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The “Everyday Politics” of IDP Protection in Karen State

Stephen Hull

Abstract: While international humanitarian access in Burma has opened up over the past decade and a half, the ongoing debate regarding the appropriate relationship between politics and humanitarian assistance remains unresolved. This debate has become especially limiting in regards to protection measures for internally displaced persons (IDPs) which are increasingly seen to fall within the mandate of humanitarian agencies. Conventional IDP protection frameworks are biased towards a top-down model of politically-averse intervention which marginalises local initiatives to resist abuse and hinders local control over protection efforts. Yet such local resistance strategies remain the most effective IDP protection measures currently employed in Karen State and other parts of rural Burma. Addressing the protection needs and underlying humanitarian concerns of displaced and potentially displaced people is thus inseparable from engagement with the “everyday politics” of rural villagers. This article seeks to challenge conventional notions of IDP protection that prioritise a form of state-centric “neutrality” and marginalise the “everyday politics” through which local villagers continue to resist abuse and claim their rights.

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Introduction

As international humanitarian access in Burma has opened up since the early 1990s, debates regarding the appropriate relationship between politics and humanitarian assistance have been ongoing yet unresolved. While a number of United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), some foreign governments, as well as Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) have called for a separation of politics from immediate humanitarian concerns, democracy activists within Burma and abroad have argued that national-level political reform is a necessary precondition for any long-term progress in the country's humanitarian situation. This dispute became especially audible and made numerous international news headlines during the post-Cyclone Nargis crisis in May-June 2008.

In response to claims that the UN was attempting to "politicise" the post-cyclone crisis, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon told the General Assembly on 16 May 2008 that "I have sought to avoid politicisation of the humanitarian crisis [...] this is not about politics. Our focus is saving lives" (Deen 2008). By contrast, one opposition news source argued that

the international community, in its efforts to depoliticize the humanitarian crisis still unfolding in Burma, may end up ensuring the ruling regime's political survival while doing little or nothing to save lives (*Irrawaddy* 2008).

The argument that political concerns should be detached from humanitarian assistance is predicated on the right of civilians to immediate access to humanitarian aid; a right which must not be held ransom to long-term political objectives (Terry 2002: 24). This position carries significant weight, especially when political objectives are narrowly defined as regime change and indigenous voices speaking of alternative political concerns are drowned out by the "loudspeaker diplomacy" of certain Western powers. As Pedersen described this trend,

[b]y identifying a transfer of power to the NLD [National League for Democracy] as the immediate and, in some cases, only objective, Western countries have given up the opportunity to help improve current conditions and build the basis for a gradual transition (Pedersen 2005: 170; parentheses added).

Furthermore, humanitarian actors have argued that their political neutrality encourages belligerents to grant humanitarian access to vulnerable populations living amidst conflict (Terry 2002: 20).

Despite the debate over the proper relationship between politics and humanitarian assistance, there is a general agreement about the crucial role of long-term governance reform as a means to go beyond external (INGO, bilateral, and UN) service provision in addressing Burma’s widespread humanitarian needs (see, for example, Duffield 2008: 41-2). Yet such national-level political reform (especially when conflated with regime change and democratisation) can appear quite distant to the immediate humanitarian concerns of the civilian population. While this understanding is relevant, it has, however, led to the adoption of two notable fallacies within international approaches to the humanitarian situation in Burma.

The first of these fallacies is that political concerns and political engagement remain the exclusive domains of the organised elite (whether the current military regime, pro-democracy opposition parties or ethnic insurgent groups). By contrast, as Ardeth Maung Thawngghmung has shown, the country’s predominantly rural population does have strong political concerns, but their views tend to be more focused on the local-level implementation of State policy than they are on the “high profile issues singled out by the international press” (Maung Thawngghmung 2003: 8). Such local-level concerns, however, tend to be missed in foreign policy debates to which rural communities typically lack access.

The second notable fallacy is that national-level political reform and ostensibly “apolitical” (yet state-regulated) humanitarian assistance are the only two approaches available for addressing the country’s humanitarian concerns. Both of these approaches remain overly focused on elite politics and perpetuate top-down models of intervention which marginalise local voices.

