7. Rights of Minorities

7.1. Background

Armed opposition of ethnic groups has existed since Burma gained its independence from Britain in 1948. These groups have engaged in insurgency activities against the central government in order to gain greater autonomy or, better, complete independence. When the military government reasserted power in September 1988 after suppressing the pro-democracy movement, it pursued offensives against the armed opposition groups. The newly-formed SLORC also adopted a policy of negotiating cease-fires with individual ethnic groups rather than dealing with the "Democratic Alliance of Burma" (DAB), the umbrella organization which grouped them together. Since 1989, the SLORC/SPDC has agreed to cease-fires with 16 of the armed ethnic minority groups. However, cease-fires have sometimes been short-lived. In March 1995, a cease-fire agreement between the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the SPDC broke down after three months. In January 1996, the SPDC signed a cease-fire agreement with the Muang Tai Army (MTA) led by Khun Sa in Shan State. Nevertheless, other Shan opposition groups have continued their armed struggle against the SPDC.

In areas where cease-fire agreements have been reached, human rights abuses continue to be committed. In fact, in these "national reconciliation" areas human rights abuses have increased rather than abated. The groups signing cease-fires entered their agreement with the SPDC with the understanding that it was a first step, to be followed by a peace agreement, development, and a political settlement of their demands. Beyond the cease-fire agreements, no progress has been made. There has been no move on the part of the SPDC to engage in political discussions with opposition groups to reinforce the military cease-fire agreements. Under the terms of the cease-fire agreement, some groups have been allowed to keep their arms and soldiers; however, the SPDC has vastly increased the number of its soldiers in those areas.

Cease-fires groups are also unhappy with the implementation of SPDC's so-called local development projects. SPDC officials have redirected development project funds into their own pockets. As a result, the groups have had to finance the construction of schools and hospital facilities as well as provide the necessary infrastructure themselves. By doing this, cease-fire groups have attempted to prove that they are able to carry out their own development projects efficiently and humanely.

The continuing armed conflicts in the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Chin States have been accompanied by massive human rights violations. The SPDC army routinely seized civilians to work as porters, the majority of whom are members of ethnic minorities. These civilians are arbitrarily detained, tortured and ill-treated. They are severely punished, especially when they are unable to perform all that is required of them. Further abuses of porters include being repeatedly beaten with bamboo sticks or rifle butts, being deprived of food, water, rest and medical treatment, and being killed.

Hundreds of thousands of others, including many ethnic minorities, have been

forced to work as unpaid laborers on new construction "development" projects in the past years. No one is spared, neither the sick nor the elderly, neither women nor children. For many, this work is utterly degrading, and causes cruel and inhuman suffering, which often results in death. Countless numbers of ethnic minorities have been removed from their homes to resettlement areas, where the conditions of the "resettlement" are brutally enforced by the army. In areas where the SPDC suspects opposition, some or even all of the civilian population is forced at gunpoint to move into relocation camps, where they are told that they cannot return home until the opposition groups among them surrender. If villagers do not obey, they are summarily executed. Their homes, crops and livestock are also destroyed. Such "scorched earth" campaigns have been conducted in Karenni State, Shan State and Karen State.

7.2. Threats to cease-fire groups for their support of the NLD

On August 11, 1998, the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), the Shan National People's Liberation Organization (SNPLO), and the Kayan New Land Party (KNLP) – all groups having cease-fires signed – issued a joint letter calling on the SPDC to enter into a tripartite dialogue with the NLD and the representatives of the ethnic groups. The letter also stated support for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's call to convene a People's Parliament.

On August 18, 1998, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) issued a statement calling for dialogue and the SPDC to respect the results of the 1990 elections. The Shan State Army (SSA) a coalition of the Shan State Army-North (SSA-North), Shan State National Army (SSNA), and the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA recently renamed Shan State Army-South) issued an even stronger statement on September 15, 1998, calling for a tripartite dialogue and for a transfer of power to the 1990 election-winning party. In this coalition, the first two groups have entered cease-fire agreements with the SPDC. The SURA has not.

