SWAN

Shan Women's Action Network Newsletter

October 2007 # 8

Commemorating deceased monks and civilians: past and present

For years, SPDC generals and senior officials have been seen daily in Burma's state-run media attending religious ceremonies, offering food and necessities to monks, and sponsoring the repair and restoration of old temples, and the building of new ones to "preserve" Buddhism in Burma. However, since September 2007, the real sacrilegious face of the SPDC has been exposed to the entire world, as it cracked down on the peaceful protests led by tens of thousands of monks throughout Burma. TV screens around the world repeatedly flashed the ghastly footage of SPDC soldiers and riot police shooting monk and civilian protestors, killing a Japanese journalist, and kicking and beating protestors who were herded onto army trucks.

Such brutality committed in front of cameras in broad daylight, leaves no doubt as to the savagery with which the SPDC soldiers and riot police raided the monasteries at night, arresting monks and sending them to detention centres for interrogation and torture. First-hand testimonies of horrendous abuses committed during this violent crackdown have been in the news constantly for weeks up to the time of writing. Thousands have been detained and untold numbers of civilians, including monks, have been killed. Monasteries continue to be raided, monks arrested, and an official smear campaign against monks has been launched in the media.

Some have claimed that these recent acts of brutality against monks are a sign of the SPDC's increasing desperation to cling on to power. However, such brutality has been commonplace over the past decades in the ethnic lands since the beginning of the civil war, in areas inaccessible to the international media. In Shan State, there have been numerous incidents of monks and civilians being detained, interrogated, tortured and killed by the regime's troops. In the month of March 1997 alone, three abbots were killed near Kunhing, Central Shan State; one was tied up in a sack and drowned in the Nam Paang River. In later incidents, monks were tortured by having nails driven into their skull, and having their limbs hacked off.

At the same time, the regime has been systematically destroying the fabric of Buddhism in Shan State through its anti-insurgency programs. The mass forced relocation of over 1,400 villages in central and southern Shan State since 1996, uprooted thousands of Buddhist monks and novices, and left over a thousand temples derelict.

To pay tribute to those who have died while peacefully advocating for the rights of their people, and the Buddhist monks in Shan State who have been tortured and killed by the Burma Army during the ongoing civil war, on 11 October 2007, SWAN, along with Shan communities on the Thai-Burma border, organized religious commemorative ceremonies at various temples.

At the ceremonies, people made merit for the deceased monks and prayed for the end of violent acts committed by the SPDC in Burma. Monks also

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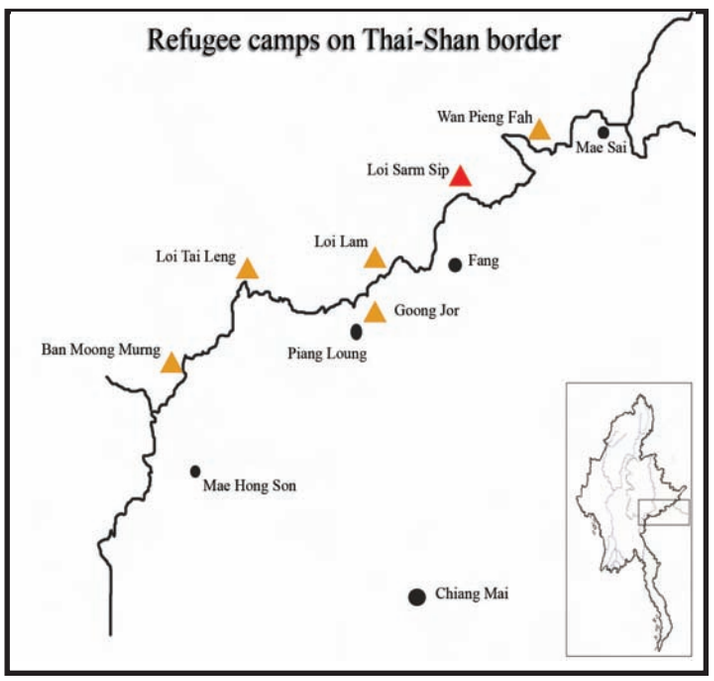
Fleeing refugees find no safe refuge at Thai border

200 meters from Thailand lie the demolished remains of Loi Sarm Sip refugee camp, set up by Shan State refugees fleeing human rights abuses committed by the Burmese military regime earlier this year. In May 2007, the Thai army determined that the site, located within Shan State, was "too easily seen from Thailand" and forcibly relocated 24 families 500 meters farther into Burma. These 91 people, having just finished rebuilding their new homes, were moved onto a steep slope in the middle of the rainy season. Currently, they are receiving no support from the Thai authorities, and are still at grave risk of being abused or killed by the Burmese military and its ally, the United Wa State Army.