While problematic to begin with, the debate over the proper relationship between politics and humanitarian aid has become especially limiting in regards to protection measures for internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, protection refers to:

all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of individuals in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law) (Inter-Agency 1999: 4).

In practice, protection covers a range of strategies aimed at preventing and mitigating abuse (responsive action), assisting those recovering from abuse (remedial action), and creating a context in which the likelihood of abuse is restricted (environment-building action) (Inter-Agency 2002: 11-12). Although protection has been generally considered and applied as separate to humanitarian assistance, *per se*, there is an increasing push to integrate

protection measures into assistance programs (Inter-Agency 1999: 3). There have also been sustained efforts by Yangon-based humanitarian agencies to expand their access into “conflict-affected” regions of Burma where the highest documented concentrations of IDPs currently reside (South 2008: 17). The assistance-protection relationship is further complicated in Karen State and other areas of (especially rural) Burma where persistent human rights abuses underlie the deteriorating humanitarian situation to which humanitarian assistance is meant to apply.

As with humanitarian assistance more generally, conventional IDP protection frameworks are likewise biased towards a top-down model of politically-averse intervention which marginalises local initiatives to resist abuse and hinders local control over protection efforts (Heppner 2005: 31). However, such local resistance strategies remain, at least in Karen State and presumably elsewhere in rural Burma, the most effective IDP protection measures currently employed. This view is supported by the statements of local villagers in Karen State, as examined below. These local initiatives have included diverse, innovative and courageous strategies to resist, mitigate or wholly evade the abusive local-level implementation of State policies which continues to provoke displacement across much of rural Burma. These efforts have also included voluntary displacement as a means of resistance; thereby throwing into doubt the prioritisation of return, resettlement and reintegration of displaced communities under national authorities which continues to pervade conventional IDP protection frameworks (for example, UNOCHA 2004: principle 28).

Recognition of local-level political agency and external support for (albeit political) village-level resistance strategies (whether directly or via community-based organisations and local NGOs) can thus serve to most effectively address the intertwined humanitarian and protection concerns of displaced and potentially displaced communities in rural Burma before, during and after displacement. This paper,¹ therefore, seeks to challenge conventional notions of IDP protection that prioritise a form of State-centric “neutrality” and marginalise what Kerkvliet (2002) calls “everyday politics”, through which local villagers continue to resist abuse and claim their rights. To that end, this paper examines displacement patterns in Karen State and village-level resistance; assesses conventional IDP protection frameworks in light of this resistance; and then concludes with some brief remarks on how an understanding of village-level resistance can positively inform more

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Burma Studies Conference, DeKalb, 3-5 October 2008.

appropriate externally-implemented IDP protection strategies amidst Burma’s current state-society conflict.

1 Displacement Patterns in Karen State

The 1998 *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, intended as “an advocacy and monitoring framework for the assistance and protection needs of the internally displaced”, (UNOCHA 2004: foreword) define IDPs as:

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (UNOCHA 2004: 1).

In the context of Karen State, displacement occurs amidst the broader state-society conflict, where the “predatory State” has sought to control all land and people as a means to extract resources. Adams and Bradbury define the “predatory State” as a feature of state-society conflict, “where control over the political system provides a means to extract resources from society”, especially from the “many peasants, pastoral communities or urban poor, who live on the margins of society”, and which is “intimately linked to the dominance of the political landscape by the military” (Adams and Bradbury 1995: 15-16).

In thousands of interviews conducted by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) over the past 17 years, villagers in rural Burma have consistently decried the exploitative manner of local governance to which they are subject in areas primarily under control of the SPDC and its allied armed groups. This exploitation has typically taken the form of coerced and uncompensated appropriation of labour, money, food and supplies. As an example,² a 51-year-old villager from Papun District told KHRG in February 2008:

They [SPDC soldiers] have demanded money every month. Our villagers have a lot of difficulties and problems. We don’t have a way

2 All interviews quoted here were conducted by KHRG field researchers inside Karen State. Villagers’ names and specific addresses have been omitted for their security. KHRG maps follow the locally-defined seven-district Karen State convention, as opposed to the SPDC’s seven-township convention. For more statements by local villagers about the human rights situation in rural Burma, see the many KHRG reports at <<http://www.khrg.org>>.

to earn a [cash] income. Not only have our villagers had to pay these kinds of demands all the time but also villagers from other villages.

