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ESCAPE TO NOWHERE



A man holds his son who is facing death from severe malnutrition. There is no place for them to run to anymore, no escape anywhere.

Information for Action +++ International Campaigns for Peace +++ Grassroots Education and Organizing

Escape to Nowhere

We can push the refugees out at any time...we will assist only those who are wounded or sick, and send them back immediately when they are well enough to travel, without waiting until the fighting stops...My understanding is that it is a military, not political matter. If it was a political matter we would give them protection...but I want to stress that we will certainly push them back, we can not let them stay here for years. - Thailand's Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart on the thousands of refugees fleeing the SLORC's arrival at Mannerplaw.

by C.A.C.

SLORC's belligerence against villagers along the Thai-Burma border has been a deadly fact of life for years. But while the people have learned to accommodate--or escape--the violence that accompanies the Burmese army wherever it goes, a clear understanding of this perpetual and malevolent abuse often escapes international attention. With the recent escalation in SLORC's campaign to wipe out resistance, it has become even more pressing for Burma-watchers worldwide to understand the people's dilemma, especially because the spectre of forced repatriation can be felt looming eerily overhead.

To many observers-- diplomats, aid workers, journalists and government bureaucrats-- SLORC's recent capture of Mannerplaw was a combat episode that sent thousands of Karen villagers into Thailand. They perceive a causal link between fighting in the jungles and new refugee arrivals. Without doubt, when the bullets start flying people will run away to whatever safe ground they can find, as they have done from the Mannerplaw area. However, a closer examination of the refugee situation-- especially in the Mae Sot area where some of Thailand's oldest refugee settlements are-- shows that the connection is not quite so simple.

When asked, most refugees will cite that their reasons for fleeing their villages inside Burma--and not going back-- are not extraordinary military offensives. Refugees come to Thailand *not because of extraordinary combat, but because brutal military*

domination over civilian life has become ordinary, and the ordinary has become intolerable. This applies even to the thousands of recent arrivals from the attack on Mannerplaw, the majority of whom were already refugees in their own land before they crossed the border. Consider these statements collected from Karen refugees in camps near Mae Sot. When is combat ever cited as the reason they fled?

"We came to Thailand about 10 years ago because we were afraid of the Burmese, so we ran. They tortured people. We didn't dare stay anymore. The whole village came. Nobody lives there anymore."

"I left my village about 20 years ago with my family because the Burmese were doing their Four Cuts policy [Four Cuts is a Burma Army policy of systematically terrorizing, executing and driving into destitution civilians in the villages in an attempt to undermine civilian support for opposition forces - this policy is still in full force]. They were killing many people."

"We came to Thailand about 7 years ago because the Burmese disturbed us all the time, tortured people, arrested people and ordered them to be porters and do many other things. First we went to Noh Pa Doh refugee camp, then we moved here."

"When I was in Pee Ta Ka village, people chose me to be headwoman. The villagehead has to stay in the village all the time because when SLORC comes and demands things like porters, the headperson has to deal with them or else they go and make trouble for the villagers, and the SLORC also orders the headperson to

go here and there all the time. The SLORC camp is near the village, in Paw Yin Pu, so they could come every day when they wanted. I was too old and weak to go here and there whenever SLORC ordered me. I couldn't do it, so I left the village. The villagers liked me and wanted me to go back, but I didn't dare to stay there anymore."

"I came here 5 or 6 years ago because we lost everything there. We had a field but the government took it. My father loaned the field to the government because he needed to borrow money to buy goods to trade. Then we couldn't pay back the money so they took the land."

"I came to Thailand about 10 years ago because the Burmese [army] oppressed us. Whenever they came to our village they took people to be porters, and I was afraid of that."

"This is our second year in Thailand. We came because the Burmese asked for porters and we didn't have time to work to survive, so we didn't want to stay anymore. I came with my whole family."

"We came to the Thai side because we didn't dare stay there anymore--the Burmese arrested people and used us as slaves and porters. If you didn't escape, they never released you. We've been on this side for 9 years now."

"I came to Thailand 5 years ago because it was too hard for us to stay in our village. We couldn't get food for ourselves because we had to work for SLORC all the time. I also had to go as a porter twice for 10 days each time."

