Inside News

FLOCKS WITHOUT SHEPHERDS

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Jungle Medicine

Burma: no health care, but plenty of drugs - page 5

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE COMMITTEE FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED KAREN PEOPLE (CIDKP)
For many villagers and internally displaced people in Karen State the ceasefire has brought additional hardship. The fighting between the Burmese army and the KNLA has stopped, but crimes against people have increased. Burmese army soldiers are still demanding people to work for nothing. Villagers are being forced conscripted to serve as militia. Looting is common and gambling and drugs use is on the increase. Infrastructure, except for Burmese military use is virtually non-existent. Many children are forced to drop out of school to help parents farm. In years to come this will be a national tragedy. Medical care is basic and with thousands of rats and mice attacking and destroying this years rice crop, rural workers predict severe food shortages. Unfortunately, many donors have no mandate to give assistance to people devastated by crop failure or rat and mice infestations inside Burma. The Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) is desperately seeking means to try to secure funding or food assistance for those people worst hit. It will be tough. Malnourishment is already high among displaced people and any reduction in food will plunge even more people into a vicious cycle of ill health. Children and the elderly are particularly at risk. Malaria, dengue fever and a host of problems associated with malnourishment already effect most internally displaced people. In spite of this doom laden prediction people are still desperate to help themselves. Children are prepared to do whatever it takes to get an education and parents and village elders are risking landmines and payback from Burmese soldiers to try to return to their old villages. Some, like the villagers of Htee Tha Blu, have already succeeded in building some new houses. Students like Naw Sa Mya Hch, have set an example with their courage and refusal to give up. She says her hope will not fade away…nor should ours.

Cover picture:
Karen medics treat villagers.

Photos: Bleedin'Heart Media (unless otherwise stated).
Karen farmer Saw Nu Nu says he’s had enough of sweating and toiling over his land only to see Burmese army soldiers reap the benefits.

‘The Burmese army steal our farmland. They say it’s army property and they can take want they want from it.’

According to Saw Nu Nu one of the main culprits is Battalion CIB 356 led by Battalion second-in-command, Hla Win Htun. Since 1993 the Battalion has been stationed near Paw Baw Cho village in Pa-an district.

Saw Nu Nu says the army has confiscated land owned by Karen farmers and by Shan farmers.

‘They stole 15 plots of Karen land and six plots from the Shan. That’s a total area of 75.15 acres. If we want to farm own land, we have to give 10 baskets of paddy to the army.’

To add insult to injury the army demanded the robbed villagers grow crops and fruit trees on the confiscated land.

‘If our animals eat any of “their” crops we are fined. A farmer had to plough their land for three days after his cattle had strayed onto the unfenced land. He had to use all his own equipment and food while working for the army.’

Villagers say the army acts like bandits and they are planning to steal more lands for their own use.

Saw Nu Nu says the army have also abused their powers by using the villagers as unpaid lookouts.

‘Since the army came here in 1993 they have ordered that everyday a villager spend a day as a lookout at the army compound. If any villager fails to turn up the soldiers mark his name and fine him 500 Kyat.’

If you want to find out how you can help internally displaced Karen people or make a donation, email <kidpc@cscoms.com>, <hlahenry@hotmail.com> or write to CIDKP, PO Box 22, Mae Sot, Tak 63110, Thailand.

“Army steals our sweat, our crops and now our land”
Naw Sa Mya Hch, 18, says all she has ever wanted was the chance to go to school and learn to write and read. ‘I started learning when I was six and because of [Burmese] army attacks I had to attend school in many places. My parents are poor farmers who earn their living from raring chickens and pigs. They have no other income, so they cannot afford to support my senior schooling. School of hard knocks

Naw Sa Mya Hch, from Hko Khee village in Tangoo district says. ‘Even when I go to school, I still have many chores to do at home. I have to help my mother feed pigs, chickens and pound rice. On Saturdays there is no school so I go to our paddy field to clear weeds.’ Naw Sa Mya Hch says she’s tired she still looks forward to school.

