karen State and into Thailand near Three Pagoda Pass.

During 2006 and 2007, the rainy period from June until the start of October saw an average of thirty to fifty people crossing via the Zemi River. Since June 2008, however, agents responsible for the transporting migrants, as well as sources within the New Mon State Party responsible for monitoring the Taa-dein checkpoint just ten kilometers from the Thai border, report that one hundred and fifty to two hundred people have been



Migrant workers attempting to enter Thailand via the Zemi River

crossing daily. This marks a drastic increase in migrant worker flows to Thailand, and the following report will attempt to document conditions in Mon State, especially in the last few months, that are responsible for the increase. Factors include Burma's deteriorating economy, as well human rights violations committed by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime, including travel restrictions, heavy taxation and extortion, land confiscation and forced labor.

## II. Economic factors contributing to increased economic migration

### A. Country-wide economic deterioration

Though Burma is blessed with abundant natural resources – it is water rich, home to fertile soil and large supplies of a mineral and energy deposits – it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Once considered the “rice bowl” of Asia, its economy has declined steadily since the sixties. The United Nations estimates that one in three children is malnourished and thirty percent of the population is below the poverty line. The

country as a whole ranks in the world's bottom twenty-five percent on the UN Development Program's Human Development Index. The International Monetary Fund, in turn, calculates inflation to be at forty percent for 2007, making it virtually impossible for the income of an average Burmese person to keep pace with the price of goods.

August 2007 also saw the SPDC mandate a five-fold increase in fuel prices, triggering both economic hardship and the country's largest mass demonstrations in decades. The Irrawaddy delta area was hit by Cyclone Nargis in April 2008, which, combined with regime mismanagement of disaster response,

saw 120,000 killed and 2.5 million in need of help. The cyclone also severely damaged at least twenty percent of Burma's rice producing land, triggering a rice shortage during a time when global rice supplies were already drastically inadequate. This further strained the budgets of families already spending, according to the UN, seventy percent of their income on food.



**A farmer on the Irrawaddy delta attempting to farm on land devastated by Cyclone Nargis**

## **B. Poor employment conditions in Mon State**

Mon State has very few industries that can employ large numbers of laborers, like construction or manufacturing. Urban areas are rife with unemployment, where the lack of industry means most people rely on traditional family businesses, like selling groceries, weaving or sewing. Life is even more difficult for the third of Mon State's population engaged in agricultural activities, which can be highly vulnerable to the wild caprices of both the weather and SPDC economic and military policy. Mon State's primary agricultural sectors – rice and rubber cultivation, employ relatively few people per acre. People also rely on animal husbandry and fish farming, as well as cultivation of smaller crops like beans, vegetables, fruit or beetle nut. Some also turn to hunting, gathering forest products or employment in Mon State's rapidly declining logging industry.

It is especially difficult for youth in rural areas to find employment, as they must compete for limited agricultural space and resources. A farmer with five children, for instance, may eek out survival for his family with ten acres of land. But as the children mature and marry, that "legacy" land quickly becomes insufficient. The families of two children can, perhaps, survive on the family homestead; the other three must seek out new work.

Though the SPDC officially ended its "Burmese Way to Socialism," subsequent attempts to open the country and create a market economy have been unsuccessful. Foreign investors tend to be reluctant to brave an uncertain political situation, rampant corruption, or the domestic costs related to strict economic sanctions enforced by major powers like the United States and European Union.

Women face particularly high rates of unemployment, and are ushered towards traditional modes of domestic employment. "Most women in our village have no occupation because traditionally their jobs are domestic housework, not income generation," says Nai Chit, 24, from Kaw Dut village, in Ye Township, southern Mon State. Most landowners and employers assume that only men are capable of the often backbreaking manual labor that characterizes typical rural employment. Women are able to find some seasonal agricultural work, such as planting rice paddy in the rainy the rainy season, harvesting paddy during November and December or collecting rubber sap during the hot season.