The military's dependence on the local population became explicit in a 1997 order by the War Office to the country's 12 Regional Commanders "to meet their basic logistical needs locally, rather than rely on the central supply system" (Selth 2002: 136; see also, Callahan 2007: 46). This policy, typically termed "living off the land" (Amnesty International 2005), has placed the burden of financing local army units and the wider structures of militarisation on the largely rural population of Burma through an extensive array of exploitative demands. In 1998, a Commission of Inquiry set up by the International Labour Organisation of the UN reported that the government of Burma, and especially the military, "treat[s] the civilian population as an unlimited pool of unpaid forced labourers and servants at their disposal" (ILO 1998). Armed Non-State Actors (NSAs) in Burma have also relied, to varied extents, on rural communities to support their ongoing field operations (see, for example, KHRG 2007b).

Over time, persistent demands for money, labour, food and supplies undermine rural livelihoods and subsistence. Regular forced labour cuts into time needed for agriculture or other work. Demands for money deplete villagers' limited savings. The coerced provision of food and supplies undermines villagers' own nutrition and household needs. A 55-year-old woman from Thaton District related the following in January 2007:

This year we've had to worry about our food as no one has enough food because our villagers were portering [doing forced labour carrying military supplies] all the time during the rainy season. The villagers didn't have enough time to clear out the weeds in their hill-fields. So the villagers' paddy fields weren't good enough and didn't provide enough food.

Depleted food and fiscal provisions resulting from extortive demands have, in turn, led to worsening humanitarian conditions across much of SPDC-controlled Karen State, and indeed much of rural Burma. As the former UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar stated in 2007, "[t]he crisis of Myanmar is [...] a poverty emergency that is leading towards a humanitarian crisis" (IRIN 2007).

Villagers living in SPDC-controlled areas therefore confront a difficult choice. They can try to eek out a living under the persistent demands which undermine their livelihoods, increase poverty and exacerbate the region's humanitarian crisis or they can flee into situations of displacement as a means of evading this abuse. A 48-year-old woman from a village in

Toungoo District described her experience of taking the latter option in March 2007:

We fled because we were oppressed by the SPDC. We didn’t get any permission to travel. They wouldn’t give us any travel documents. They were making us do construction work. So, we couldn’t do our own work. If we had stayed, we would have only fallen into debt and so we came here [to an IDP hiding site inside Karen State].

This displacement into hiding represents a form of resistance to exploitative military rule and, furthermore, reduces the resource base of local army units. It also involves civilians moving away from a deteriorating humanitarian situation under state control. With a strong attachment to their homeland, many IDPs in hiding initially try to remain close to their abandoned villages.

The SPDC has responded to this evasion with hostility; conducting search-and-destroy missions targeting IDPs and their hiding sites as well as yet-to-be-displaced villages in non-SPDC-controlled areas; burning covert farm fields; and shooting civilians on sight. In some cases, SPDC army units have punished civilians in retribution for Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) attacks on SPDC patrols that occur near a given village (see, for example, KHRG 2007a). In other cases, however, especially in the those areas less firmly under state control, attacks against civilian communities have functioned more clearly as a means of undermining livelihoods and creating insecurity in order to flush villagers out of the difficult-to-control hills and into relocation sites and other SPDC-controlled settlements in the more easily controlled plains, along vehicle roads or near army camps and bases.