‘I love school, but I can’t afford exercise books, pens or textbooks. To keep up with what’s happening I have to copy from other student’s books. I have to be economical in everything I do.’ Naw Sa Mya Hch says army soldiers make life difficult. ‘I always have to be on the alert, both at school or staying at home. Whenever troops come, all villagers, including farmers, students and teachers have to leave everything behind and run into the jungle. We hide in riverbeds and in the hills. Sometimes we stay there for weeks.’ In spite of the harsh life and living on the run Naw Sa Mya Hch is determined to get educated. ‘In order to pass each standard, sometimes I have had to attend school under a tree, sometimes in the rain being bitten by mosquitoes. It’s very hard living. I got anemia and had to leave school for three years. Although we are just only ordinary villagers, students, teachers or farmers the army has no pity for us.’

Education pays

Naw Sa Mya Hch’s hard work has paid off. ‘In February 2004, I passed the seventh standard in Hko Khee village. This year I will study at Ho Kay middle school and after I finish I will attend medical training. I want to become a medic and help my people who are facing difficulties. As longs I am alive, my hope will not fade away.’

"When soldiers come to destroy...villagers...farmers, students and teachers leave everything behind and run into the jungle."
Ceasefire delivers forced conscription and drugs but no peace

Villagers and farmers living in the Mae Pleh river basin, near Ta-nay-eha township, say since the ceasefire demands for free labour from Burmese army units has increased. The villagers mainly work on their farms and rely on rice, corn and tobacco farming to generate income.

Saw Thain Saw, a farmer, said the Burmese army units based in the area wanted the villagers to supply not only free labour, but also conscripts. He named Light Infantry Brigades 703, 704 and 705 and two columns of DKBA soldiers from Brigade 999 as the worst offenders.

‘Since the ceasefire agreement it has got even harder for villagers. DKBA troops from Ta-nay-cha in Pa-an district, under the control of their commander Maung Chit Thu, ordered 30 villages to send five people from each village for military training. Taking 150 villagers away from their farms is devastating enough but to use them for military purposes is abuse.’

Saw Thain Saw said after the military training villagers were sent back to their own villages to act as village militia.

‘The strategy is meant to stop KNU soldiers from moving in and out of the area. Deadline for villagers to go for training was set down for April 10. Villagers who failed to attend had to hire other villagers to take their place.’

Saw Thain Saw said to hire another villager cost 15,000 Thai baht per year for 3 years. He said DKBA troops were prepared to abduct villagers who failed to pay fines.

Saw Thain Saw says the availability of illegal drugs in the region has become easier since the ceasefire. The DKBA’s involvement in trafficking methamphetamine has been a target of Thai border authorities.

‘It’s harder for the DKBA to move drugs into Thailand but the drugs are now widely sold in our area. Now many people are using drugs, old, young, men and women. The best quality has “XW” stamped on the tablet and they sell for 1200 kyat a tablet.’

Saw Thain Saw says the DKBA produce the drugs, but must have permission from the Burmese military to do so.

‘If something is not done we will have a drug epidemic on our hands. If having a ceasefire means our young people are becoming drug addicts then we’re worst off.’

International drug agencies name DKBA as drug traffickers.
**MY STORY**

**In my own words...**

Name: Saw Boe  
Age: 29  
Family: Naw Thaw, 28 years. Two children.  
Occupation: Farmer  
Religion: Buddhist  
Place of residence: Pah-kat village, Paing Kyone township, Karen State.  
Date of fleeing: 20 April 2004  
My reasons for leaving:  
(1) The Burmese army and DKBA soldiers extorted money all the time, saying that it was tax on farmland and other taxes.  
(2) I was forced with other villagers to build military camps for DKBA and Burmese army soldiers. I was ordered to be a watchman/sentry for the security of the military camp. All villagers including my children and wife had to work for the military, we had no time to do their own farming or household chores.  
(3) Villagers were prevented from working where DKBA troops did their logging business. Villagers were also forced to work in the sawmills for free by the soldiers.  
(4) The DKBA used forced labour to build a pagoda in front of the Christian church. The DKBA said that when it was completed they would drive away the Christians. Some Christian villagers and Saw Pu Shwe took the threats seriously and fled together to the Thai border.

**Why should we do their work?**

The DKBA desecrated this Christian church

photo: KHRG
Villagers build hope out of ashes

After the 2002 dry season Burmese army offensive many villages were burnt, villagers killed or taken as forced labour and crops destroyed in Karen State. Among those destroyed was the village of Htee-Tha-Blu.

Now village headman Saw Maung Gyi is trying to persuade his villagers to come back to their traditional land where their ancestors had lived and died for hundreds of years. Many of the villagers fled from the Burmese army to refugee camps in Thailand, others lived in jungle hideouts.