Loi Sarm Sip is only one example of a major problem for Shan State refugees attempting to find safe refuge on or near the border. Denied asylum inside Thailand, these refugees have set up communities along the Thai-Burma border in hopes of finding some safety and stability. However, despite their location right on the border, the camps remain at risk of being pushed back by the Thai authorities. Loi Sarm Sip refugees were ordered to move deeper across the border for no other reason than they were "within eyesight of Thai border." In a similar incident in 2004, the Thai Third Army deputy commander, Manas Paorik, pushed children, women, elderly and orphans from the Loi Tai Laeng refugee community back into Burma, immediately after fierce fighting there.

MESSAGE FROM SWAN

We are humbled by the outstanding bravery shown by the monks, nuns and other civilians who recently dared to march openly in streets throughout Burma to oppose military rule. We witnessed with horror and anguish the cold-blooded crackdown by the regime on these peaceful protestors.

While we have been heartened by the response of various countries, such as the US, EU and Australia, in imposing new sanctions on the regime, we are appalled that some countries are still continuing to support Burma's dictators. In particular, we regret the refusal of China and India to condemn and pressure the regime, owing to their massive energy investments and strategic interests in Burma.

Given the overwhelming groundswell of public support for democratic change that has manifested itself in Burma, we cannot understand how these countries can continue to scorn the aspirations of Burma's people and clasp the bloody hands of the generals.

The regime is as usual trying to buy time by making token concessions, such as allowing UN envoys into Burma, to assuage international pressure, while at the same time continuing to hunt down, arrest and torture protestors and their families. We urge the international community not to be taken in by their ruses. The recent protests have unleashed a momentum for change, and concerted international pressure must be exerted at this crucial time to bring an end to the decades-long suffering of the people of Burma. Targeted sanctions must be imposed on the regime and their cronies, and there must be an international arms embargo on Burma

We believe that such pressure will force the regime to begin making genuine concessions, such as the immediate release of all political prisoners in Burma, including Aung San Suu Kyi and Hkun Htun Oo, and the implementation of a nationwide ceasefire, which are necessary conditions for meaningful dialogue to lead to peace and democracy in our country.

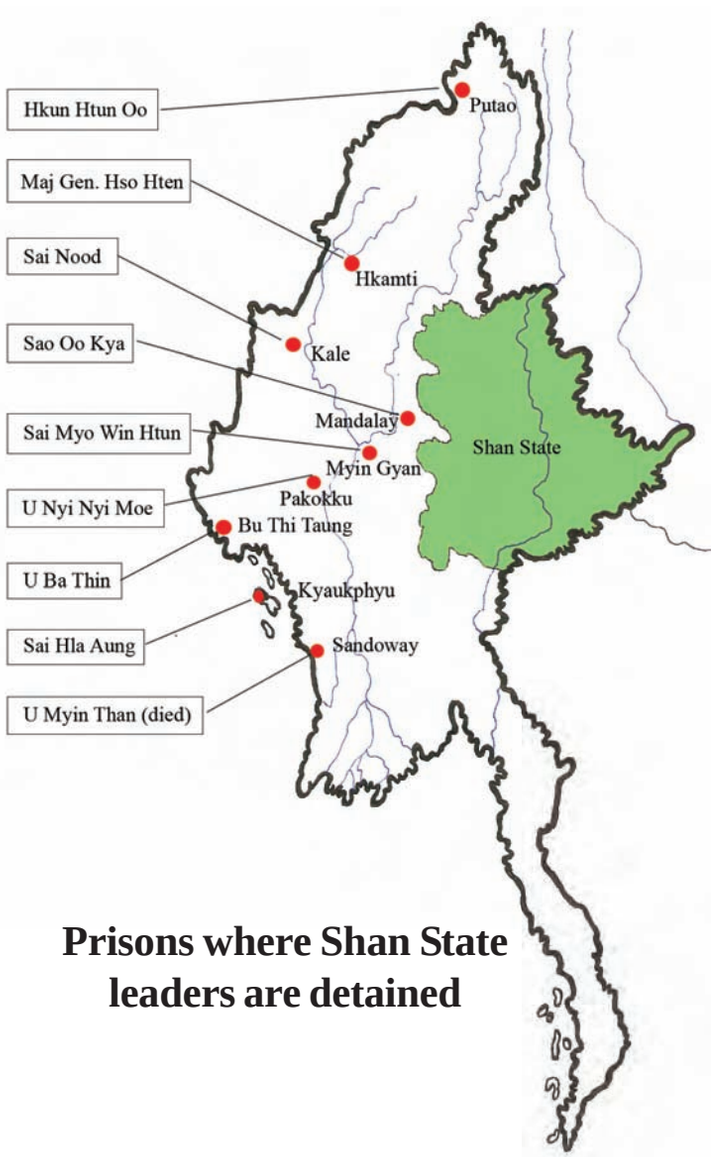
The situation is of great concern to the Shan community as the regime continues to persecute and commit all forms of atrocities against the people in Shan State. It is urgently needed for the Thai government to review their policies towards refugees from Shan State, allow them access to refuge and protection inside Thailand, and honor their right to receive humanitarianaid. ❑