Mon State is also characterized by severe underemployment, and most wages fail to keep abreast of inflation. Local Burmese economists estimate that an average family of fives requires a monthly income of 80,000 kyat, about \$65 US dollars, assuming \$1 equals 1,200 kyat. A typical professional worker, teacher, university professor or government official makes less that 10,000 kyat a month. A laborer on a paddy farm in Mon



State can expect to earn about 3,000 kyat a day, while a tri-shaw driver or laborer at boat, car or other transport stations can earn a maximum of 4,000 kyat for a full twelve-hour workday. Though ostensibly a higher daily income than white-collar workers like government officials, the income of most residents still falls well short because few people can find consistent daily work. Women employed outside the home face similar problems, but due to discrimination can expect to earn just 2,000 kyat a day.

Though many families number between five to eight people, and can therefore pool income, it is typically only adult men that are able to find stable employment and families struggle to cover the costs of daily needs like food. Though current economic difficulties are not new, the economic situation has deteriorated as inflation has risen, bringing many families to the tipping point. With low daily incomes, many poor and unemployed families cannot afford to buy even basic foods such as rice, fish-paste, salt, chili, cooking oil, meats and vegetables.

As the economic situation has deteriorated and inflation has increased, commodity prices have risen across Burma. A basket of mid-range quality rice, which cost 8,000 kyat last year, now costs between 11,000 and 12,000 in Mon State. Some families report being forced to subsist on boiled rice gruel, because they cannot afford to eat steamed rice and curry. Ma Myint Thein, a 30 year-old mother of two from near Moulmein, recently spoke to the toll taken by rising market prices. Interviewed in Three Pagodas Pass by a HURFOM field reporter, she described having to leave her two children with her mother while she sought employment in Thailand. The 1,000 kyat a day she earned as a seasonal farm worker was no longer sufficient to feed her family, and she lamented the rise in rice and vegetable prices over the last three months.

“Wages in my village are very low and we have to do hard labor all day – for twelve hours – just to earn 2,000 kyat,” added a migrant worker from Mudon Township, northern Mon State, employed in Mahachai’s fishing industry. “In Thailand, if we work for eight hours, we get 190 baht. I don’t want to work in paddy farms again. It is better that I send money back to my father and he can hire a laborer instead of me.”

### **III. Abuses by army and township authorities contributing to increased economic migration**

The SPDC preserves its hold on power by maintaining the second largest army in South East Asia. This presents serious problems for a government with little in the way of official revenue streams. The SPDC resolves its budget shortfall, in the case of the military, by instructing the armed forces to be “self-reliant,” giving officers and their troops carte blanche to raise money however they see fit.

Mon State, though one of Burma’s smallest states or divisions, retains a highly concentrated military presence. The state saw heavy fighting between the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) and the SPDC until 1995, when the New Mon State Party (NMSP) agreed to a ceasefire that put an end to conflict in much, but not all, of Mon State. The breakaway Mon group the Hongsawatoi Restoration Party, however, remains active in Ye Township, in southern Mon State and its bordering neighbor Tennasserim Division, while the Karen National Union (KNU) continues armed resistance in Tennasserim Division and, on Mon State’s eastern border, Karen State. Though the SPDC retains the upper hand in its struggle against both groups, it retains large garrisons to ensure that neither they nor the NMSP has the space to broaden their support bases.

Importantly, Mon State is also home to two “National Development Projects,” natural gas pipelines originating in Kanbauk, in northern Tennasserim Division, just below the southern tip of Mon State. One, built in 1998, runs east, straight across Tennasserim and into Thailand, while the other, built in 2000, traverses nearly the entire length of Mon State before feeding into a large government owned cement factory in Myaingkalay, Karen State. The SPDC feels the pipelines to be highly vulnerable, with some cause, as there have been fifteen explosive accidents since the first pipeline was built in 1998. Of these, seven were substantial, and six have been attributed to rebel activity. The KNU is widely understood to have been responsible for two, though it has never officially claimed responsibility, while the origins of the others are unknown, though they are thought to have been the result of poor joints linking sections of the pipeline.

Every township, in any case, hosts at least one light infantry battalion, while some – especially “gray” and “black” areas like Ye or Thanbyuzayat Townships – are home to three or more. The disproportionately high garrison rate, coupled with the SPDC’s policy of military self-reliance and the lack of oversight, means that an army struggling under the strain of rising commodity prices is leaning extra hard on civilian populations. The result has been a variety of human rights violations with clear economic consequences for rural civilians



already struggling to subsist. The following section will explore four main categories of human rights violations and their economic consequences: travel restrictions, extortion, forced labor and land confiscation.