"I came to Thailand 9 years ago because we faced many problems and we were afraid of the Burmese. Whenever they saw us they arrested us and forced us to carry things for them, and sometimes they beat us. I had to go as a porter so many times I can't even count them. When they told us to carry

we didn't even know how many days it would be, we just had to run away because they never released us for 5 or 10 days."

"We left our village because the Burmese Army came. They arrested people to be porters, tortured people and buried some people alive to kill them. We went to Kler Day, then 4 years ago the Burmese Army came there too so we had to come here. This July I went back to my home village to visit some relatives. The soldiers came to catch porters."

If the real issue were temporary asylum from combat, none of these people or thousands like them would choose to give up their farms, their homes, their jobs, their children's education, their entire lives, to wander unwanted and abused into marginally better conditions in Thailand-- and then stay for 2, 5 or 10 years. It's easy enough to find temporary shelter in the rugged mountains. Unfortunately for the thousands of families that flee to the hills, it is often impossible to return to their former lives, and the long trek to Burma's "liberated areas" or Thailand begins.

In addition to the some 75,000 refugees currently registered in camps in Thailand, there are unknown numbers who have fled their villages and came to the camps only briefly before drifting into mainstream Thailand. The refugee numbers can be deceptively low, because as these people check out, new ones arrive and the camp rosters seem to show a stable population. There are, of course, many, many people who come to Thailand for the same reasons but never enter the camps at all, but pick up work as illegal migrant laborers. Further, there are untold thousands, by many estimates hundreds of thousands-- of villagers who have fled the areas of the most severe oppression and settled anew, still within Burma's boundaries in border areas they consider safe. Until recently, Mannerplaw had been one such location. And this is just the Karen people coming to Kawthoolei. What about the Kachin, Rohingya, Chin, Mon, Burman and peoples of Shan state. Thus, we can see that over the last few decades there has

been a massive internal dislocation and international migration of people fleeing oppression in Burma. The numbers can only be guessed at, but in Thailand clues everywhere indicate that the problem is immense: a huge illegal migrant population, increasing numbers of women and children from Burma ending up in the sex industry, and new refugee arrivals daily.

January's collapse of Mannerplaw sparked a crucial leg of the journey for some 10,000 or more people: crossing the border into Thailand. The majority of these people originally came from areas far flung from the isolated jungles around the ex-KNU and resistance headquarters.

Joining the refugees already in the

...brutal military domination over civilian life has become ordinary, and the ordinary has become intolerable.

Mae Sot area, these people now must finally submit nearly all control over their lives to external forces. No land, no citizenship, no political rights, and most significantly, no voice in the upcoming inevitable discussion on how to send them back to Burma. Thai officials have indicated that the refugees will be sent back as soon as the situation inside Burma returns to "normal." This is exactly what the people should fear, and what the international community must help to prevent. What is normal inside Burma is a perverse betrayal of human dignity, and this, of course, is what refugees have been fleeing in one way or another for decades.

It's bad enough that ostensibly savvy Thai officials should fall into the trap of thinking that the situation across the border could simply "return" to a state that is normal enough for the refugees to return home and exist safely. That some, such as Khun Sanan quoted above, flout even that flawed premise indicates the careless whim upon which so many lives depend. Unfortunately, others who don't pretend to believe that the situ-

ation in Burma will be returning to normal aren't much better. Army Commander Wimol Wongwanich told reporters that when the time comes refugee repatriation must be handled "carefully." Although the asylum-seekers have asked to be repatriated to specific locations (places which no doubt would offer at least temporary relief from their tormentors), Khun Wimol argues that this would be tantamount to supporting the rebels. "When we try and send them back somebody always comes out and says we aren't showing respect for human rights," he complains, "which isn't true because we've been careful to look after them and to repatriate them to the proper place." Are these places the army camps and relocation camps that the people fled to begin with?

