

BURMA ISSUES

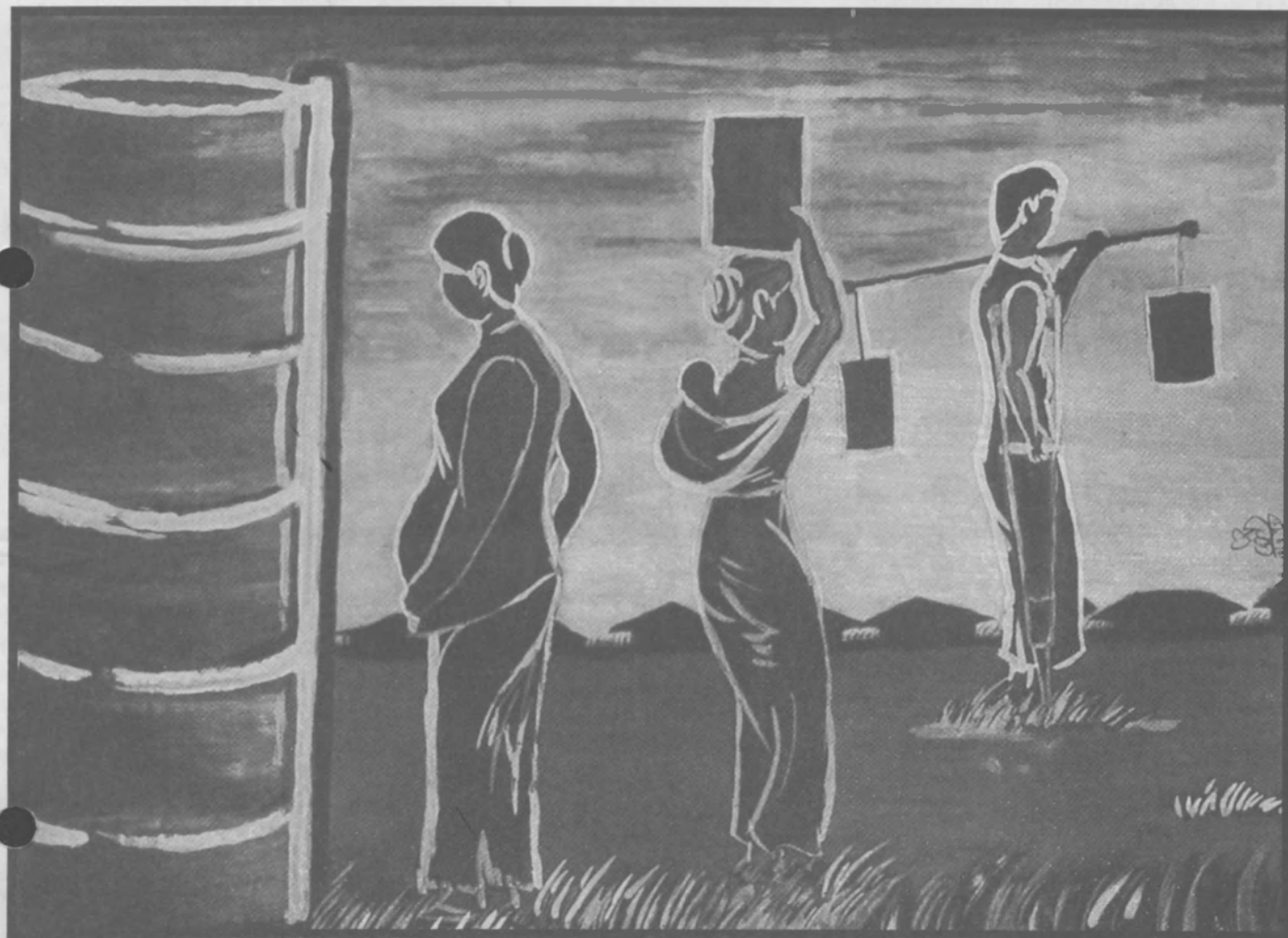
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"Too much emphasis on economic progress is dangerous, because what happens is that you start sacrificing human values to economic expediency and that, in the long run, will lead to conflict."

– Aung San Suu Kyi



Painting by Saw Po K'ler Htoo, 16 years, Maw Ker High School

Burma Issues, the monthly newsletter of Burma Issues, highlights current information related to the struggle for peace and justice in Burma. It is distributed internationally on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned about the state of affairs in Burma.