## A. Travel restrictions

Residents of “grey” and “black” areas in Mon State face a variety of travel restrictions that, though they do not necessarily raise revenue for the army, result in severe economic consequences for villagers. Ostensibly for “security,” the restrictions represent an attempt to both cut off rebels from potential supporters, and limit the clandestine movement of rebels often indistinguishable from noncombatants. Curfews and mandatory travel documents are the most typical forms of restriction, and mostly control the movement of villagers between their homes and workplaces. The costs of the restrictions are high, because they both make it difficult for people to work, and because violating the restrictions can result in heavy fines, or worse.

Residents of “white” areas are also restricted. Villagers in Thanbyuzayat Township, central Mon State, report that their movements have been controlled since July. Soldiers of Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 318, led by Commander Aye Hlaing, are requiring villagers to purchase travel permits for the area around Waekalee, Kyaik Pun and Wae Ton Gyaung villages. “The identity cards only cost 500 kyat per person, but they only allow us to be on our farms from six in the morning until six at night,” reports Nai Noe, 65, a farmer from the area.

Villagers in areas where armed rebel groups are more active face even more severe controls. Residents of the area around Kyaung Ywa village, in southeast Ye Township, report that, since February, local authorities have banned them from traveling outside their village after 6 pm. Thirty-five kilometers to the southeast, villagers in Yin-ye report that similar restrictions began in March, after HRP activity increased.

The restrictions create special difficulties for farmers. Many farmers wish to stay with their land at night, so that they can protect it from wild animals and domestic animals like oxen, as well as looting by thieves. “We have invested a lot of money in our plantations,” says Nai Noe. “Who will take care of them at night?” Other farmers need to work on their farms at night or the early dawn hours when, for instance, it is better to tap rubber trees. Still others wish to work longer hours than those permitted by the army, but face harsh penalties for violating the restrictions. A married couple, laborers on a rubber plantation near Ying-ye, was shot on March 3<sup>rd</sup> for violating the area’s curfew. The husband was severely wounded, but survived. The wife was killed at the scene.

In Alaesakhan village in Ye Township and Paukpinkwin village in Yebu Township in Tenneserim Division, IB No. 282 has been preventing farmers from visiting their land during the day since August 21<sup>st</sup>. “We are farmers; we work in our farms to survive. Now the soldiers order us not to travel, but we would like to harvest our crops in a timely manner,” said one farmer. According to another farmer from Yebu, “I need to harvest areca nuts from my plantation. But I can’t go there because they army has banned visits to my plantation.”

## B. Punitive taxation

One of the most immediate negative economic consequences of the army’s presence in Mon State is the array of revenue generating “taxation” schemes, sometimes referred to by the military as “voluntary donations.” The taxation, levied by both the army and local Peace and Development Council (PDC) authorities, which sometimes funds ostensibly worthwhile endeavors, does not resemble traditional revenue-raising policies. It is not imposed via legislation or any codified laws, and is applied with seemingly arbitrary, punitive inconsistency. Rural inhabitants are especially vulnerable and, in the last few months, people in Mon State have been forced to pay for a variety of “development projects,” arms, electricity, checkpoint fees, vehicle licensing and even mandatory football tournaments. The combined costs take a serious toll on residents; a migrant worker interviewed in Mahachai, in southern Thailand, explained that he must send at least 30,000 kyat a month to his mother in Burma, just so she can pay her “taxes.”

In Thanbyuzayat Township, LIB No. 318 is collecting an annual tax of 700 kyat per rubber tree. Because a typical plantation can be a home to between 600 and 2,000 trees, the tax generates significant income for the battalion. The tax also causes serious hardship for plantation owners. “I think, I am not able to pay these

taxes.’ It is no different than just confiscating my lands,” said a landowner from Wae-win-kra village. “Some of my friends who could not pay the battalion already fled to the Thai-Burma border to seek the jobs in Thailand. I am thinking about following them.”