The plight of these new asylum-seekers underscores even more distinctly the solution to the crisis. Security and peace for Burma's people can only be achieved by the universal application of all civil, political and human rights which are due to all members of the human family. There is only one solution to the refugee crisis: an enormous social transformation in Burma which replaces the disproportionate power of the military wielded with brutal impunity in campaigns of ethno-political hegemony, with some form of government which guarantees all Burma's people the basic human rights to pursue freedom and happiness.

For refugees waiting out the resolution of Burma's woes from the cramped squalor of Thailand's border camps, the light at the end of the tunnel is not yet visible and the walls seem to be closing in. Compounding the oppression of their initial victimization inside Burma, they have found only meagre succour from the powers available to help them, and can expect little improvement unless international pressure on their tormentors both inside Burma and out escalates.

from "Hanging on to Hope",
Burma Issues, February 1995



ETHNIC GROUPS IN BURMA: Development, Democracy and Human Rights

by Martin Smith

A report by Anti-Slavery International

Martin Smith is well known for his writings on Burma, and his magnum opus 'BURMA: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity' is an invaluable work of reference for anyone involved with any aspect of that country. His latest work, a succinct 140 pages, was commissioned by Anti-Slavery International, the eighth volume in its human rights series.

The report is divided into three sections. The first gives a brief overview of Burma's recent history, followed by a most useful survey of Burma's main ethnic groups, in which are included the Chinese and Indians. The numbers cited (an estimated 400,000 Chinese and one million Indians) amply justifies their inclusion, and the intermittent racism they have suffered is on a par with any other group. Although the Chinese have been living in Burma since the days of Kublai Khan, both they and the Indians are usually omitted from Burma's listed ethnic groups.

In this section Smith tackles some contentious questions, such as "What is an Ethnic Minority?" and what number can be realistically attached to the Karen population of Burma? (SLORC calculates 2.5 million, the KNU claims 7 million, and independent anthropologists estimate 4 million: but more importantly, Smith identifies the complicating factors of language and population distribution)

The second section deals with military rule and human rights abuses. While much of the material here will be sadly familiar to those following Burma, it is well-chosen and clearly laid out. Relevant United Nations declarations, articles and conventions are highlighted and attached firmly to

specific forms of abuse. The point is made that ASI considers arbitrary arrest and violence used to forcibly relocate villages, and military demands for compulsory or unpaid labour, to be modern forms of slavery.

The environmental and cultural effects of Burma's long conflict is carefully documented, in select rather than comprehensive detail. Topics covered are the destruction of forests, the likely environmental consequences of planned dams and tourism projects, the neglect of education, religion and culture in border areas, opium cultivation, increasing levels of forced prostitution and the spread of AIDS. Again, the specific rights of children, women and indigenous people are linked to the mismanagement of Burma's natural and human resources.

The final section indicates the way in which Burma might move towards a harmonious future. Smith points out that while peace is a pre-requisite to development, democracy and human rights, it does not by itself guarantee any of these things. For progress towards these goals, there must be widespread public debate and consultation with opposition leaders of all persuasions and ethnicities. This in turn means that all political prisoners and detainees must be released and permitted to consult freely with each other. Some guidelines are offered to NGOs planning to enter Burma.

Smith perceives limited signs that SLORC is influenced by international opinion - its signature to a small but increasing number of international conventions and protocols in recent years, its willingness to accept visits from the UN Special Rapporteur and the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, its opening of dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, its drafting of a constitution which does offer some

concessions to ethnic demands. While SLORC concessions to world opinion have a surreal, Alice in Wonderland quality - for they always appear to offer far more than they deliver - the fact that even gestures are made should not be discounted if the long deadlock with Rangoon is ever to be broken. Nowhere does Smith suggest that anyone should accept SLORC statements or gestures at face value, or that pressure on the regime should be relaxed

ETHNIC GROUPS IN BURMA carries a chronology of important dates, a selected bibliography and extracts from the ILO Conventions concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour. It does not have an index. The book succeeds admirably in focusing on some important aspects of Burma, and sorting out salient facts from the mass of material available. By this means the book is kept simple without becoming simplistic. It provides a timely and readable introduction to Burma for those unable or unwilling to handle weightier tomes: and even experienced Burma hands will find the professional presentation helpful for quick reference.