In response to these attacks, displaced villagers in hiding have adopted a range of strategies that support their efforts to evade state control. These include establishing covert hiding sites and hill-side farm fields in the forest, hiding food stores in preparation for expected displacement, accessing indigenous mobile health teams delivering aid cross-border from Thailand, setting up temporary schools in the forest to educate children, trading at clandestine “jungle markets” with villagers from SPDC-controlled areas, and utilising advanced warning systems to relay information about SPDC troop movements and locations between displaced communities.

These strategies support IDP efforts to remain outside of state control both directly (through the initial flight and monitoring of troop movements) and indirectly (by addressing health and nutrition needs that allow them to survive in hiding). Despite the ever-present threat of military attack, large numbers of villagers continue to choose displacement in hiding. The most recent estimates indicate that a total of 49,500 IDPs remain at hiding sites in Karen State alone (TBBC 2008b: 67).

Not all villagers, however, respond in the same ways to similar displacement pressures and discrepancies in choice exist between members of the same village and even the same household (South 2007: 66). While the residents of some SPDC-controlled communities may be unable to flee (often due to movement restrictions and/ or local military threats), others may actively choose to remain in their home (or relocated) communities as long as they can maintain some means of livelihood and address their needs. However, in this context, persistent demands for labour, money, food and supplies threaten to increase poverty, exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and thereby heighten displacement pressures (Heppner 2005: 11). In these situations, villagers have also sought to resist, mitigate or wholly evade compliance with abusive demands, but without abandoning their homes; their ability to successfully resist such exploitation lessens displacement pressures.

Under threat of violent enforcement, village-level resistance to exploitative demands includes a broad assortment of strategies ranging from the subtle to the overt which villagers continue to test and refine. These include, but are not limited to: negotiating with local authorities for a reduction in demands; bribing these same authorities with small amounts of money, alcohol and food; lying about village population or capacity; avoiding land and household registration; shaming local officials into withdrawing demands; outright refusal to comply; ignoring order documents; or forms of discreet false compliance such as delaying fulfilment of orders, foot-dragging, shoddy workmanship on construction projects, compliance only in part, and giving poor quality paddy and food supplies to meet demands. The following two quotes are illustrative. The first is from a villager in Dooطلا District who spoke to KHRG in November 2006 and the second is from a villager in Papun District who spoke to KHRG in October 2007.

The SPDC soldiers demanded taxes for the plantations, hill fields and flat fields. They also asked us for the number of households in our village. We told them we had only over 80 households, not over 100 households. We took out the widows' and orphans' households because we thought that if they demanded taxes from us, the widows and orphans shouldn't need to pay them.

They [the villagers] had to carry things for the SPDC and also had to cut bamboo poles for them. I didn't want to see it [the forced labour], so I warned them [SPDC authorities] that 'If you continue to order the villagers to do these things, the news [of the forced labour demands] will spread out from BBC and VOA'.³ After that they reduced

3 BBC and VOA; Foreign Burmese-language news radio stations which broadcast into Burma.

the forced labour. At first the villagers had to cut bamboo poles twice a month or once a month. After I confronted them the villagers didn’t need to do this [particular type of] work anymore.

Villagers also regularly employ jokes and counternarratives to challenge the legitimacy of local structures of authority or, where possible, villagers may temporarily flee to avoid military demands altogether. These efforts – while largely “humanitarian” in their attempts to address issues of livelihood, poverty, and subsistence – are clearly political in their resistance to local expressions of state power and authority. They can be understood within the framework of James Scott’s theory of “everyday resistance” comprising “the nearly continuous, informal, undeclared, disguised forms of autonomous resistance by lower classes” (Scott 1989: 4). KHRG calls this village-level initiative and capacity to resist abuse in rural Burma “village agency” (Phan and Hull 2008: 19).

Drawing on Scott’s work, Kerkvliet (2002) argues for an understanding of “everyday politics” that goes beyond a narrow conception of formal alliances and factions expressly challenging or supporting *de jure* state authority and legislative powers. Rather, it should include the “debates, conflicts, decisions, and cooperation among individuals, groups, and organisations regarding the control, allocation, and use of resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities” which are “a part of daily life” (Kerkvliet 2002: 11).