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, Colonel Kyaw Myint of Infantry Battalion (IB) No. 31, in southern Ye Township, informed villagers of Yin-ye that they would be forced to pay for weapons. The weapons are for the village People’s Militia, a required civilian military force most villages in rural areas are required to provide as an auxiliary to the army and police. According to the colonel, the arms will cost nearly one million kyat, and each household will be required to contribute between 10,000 and 30,000 kyat, depending on income. Villagers expressed frustration, particularly because the arms actual costs will not be disclosed and no oversight will accompany the procurement. This is the first time in three years that villagers have been forced to pay for weapons. The army also frequently collects money to fund a variety of expenditures, including “porter fees” and “food supply fees.”

It is also not uncommon for township authorities to require villagers to pay for health and social programs, regardless of whether or not they are desired. Residents of Mudon Township recently reported being required to pay for the 13<sup>th</sup> annual Inter-State and Division Under-15 Football Tournament, held in Moulmein during the first two weeks of September. Each household was required to pay between 500 and 1,000 kyat. The tournament involved sixteen teams from Mon and Karen States as well as Tenneserim Division. Earlier in the month, the Mon State PDC also ordered township PDCs to hold Township Cup tournaments, though the central authorities provided no financial support. Though football is popular with youth in Mon State, many did not want to participate in the tournaments because of their expense. Local authorities are well aware of which youth play in frequent informal football matches; regular players were forced to play or be subject to fines.

The SPDC implements a variety of top-down development projects throughout Mon State and the rest of Burma. Local residents frequently foot the bill, and suffer the consequences, of the often misguided government schemes. Projects in Mon State include road, bridge, dam and reservoir construction. Sometimes residents are also forced to pay for village beautification, like recent replacement of bamboo fences with modern cement walls in Thanbyuzayat. Communities of more than 1,000 households have also been ordered to create “model villages.” Villagers are forced to re-build their own homes and village infrastructure, without government support, requiring donations of either manual labor or many thousands of kyat.

Mon State, like the rest of Burma, is also subject to the regime’s campaign of forced cultivation of jatropa “physic” nut, which the SPDC hopes can be used for fuel. Though the plant is poisonous and detrimental to soil fertility, in 2004 the regime began requiring each state or division to plant 500,000 acres of the crop. People are often forced to grow the plant in front of their houses or along roads; in Mudon, some plantation owners have even been ordered to cut down rubber trees and replace them with jatropa. The cultivation, which offers little economic benefit to farmers because there is no infrastructure to process the crop into fuel, must also be undertaken without government support. During July, authorities in Ye also required residents to pay for the replanting of dead or unhealthy saplings.



Police checkpoint on the Mudon to Thanbyuzayat road

Corruption related to a variety of government services also takes a heavy toll. The Berlin-based Transparency International, a watchdog group which monitors government corruption worldwide, rates the SPDC as the most corrupt government in the world, tied with Somalia. Residents are required to pay for basic services, from the processing of paperwork to medical care. Residents of Htin-Yu village, in Thanbyuzayat, recently reported being forced to pay extensive fees to gain access to electricity. The fees augment the official government price of connecting a village to the grid, listed on receipts as between 10,000 and 20,000 kyat. Villagers report being forced to share the connection costs, which approached one million kyat. Each house must also pay monthly 500 kyat “maintenance fees” to the village Power and Lighting Committee, on top of official charges determined by individual electricity meters.



**Jatrop “physic”nut plants in Ye Township**

The army, as well as armed insurgent groups, requires road and river traffic to pay heavy tolls throughout Mon State. According to local sources in Mudon Township, for instance, troops from Artillery Regiment No. 315 are taxing traffic on the Ahbit to Yetagon-Waenaing road. The soldiers, led by Sergeant Myint Htoo Naung, built a checkpoint on the junction near Ahbit village and began levying taxes on July 2nd. The new tax affects farmers from Hneepadaw, Yaung Daung, Doe Mar, Kwan Hlar, Set Twe and Ahbit villages, who must use the ten-mile stretch of road to access their rubber plantations. “They told me to register my bike for 10,000 kyat. Then, they took down information about the brand of my bike and license number and gave me a card granting me permission to use the road. Each time I pass this gate, I have to show this card,” reports A Kyaw, a 30 year-old farmer who recently had to register his motorcycle. “One hundred and fifty to two hundreds farmers, from just Hneepadaw village, use this road and most of them ride motorcycles. The soldiers will make a lot of money.”