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SHOCK VALUE: A HUMAN RIGHTS COMMENTARY

One of the more challenging duties a human rights organization assumes is to remain vigilant and self-critical, always scrutinizing the goals, tactics and impact of its work. In fact, sharpening this institutional self-consciousness may be its most valuable contribution to an overall social movement. Struggling to articulate the meaning of human rights, explicating the culture of violence in society, or leading the search for avenues to peace, we compel ourselves and others to engage in the analysis which is necessary for social transformation. We must also wrestle with agonizing ethical and philosophical dilemmas which cut to the core purpose of our efforts – promoting human dignity.

The March edition of *Burma Issues* printed an article on the role of human rights abuse documentation in the struggle for social change, which suggested one such dilemma. While it proposed a new model for documentation, the piece lacked a concrete example of how collecting and publicizing such information can at times injure, rather than promote, a people's movement for justice. In this month's article I would like to produce one such example and by doing so seek to reflect on the quality of human rights reporting and its underlying – sometimes conflicting – messages.

In a seasonal pattern now familiar to the Thai-Burma border, the month of March ushered in a tense period of violence and fear, particularly among refugee populations. As in all arenas of Burma's civil war, there was anger and there was death, there was suffering and despair, as well as strength and hope, love and resilience. There was also support from the international community, provoked in part by the swift response of local human rights organizations monitoring the border. In a scramble to document attacks on refugees and alert the world, most coverage focused on the minutiae of the incidents: the route of attack, the caliber of weapons employed, the colors of badges and uniforms, theories of official complicity.

Perhaps inevitably, the body count also became a major preoccupation, epitomized in graphic detail by the much-publicized photograph of a dead refugee woman. Burnt, swollen and disfigured, her anonymous body lays in the dust, her face has been burned off. Her corpse is naked, whatever clothes she might have been wearing as she attempted to flee the shelling of her camp

scorched from her body. A shocking portrayal of the random violence of war, the photo also suggests a disturbing portrait of the priorities and the privileges of human rights reporting.

Reflection on the enthusiastic circulation of this picture leads one to confront a trying paradox. Although the fundamental motive for human rights work, including reporting



Ma Pyne in life. Honoring her struggle is one form of human rights documentation.

of human rights abuse, is to promote and celebrate people's inherent dignity, there is no denying that this is one of the most graphically undignified images one could ever see. It is difficult to imagine that were she alive, Ma Pyne – the deceased woman – would ever consent to it, or that her close friends and relatives, if consulted, would either. If she were a sister, a friend or a colleague, would we choose the same image to represent her life to the world? If the answer is no, then we have to wonder at a human rights movement in which the average person is anything but a colleague. What exactly is the relationship between human rights organizations and the Burmese people whom they hope to aid and represent?

Assuming that she wished to retain her dignity in life, why then would a human rights movement choose to disregard that wish in

death? Perhaps the answer is that with too great an emphasis on exploiting the details of human rights abuse, the movement has ended up paying more attention to people in death than in life. Is it possible that the dignity of their lives is less interesting or less useful than the final indignities done to them in death?

The counter-argument is that sometimes drastic measures are needed to shake people out of their complacency. The world must know what is happening in rural Burma, and must face the ugly reality of violence and war to become motivated enough to get involved. Moreover, graphic images are solid evidence which enhance the credibility of human rights reporting.

Much can be said about “shock value” – drastic measures to ~~the~~ ^{the} drastic times. But it is also true that there is much that goes on in rural Burma besides graphic violence, and the world needs to know about this as well. There is a constant, unrelenting struggle to overcome racism and violence; there is an unflagging commitment to living in peace; there is an unshakable conviction in the dignity of human life. These features of daily life have as much – if not more – to do with human rights as the ubiquitous body count. Yet while these more mundane aspects of daily life may offer little shock, they offer much value. In fact, they hold out more hope for a peaceful future than do close-ups of tattered flesh.

In the case of Ma Pyne, the scant ~~fact~~ ^{fact} captioned to the image taught us nothing of her life, where she was from, where she hoped to go. We know nothing about her dreams, her fears. She was a refugee, but what did we learn of her flight from Burma, or her struggle to make ends meet in a refugee camp? It was noted that she died several months pregnant, but what do we know of her husband's life, before and after this tragedy? *Who was Ma Pyne?* is a question left unanswered because no one bothered to ask, even though people all over the world were treated to a view of her scorched, naked body. Did we neglect the woman's life in relishing the injustice of her death?

These harsh observations may force us to consider the relationship between human rights work as we currently practice it and the popular peace movement which Burma needs. One hopes they are one in the same, but when the people's role is limited to that

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of the victim, the informant, and the corpse, it is hard to see how all this documentation is serving their empowerment. For human rights documentation to be a vital element of a people's struggle it must represent their quest for dignity in life.

