



SWAN

Shan Women's Action Network Newsletter

October 2008 # 9

Voting "No" in Shan State

On May 10, 2008, despite the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis only a week earlier, Burma's military regime went ahead with a nationwide referendum to endorse their new constitution, part of their road-map to military-led "disciplined democracy." Five days later, it was announced that the constitution had been overwhelmingly approved by 92.4% of voters.

SWAN interviewed a young woman from a town in southern Shan State about her experience of the referendum.

How were people informed about the referendum in your area?

We began hearing there would be some kind of vote a few weeks before it took place, but many people didn't understand what it was for. The authorities distributed some Burmese language leaflets saying the referendum was to vote for the new draft constitution, but many people can't even speak, let alone read Burmese. Anyway, the leaflets didn't explain what was in the constitution. They just described the voting procedure, and urged people to tick their ballot if they wanted peace and stability, and not to be under "imperialists."

The authorities also distributed T-shirts free to some of the civil servants. They had large ticks on them and the words "Give your supporting vote!" The T-shirts were printed in Burmese, Shan and Pa-O.



One of many anti-referendum campaign materials secretly distributed inside Burma

Were copies of the draft constitution distributed to the public?

No. Most people had no idea what was in the new constitution. In fact, when I asked a local Burmese military officer if there were any copies of the constitution available, he said: "Even we in the army haven't been given any copies, how do you think you can get one! All I know is we have to vote Yes."

But in the end I saw a copy of the constitution in the local library. It was in Burmese, and was quite thick. I just had

a quick look at it, because no one else seemed to be interested in it, and I thought it would look suspicious if other people saw me reading it.

How was the polling organized?

Local USDA* members and quarter headmen were responsible for drawing up the voting registration lists, and organizing the polling stations. In our quarter, the polling station was in a school building. They had to rehearse the procedure every evening for over a week before the actual voting day.

Everyone was forced to vote. We were told that if our name was in the voting list and we did not vote, then our house and land would be confiscated.

The poll organisers visited all the houses in advance and gave each voter a number to take to the polling station on the voting day. They persuaded some people, particularly old people, to vote in

* The Union Solidarity and Development Association is a regime-backed social organization.

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advance, so that they wouldn't have to stand in a long queue on the day. They made them mark their fingerprints on the voting list, and then ticked their ballots for them.

What happened on the voting day?

The voting began very early, at about 6 am. Already at 4 am, public loudspeakers began playing Burmese songs telling people to vote yes. A company of soldiers had been stationed at the school the night before. When I got there, there were already hundreds of people. The polling officials were telling everyone to tick the ballots. I even saw them ticking the ballots for some Lisu villagers.

I showed my number to the officials, and then was given my ballot, and I went behind a curtain to vote. I put a cross and then folded my ballot and came out and put it in the voting box. I was quite nervous, but nothing happened to me. The voting ended early, at about 8.30 am.



Why did you vote No?

I didn't believe in the new constitution. It was written by military people, or people they could control, to keep themselves in power. I didn't believe what they wrote in their pamphlets - it was all propaganda. I couldn't accept it.

Did many other people vote No in your area?

Yes, even at the local Burma Army base. Someone from an army family told me that the voting was held about a week in advance for the soldiers and their families, but it had to be held three times. The first time, most people voted No. So they organized it again, this time separating men and women, probably because they wanted to see how many of their soldiers were voting No. But again, most people voted No. Then they threatened everyone, and finally the third time, most people voted Yes.

In one of the villages near our town, I heard that almost everyone voted No, and some even wrote "It's not fair!" on the ballots. But the authorities changed all the votes to Yes, because they were afraid they would get into trouble when they sent in the results. That's why I was not surprised when the regime announced that 92% of voters accepted the constitution. Everyone knows that they cheated. □

MESSAGE FROM SWAN

The Burmese military regime has repeatedly claimed that women in Burma enjoy equal rights to men. They trumpet the "Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation" as the national mechanism to promote the advancement of women in Burma. However, the MWAF has simply been used a mouthpiece for the regime, and has been granted no space to develop independently and genuinely work for women's empowerment. They are led by the wives of SPDC officers at different levels, and their main role has simply been to attend ceremonies.

In contrast, women's groups working along Burma's borders have developed organically to address the needs of their communities and empower women. With the support of our communities and networks, we have created an enabling space for women to speak out openly about injustices, and advocate for their rights and for social and political change in Burma.