Protection is being used as a pretext for the extortion, says a local farmer. “A Captain told me they are providing the security for us to work safely. The costs of registering motorbikes are to be used to pay for the security expenses of the troops,” adds Soi Jow, a 35 year-old landowner from Doe Mar village. Residents are, however, skeptical, as the area has been without rebel activity for four years, since an alleged attack on the Kanbawk to Myaingkalay pipeline in 2004.

People from other parts of Mudon Township also report being forced to pay tolls to traffic police. A young villager from Mudon reports that motorcycle riders traveling to Thanbyuzayat or between Mudon and Moulmein began being taxed on September 5<sup>th</sup>, regardless of whether their bikes are licensed. “We have to pay money whether we have the license or not. Even if the bike has a license, they find fault and threaten us until they get the money.” The tolls vary depending on policemen’s assessment of relative wealth of each traveler. “Some people have to pay up to 10,000 kyat,” said a local resident. “Others have their bikes seized.”

Troops along the road that joins Mudon Township with Kyainnseiki in Karen State are also extracting heavy tolls, reports a young man who traveled to Mudon on September 4<sup>th</sup>. Vehicles carrying passengers returning from Karen State or Thailand have to pay 10,000 kyat or be detained. “They soldiers at the check points know which vehicles carry travelers coming back from Thailand. And they always extort,” the boy told a reporter from the Independent Mon News Agency. Soldiers are also reported to have taken 6,000 kyat from two women after threatening them as they attempted to visit their ailing father. “Both of them showed their ID. But the soldiers asked for travel documents from Tamort-kanin village Lamine Sub Township,” an eyewitness said, adding “I also saw soldiers threaten to detain three men on the spot if they could not pay, though the men pleaded with the soldiers saying they did not have that kind of money.” Even two Cyclone Nargis refugees were preyed upon, reports the source, and ordered to pay 2,000 kyat each.

Armed ethnic groups also force travelers on the Zemi River to pay transit fees. The river is home to at least fifteen checkpoints, operated by the SPDC, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, KNU and NMSP. “Our boat was taxed about 30,000 kyat by the DKBA before being allowed to enter Kyainnseiki from Mudon,” said a



traveler from Mon state. “Boat operators have to pay at least 5,000 kyat at each gate, even if we are carrying nothing,” added Nai Doat, who owns a boat and transports people on the river. “We have to pay more if we carry passengers or commodities.” One passenger is charged about 15,000 kyat for a trip between Chaung Zone, near Three Pagodas Pass, to Kyun-chaung and 18,000 kyat to get from Kyun-chaung to Kyainnseikiyi. Traders are charged less than other passengers, especially if they bring large amounts of commodities, reports a Mon businesswoman who recently traveled on the river.

### C. Forced labor

The SPDC continues to utilize forced labor, even though Burma is a signatory to the Forced Labor Convention and was condemned by the International Labor Organization. Though the army has recently reduced its reliance on conscripted porters, villagers are still exploited and forced to join People’s Militias, guard state infrastructure and work as laborers and construction workers. The work is too much for many people, says a man from Khaw Zar Sub-township in southern Ye Township. “Some villagers want escape into the border areas as a consequence of forced labor and extortion by the army. The cases of unpaid labor have been continued repeatedly over the last five years. IB No. 31 and LIB No. 343 have perpetrated most of the abuse. IB No. 31 has worked me constantly, forcing me to build their barracks, fence their compound, grow castor oil plants and construct a road for the army. I haven’t ever been paid...sometime I really want to escape from this slavery system, like most of my friends who have relocated to Thailand.”

The Kanbaw to Myaingkalay pipeline, which was constructed using forced labor, continues to require uncompensated work by villagers. Sources in Doe Mar village report that civilians are being forced to guard the pipeline, as well as the Moulmein to Tavoy railway, according to orders issued on September 1<sup>st</sup> by Nai Amyint, head of the village PDC. Sentries must be present from 7 pm to 4 am everyday. “I saw four groups and each included four persons. They all have to take responsibility from 7pm to 4 am every night to patrol the gas pipeline and the railways line which pass through near village,” said a source in the village.