However, to do so, documentation must reorient its focus from the technical to the ideological. An overemphasis on technical achievement drives a wedge between those with access to the media and the Burmese people. Photography is an obvious case in point. Another example is standard human rights abuse investigation, which often follows a technical format set by the researcher's agenda, rather than the ideas and needs of the people. Often the field investigator has nothing to share with the people other than a flick of the shutter and a barrage of questions – the technical necessities of documentation. An ideological emphasis, on the other hand, might see the field worker's agenda shift from documentation to education, a collaborative analysis of economic, political and cultural life in Burma and search for solutions to social conflict. Such an approach is ideological in the sense that it seeks to develop a common understanding of the social forces in Burma and how they relate to oppression.

Across rural Burma, people are struggling to have their voices heard. Fearing that they will suffer and die in obscurity, the human rights movement seeks to redress their isolation. However, the majority of such work is in the control of elites whose technical skills and access to media give them disproportionate power over how the people are portrayed. From time to time, glaring examples of this compound injustice come to the fore, such as the publication of Ma Pyne's photo. However, there remains a need for greater grassroots participation and control over human rights documentation and the whole human rights agenda. This participation can be achieved by pairing documentation with progressive, mutual education in which grassroots Burma articulates its own battle for dignity and its own vision for the future. Before she died, Ma Pyne won her own personal battle to overcome illiteracy. Ma Pyne learned to hold a pen and sketch out those few lines that spell her name, that declare her place in the world. She struggled to tell us, and tell us she did, that she was Ma Pyne, and she was human. Were we listening?



Chris Cusano

Heroin and AIDS in Burma

So many young Burmese are injecting heroin that some medical experts say that Burma has the world's highest rate of HIV infection and AIDS contracted from dirty needles. One study which was financed by the United Nations Drug Control Program, found drug abuse prevalent in 1.7 % to 25% of the population studied in 3 dozen Burmese townships. With 88% to 99% of drug abusers identified as male, the study implied that up to half the men in some townships could be addicted. This and other studies were cited in a new book, *War in the Blood: Sex, Politics, and AIDS in Southeast Asia*, by Dr Chris Beyrer, an American epidemiologist who has worked in the region and interviewed health workers, addicts and people with AIDS. *New York Times, Bangkok Post, 4 May 1998* Christopher S. Wren.

UNDCP looks at Burma's poppies

For the first time since the 1980s, Burma's military junta has agreed to full representation in Rangoon of the U.N. Drug Control Program (UNDCP). On May 10, the U.N. and Burma announced a 10-year drug control program, part of a UNDCP program to eliminate poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle (poppy-cultivating regions of Burma, Laos, and Thailand) within a decade. The U.S. is contributing \$3 million toward the plan. In April, Richard Dickins took his post in Rangoon as resident representative of UNDCP. He announced that UNDCP's Burma program will be comprehensive, including crop development, health care, and education. It will cover the entire country, not just Shan State, where most of Burma's opium is grown.

Bangkok Post, 16 Apr, 10 May 1998. Far Eastern Economic Review, 7 May 1998.

Executive Director of the UNDCP, Mr Pino Arlacchi made a 5-day visit to Burma beginning on May 11, following official visits in Yunnan Province, China. During his visit, he met with senior SPDC officials, and toured Kokang and Wa areas of northern Burma, visiting poppy-eradication projects and meeting with local leaders.

New Light of Myanmar, May 12-15 1998.

Displaced in Burma

Three reports published in April look at and displaced populations resulting from counter-insurgency operations in Karen and Shan areas. The Burma Ethnic Research Group published a study estimating that 30% of the rural Karen populations of eastern Burma, or 480,000 people, are currently displaced on either side of

the Thai border. The Shan Human Rights Foundation reported that over 300,000 people from Shan State have been ordered to relocate to strategic relocation sites since March 1996.

"Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma," BERG/FNF, April 1998.

"Dispossessed: Forced Relocation and Extrajudicial Killings in Shan State," SHRF, April 1998.

"Wholesale Destruction" Karen Human Rights Group, April 1998.

Ceasefire talks?

In February, KNU/KNLA General Bo Mya told journalists that he was ready for peace talks but said "I was informed that the SPDC has to clear some internal problems first before they will begin talks with us. With ongoing international pressure, I hope the military government will soon come to hold peace talks with us." Gen Bo Mya is apparently still waiting: On May 7, he told a group of 1,000 people in Tak province, Thailand, that the KNU was ready for talks with Rangoon.

Bangkok Post, 23 Feb 1998 and 9 May 1998.

Japanese money goes to Burma

On April 27, the Japanese Embassy announced that it had given Burma US\$ 1.1 million during the last fiscal year under a grassroots assistance program, despite a suspension of aid to the country.