Copies are available from Anti-Slavery International, The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL, England. Price (until March 1st) is UK£4.00 (+ 50p post and packing).



Slorc on the Offensive Again

by N. Chan

Following nearly three years of relative quiet on the battle fronts, Slorc launched a major military offensive against the Karen in mid-December 1994. The offensive caught Thai authorities, basking in the "success" of their constructive engagement policy with Slorc, by surprise. Although sporadic fights between several of the ethnic insurgent groups and Slorc troops had continued since Slorc's 1992 cease-fire, there had been no major campaigns between armed combatants.

The offensive began as the Karen National Union (KNU) was struggling with an internal conflict between Karen Buddhist and the Karen Christian leadership of the KNU, sparking speculation that there was a definite link between the two events.

Karen Buddhists, although making up a majority of the KNU, have few top leadership positions. This situation created tension within the organization which erupted in early December near the KNU headquarters of Mannerplaw. A small group of Karen Buddhists mutinied and closed off part of the Salween River which provides a major transportation service for Mannerplaw. Negotiations between this small group of dissidents and some of the KNU leaders seemed to have reached a mutually agreeable solution when several mutineers suddenly, and without warning, rejected the agreement. According to one eyewitness, several Karen Christians were, at that point, executed.

A KNU statement of 15 December, charged that Slorc was behind the conflict and had sent agitators to stir up dissension between Buddhists and Christians. The statement went on to say, "Through the work of its undercover agents, it [Slorc] succeeded in organizing some unscrupulous opportunists to agitate in one area of the KNU." The Burmese military's history of creating religious and ethnic

conflicts to gain a firmer hold over the country gives reason to suspect the statement is correct.

While the KNU was trying to settle this "internal" conflict, Slorc began moving heavy weapons and reinforcements into its Sleeping Dog Hill stronghold above Mannerplaw (TN 941216). One source estimated that at least nine Burmese battalions numbering 2,700 to 3,600 troops were deployed around Mannerplaw which was being defended by some 1,000 Karen troops (TN 950126). Slorc also had at its disposal, heavy artillery pieces recently purchased from China. With the help of some Karen mutineers who were well acquainted with the local terrain, Slorc launched its attack against Mannerplaw.

On January 27, 1995, the Burmese army overran Mannerplaw. Karen soldiers, not wanting to leave a base for Slorc, burned down their headquarters of 21 years. "It was clear in advance that the Slorc, with heavy weapons it had acquired from China, had the capacity for a heavy offensive," the Karen said in a statement issued on the 5th of February. KNU leader, General Bo Mya also said he abandoned Mannerplaw because he did not want Karen killing Karen, referring to the presence of some Karen mutineers among the attacking Slorc troops.

The fall of Mannerplaw was a definite political victory for Slorc, but KNU's withdrawal not only saved lives, but also set the stage for a new strategy in the struggle for self-determination. "On 26th January, the KNU abandoned Mannerplaw and switched from static defence, positional warfare to active guerrilla warfare in order to continue the struggle," the KNU statement explained.

Karen mutineers number approximately 400 to 500 members according to local sources. Slorc has insisted that the attack on Mannerplaw was carried out by members of this Karen

Buddhist faction with only some logistical support from the Slorc. However, even Slorc's friends find that hard to believe. On February 3, the Burmese envoy to Thailand, U Tin Win, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry to receive an aide memoir from Dr. Surin, officially conveying Thailand's concerns over the impact the assault could have on the life and property of Thai nationals living along the common border. (BP 950204) A few days later, an unnamed Thai official commented, "If we [Thai government] believe the Slorc's words that the fighting was between the two Karen rival forces and not the Burmese army's operation against the KNU, we would not have summoned the Burmese ambassador for a protest." (TN 950208)

Slorc was quick to act on the new situation. On December 21, they formed the Karen mutineers into the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Organization (DKBO) with its own army, the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA). By the end of January, the military regime had officially handed Mannerplaw over to the DKBO and renamed the Karen State as the Kayin State (BP 950130). Slorc's propensity to use a change of name as an attempt to signify important political changes, was once again employed.