“The village headmen said that that each household must send at least one person per month. For those who fail to meet their obligation, they must pay 2,000 kyat per month. Most households choose to pay the fine or hire somebody else,” said another villager. The village secretary, Myo Win, regularly collects gas pipeline sentry fees from the village. Doe Mar village has about one hundred and sixty households, and every household except government servants has to pay 2,000 kyat each month. “The order is not fair. All villagers have to pay but the order doesn’t apply to government servants such as teachers, members of USDA or their supporters. They all are civilians like us,” said a former teacher at a Mon National School who lives in Doe Mar.

Residents of Yaung Doung village, four kilometers south of Doe Mar, have also reported that LIB No. 62 is forcing them to take responsibility for the pipeline’s security. Villagers have also had to work clearing brush and reburying sections of the pipeline that have been exposed by heavy rainfall. “We have been guarding for a long time and working to heap soil again and again on the pipeline,” said a villager. Villagers in both Doe Mar and Yaung Doung will be held responsible if an explosion occurs, and are likely to be accused of colluding with rebels, as well as forced to pay for repair costs.

Villagers are also forced to provide security in other contexts. According to a 35 year-old villager from Yin Dein village, in Ye Township, “Our village chairman collects 3,000 to 5,000 kyat from each house for monthly village security fees. The soldiers and the village headmen said that they needed to hire private militia forces to provide security. Sometimes, we have to pay a porter fees to hire porters for their military operations, that way we do not have to work as porters ourselves. It costs 3,000 kyat every three months. Soldiers also force us to repair the roads or re-build the bridges, and we work without



**A man serving as a forced sentry duty on the Moulmein to Tavoy railway**

payment. Additionally, we also have to guard our own villages and immediately inform the army if we see strangers.”

Some villagers are also forced to join People’s Militia forces. A 38 year old man, interviewed in Thailand after he fled a military training school in Thanbyuzayat Township, said: “the soldiers forced every man in my village to attend training except children and elderly people. The village headmen collected money from the villagers and gave it to the army commander for expenses and foods during training, but we still had to pay for our own meals. We were forced to train for over twenty days. I had to abandon all my works on the rubber plantation, and my family lost income. After training, every week we were asked to do some works on the army bases and to conduct patrols. I could not tolerate it any longer.”



**Forced laborers working on an infrastructure project in Ye Township**

Forced labor also occurs in urban areas, at the behest of township PDCs. After a small bomb exploded in the Mudon Township Telecommunications Office in July, the TPDC ordered staff members of every office to patrol their administrative centers. The order even applies to schoolteachers, three to four of whom must act as school night security, according to a principle of a high school in Mon State. The teachers, who are supposed to be alert all night, are then supposed to teach during the day. “We have to take responsibility for the safety of the school because authorities are afraid of something happening like the explosions in Mudon,” said the principal.

Residents of Mon State must also work on construction and development projects, without pay. U Kyaw Moe, the chairman of the Khaw Zar PDC, ordered over twenty carpenters to build a new high school. U Kyaw Moe divided the men into three groups, which each must work twice a week. “We have to build the high school on orders from the PDC,” said one of the carpenters. “The authorities pay for nothing. We have to bring all the materials, even our food.”

Unsealed roads, damaged by heavy rains, are also an annual project. Sources in Khaw Zar, in Ye Township, report that Kyaw Myint, the commander of IB No. 31, has already begun forcing villagers to perform road repairs. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, a group of women was forced to rebuild the mile long road that connects Khaw Zar Sub-township with the battalion’s headquarters. “I saw a total of nine women including a seventy-five year-old lady being forced to repair the army’s road. They were made to carry stone, sand and soil to fix the road. There were no male laborers in the group. A twenty year-old girl who was forced to work said they worked for the day without pay,” said Mi Nyo, 28, a witness from Khaw Zar, in Ye Township. “Neither IB No. 31 nor the PDC made an official announcement calling for forced labor, and this group of ladies was only forced to work one day. Last year, we worked nearly a month to finish the repairs,” said Nai A-Not, 50, who worked on the road last year. The lack of official announcement does not, however, mean more forced labor is unlikely, and villagers expect more conscription as the rainy season draws to a close.