Bangkok Post, 28 Apr 1998.

Japan's Export-Import (Exim) Bank on April 28 said that it had extended a loan to a Japanese joint venture, Nippon Oil Exploration (Myanmar) Ltd, for an offshore gas project in Burma. Nippon Oil Exploration is equally owned by Nippon Oil Co Ltd and Japan National Oil Corp (JNOC), holds a 17.2% stake in the Yetagun field, located in the Gulf of Martaban.

Bangkok Post, 29 Apr 1998.

Amazing Burma?

Thai and Burmese authorities are negotiating a memorandum of understanding to promote tourism between the neighboring countries. They are negotiating about the ability to travel overland through several border passes. Thailand is calling on Burma to upgrade roads to make overland trips from Thailand deep into Burma possible. Currently foreigners who cross the overland border checkpoints are not allowed to travel on to Rangoon, Mandalay or other Burmese tourist destinations.

Bangkok Post, 13 May 1998.

ALL CATS ARE GREY IN THE DARK

"... the map of Burma was divided into a vast chessboard under the Tatmadaw's six regional military commands and shaded in three colors: black for entirely insurgent controlled areas, brown for areas both sides still disputed and white was 'free.'" – Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 1991, p 259.

The land known to the Karen as *Kawthoolei*, situated in southeastern Burma, has for over forty years been used as a chessboard by both sides in the ongoing civil conflict being fought out between the forces of the Rangoon military regime (now known as SPDC – State Peace and Development Council) and the Karen National Union (KNU). For many of these years the Burma Army has been able to control only a limited area, which left the Karen forces to occupy a huge swathe of territory, encompassing much of Karen State and Tenasserim Division, as well as smaller areas in Mon State and Pegu Division. However, well-planned recent offensives, beginning in January, 1995, with the occupation of Manerplaw, the former KNU headquarters, have swept much of the chessboard clear and back into the hands of the Burma Army.

To complicate matters, since the fall of the KNU headquarters, a new political and military force, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization/Army (DKBO/A) has entered the fray. Notorious for their repeated attacks on the Karen refugee camps,¹ and suspected of being backed by the Burma Army, the DKBA have acquired a deservedly bad reputation. To some Karen, they are seen as raiders and looters, others see them as opponents of the KNU in league with the government, still others as hijackers of the Karen's dream for a homeland *Kawthoolei*.

A recent visit to Burma brought home to me the new dimension the DKBA have added to the political and military situation in this part of Burma. After learning of the plight of Karen villages flooded or hit by landslides late last year, members of the Christian Baptist church in Rangoon set out to deliver assistance. A mixed group of Christians and Buddhist monks pooled their contributions to purchase rice, and organized collections of used clothing. To reach the affected villages they would have to travel through DKBA-controlled areas, so assurances of security were sought, and received, from the

DKBA in that area.

The food and clothes were loaded into a little Toyota truck, and they headed down unpaved country roads, at the height of the rainy season. When the little truck got stuck everyone got out to push and drag it free – elderly church members and robed monks alike up to their knees in mud. For the last part of the journey, they were assisted by DKBA soldiers who guided them to the point of distribution. The trip ended with all the members of the team sitting singing songs and having a final meal together before setting off on the long trip back home. So encouraged were the group with the cooperation from the DKBA to reach villages displaced by natural disaster that they have since organized another trip – again an interdenominational Christian/Buddhist affair.

The effort of the churches in Burma to assist displaced people is not new – indeed it is only the churches in Burma that have been relatively successful in reaching displaced people in the border areas. As with the trip described above, it is the churches themselves that have negotiated access to the internally displaced. Conversely, international NGOs in Burma have largely steered clear of addressing the needs of internally

displaced people. As a recent study on internally displaced Karen observed, "Faced with a deeply suspicious government and operating within narrow margins ...the NGOs have approached the problems of IDPs [internally displaced people] only implicitly, attempting to reach the IDPs through addressing more general problems."²

Further into my trip I met a group of Karen who were in the process of considering the possibilities and applicability of micro-credit schemes for their community, consulting books about fish ponds and chicken breeding. They were not asking for help, they were not looking for outsiders to come and set such schemes up for them – they were thinking hard about what they could do for themselves.

I was very impressed with this small self-help effort by the Karen, too often thought of as the 'victim' in the conflict and not a 'player' to be capacitated to solve their own problems. Without wanting to underestimate the difficulties of delivering any form of relief assistance or implementing any kind of development project under the present regime, I was nevertheless impressed and humbled by their sincerity and nonpartisan approach.