Village-level resistance to local expressions of the “predatory State” comprises a form of “everyday politics” intimately tied to displacement. The successful execution of resistance strategies can reduce the humanitarian aspect of displacement pressures. Where this resistance proves insufficient, villagers may flee to IDP hiding sites, urban areas inside Burma, refugee camps in Thailand or seek work as migrant labourers abroad. Efforts to “escape from a predatory military” thus underlie, at least in part, the current large-scale urban migration of rural communities in Burma (Steinberg 2006: 131).

2 Conventional Frameworks for IDP Protection

Despite the increasing international attention to IDP issues, no international legal instrument has yet to define “what IDP protection involves” (Phuong 2005: 119). Nonetheless, there are guidelines for action outlining broad protection frameworks. These include the 1998 *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, the 1999 Inter-Agency report *Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, and the 2008 Inter-Agency report *Protection of Conflict-Induced IDPs: Assessment for Action*. While all three of these documents are positive steps

towards addressing the concerns of IDPs, they are, nonetheless, limited in that they prioritise top-down implementation of IDP protection measures and a state-centric form of “neutrality”.

The Guiding Principles and both Inter-Agency reports identify the primary obligation and role of states in protecting the rights of IDPs and the supportive role of external humanitarian agencies towards state initiatives. *The Guiding Principles* state that IDPs “have the right to request and to receive protection and humanitarian assistance from these [national] authorities” (UNOCHA 2004: principle 3.2). The 1999 Inter-Agency report, while prioritising state initiatives, does recognise that local NGOs can also play a role in IDP protection. The 2008 Inter-Agency report goes somewhat further, outlining how to

elicit information from displaced and affected communities, to hear from them the protection risks they face, as well as their capacities and proposed solutions to address those risks (Inter-Agency 2008: vii).

The UNHCR, however, made a much more progressive statement in 1994 when it declared that, “[p]ractical protection is provided first of all by and through the local community, through a complex social network including family, clan, village or tribe” (UNHCR 1994: 26). Similarly, Slim and Bonwick (2005: 32) have described protection as something which depends on “people’s ability to organise and claim it for themselves”.

Despite recognising the importance of local involvement, the 1999 Inter-Agency report urges that international humanitarian agencies be “supporting, not substituting for, the protection responsibilities of competent authorities” (Inter-Agency 1999: 11). States are indeed responsible for ensuring the rights of those within their borders and external support to national authorities can (in some contexts) strengthen the sustainability of protection efforts. However, the prioritisation of national authorities by external humanitarian agencies wishing to support IDP protection measures becomes problematic when the local enforcement of state policy represents the main threat to IDPs in the first place. Prioritisation of state initiatives also misses opportunities for strengthening grass-roots protection networks that support long-term goals of peace-building and democratisation (South 2004: 242).

The role of international humanitarian agencies in IDP protection is further complicated by their adherence to a form of state-centric “neutrality”. The UN has stated that it is “using humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality, and impartiality to provide the space [in Burma] necessary to bring assistance” (IRIN 2007). While humanitarian “neutrality”, in the sense of avoiding partisan support for a select political party or armed

group (including the ruling administration), can play a functional role in gaining access to vulnerable populations, prioritising the protection efforts of national authorities; adhering to state regulations; working only with state-approved actors; and refraining from work outside of state-controlled spaces amidst a state-society conflict leaves little to no room for support of indigenous protection strategies that challenge local expressions of state authority. Furthermore, restricting humanitarian assistance to state-approved distribution channels in state-controlled areas increases pressure on civilians to submit to abusive local expressions of state authority they would otherwise have sought to resist.

In contrast, much of the success of indigenous organisations providing assistance to IDPs cross-border has been due to their ability to evade state control (TBBC 2008a: 20-21). Many of these local aid organisations do retain links to armed opposition groups – or at least rely on such groups for security within conflict areas. However, the transparency, accountability and relative independence with which local aid organisations have been able to operate (South 2004: 246) have mitigated concerns that such assistance reinforces the power and control of insurgent groups.