Kawmoora, another large KNU base further south, and opposite the Thai town of Mae Sot in Tak Province, continued to come under heavy artillery attacks from Slorc soldiers. Thai border authorities estimated that from 3,000 to 3,500 Slorc troops were carrying out the assault against Kawmoora which was being defended by approximately 1,000 KNU forces.

The artillery barrages were fierce, with reports of 1,000 or more shells falling on the camp each day. Some of the shells also fell on the Thai side of the border, resulting in a Thai military build-up in the area. (continued on page 6)

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Conflict over Thai policy

The Thai government has reacted with confusion to SLORC's latest move.

On January 27, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs called on the Foreign Ministry to review its constructive engagement policy towards Burma. (BP)

On January 31 Foreign Minister Thaksin defended this policy and said Thailand would remain neutral in the current offensive against the Karen. (TN)

On February 1 NSC Secretary General Charan Kullavanijay said General Bo Mya and other refugees would be granted temporary shelter in Thailand, but would be returned as soon as Burma was safe. On the other hand, the Interior Minister, Sanan Kachornprasart said recent Karen refugees would be forced back to Burma without waiting for the fighting to stop. (TN & BP)

(continued from page 5)

On February 20, several shells fell near Huay Ka Lok refugee camp which is four kilometers inside Thailand. The shelling was no accident, and terrified refugees ran for cover wherever they could find it.

That night the KNU decided to abandon Kawmoora, and their troops began to withdraw early on the morning of the 21st. Local sources claim that, shortly before the KNU troops had withdrawn, SLORC fired shells which contained some sort of chemical which caused disorientation, bleeding from the ears and nose, and unconsciousness in many of those affected.

In keeping with its tradition of manipulating the news, SLORC reported that the Burmese military was not involved in the assault on Kawmoora. Their television news report claimed that the attack was made by Karen Buddhist mutineers (DKBO), and that

On February 2 the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Chair, Suthin Nappaket, said ASEAN should exclude Burma from its planned first meeting of 10 SEA nations in December, as disciplinary action for its attack on Manerplaw. (TN)

On February 3 Deputy Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan said Thailand would not abandon ASEAN's constructive engagement policy towards Burma. (TN)

On February 4, outgoing Foreign Minister Thaksin had changed his mind, and questioned constructive engagement in the light of Rangoon's latest offensive. (TN & BP)

On February 7 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it would consider whether Thailand should serve as a mediator between the Burmese junta and the ethnic minorities. (BP)

On February 10, Suthin criticised Thailand's constructive engagement

the KNU fled into 'the other country', their way of referring to Thailand when they are displeased with their neighbor.

As the fighting raged on, it was once again, the villagers who had to suffer the most. From 6,000 to 10,000 new refugees fled into Thailand, leaving behind their homes, their gardens, their meagre possessions, and their hopes for the future. If SLORC continues its offensive, tens of thousands more might move into Thailand, creating a serious problem for Thailand and for the private organizations who are struggling to provide them with basic food, shelter and medical services. Thailand, while not happy about welcoming new refugees onto its soil, has pledged to protect them and help provide them with the services they need.

from "Hanging on to Hope",
Burma Issues, February, 1995

policy, saying it was unprincipled, and anyway it clearly wasn't working. (TN)

On February 11 Army Commander General Wimol reaffirmed that the Thai army would not permit Karen refugees to use Thai soil to stage a counter-attack against the Burmese. (BP)

On February 15 Burma accused Thailand of obstructing its fight against the KNU by supplying the Karen with food and medicine. (BP)

On February 16 Acting Foreign Minister Surin summoned the Burmese Ambassador to protest the abduction of three Karen leaders from a Thai refugee camp, saying it was a violation of Thai sovereignty. He also protested the incursion of Burmese troops onto Thai soil. Surin further stated that Thailand would do what it could to help in the conflict between the Burmese and the Karen. (TN)

House Committee on Foreign Affairs again urged the Thai government to review its Burma policy, and to avoid the influence of permanent officials. NSC Secretary-General Charan responded to Suthin's criticism by stating there was nothing wrong with Thailand's current policy towards Burma. (TN & BP)

Burma threatened Thai troops with shelling if they were not removed from the area opposite Kawmoora. Thailand's Third Army Commander pointed out that Thailand was entitled to protect its own territory.