All wars are dirty businesses, civil or ethnic conflicts perhaps dirtier than most. All sides in the conflict may have skeletons in their cupboard, all sides may have human rights abuses to answer for and all sides may resort to dubious methods of earning income to pay for the war. We, the outside observers, often like to simplify conflicts into right and wrong, democratic and undemocratic, just and unjust, or like a game of chess – divide the sides into black and white. The complicated counter-insurgency going on in the area known to Karen as *Kawthoolei*, now with three protagonists, not to mention private militias, is considerably more complicated than a chess game. Instead of painting the protagonists as black or white, it is perhaps more accurate to see the situation in terms of shades of grey. The DKBA with their yellow headbands are perhaps just another shade of gray in the complicated puzzle of Burma. All sides, whatever the color of their uniforms and headbands, whatever titles they give themselves, must be held accountable for past abuses.

Perhaps the key to Burma lies away from the chessboard altogether. Maybe we need to look at the self-help activities of ordinary civilians in Burma, and start to build on that.

◆ Graham Mortimer

1 A Question of Security, Images Asia and Borderline Video, 1998, p 5.

2 "Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally displaced Karen in Burma," BERG/FNS, April 1998, p 48.

"FOUR CUTS" IN CENTRAL SHAN STATE - PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

Excerpted from "Dispossessed: Forced Relocation and Extrajudicial Killings in Shan State," Shan Human Rights Foundation, April 1998.

Forcible location is part of a Burma Army military strategy, commonly known as "Four Cuts," that has been in use since 1968 against insurgent armies throughout Burma. The four cuts are aimed at cutting food, funds, intelligence and recruits provided to the insurgent groups by local villagers. As such, the strategy primarily targets civilians, forcibly moving whole village tracts to closely guarded strategic sites where their activities can be closely controlled and monitored. Large areas of Shan State have been repeatedly disrupted over the past thirty years. However, the SLORC in 1996 began massive forced relocations in central Shan State which were unprecedented in scale, and continue to this day.

All people who are forcibly relocated are effectively separated from any means they formerly had to support themselves. Thus, they move based on what they see as their best chances of survival. The movements of villagers who have been forcibly relocated appear to fall into three main categories:

- those who move to the relocation sites;
- those who continue to stay around their village, hiding in the jungle; and
- those who move elsewhere, mainly to Thailand.

The displaced in the relocation sites

Most of the villagers are too afraid to disobey the relocation orders and end up moving to the relocation sites. Unless they have relatives in the area they can stay with, they have to build their own huts, sometimes sharing with other displaced families. In most cases, the land close to the relocation sites is too arid to plant, or is already claimed by other villagers living in the area. Thus, people survive by selling off possessions and doing day labor.

"They built little huts and then they made a living doing day labor... for whoever needed work done. They did not have any fixed employers. They worked for different employers in turn. They earned about 50-60 kyats a day. It is not enough to survive, but they had to buy rice." (KHRG interview with refugee from Murng Nai, 30 Aug 1997.)

Those who have nothing to sell or cannot find work must resort to begging.

"Many don't have enough to eat. Some have

to beg along the road and people are crying all the time. Some people take refuge in the monasteries." (KHRG interview with monk from Lai Kha, 31 Aug 1997.)

Although in some areas the displaced may get written permission to return to tend their



A displaced Shan family. [SHRF]

fields if they are close to the site, the fact that villagers can be shot on sight outside the relocation site makes many too afraid to risk this.

The displaced in hiding

It is impossible to estimate the numbers of villagers who are hiding near their villages in the jungle. Those who do so are either afraid they will not survive in the relocation sites because they are too poor, or, particularly in the case of old people, simply feel too insecure to go far from their homes. They thus stay close to their farms, either secretly planting their old fields, or else relying on stores of rice they have hidden nearby. They cannot stay in their old villages, but make makeshift huts among clumps of trees, or in thick bush, where they are not easily visible.

One 18-year-old Shan villager, who had spent over a year hiding in the east of Murng Kerng, described his experience:

"We could not move to the town because we had no money. There were about four other families from our village who hid in the jungle. We took our rice from home and hid it in the ground, so we could go and get it when we needed it. We stayed under trees and moved around all the time. If we stayed

too long in one place, the paths we used became too obvious, and we were afraid the SLORC soldiers would find us. Finally, though, we found a cave, where we felt safe, so we stayed there." (SHRF interview with villager from Murng Kerng, Nov 1997.)

The displaced who flee to Thailand

Because of the difficulties of surviving in the relocation sites and fear of the abuses of the SLORC/SPDC troops, many relocated villagers decide to seek food and shelter elsewhere. Some move to other parts of Shan State where they have relatives or think they can find work. However, most of them flee to Thailand.