#### **D. Land confiscation**

The army has confiscated wide swathes of land in Mon and Karen States, as well as Pegu and Tennasserim Divisions, motivated by three primary factors:

- a. The extension and deployment of new battalions, which require land for barracks, bunkers and other facilities. Soldiers and officers are also given land on which they can earn additional income to support their families.
- b. Enterprises and business deals sponsored by the regime or sympathizers.

- c. Development projects like railways, roads or dams.

Land is also sometimes temporarily seized during harvest times, or crops are simply appropriated after they have been collected. In either case, landowners are rarely compensated for their loss, though authorities occasionally promise to do so, as they did in Ye Township between 2002 and 2004. Loss of land leaves former landowners without an immediate source of income, forcing many to seek work in Thailand.

On August 26<sup>th</sup>, AB No. 318, based in Wae-win-kra village, Thanbyuzayat Township, seized two hundred acres rubber plantations belonging to local people. According to local people, the sap of about 8,000 rubber trees was harvested. "The army officer told us, they did not 'confiscate' the land, but just 'extended army land,'" a villager quoted an army officer as saying. "That is an excuse. In reality they are just warning us that they will take our plantations later, like they have done to landowners in the past," he said

In Mudon Township, fifteen hundred acres have been confiscated by LIB No. 209 over the last seven years. The battalion's commander, who is about to leave for a new posting, as recently begun selling some of the land, reported the 35 year-old son of one the former landowners. "My parents' land was seized seven years ago," the man said. "It was about seven acres and full of rubber and Ceylon trees. Recently, the commander sold our land to a businessman from Mudon for five million kyat." Another former landowner, Nai Lon, from Htounng Kay village in Mudon, reports that the battalion commander is also selling his five-acre rubber plantation, confiscated five years ago. "I lost my land in 2002. It was worth about three million kyat, and now it is worth five million! The army came for it twice, each time taking half. Captain Aye Tun from LIB No. 209 seized the second half, and later I learned that he sold it to a businessman from Moulmein," Nai Lon said. The land sales have triggered fears that the commander's replacement will issue a new round of land confiscation. Says Nai Lon, "What we can do? Nothing! We have no rights at all."

Farmers report that land is frequently seized under pretexts related to ownership certificates. Often, the army claims that state law requires owners to have land certificates authorizing them to own and work on their land. Many farms are "free hold lands," however, passed down within families for generations and without legal documentation. Though neighbors and the surrounding community may know whom the land belongs to, obtaining documentation from the Land Records Department is difficult and expensive. "I had never heard of having to register free hold lands to be legal," reported a former landowner. "I couldn't pay the amount of money asked by the land records office to register my lands. Registering my ten acres would have required a one million kyat bribe to the land record officer in Mudon Township."

In a cruel twist, some of the farmers report being forced to work as unpaid laborers on their former property. "I was forced to clean the bushes on my own land after the army took it. I felt too depressed and could not work, so I asked my two sons to work for me. They were also very upset and fled to Thailand to find other jobs," said Nai Lon, a 60 year-old villager from Kamawet village. "I don't think I'll ever get my land back."

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The movement of migrant workers from Mon State into Thailand is not a new phenomenon. This year's rainy season, however, which is only beginning to approach its close, has seen the volume of migrant worker flows increase significantly. The number of people making the crossing via the Zemi River, which is one of the primary access points for people migrating from Mon State during the rainy season, has risen from 30 or 40 in years past to an average of over one hundred.

Interviews with incoming workers highlight a variety of factors underlying the decision to seek work in Thailand. People throughout Mon State face increasingly difficult economic circumstances, and most work jobs for wages too low to keep pace with rapid inflation. A global rice shortage, combined with Cyclone Nargis's destruction of thousands of acres of rice paddies, means household incomes are especially stretched as families attempt to cope with the rising price of rice. Residents of Mon State must also foot the bill for poorly designed development projects conceived far away from their locales. An added burden stems from the high concentration of armed forces in Mon State, with residents of areas with armed rebel activity living in the most difficult circumstances. The army is costly to residents of even relatively peaceful "white" areas, due to the SPDC's policy of military "self-reliance," which gives the army permission, and a tangible economic incentive, to exploit local people. Matters are made worse by the fact that local PDC and army authorities receive little oversight, and there is little recourse for civilians wishing to make complaints or demand accountability.