Gratuitous cruelty to Shan State political prisoners and their families

In 2005, various Shan State political leaders were arrested by the Burmese military authorities. Denied access to their lawyers, nine of them were tried and given absurdly long prison sentences. Hkun Htun Oo, the 64-year-old elected leader of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy was sentenced to 93 years in prison. His "crime" had been simply to advocate peacefully for political reform.

Not only were these leaders given long prison sentences, but, in a gratuitous act of cruelty, they were sent to different prisons in remote areas of Burma, hundreds of miles from their hometowns. None were imprisoned in Shan State, nor even Rangoon, but instead were sent to the far north of Burma, in Kachin State, to the far west, in Arakan State, as well as to Mandalay and Sagaing Divisions of Central Burma.

> ***"We didn't commit any crime. We reaffirm our aim to empower our people to bring peace, justice and equality to the people."***
> ***Hkun Htun Oo***



Prisons where Shan State leaders are detained

It is anyway extremely difficult for family members to visit political detainees. They need to apply to the military authorities for approval to make a prison visit, and permission is only given to immediate family members to visit, meaning that other relatives or friends cannot help out in providing supplies to the detainees. The far distance of the prisons from Shan State makes the visits even more difficult to arrange. Visits end up being up to four months apart.

Families of political prisoners are already struggling to survive financially. The cost of traveling across the country to visit remote prisons is an added burden. At the prisons, the costs of providing food and medical supplies are also inflated.

As a result, the health of these detained Shan State leaders is a source of great concern. Last year, on May 2, U Myint Than, aged 56, the spokesperson for the "New Generation Shan State", passed away under suspicious circumstances in Sandoway Prison, Arakan State. The junta claimed he died of epilepsy, but his close associates insist he was tortured.

Most of those detained are elderly, with serious health conditions. One of the detainees had already undergone several operations for his health before his imprisonment, and is currently in need of further surgery, but is afraid of being treated in the prison hospital. Another prisoner began suffering from mental illness after his imprisonment, and has been unable to recognize even family members when they visited.

If the detainees had been imprisoned closer to their homes, their relatives would at least have been able to regularly monitor their health. As it is, they remain hundreds of miles from their loved ones, left to agonize for months between visits with no information about their fate. This gratuitous cruelty is yet another of the inhuman acts for which the Burmese military regime must be held accountable. ❑

Promoting safe delivery at the border

22-year-old Ying Hom Noan is a medic at the Wan Piang Fah clinic serving over 2,800 refugees at the Shan-Thai border. Originally from western Shan State, she came to the border at the age of 15 and received training in emergency obstetrics care at the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot. Since 2006 she has been running the "MOM" (Mobile Obstetric Maternal Health Workers) Project, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, at Wan Piang Fah. SWAN interviewed her about her work.

Q: What does your work involve?

A: My day-to-day work at the clinic involves giving ante-natal and post-natal care, performing deliveries, and administering family planning. But as part of the "MOM" project, I have been collecting reproductive health data from the refugees in the camp. I have also given training to other medics at our clinic in obstetrics, and I have given training to traditional birth attendants who live in different sections of the camp.