Some of the relocated villagers travel straight to Thailand after receiving the relocation orders, and do not even go to the relocation sites.

"In Kali and Kun Hing [relocation sites] we had heard there was nothing for most of us. How could we move there? We had no money, so how could we buy food there? Some people had money, and they came to Thailand immediately, while they still had money. We knew that if we came to Thailand we could work and get money, but if we went to Kun Hing, we would starve. So I came to Thailand. Actually I didn't even have enough money to come to Thailand, so I had to borrow some from relatives." (KHRG interview with villager from Keng Kham, 30 Aug 1997.)

Others have come to Thailand in desperation after trying to survive as long as a year or more in a relocation site or hiding near their village.

The Thai government continues to deny refuge for those persons fleeing human rights abuses in Shan State. Shan refugees fleeing to Thailand have been repeatedly pushed back across the border by Thai authorities, and unlike refugees from several other ethnic minority groups in Burma, there are no Shan refugee camps and Shan refugees receive no formal assistance from international aid groups. The result of the Thai policy has been that until the present, any Shan refugees fleeing to Thailand have been forced to try to survive as illegal migrants. The risks and difficulties in this have compounded their suffering.



S.H.R.F.

MERGUI-TAVOY DIVISION: "THINK ABOUT IT – HOW LONG COULD YOU AND YOUR FAMILY SURVIVE..."

Burma Army military strategy, as described by Karen Human Rights Group on the next page, aims to gain control of entire civilian populations in order to cut off support for insurgents.

The following testimony was collected in August, 1997, from a displaced man, 30 years old, from Lur Mu Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy Division, Karen State. His village is adjacent to the one described last month in "Our situation haunted us every day," and his testimony describes roughly the same period of time: the first weeks of military occupation in February 1997.

"Every day I felt as though I was between a hammer and an anvil..."

Large numbers of people who first fled their villages during this offensive are still displaced inside Burma and along the Thai-Burma border.

Many are still hiding in the jungle in their own regions. Some came as far as the Thai border and managed to cross over, while others who were refused entry wait on the other side. Some people with small children or elderly relatives, or those hoping to be able to maintain their fields, stay around their villages in areas they think might be safe for them. Our reporter wrote, "The places where these internally displaced people find refuge are not villages. They are only places in the jungle where they have managed to make temporary shelters to live in. Whenever they learn that Burma Army troops are approaching, they move to safer places and then stay there for another few weeks or months. Usually Karen people are used to jungle life, and they can handle the situation there. But lacking food and medicine, things are not going well. They are faced with several kinds of poverty, as they have left their villages with whatever they could carry in their backpack or basket. Up to this time these people have very limited food and medicine."

There are fifty houses in my village. In the second month of the year [February, 1997], Burma Army troops entered our village. Everyone fled in fear into the nearby jungle for safety. After a while, a few of us went to a nearby village to buy salt and other things, and were captured by soldiers there. At the time, the Burma Army had not set up

a camp at our village because there was no one there. The military persuaded the two captives that they should return to our village, saying that they will build us schools, a clinic, and other kinds of development projects.

The two came back and told us about the Army's plans for our village. We didn't believe it – we were still frightened. But they kept working on our pastor, talking to him, trying to convince him. Finally our pastor went back to the village, and he met with a Burma Army military officer who urged him to organize the people to come back. We lis-

tened to him, and decided to return to our village because he said that Army would not harm us, but if we did not return, the soldiers would search for us and if they saw us in the jungle, they will not take any responsibility for our safety.

When we returned to our village everything was quiet, things were broken and scattered everywhere. There was nothing living around our wrecked houses, no fruit left on the palms and crop trees, the skins and bones of our animals spread out and flies hovered in swarms.

We started to repair our houses, and moved into them again. The next day, troops entered our village and started to dig fox holes on all sides of our houses. They told us that no one could leave the village. Everyone who wanted to go work in their fields had to ask permission from the army officer and pay 15 kyats per day per person. It was not permitted to spend the night out by the fields – everyone has to be back in the village before dark.

Every two days, out of fifty families, two people had to take a boat to the army camp commander's station and serve as a guide for the army troops. They asked me where the rebels are, where villagers are hiding in the jungle, where the villagers hide their paddy rice [from the troops, so it wouldn't be confiscated or destroyed], and on and on. They also wanted me to tell them who were members of the village defense. It was very hard for me to take. I also had no time to work for my family any longer.