Saw Maung Gyi says he’s pleased to see villagers are returning.

‘We might be poor but staying in their own village and although makes us feel happy. We have difficult times ahead as the soldiers destroyed everything we owned.’

Villager Kaw Doe Soe Pa is determined to make the return home, work.

‘All our utensils; cups, pots, pans and spoons were all burnt. We cannot afford to buy new ones. We’ve picked up the burnt ones in the ashes and we will use them. If there are some holes we’ll try to block them and make them work.’

Since the situation is still not secure around Htee-Tha-Blu, the villager’s live in fear says Kaw Doe Soe.

‘We do not need much money to live so long as we can stay peacefully without interference and do our work freely. We just need enough to earn our own living. But our situation is like a small deer, when there is a strange noise near you, you have to flee, it does not make us feel happy.’

Saw Maung Gyi says in the past, Htee-Tha-Blu was a pleasant village to live in.

‘Beautiful mountains surround our village…rivers with clear spring water and evergreen forest are all around us. Now it is bombsite. Our bamboo houses are built among our old burnt ones. Our lives are like a newborn child. We will have to start our lives from the very beginning.’
The ceasefire in the Karen State has brought some respite to villagers, but they are still wary of its long-term benefits. The ceasefire has allowed people to return to their villages and resume normal life, but the situation remains unstable and uncertain.

Villagers express concerns about the potential for conflict to resume if the ceasefire talks break down. They also express frustration at the actions of Burmese soldiers and DKBA troops, who are accused of stealing, demanding materials, and extorting fees from them. Villagers accuse Burmese soldiers and DKBA troops of demanding money from village sawmills as tax.

Villagers are also concerned about the potential for government troops to dominate the area by moving extra soldiers in. They say that they are caught in the middle, unsure of the benefits of a real ceasefire and distrustful if it will bring peace.

On the bright side, villagers say that the fighting has stopped and people are returning to their old villages. However, many remote villagers continue to face challenges, such as landmines, lack of seeds and farm equipment, and underdeveloped health and education systems.
A senior Karen agriculture official warned that displaced villagers in the Mae Tha Wa valley region faced severe food shortages due to crop destruction by rats and mice.

Saw Min Aye, of Pa-an district agriculture department said.

‘Rodents destroyed the villagers hill paddy fields. They ate all the seeds and have been eating the young plants since May.’

Saw Min Aye said villagers claimed their crops were attacked by three different kinds of rodents.

‘The worse are the smallest because they come in great numbers. These mice had no limits, they came at night and they came in the day. They thrashed the rice seedlings.’

A spokesperson from the Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) says even though the villagers in Mae Ta Wah valley are all displaced, the CIDKP could not help as they fall outside their donor’s criteria for help.

‘This kind of disaster has never been planned for. We have requested assistance from our donors but there is little they can do to get help to these villagers.’

Saw Min Aye said villagers had pleaded with him for help but there was not a lot he could do.

‘It’s going to be a hard year. We have already received more reports of crop destruction in Mu Traw (Papun) district. Unless we get urgent assistance the health problems are going to be horrific, especially among the young and old.’

"If the rice harvest fails the children will suffer."
Before 1974 Karen villagers living in the hills of Toungoo district led contented lives. Their lands were fertile and they grew rice, vegetables, spices and animals. They had plenty for themselves and usually enough left over to sell. They had time to practice their different religions and could celebrate traditional ceremonies without fear.

But in 1974 the Burmese army launched their “four cut operation” against the Karen in an attempt to cut off information, food, recruits and support to the Karen army. Human right abuses became common. Burmese soldiers killed villagers, raped, looted, burnt down villages and stole livestock.

People forced from villages became displaced - refugees in their own country. Others fled to the Thai border and lived in refugee camps.

The history of internally displaced Karen people began in 1974 and even though the situation was bad it was still manageable. The remoteness of the region afforded some security and protection to villagers.

In 1997 the Burmese regime launched another military offensive to wipe out the Karen National Union (KNU) and its army, the KNLA.

This “scorched earth” strategy regarded all Karen villagers not under their control as enemies. The army destroyed all basic means of economic support saying it was used to support the KNLA.

The Burmese army deployed three military commands, consisting of 18 battalions, in Toungoo district hill region and forced 12 villages in Tantabin Township to relocate. Overcrowded camp conditions forced villagers to build cramped bamboo houses with no space to grow food. The Burmese army did not give any assistance to the villagers, but instead looted food and property that the villagers had brought with them.