Against such a backdrop, residents of Mon State find themselves struggling against added obstacles to meeting basic income requirements. People must heed a variety of demands for direct payment to PDC and army authorities, which take the form of taxes, bribes or “donations,” ostensibly designed to fund everything from basic electricity to mandatory football tournaments to the lifting of a checkpoint gate. A slew of human rights



**Migrant workers detained and waiting to be deported after being captured entering Thailand without work papers**

abuses related to the army’s presence also make it difficult for people in Mon State to earn a living. Travel restrictions keep farmers from tending their land. Conscription and unpaid forced labor trade-off directly with gainful employment. Appropriation of land and crops steals both fruits of people’s labor, and the basic land upon which they work.

The specifics of how these policies manifest themselves vary across Mon State, depending on the presence of active rebel groups or the particulars of PDC and army officials. Kyaw Myint, commander of LIB No. 31, for instance, has an especially notorious reputation for human rights abuses and economic exploitation. But though the individual policies may vary, their effect is the same: many residents, already struggling to cope financially, are pushed over the edge and forced to seek work in Thailand. “I have no choice,” said a worker interviewed in Mahachai, near Bangkok. “If I don’t send money back to my family, they cannot survive.”

The streets of Thailand are not, however, paved with gold. Migrant workers employed in Thailand, especially those in the country illegally, find themselves working menial, low paying jobs for compensation often far lower than their Thai counterparts. Burmese workers are often subject to abuse and exploitation by the agents hired to help them enter the country and their subsequent employers. Women are particularly vulnerable, and face the specter of being sexually assaulted, or even sold as sex workers. Thai authorities are no help, and often ignore the plight of Burmese workers, or take notice only long enough to complete deportation procedures. “I am frightened when I am alone...because I have heard many stories of women being raped and killed,” a nineteen year-old Burmese girl in Mahachai told a Women and Child Rights Project reporter. “I feel like I have no security, but I have to work here so I can send money back to my family. I am afraid, but what can I do?”

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Dear Readers,

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995 by a group of young Mon people. The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- monitoring the human rights situation in Mon territory and southern Burma,
- protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma

To these ends, we produce the monthly “Mon Forum” newsletter. We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or know someone who might like to receive the newsletter. Please email or mail us a name and address; our contact information is on the back page.

With regards,

Director  
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

## Broken Communities: Just what the junta wants

### Azan Commentary

I was born in Mon State, but recently traveled to Rangoon. I went to get a passport, but the moment I walked into the immigration office, I became afraid I would not succeed. Hundreds of people were crowded around – so many people it seemed as if a wealthy person was making a rice donation to the people.

The office is small and so crowded I felt as if I could not breathe. A government official said that three hundred people apply for a passport every day; every person I talked to said they were trying to leave Burma.

That I met many people trying to leave the country did not really surprise me. In Mon communities, it seems like there are only children and grandparents. Every one else is gone, working in Thailand. I see children playing games, pretending they are journeying to Thailand and saving money to make their families rich.

Many people in Mon State are poor. At the same time, people who are wealthy have more money than rich people in times past. Money made in Thailand dwarfs money made in Burma, and people rely on what is sent to them from abroad.

Even though some people are making more money, the community overall is more poor, and especially poorly educated. Fewer people get an education – why should they? Even with a university degree, it is difficult to find work. People put everything they have in getting a degree, and then they struggle just as much as everyone else. Or they leave. So families stop investing in education for their children.

The regime is powerful. It has a large army and plenty of money from selling Burma's natural resources. But it is more powerful because it divides the people. For decades, it was powerful because it fought many small groups – ethnic groups, mainstream pro-democracy groups fighting by themselves, communists, mostly fought by themselves, and sometimes fought each other.

Now, the people are even more divided and communities are broken. People are poor, people are rich, but people don't bother to help each other. They care only about making money. This is what the junta wants – a populace that does not work together, and watches as its best and brightest are forced to leave – and as long as the SPDC has what it wants, things will never change for the better.



A grandmother and her granddaughter carrying agricultural products in Ye Township

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