The villagers had to construct a frontline hospital, a rice storage shelter, and an administration office for the army with our own materials and labor. Every day, soldiers would roam the villagers' plantations and take what they liked for themselves. We had to live side by side with these soldiers. When they built an army base camp in Kawut Hta, we were required to collect 3,000 palm leaves and send them for roofing. To avoid problems with the soldiers, the villagers just sit tight and look on. Resigned and discouraged, we do what they ask us.

For me it was more difficult than for other people. Every day I felt as though I was between a hammer and an anvil, because they used me as a constant guide. If I did what they ordered me, villagers would hate me; if I didn't the soldiers would harm me. It would only get worse for me over time.

At that time some close friends told me that they didn't want to stay any longer. So one night after about three weeks back in our houses, nine families fled the village together. We managed to take some polished rice with us. We were lucky because after traveling two days with children, women, carrying heavy loads, we met some Karen soldiers. They gave us some more white rice and we talked about the situation.

I went back to the village once more to get some medicine I had left behind and to find out how things were there. A villager I met warned me that once I leave, it would be better to leave for good without returning. If we come back, or meet Burma Army soldiers in the jungle, they won't ask any questions. He also told me that if we manage to escape, they would like to know the way so they could follow us. Now I feel responsible to keep looking for a safer place, and if I find one I will try to go back and tell them.

When I was in my village, living alongside the Burma Army troops, one thing truly made me bitter. They confiscated our paddy rice and ate it themselves, and then they turned around and sold us their rice rations. We had so little money there, and we were forced to buy their rice to survive.

Think about it – how long could you and your family survive without any income, without time to work to support yourself, to make a living?



Reported by friends of Burma Issues.

THE STRATEGY OF THE SPDC

Aware of the massive violence and destruction that accompanies Burma Army offensives, it is easier sometimes to assume the evil intentions of individuals or groups of individuals, than it is to imagine that such destruction could be motivated by something as broad and coordinated as military strategy. However, as the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) makes clear in its recent report, "Wholesale Destruction," the consistency of the Burma Army's actions throughout offensives seems to indicate precisely that: an intensive and focused strategy for control.

Several villagers interviewed by KHRG were asked what reason they saw for the attacks on their remote mountain villagers. Some saw ethnic hatred: "I can't understand why they burned our houses. I think they hate Karen people so they burn our houses." The desire for political power, the drive to control, is also a recognizable motive: "I'm not sure. I think that the Burmese are fighting to rule over people. But if they keep killing people like this, they will rule over nothing but mud. If they want to rule over people they should not kill them like this.... I dare not go back to build a house because if they see us they will kill us. If they could look at us without killing us we would go back and build our houses." One person observed, "I hear that they said that if they burned everything in our village then the *Kawthoolei* [Karen name for the mythical Karen homeland, also sometimes the Karen people] would have nothing to eat, so we would have to go back to them [the SPDC; i.e., the villagers would have to give up on the KNU and cooperate with the SPDC]." Indeed, not just military domination, but entrenchment and control seem to be the aim, as KHRG describes it:

The policy of the SPDC, and before it the SLORC, in the case of any form of armed resistance has amounted to 'drain the ocean so the fish cannot swim;' in other words, to undermine the opposition, attack the civilian population until they can no longer support any opposition. This is the fundamental idea behind the Four Cuts policy (cutting supplies of food, funds, recruits and intelligence to the resistance)....

The direct attacks on the civilian population, characterized by mass forced relocations, destruction of villages and the village economy, and completely unsustainable levels of forced labor, have become even more prevalent in SLORC/SPDC policy in the last 2-3 years. The current SPDC plan for consolidating control over areas where there is resistance appears to consist of the following steps:

1. *mount a military offensive against the area;*
2. *forcibly relocate all villages to sites under direct Army control;*
3. *use the relocated villagers and others as forced labor, portering and building military access to roads into their home areas;*
4. *move more Army units in and use the villagers as forced labor to build bases along the access roads;*
5. *allow the villagers back to their villages, where they are now under complete military control and can be used as a rotating source of extortion money and forced labor, further consolidating control through "development" projects, forced labor forming for the army, etc. If resistance attacks still persist at this stage, retaliation is carried out against villages by executing village elders, burning houses and other means.*

The first two steps of this strategy can be

combined or reversed in some cases. Throughout Burma we can see examples where this process is at various stages. In central Shan State and eastern Tenasserim Division, SPDC is working on stages 1 and 2; in Duplaya District of central Karen State, where they just occupied in early 1997, they are implementing stages 2 and 3; in the free-fire zones of southern Tenasserim Division they are between stages 3 and 4; while in the western plains of Nyaunglebin District, Thaton District [Karen State] and many other areas they have already reached stage 5.