After rounding up the MPs-elect and many key NLD members, the SPDC ordered representatives of the six cease-fire groups to go to Rangoon for a meeting: these included the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA-a Kokang group) and the Shan Special Region 4. Lieutenant Colonel Than Aye from the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) named Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as an "enemy of the state" like Western countries and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). Lt-Col. Than Aye told those gathered that as a result of signing cease-fire agreements, they were allied with the SPDC. "As the NLD is the enemy of the Tatmadaw," he continued, "any group that supports the NLD becomes our enemy." In addition, the SPDC sent a representative to Loikaw to put pressure on the KNPLF, KNLP, and SNPLO to retract their joint statement of supporter the NLD or deny having made it.

7.3. Forcible closure of Mon National Schools

Since July 1, 1998, the Mon State Peace and Development Council has instructed its local authorities to close down all Mon National schools in the whole of Mon State;

these were built and run as self-supporting entities of the local Mon community in the State. The authorities claimed the teaching Mon literature is illegal and the running of Mon National Schools in the villages is against existing laws.

This forcible closure of Mon National Schools in Mon State is a second time a promise made has been broken by the General Khin Nyunt, Secretary 1 of the SPDC. When the New Mon State party met the SPDC leaders on June 29, 1995 after concluding a cease-fire, Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt stated that the teaching of Mon literature was not possible in school time in government schools according to the SPDC's policy. However, he promised that if the students in Mon State wished to study Mon literature, they could attend special Mon literature studies outside school time in government schools. Many Mon students at the village level joined the Mon literature classes and they were strongly supported by the Mon community. However in 1997, the Mon State LORC issued an official statement that it would not allow the use of government schools any longer to teach Mon literature. They later instructed the concerned township authorities to prohibit the teaching of Mon literature in government schools. The local authorities forced Mon teachers to leave the schools and ordered the students through the parents not to join the teaching of Mon literature classes. The government teachers also kept all school materials after school time and did not allow the Mon teachers to use these materials.

Concerning this new instruction, NMSP leaders asked the authorities to explain the reason why they ordered a stop to the teaching of Mon literature. Gen. Ket Sein, commander-in-chief of Southeast Military Command, replied that the Mon community must build their schools if the students really wanted to study the subject.
Therefore, the Mon community leaders built many Mon schools in rural Mon villages with their own funds and manual labor in order to teach Mon literature in the 1998-99 school year. At the beginning of 1998, many Mon literature schools had been built and started to run in the first week of June 1998.

On July 16, 1998, an order to close the Mon National schools in entire the Mon State was issued by the Commander of Military Intelligence Unit 5 (MI-5) based in Moulmein, Mon State. This order affected all 123 Mon National Schools and an estimated 6,000 students. This order furthermore warned anyone who failed to comply would be arrested. (***Source: HURFOM***)

For additional information on the ethnic minorities situation in Burma see also the following chapters: Chapter 1, Extra-judicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions; Chapter 5, Forced Relocation and Internally Displaced Persons; Chapter 6, Deprivation of Livelihood; Chapter 11, Freedom of Movement; and Chapter 13, Abuse of Women.

7.4. Meeting for Shan New Year disturbed

A meeting of preparation for Shan New Year was held at a meeting hall inside the Haung Leik monastery, Tacheleik township, Shan State, on August 8, 1998. While the meeting was going on, a group of soldiers led by Captain Min Wai from LIB 331 surrounded the monastery compound. The troops ordered the people at the meeting not to come out until 6:00 p.m. The organizers of the meeting explained the reasons of the meeting and asked the soldiers to let them leave the monastery. However, the soldiers did not allow anyone to depart. Sai Lin and Nang Bain, two Shan youth leaders, negotiated with the

troops and finally participants from the meeting were able to rush to their homes. Two Shan leaders were later taken to the headquarters of LIB 331 and interrogated by the battalion commander. Though they were later released because the authorities could not charge to them, all monasteries in Tacheleik were sealed off between August 8-12, 1998. (***Source: HRDU***)