In spite of limited resources and challenges due to insecure status, our work has become increasingly visible, and we have gained recognition both inside and outside Burma. Our advocacy work in particular is threatening the regime. In their recent report to the Committee of the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the regime once again highlighted SWAN's exposure of systematic sexual violence in Shan State, by denying the contents of our report "Licence to Rape."

Women living under the control of the regime who have dared to speak out, have been physically assaulted, arrested and detained indefinitely. Under such conditions, how can women create space to empower themselves for the advancement of the status of women?

Until women can openly organize themselves, voice their concerns, and advocate for their rights, there should be no illusion that "space" exists in Burma. Only genuine political change can guarantee such space. □

Aid to Burma: only on the regime's terms

On May 2-3, 2008, the deadly cyclone Nargis hit five divisions of Burma, killing over 130,000 and affecting nearly two and a half million people. With billions of dollars of income from sales of natural gas to Thailand, the regime had more than enough financial capacity to assist the cyclone-affected people. But they didn't. Instead, they even blocked aid and relief supplies given immediately by the international community. Only gradually, under pressure from the international community, did the regime allow aid to the affected areas, but only on their own terms.

At the same time as they were blocking international aid, the regime was extorting money from local populations, including in Shan State, for cyclone relief. On May 8, 2008, 20 ten-wheel trucks carrying biscuits and other supplies were seized by the Burma Army in Muse, Shan State, on the Burma-China border. The North-east Commander Aung Than Htut declared that the goods would be sent to cyclone-affected people. Outraged local traders said they were more than willing to assist cyclone-victims, but this was simply robbery, and they had no idea whether the goods would reach the delta or not.

Numerous reports have emerged of relief supplies destined for cyclone victims being diverted and ending up in markets throughout Burma, sometimes sold directly by Burma Army personnel. This is not to mention the millions of dollars from donations going straight into the regime's pockets due to the distorted official exchange rate, as the UN has admitted. Such outright theft is no surprise for us, long used to living under a regime which is ranked as the most corrupt in the world by Transparency International.



SWAN has in the past repeatedly raised concerns about the restrictions by SPDC on aid agencies inside Burma. We are very used to how SPDC has manipulated aid distribution to control people and areas in Shan State. As soon as Nargis hit, we raised these concerns, demanding that the military regime immediately lift any national or local restrictions hindering the delivery of relief, and allow unrestricted local and international media access to the disaster zones.

However, predictably, the regime ignored these concerns, and has succeeded in keeping tight control over aid delivery to the delta, and ensuring that UN and international aid agencies issue no public criticisms of the regime. The result is that five months after the disaster, the only public call from international agencies working in the delta is for more funding to aid the victims.

This is very similar to what has been happening with aid in Shan State. People throughout the state are suffering a humanitarian crisis due to the ruinous policies and practices of the junta, including mass forced relocation, land confiscation, extortion, forced labour, and unsustainable opium eradication programs, which have led to widespread poverty and food insecurity.

Instead of allowing aid to all needy peoples in Shan State, the regime has been exercising a divide-and-rule policy by opening a small door for aid agencies to give help mainly to certain "Special Regions" (under the control of strategically important ceasefire groups).



Nargis survivors waiting for aid

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Promoting gender equality through

SWAN believes it is vitally important to carry out activities at the community level to raise awareness about gender and empower women. Under our Women's Empowerment Program, SWAN has been supporting bi-monthly Women's Exchange meetings, running literacy classes for women and organizing community awareness-raising events on International Women's Day, International Day of Peace and Stop Violence Against Women Day in Shan communities along the Thai- Shan border.

Here are some comments from community members, both women and men, on our activities

Nang Kham Lern, 28, IDP woman

Before I came to the IDP camp, I never got any information on basic health care. When I was pregnant, I never got any special care. I have been living here for 5 years now. I am very happy that I have been able to attend the training workshops and women's exchange organized by SWAN. I like our discussions on violence against women and health. In the past, I didn't want to bring my child to get vaccinated, because my child always got a fever after being vaccinated. But after I raised this in our discussion, I understand why this happened, and now bring my child to be vaccinated regularly.



Pa Kham, 47, IDP woman

I'm the leader of Section 2 in this IDP camp. I organize the participants for the women's exchange and all logistics for our meeting. I always participate in the women's exchange. I never miss a single women's exchange in our camp with SWAN representatives. It is great for us women to be able to discuss things freely. We share and learn from each other, especially from our resource persons from SWAN.