Q: What are some of the challenges you have faced?

A: One problem is malnutrition among the refugees. This causes difficulties during delivery, and causes babies to be underweight. It can also prevent women from breastfeeding. Sometimes the problem is not only lack of nutritious food, but wrong traditional beliefs about what women should or should not eat during and after pregnancy. Some healthy fruits and vegetables are avoided by women for superstitious reasons.

Women also used to avoid coming to give birth at the clinic. They preferred to give birth at home, with traditional birth attendants. They were embarrassed to give birth in front of strangers, and also afraid that they would have to be operated on at the clinic. Some also had superstitious beliefs that bad spirits might inflict harm or illness on their baby if it was born away from home.

The traditional birth attendants have had a lot of experience in delivery, but sometimes do not have very sanitary practices. Some also "massage" the baby in the womb, which can cause damage. And some do not recognize dangerous symptoms that require emergency care. This is why I have been giving training to them.

Q: Have the traditional birth attendants been responsive to your training?

A: It has been quite difficult because I am much younger than them. Also, some new practices are difficult for them to adapt to. For example, some say it is awkward having to wear gloves for delivery. But anyhow, they are now helping ensure that most women in the camp come to give birth at the clinic.

Q: Have there been any problems related to family planning?

Some husbands pressure their wives to have children when the women don't want them yet. Some husbands also prefer sons to daughters. They don't treat them equally, and it causes problems in the family. ❑

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chanted a discourse to drive out evils and "ogres" from our land: in this case, the evil army ogres and their followers, which have been preying on our people and lands with no mercy. Leaflets detailing cases of monks who had suffered extrajudicial killing and torture at the hands of the regime's troops were also distributed among the community. The religious activity was followed by the reading out of some cases from the leaflets, and the releasing of red balloons and hot air balloons carrying our messages and leaflets. Before releasing the balloons, people wrote messages relating to the current situation in Burma and within Shan State on pieces of coloured paper, to attach to the balloons. Common messages and calls included "Free Burma, Free Khun Htun Oo" and "SPDC, get out!"

At least 3,750 Shans participated in the activity in ten locations along the Thai- Shan border.

Further information can be seen at: www.shanwomen.org ❑

Lives destroyed by false trafficking charges

The international community has become increasingly concerned about the problem of trafficking in persons, allocating increased funds for anti-trafficking programs worldwide. International agencies inside Burma have also focused on this issue, and assisted the Burmese military regime in drawing up new anti-trafficking legislation which was passed in September 2005.

However, the danger exists that in countries like Burma where there is no rule of law, anti-trafficking legislation may be misused and can end up as a tool to oppress women even further. Extreme caution should therefore be exercised when promoting anti-trafficking programs there.

SWAN recently assisted a woman who had served a sentence of nine and a half years in Burma for child trafficking, a crime of which she was completely innocent. This is her story.

"I was born in northern Shan State, in a village in Tang Yan township. My family are farmers. In the early 1990s there was a lot of fighting in my area between the regime's troops and Shan resistance forces, so my village was relocated to Tang Yan town.

"In 1994 I moved with my husband and children to Ho Mong in southern Shan State, to an area controlled by the Mong Tai Army (a Shan resistance force) to stay with my sister. We ran a small store. Only about a year after that, the MTA surrendered to the regime. In 1996, I decided to go back and visit my family in northern Shan State. I also took some clothes to sell. The local authorities gave me an ID card from Ho Mong.

"On my way north, I stayed with a relative in Mong Hsu. As is normal in Burma, the relative had to report my presence as a visitor to the village leader. There was no problem on my way north, but on my way back I was stopped by the police and taken to the local police station. I think they were suspicious of my ID, because it was from the south, from a former Shan resistance area.

"I was traveling with a woman relative and her four children aged between 2 and 18. Her husband had been killed the year before by the regime's troops, and she wanted to find work in Ho Mong. She and her family were also arrested, as well as another woman, who I had never met before, traveling with her 22-year-old daughter.

"I and the other women were accused of trafficking, even though I did not understand what this meant at the time. All of our photos were taken, and we were imprisoned for 3 days at the police station at Mong Hsu. We were interrogated, and then taken to court and asked to sign that we had been involved in trafficking. We were beaten by the police, so we had to sign.