The contradiction between the state-centric form of “neutrality” described above and the needs-based principle of impartiality was made especially clear in 2006 when Burma’s Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development issued new guidelines delimiting the work of international organisations operating in Burma. These included prohibitions on “conducting or distributing any surveys not mentioned and approved in the original project documentation” (GAO 2007: 18). The UN reports that the resulting “data weaknesses have impeded international organizations’ efforts to assess needs, conduct strategic planning and implement programs” (GAO 2007: 24). These restrictions serve to suppress local voices and marginalise the “everyday politics” of village communities, thus obstructing humanitarian agencies’ efforts to support indigenous protection strategies. They also conflict with “[o]n-going monitoring of the protection requirements of internally displaced persons, and how these needs are being addressed” which remain crucial for any effective external implementation of IDP protection programs (Inter-Agency 1999: 10).

3 Concluding Remarks

In the context of Burma’s state-society conflict, the IDP protection mandates of humanitarian agencies are inevitably political insofar as these agencies must either support or marginalise the resistance strategies of rural villagers; strategies which challenge local expressions of state power and

authority and which constitute persistent forms of “everyday politics”. Village-level efforts to resist abuse remain the most effective IDP protection measures currently employed in Karen State and other parts of rural Burma and their success is, as Scott observed, “contingent on relations of power” (1989: 12).

Furthermore, local-level efforts to address human rights abuses represent crucial opportunities for external engagement with human rights issues amidst an otherwise restrictive political environment. Yet they risk being missed by international actors who remain overly focused on national-level politics. As Bonwick (2006: 21) notes regarding lessons learned from protection efforts in Colombia, “Analysis that puts too much weight on dealing with complex macro-level issues may miss opportunities for micro-level solutions”.

The effective implementation by humanitarian agencies of any IDP protection mandate thus depends on their willingness and ability to listen to local villagers about the situation of abuse they face and their own efforts to resist this abuse and to support these admittedly political strategies; strengthening villagers’ positions in their “relations of power” with local authorities; increasing the options through which rural communities can decide for themselves how to best respond to abuse; and avoiding activities which undermine village-level resistance strategies or otherwise strengthen state power and control over civilians at the local level. As appropriate external support for local resistance strategies inevitably depends on local context, a point of departure would be the establishment of alternative fora free of state and armed NSA control where indigenous communities and community-based organisations can openly engage international humanitarian agencies, discuss their own efforts to resist abuse and proffer initiatives on how these efforts can be practicably supported.

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UNOCHA see United Nations Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs

Flüchtlingspolitik im Karen-Gebiet

Zusammenfassung: Obwohl der Zugang internationaler Hilfsorganisationen nach Burma sich in der vergangenen Dekade verbessert hat, bleibt die Debatte über die angemessene Beziehung zwischen Politik und humanitärer Hilfe ungelöst. Die Debatte ist insbesondere bei Fragen des Schutzes von Binnenflüchtlingen (IDPs) sehr begrenzt, die mehr und mehr unter den Schutz humanitärer Hilfsorganisationen fallen. Der konventionelle Rahmen des Schutzes von IDPs basiert auf einem Top-Down-Modell, das sich gegen eine politische Einflussnahme ausspricht, lokale Initiativen zum Schutz gegen Missbrauch marginalisiert und lokale Kontrolle über Schutzmaßnahmen verhindert. Lokale Widerstandsstrategien bleiben aber im gegenwärtigen Karen-Staat und in anderen Teilen des ländlichen Burma die effektivste Schutzmaßnahme. Die Befriedigung der Schutzbedürfnisse und der humanitären Notlage von Flüchtlingen bleibt so untrennbar mit dem Engagement der „täglichen Politik“ der ländlichen Bevölkerung verbunden. Der Artikel versucht, konventionelle Auffassungen des Flüchtlingsschutzes zu hinterfragen, die auf staatliche Neutralität setzen und die tägliche Politik außen vor lassen.

Schlagwörter: Burma/ Myanmar, Karen, Flüchtlinge, Internationale Politik, Schutz, humanitäre Hilfe, Neutralität