In 1997 the Burmese army started constructing two motor roads in the region, from Bawgalie village to Bu Hsa Khi and from Bawgalie to Mawchee in Karenni State.

To build the roads villagers were used as forced and unpaid labour. Women, children and elderly people where forced to carry military supplies and food for the army.

People had to supply their own food and the soldiers even stole that. Caught in a vicious abusive cycle people had no time to do their own work. They couldn’t grow food and they had no money to buy food.

Many fled to the jungle and had no permanent place to live, no health care, no security and always had to fear the army. They eked out a living from wild roots, fruits and vegetables. With no access to medical care, many people died.

From 1997 to 2003 displaced people in Toungoo district had it tough. There was little assistance from outside and at times of emergency the Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) had difficulty getting emergency relief to people.
The Burmese army planned their attacks for harvest time, from October to December, so that the villagers could not reap their rice and cash crops such as cardamom, betel nut, coffee and tobacco.

On 10 December 2003, villagers heard that an informal cease-fire between the Burmese army and the KNU had been reached.

But their hopes were soon dashed. On 18 December, troops from Burmese units IB92, IB39 and LIB 589 forced relocated the village of Klay Soe Khee. Villagers were told the relocation had to be completed by the 19 December and if not they would be shot dead.

To reinforce their threat the army burned down three houses and dismantled another 20.

On 20 December 2003, troops from unit IB 264 killed four villagers near Naw Thay Doe.

On 7 January 2004, a sergeant of SPDC IB 124 raped a woman from Kaw Soe Khee village and also attempted to rape another woman of Maw Pa Doe village.

On March, troops from IB48 burned the forest in Gar Mu Doe area and destroyed the villagers’ cardamom plantations. During April, the army continued burning the forest and 90 percent of plantations in Wah Soe area were destroyed.

In March 2004 a CIDKP report in Toungoo district found that in Than Daung township, 468 families from eight villages were forced to relocate to overcrowded resettlement camps - 4590 people from 30 different villages had already been forced to live there.

In Tan Tabin township 628 families were relocated by troops to resettlement areas to join another 5348 people.

Instead of decreasing after the ceasefire the Burmese army intensified their activities. Without any resistance from the KNLA displaced people were left unprotected.

A CIDKP investigation in Toungoo district in April, found 5651 people from 19 villages faced severe food shortages.

Following the ceasefire Burmese army soldiers formed into small groups and went to places where they could not go before.

Displaced people hiding in the jungle say secure hiding places are getting less each day and are worried about their future if ceasefire talks break down.

Background of Toungoo district
Toungoo district is in the far north of Karen State, bordering with Karenni State in east Burma. It has rich growing plains and tree covered mountains. It is divided into two townships, Thandaung and Tan Tabin Township. The people living in the hill region are Karen farmers. They grow hill rice, betel nut, cardamom, coffee and durian. Villagers also raised chickens, pigs, goats and cattle. Before the “four cut operation” in 1974, villagers could get enough food and income from their farms and led relatively peaceful and happy lives. Between 1974 and 1997 although many parts of the region were taken control by the ruling Burmese army, many villagers could still stay in their own villages. But after the “scorched earth policy” of 1997 villages were destroyed and people moved to relocation camps or fled to the jungle or to Thailand.
Ceasefire doesn’t stop abuses

The ceasefire between the Burmese regime and the Karen National Union is still in place, but according to the Federation of Trade Unions Kawthoolei (FTUK) there are worrying signs of a huge military buildup. An FTUK organizer recently returned from a fact finding tour of Karen State and wrote this report for Inside News.

Villagers forced to dig in for army
Since the peace talks the Burmese army are occupying more of Karen State than before. They have set up military positions through out rural areas. They are forcing villagers construct army camps, transport military equipment, build roads and work in army plantations.

Toungoo District - July 2004
Burmese soldiers from Light Infantry Brigade (LIB) 73 led by Major Tin Kaing occupied a large area of Sha-Zee-Bo village land. The villagers from Sha-Zee-Bo, Zee-Pyu-Gone, Yi-Shan and Taw-Gone were forced to build a military camp, living barracks, trenches, stores, bunkers, kitchen and fences. They also had to work and construct an army plantation. Villagers have no time to work on their farms or businesses. They have to supply their own food and equipment and receive nothing from the troops.