"We were sentenced to 14 years in prison for trafficking. Some other relatives paid 3,000 kyat each to get the children released. Then after four days we were transferred to Bae Lin prison camp, Sin Kaing township, Mandalay.

"While I was in prison, I had to do hard labour, sometimes breaking up stones on roads outside the prison, and sometimes inside the prison. My wrists are now permanently injured from this. We had to work from 6 am till midnight. Sometimes we were beaten.

"My relative Nang Lu, who was sentenced with me, couldn't eat the food in the prison, and was too weak to do the work. She died after about a year. The other woman Nang May is still in prison, serving out her full 14-year sentence. She was always getting into trouble in the prison and once tried to run away.

"I received one visit from my sister each year, and my brother and another monk also visited me once. But my husband never visited me. He sent our four children, who were aged one to nine years to stay with relatives, and then remarried. I missed my children terribly.

"Finally, in mid-2006 I was released, after nine years and 6 months in prison. I think my sentence was cut because of good behaviour. I traveled to visit two of my children who were staying with my mother in Tachilek, and I ordained there as a nun for several months. I have not yet seen my two other children. One is living in another part of Shan State, and another one is working in Bangkok.

"I am now surviving by working in northern Thailand, picking chilies on a farm. I live in hope of being able to see my other children one day." ❑

An orphan's story

Five decades of civil war have left terrible scars on the peoples of Burma. One of the most cruel legacies is the high number of orphaned children, who have lost their parents not only in combat, but also through the systematic human rights violations committed by the Burma Army against civilian populations in ethnic areas. Such violations include forced portering, extrajudicial killing, torture and rape. In the fifteen schools which SWAN is running along the northern Thai border for over 2,000 children, about one out of every five children is an orphan.

The orphans staying at the schools live together in dormitories, looked after by teachers. There are 250 orphans staying at the Loi Tai Laeng refugee camp, on the border of Mae Hong Son province. Many of them lost their parents at a young age. One of them, 16-year-old Sai Kham, related his story. His eyes filled with tears when he spoke about his parents.

"My name is Sai Kham and I'm studying in Grade 7 at Loi Tai Leng School. I came here in 2000, when I was nine. At that time there were only about 60 children staying in one dormitory with our teacher Mya Jing. I felt safer being here with other friends who were the same age as me.

"I come from Laikha in central Shan State. My father died when I was seven years old. The Burmese soldiers came to take him as a porter, and he was killed on the way because he couldn't carry the heavy ammunition. They didn't give him any food and he didn't have enough strength to work, so they killed him. I heard this from the other villagers who were taken with him.

"When I was eight, the second nightmare of my life happened. My mother was raped and killed by the Burmese soldiers. I saw my mother's dead body at our farm. I can still see the picture in my eyes. Some neighbors then took care of me and I stayed with them for one year. After that, the Shan Army came into the village and I came with them to study at Loi Tai Leng School.

"I like to read news and we get the newsletter from SHAN (the Shan Herald Agency for News). When I read about the Burmese soldiers killing villagers and abusing them, it really hurts me. It reminds me how the soldiers killed my father and mother. What I wish and want them to do is to stop killing people in villages. I want our people to be free from danger.

"I want to continue my studies and be a teacher, to transfer my knowledge to children who have no opportunity."

While the scars of Sai Kham's traumatic past have yet to heal, the irony is that his current home is far from safe. Loi Tai Laeng camp houses over 2,000 refugees like Sai Kham who have been unable to seek refuge in Thailand. They live on a remote mountain top under the tenuous protection of the Shan State Army, only a few kilometers from military bases of armed groups allied to the Burmese regime. The location was shelled in 2005, and remains vulnerable to attack at any time. Sai Kham's nightmare has yet to end. ❑

Salween dam construction launched in southern Shan State

Ignoring the potential negative impacts on the livelihoods of millions of ethnic people, the MDX Group Co Ltd of Thailand and Burma's ruling regime, jointly launched the construction of the giant Tasang Dam on the Salween River in southern Shan State on 29 March 2007. The Burmese military authorities forced over 400 villagers from Mong Ton and Mong Pan to attend the dam construction launching ceremony, which was hosted by MDX.

MDX has been preparing for the construction of the Tasang dam since 1998, and on April 3, 2006, MDX and Burma's regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), signed the MoU for the joint development of the hydropower dam. In March, 2007, the China Gezhouba Group was awarded the preliminary construction contract for the dam.