Meanwhile the Thai Board of Trade led a delegation of 80 businessmen to Rangoon to meet ministers responsible for trade, economic planning and development mining, agriculture, forestry, transport and telecommunications. It said Burma appeared to be more stable. (TN 950216)



Between a rock and a hard place: the fate of the Rohingya

by Anna Mitchell

There is a trick well-known to every conjurer. "Watch!" he says, flourishing empty sleeves and pockets. And while audience attention is firmly focused where the Maestro wants it, hey presto!, the white rabbit emerges unexpectedly from his hat.

SLORC has an instinct for such tricks and sometimes it appears that the international community is like a meek theatre audience, spellbound and amazed that the action is not where it appears to be, things are not what they seem.

While international concern seemed fixated on the release of Aung San Suu Kyi until the January assault on Manerplaw swung attention round to the Thai-Burmese border, an even more outrageous and systematic assault is taking place on the Bangladesh-Burmese border. Here the UNHCR, financially supported by the US, Japan and Canada, is colluding in a repatriation program. Characterised as 'voluntary', it redefines the word in an alarming way.

The Rohingyas, a Muslim minority of over one million in the Buddhist state of Arakan, have been persecuted in Burma for decades. Since 1942, 1.5 million have either been expelled or forced to flee. The earliest Muslim settlements in Arakan can be dated back to the 7th Century AD: but many Rohingyas are still not entitled to any form of citizenship. Their relationship with the Arakanese (Rakhine) people has waxed and waned over the centuries, but since the SLORC takeover in 1988, relations have deteriorated drastically.

In early 1991 the SLORC instigated a campaign to exterminate the Rohingyas. This involved the by-now horribly familiar litany of atrocities -

looting, rape, forced labour and relocation, destruction of villages and religious institutions, detention, execution. From 1991 to mid-1992, between 250,000 and 300,000 Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh in search of what they hoped would be temporary asylum. They were housed in 18 camps along the border.

Even as they escaped to the camps, an agreement was signed between Bangladesh and Burma to repatriate them, despite no change in the conditions which had caused their flight in the first place. The agreement did not define the role of UNHCR in Burma, and its attempts at monitoring the situation in the refugee and transit camps inside Bangladesh were continually frustrated.

In November 1993 UNHCR and SLORC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), but this gave little protection to returning refugees and has anyway expired. In the same month the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) agreed that UNHCR should be permitted to verify the highly questionable voluntary nature of the repatriation, but this was rendered impossible for them to do, since they were only granted access to refugees on the night prior to their repatriation, and it was unclear how freely the refugees could speak to UNHCR. There was well-documented evidence of coercion in the camps - refugees resistant to repatriation were deprived of food, beaten, humiliated and physically forced into trucks and sent to transit camps.

These methods caused UNHCR to withdraw from the program in December 1993. It was suspended in



Rohingya refugees waiting to be sent home. But are they ready to go?

January 1994, and during the next few months the repatriation rate declined significantly. NGOs were permitted to carry out relief activities in the camps, but anxiety and tension remained high.

In May 1994 the GoB and UNHCR signed a new agreement which theoretically provided safeguards for the refugees. From May to July 1994, 43,000 repatriations took place under this agreement. These cannot be considered voluntary, since Bangladesh camp officials openly brutalised refugees, particularly in the transit camps.

A revised and streamlined repatriation program has been in force since July, replacing refugee interviews with mass registration. In effect the mass registrations are simply UNHCR promotion sessions aimed at dispelling refugee fears for their safety. Camp officials make it quite plain the refugees have no option but to return. Any resistance, or even questioning, is summarily punished.

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Under the November 1993 MOU with the SLORC, UNHCR does have a presence both in Rangoon and Arakan. However, a basic condition of the agreement is that the SLORC Home Affairs Minister remains responsible for the entire repatriation program. UNHCR can only monitor the refugees' return to 5 reception centres within Burma, not the promised return to their villages of origin. Much of the land formerly farmed by the Rohingyas has been confiscated and subsequently settled by Burmans. The ultimate fate of returned refugees is not subject to any outside scrutiny.