Soldiers from Brigade 73, led by Capt. Myo Naing demanded villagers from Sha-Zee-Bo, Yi-Shan, Zee-Pyu-Gone, Taw-Gone do construction work at the army camp. Capt. Myo Naing ordered each village in the region to provide the army with one bag of rice during the construction period. The battalion commander also demanded villagers of Sha-Zee-Bo to supply two bags of rice each month.

The commander of the troops from LIB 26, positioned at Than-Daung town in Toungoo district forced 15 people from Gah-Mu-Der village to carry military equipment from Than-Daung to Tha-Aye-Hta camp.
Capt. Myo Naing from LIB 73 ordered 36 villagers of Sha-Zee-Bo village to carry ammunition from Sha-Zee-Bo to Ka-ser-do military camp.

The commander of the troops from LIB 26, forced 11 Baw-Ga-Li villagers in Tan-ta-bin district to carry military equipment from Baw-Ga-Li to Ko Day camp.

Nyaung-Le-Bin District – July 2004
The battalion commander of LIB 590, based in Mone Township, ordered villagers from Mee-diang-daw to construct an ammunition store and fencing. Villagers were told they had build 900 yards of a triple security
They're not soldiers, they're thieves!

fence within a week. The villagers had to bring their own food supplies, equipment, bamboo poles, bamboo walls, timber, nails and ropes. They received nothing but abuse from the army. Villagers had to supply a total of 2100 pieces of beetle nut timber. Troops from LIB 264 led by commander, Maj. Nyein Chan Oo demanded villagers from Mala-Daw carry army supplies from Ta-Ler-Day to Ter-Kweh-Lay-Ko military camp.

Pa-Pun District – July 2004
Troops from LIB 340 Battalion commander Myint Win Aung forcibly demanded the villagers of Kler-Ko, Klo-Klee-Lo, Paw-Baw-Ko, Ta-Dwee-Ko to clear bush beside the road from Mae-Ta-Roh to Way-Moe village. It is about seven miles in distance. Villages located close to the army camps have always been the victim of forced labor by soldiers.

Pa-An District
Soldiers from Division 77, (LIB 6) joined with troops from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) to force villagers from Myawaddi Township to build roads - Major Maung Chit Thu from Brigade 999 led the DKBA troops. The road construction was 10 miles long, Mae-plet to Shwe Koak-Ko, the DKBA headquarters. One person from each village household had to go to work on the road construction. Men had to dig ditches, carry stone and sand, women and children were forced to remove debris and rocks to prepare the road. If unable to work they had to hire a replacement to take their place in the road gang.

Dooplaya District
Troops from LIB 284 occupied a large area of Wah-Bo-Gone village in Kya-Inn Township and set up a military camp. They confiscated land owned by villagers and set up a farm for their army. Villagers have to work and tend to their plantations. During July 2004 Burmese army soldiers from LIB 284, demanded Ta-Kat-Klo villagers cultivate land for an army rice paddy. The villagers had to provide the paddy seed, cultivation equipment, cattle using for ploughing, transportation and people to do the planting. The army used 45 villagers from Ta-Ka-Klo at the Wah-Bo-Gone army plantation.

Soldiers from LIB 230 demanded 200 bamboo poles from Htee-Po-Than villagers.
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In 2002 Burmese troops burnt Htee Tha Blu village to the ground. But unbowed by the soldiers destruction the villagers regrouped and started rebuilding the village. School teacher Naw Wah says. ‘We have built about 10 houses so far and as the villagers are Christian they’ve built a bamboo church that doubles as a school. Our lives are filled with instability, but our villagers want to teach their children to be able to read and write.’

Naw Wah says. ‘We have no special building for a school, we do not have enough books for the students, but we try our best to give some education to our children. This school is only up to 1st standard and we have 17 students. The subjects we teach are Karen, Burmese, English and mathematics.'

According to Naw Wah the school receives some materials through a refugee camp. ‘We need help. The school does not receive any help from any organization. Teachers get no salary. We depend on each other to help each other. I dedicate my life to help my people.’

Naw Wah says the remoteness of Htee Tha Blu village means people have to work hard to earn a living and many children who finish elementary school are not encouraged to continue further studies.

Student Saw Kaw Doe, 11, agrees. The [Burmese] army burned down my school. I finished 1st standard and I want to do 2nd standard but I don’t have time to stay in school. I have to look after our cattle. Many of my friends have to do the same.'