A villager's account, opposite this page, describes his experience of the early stages of the offensive in Mergui-Tavoy Division, Karen State.



All quotations are excerpted from "Wholesale Destruction," Karen Human Rights Group, April 1998.

NOW IN TECHNICOLOR...

In early April, Karen National Union (KNU) senior officer Padoh Aung San, second in power only to Gen Bo Mya, abandoned the struggle and defected to the SPDC, taking with him 200 followers and, according to Gen Bo Mya, 28 million baht (\$US 736,000). Padoh Aung San's defection deals a heavy blow to the KNU. Since the Burma Army launched massive offensives in 1996 and 1997, nearly all of its territory is back in the hands of Rangoon, and, reduced to the barest mobile headquarters, KNU strength and support are at a low.

Padoh Aung San was KNU Central Committee Chairman and, since 1980, head of the KNU's Forest Ministry. As Forestry Minister, Padoh Aung San was responsible for raising KNU funds from logging, and consequently had near exclusive control over the KNU's most significant source of income. He was also responsible for obtaining weapons, and since his defection, a large cache of weapons has been found and seized by Thailand's Border Patrol Police. The cache is believed to belong to forces loyal to him.

The junta has been milking this high-profile defection for weeks, and Padoh Aung San has made numerous appearances in

the state-run media praising the junta, criticizing the KNU, and repeatedly exhorting KNU soldiers to follow him. The latest propaganda move, apparently aimed directly at the KNU and Karen along the border, has appeared in the form of a small full-color brochure which is currently being passed from hand to curious hand. Amid numerous bright pictures of Padoh Aung San and his family exchanging gifts and handshakes with prominent SPDC leaders, are statements by SPDC Chairman Gen Than Shwe and Padoh Aung San. In both Karen and Burmese, Padoh Aung San appeals directly to "KNU leaders, soldiers, all the Karen people," urging them to follow his lead: "...now the government is trying to arrange a way to make peace. So if we, the KNU, don't try to accept this offer, then in history we will be remembered as the ones at fault." He promises, "The government will support us and take care of us as much as possible. They want to help us more than we even need. We should not fight each other. That is my announcement to you, the Karen people. Our hope is to have complete peace." ❖

Brochure, statement signed by "Padoh Aung San, Chief Economy Department, KNU Central, April 27, Pa-an, Karen State."

Bangkok Post, 21 Apr, 28 Apr, and 4 May 1998.

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"The KNU will continue to fight the government soldiers as we have guerilla units along the border in areas opposite Mae Hong Son, Tak, Kanchanaburi and Ranong [Thailand]. We can get rid of at least 100 enemies every month."

— Gen Bo Mya, leader of the Karen National Union, to a gathering in Tak Province, Thailand, where he also stated the KNU is ready to negotiate a cease-fire with the SPDC.

...

"The only way things are going to get better in Burma is for so much money to come in via overseas Chinese and other investors is that the Burmese Army just becomes greedy and less psychotic. Plain greed can be dealt with; we can understand corruption." — Sterling Seagrave, author of *Lords of the Rim*, a study of ethnic Chinese business empires in Southeast Asia.

...

"We'll get there (all the necessary conditions) one day, as it is the durable solution to the problem." — UNHCR regional representative, Amelia Bonafacio, on talks between the UNHCR office in Rangoon and Burmese officials discussing plans for refugees situated along the Thai-Burma border.

...

"We have a moral obligation to use the same grassroots pressure that helped rid the world of apartheid to help bring democracy back to Burma." — Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett, a Seattle pediatrician who has worked with Burmese refugees on the

Thai-Burma border, in supporting the Seattle Burma Ordinance due for consideration later this month, which would discourage city contracts with companies doing business with the Burmese regime.

...

"Sanctions do make a powerful point. They put tremendous pressure on repressive regimes and they can often have beneficial results, as we've seen in South Africa." — New York City Republican Mayor Giuliani, on signing a selective purchasing law modeled on the anti-apartheid laws of the 1980s. The NYC council backed the measure 50-0, making it the 18th US city to do so along with one county, the State of Massachusetts, and one Australian city.

...

"Unless it is profitable, no one will come here. We want this country [Burma] to progress, but the approach has to be different. It has to look good and save face for both sides." — Halpin Ho, Chinese immigrant to Burma, manager of the Ho Group's Burma interests.

...

"I love Burma. I want to see Burma as a free and peaceful country. If the SPDC also wants Burma peaceful, they should start to talk with the democratic groups." — James Rupert Russell Mawsley, dual Australian-British citizen, recently sentenced to five years' imprisonment charged with illegal entry and being a mercenary in the pay of rebel groups.

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