Identity cards issued to returning refugees do not accord them any citizenship rights. Small-scale projects aimed at facilitating their return are entirely in the hands of SLORC officials. UNHCR is not permitted to provide any information on the situation of the 135,000 refugees repatriated since September 1992.

While it is clear that UNHCR is utterly failing to provide even rudimentary security to refugees, either in Bangladesh or in Burma, to lay all blame at its door would be simplistic. The GoB castigates UNHCR as slowing down the repatriation process. The SLORC does not want UNHCR to have anything but a token, white-washing presence. From bitter experience, the refugees know that UNHCR cannot be trusted.

What can be done? It would appear that the most creative approach to the problem is to work with the GoB in a way which enables them to care for the refugees in a humanitarian manner until such time as the Rangoon junta has been either toppled or forced to cease victimising its own people. Some \$3.2 million has already been donated to local, non-refugee populations in health, food and sanitation projects. The GoB has benefitted from tariffs imposed on relief goods and from substantial donations of equipment, including vehicles. Staff provided by the GoB for the relief effort are paid by UNHCR. And, as everywhere, refugees are used to provide Bangladeshi businesses with cheap labor.

Yet until such time as a safe return can be genuinely guaranteed, it seems even more effort must be concentrated on helping both the government and citizens of Bangladesh to assist the beleaguered and powerless Rohingyas. In doing so, they would not only acquire the respect of the international community, they could turn misfortune to advantage to the benefit of all concerned.

As for the SLORC, it should be made aware that not everyone is mesmerised either by their fake 'peace talks' with other ethnic minorities (talks in which the Rohingyas have not even been invited to participate) or by their armed offensive along its eastern border. Sooner or later the spotlight will shift to reveal the most misused, abused and voiceless of all Burma's gentle peoples.

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"*Mirror or Arakan*" January 1995

UNHCR statistics



Citizenship in Burma

Under the 1982 Citizenship Law, inhabitants of Burma are divided into three classes of citizenship.

1) Burma citizens, 2) Associate citizens, and 3) Naturalized citizens

1) Only those born in Burma and registered in Rangoon are considered full citizens. Anyone who joined the opposition during or after 1988 has had their citizenship revoked.

2) An individual, or his/her direct ancestors, must have applied and been acknowledged prior to 1982 as associate citizens under the Union Citizenship Act, 1948. To qualify under this Act, a Rohingya would have had to have been descended "from ancestors who for two generations at least have all made any of the territories include (sic) within the Union their permanent home and whose parents and himself were born in any such territories shall be deemed to be a citizen of the Union." It is unclear how many of the Rohingyas registered for citizenship prior to 1982, and, given the isolation and lack of infrastructure in Arakan State, such a restriction is unfairly prejudicial.

3) A naturalised citizen must have been born in Burma and their parents "entered and resided in the State prior to 4th January, 1948," or at least one parent must have been recognized as a naturalized citizen. A Rohingya who would otherwise qualify but who failed to apply for citizenship prior to their twenty-third birthday ceases to be eligible. Similarly, if at least one parent does not have some form of Burmese citizenship (ie one parent loses his/her citizenship and the other is a foreigner, or both parents lose their citizenship), then the children also lose their citizenship.

As a result of the exclusionary nature of the citizenship act and SLORC policies towards the Rohingyas a significant proportion of the Rohingyas, both refugees and residents of Arakan State are, in effect, stateless persons, deprived of any rights whatsoever.

Source: The Return of Rohingya Refugees to Burma: Voluntary Repatriation or Refoulement? - Draft report submitted to US committee for Refugees, 27 November 1994, pp 17-19

Chronology of Events Relating to the Rohingyas

- **Early 1991**

SLORC institutes a Rohingya extermination campaign code-named 'Pyi Thaya' (Prosperous country).

- **Late 1991-mid 1992**

250,000-300,000 Muslim residents of Rakhine State seek refuge in Bangladesh.

- **Feb 1992**

Bangladesh permits UNHCR to assume a formal role in the relief operation, due to deteriorating health conditions in the camps and international pressure.