The US$6 billion Tasang hydropower dam is expected to produce 7,110 megawatt of electricity. However most of the electricity from the dam will be exported to Thailand.

The location of the planned dam is in the middle of an area of ongoing conflict in Shan State, where the regime's troops have been committing systematic human rights violations. Already, since the beginning of the dam studies, the regime has forcibly relocated about 300,000 ethnic people from the area surrounding the dam site and potential flood zone. Villagers hiding near their old homes have been tortured, raped and killed.

Sexual violence is still ongoing. In August 2007, a 50-year-old woman from Mae Kaen, along the planned power transmission route from the Tasang Dam to Chiang Mai province of Thailand, was raped by a Burmese soldier, then given 2 tins of condensed milk as "compensation."

Despite all these serious concerns, in April 2007, an MoU for the implementation of another hydropower dam on the Salween in northern Shan State was signed between the regime's Hydropower Implementation Department and two Chinese companies: Farsighted Investment Group Company Ltd and Gold Water Resources Ltd. ❑

Fears over imminent China-Burma oil and gas pipelines

Residents of northern Shan State fear mass forced relocation to make way for oil and gas pipelines from the west Burma coast to southern China.

According to news reports, a planned US$2 billion oil pipeline will let China bring in oil from the Middle East without having to ship it in tankers round the Strait of Malacca, while a US$1.04 billion gas pipeline will transport natural gas from reserves off the Arakan coast to China.

The pipelines will run from Kyaukphyu across Central Burma and northern Shan State to Kunming in China's Yunnan province. Construction is slated to begin this year.

Map by Shwe Gas Movement

People are fearful that all communities in the path of the pipelines will be bulldozed and that a massive increase of Burma Army troops will be deployed to provide security. From experience, increased militarization means increased land confiscation, forced labour, extortion, torture, rape and extrajudicial killings for local populations. ❑

SWAN urges EU to impose stronger sanctions against the Burmese military regime - 12 Oct 07

SWAN has consistently called for economic sanctions against the Burmese military regime, and at this crucial time urges the European Union to impose strong new economic sanctions on the regime.

The Shan State is the largest state of Burma, and one of the richest in natural resources. Since the opening up of the economy to foreign investment in 1988, foreign companies have rushed in to invest in our forests, minerals and rivers. Yet the vast majority of our people have seen no benefits from this investment whatsoever. On the contrary, we have seen a massive increase of Burma Army troops to protect these investments, which include vast logging concessions, gem mines, and mega-dams, including on the Salween River. This has led to increased forced relocation, land confiscation, forced labour, extrajudicial killing, torture and systematic rape. Our environment has been ravaged, and food security has plummeted, as have standards of health and education, resulting in an influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Thailand.

The international community has recently witnessed the regime's brutal crackdown on the peaceful demonstrations led by Buddhist monks in Rangoon. In fact, such brutality has been commonplace over the past decades in Shan State, in areas inaccessible to the international media. Countless civilians, including Buddhist monks, have suffered extrajudicial killing and torture at the hands of the regime's troops. Since the publication of our report "Licence to Rape" in 2002, detailing the rape of 625 women and girls in Shan State, SWAN has been exposing the ongoing use of rape as a weapon of war by the regime. With the continual build-up of Burma Army battalions in Shan State, civilians face the constant threat of violence, and women and girls live in perpetual fear of sexual assault.

It is very clear that foreign investment in Burma at this time means complicity in the military regime's oppression of our people and exploitation of our resources. We therefore urge the EU to impose strong new economic sanctions on Burma's military regime. In particular, we call for an international arms embargo. ❑

Lanna Action takes on the SPDC

Lanna Action for Burma (LAB), made up of long time Burma pro-democracy campaigners in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand (Lanna), has been carrying out protest actions against the SPDC's recent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. LAB has just launched a "Panties for Peace" campaign calling on women around the world to send their underwear to SPDC embassies to express outrage over the regime's continued persecution of peaceful demonstrators since last September. The campaign is targeting the SPDC military leaders, who hold superstitious beliefs that women's underwear can rob men of their power. SWAN members have been actively involved in LAB's campaigns.

For updated information about LAB actions, please visit <www.lannaactionforburma.blogspot.com>

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