- **April 1992**

Agreement signed between GoB and Burma to repatriate refugees without UNHCR presence.

- **Sept 1992**

First wave of repatriations commences, amidst refugee protests and violent incidents. UNHCR and private relief groups denied access to camps.

- **Dec 1992**

UNHCR withdraws from the repatriation as its voluntary character is not respected

- **Feb 1993**

UNHCR resumes involvement on the Bangladesh side only, after being allowed to conduct individual interviews with heads of families to ascertain voluntary nature of repatriation.

- **Feb 1993-July 1994**

UNHCR plays limited role in repatriation process. Refugees 'volunteer' to return in climate of extreme coercion.



There is little or no guarantee of safety for the Rohingya refugees when they return to Burma.

- **Nov 1993**

MoU signed between UNHCR and SLORC which secures a UNHCR presence in Rangoon and Arakan. A basic condition is that the SLORC Immigration & Manpower Department remains responsible for the repatriation operation. UNHCR officers authorised only to go as far as reception centres in Burma. 84% of repatriations in Nov and Dec occur without any UN supervision.

- **Late Jan 1994**

UNHCR again agrees to take part in program.

- **May-July 1994**

GoB and UNHCR sign a temporary MoU setting forth criteria for the repatriation. Approximately 43,000 repatriations take place under this MoU, in a climate of well-documented coercion.

- **July 1994**

GoB and UNHCR agree to "implement a policy based on the view that conditions have been created to allow all refugees to return to Burma."

- **Aug 1994**

Bangladesh and Burma agree on a repatriation rate of 5,000 refugees per week.

- **Sept 1994**

Approx 61,000 refugees repatriated, leaving 190,000 refugees remaining in 18 camps. UNHCR under pressure from GoB to complete repatriation by the end of the year.

- **Feb 1995**

Total no. of repatriations to date 134,800



REFUGEES

News this month

U Nu dies - Burma's only democratically elected Prime Minister, U Nu, died on February 14, aged 88. The NCGUB issued a statement of profound regret at this death.

Diplomatic Visits - Thai Foreign Minister Thaksin, on his January visit to Rangoon, invited Sec-I Khin Nyunt to visit Thailand. The invitation was accepted but has now been postponed. (TN 950203)

Suu Kyi speaks - In a rare public statement, Aung San Suu Kyi announced that she had not and would not strike a secret deal with the SLORC. Both a Canadian envoy to Burma and Alvaro de Soto were denied permission to visit Aung San Suu Kyi. (TN 950124, Montreal Gazette 95012, BP 950215)

UN Chief representatives in Rangoon - Alvaro de Soto, Assistant to the UN Secretary-General and Francisco Vendrelli, Director of East Asia & Pacific Division of the UN Political

Affairs Dept met with Burma's Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw during their 5-day mission to Burma.

Political Prisoners Freed - Prior to the visit to Rangoon of the UN Secretary General's representative, 23 political prisoners were released, including the NLD's Aung Khin Sint.

Renewed fighting between SLORC and the KNU - Following a split in the KNU ranks between Christian and Buddhist factions, the Burmese army broke its ceasefire agreement and joined with the breakaway Buddhists, now known as the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Organisation (DKBO) to capture Manerplaw on January 27. The KNU torched most of the camp before departing. (TN & BP 94128)

New name - The SLORC has now renamed Karen State (Kawthoolei) Kayin State and 'handed it over' to the DKBO. (TN 950130)

Refugees - Between 6,000 and 12,000 new refugees have flooded into Thailand as a result of renewed fighting. (TN & BP 950131)

Kawmoora, said to be the last stronghold of the KNU, was captured on 22 Feb. There were reports, still being verified, that gas was used to temporarily disable soldiers. (TN 950222 and BP 950223)

Amnesty International issued a statement saying that Burmese troops are forcing hundreds of civilians to carry weapons and supplies into combat zones. (TN & BP 950204)

The DKBO attacks refugee camps, threatening to burn them down and looting supplies. On February 13 they kidnap 4 Karen Buddhists from Bae Klaw Camp, but a second kidnap attempt fails (TN950215)



BURMA ISSUES

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