After joining the women's exchange, I have become more confident speaking to others and in front of many people. We want more women's exchanges. They give us a place to gather and build trust and friendships.



Nang Kham Lu, 34, IDP woman

I am from the village of Wan Parn Kard, Mong Kerng township, Shan State. I have never been to school in my life, as there was no school in our village. This is the first time for me to learn how to read and write. I want to teach my children and also use it in my daily life. Thank you for organizing the literacy classes for us. I want to let our teacher know that I will try my best and study hard. Our people have been suffering for so long under this military regime; please open more classes to bring light for our future. Thanks to SWAN for giving me this opportunity".

Nang Kham Ing, 24, IDP woman

I am from Laikha Township. There was no school in my village, so I have never been to school. When I was 10 years old, I remember that the Burmese troops came to our village and burnt down the headman's house. The soldiers said "You all have to move from your village tonight, or we will come back tomorrow morning and kill all of you". We all had to move that night to a new area and have been on the run ever since. This is my first time to learn how to read and write. I want to express my deep appreciation to my SWAN sisters.

gh community-oriented activities



Sai Leng, 57, refugee camp leader

I was pleased and proud to celebrate the International Day of Peace in our camp. We know that there is no peace in the ethnic areas of Burma. Some of the revolutionary groups have made cease-fire agreements, thinking they will get peace, but now they are being forced to surrender completely. Civilians from ethnic areas have to stay in the forests as IDPs, with no future for them or their children. We ourselves had to leave our own country because there is no peace. We love peace, but not the kind that comes from the barrel of a rifle, or that means living under the boots of the army.

Ku Shwe Ing, 29, female teacher

I'm glad that we have been able to organize many international days such as International Women's Day and International Day of Peace for the community. It is great for us as teachers to bring together our students and people in our community by organizing these activities. I really look forward to these days. When I first heard about them, my first reaction was – What is this day? Why have I never heard about it before?

The women's exchanges are really great for us, because we can talk freely about all the issues we want to talk about and ask questions to friends and our facilitators.



Ku Aye, 27, male teacher

Now, our children know about the International Day of Peace because of the activities here. The parents of the students also participated in the Peace Day activities. We need more activities like this in the long run to raise awareness and promote unity and cooperation among our community. We also want to involve other schools in the next activity.



A Shan “biofuel refugee” speaks out

Nang B. a 30-year-old refugee woman from Murng Keng in Shan State, fled to Thailand in April 2008, after being forced to grow jatropha (physic nut) under a nationwide biofuel program authorized by Burma’s military regime, targeting eight million acres of land. According to the May 2008 report “Biofuel by Decree” by the Ethnic Community Development Forum (ECDF), nearly 800 “jatropha refugees” had fled from southern Shan State to Thailand.

We first heard that we would have to grow jatropha in May 2006. Our village headman passed on the order from the military authorities. We were given only one day’s warning before being told to gather at 8 in the morning at the planting area. Each family was ordered to plant 45-50 jatropha plants. No one dared to refuse.

We weren’t supplied with any seeds or plants. We had to find them ourselves. Some people had seeds, but some people had to travel to other villages to buy branches to plant. Each branch cost 10 kyat.

We were ordered to grow the plants along the main road leading from our village. Some people had farms along the road, but they had to give up their land for the jatropha, and were told to find other land to plant their own crops.

We had to bring our own food when we went to plant the jatropha. The place where I planted was about 30 minutes’ walk from the village. We had to start by clearing the land, and then use a string to make sure we planted the seeds or branches in a straight line. We had to go two or three times each month to tend the plants, and clear away the weeds.

Actually, the rainy season had not yet started when we planted the jatropha and the soil was very dry. So some plants died, and even after two years the biggest plants were only thigh-high.

The local military commander came to check on the plants and when he found plants had died, he ordered the villagers to grow new plants in their place. We knew the jatropha seeds would be



Photo: ECDF

Mass plantation of jatropha in Shan State

harvested for bio-fuel, but no one told us what the process of extracting the oil or marketing it would be.

We had to waste so much time planting and tending the jatropha, on top of other forced labour for the local military, such as repairing fences or clearing weeds around their barracks. We also had to pay quotas of rice and money to the military. My husband and I had our own farm, but we simply couldn’t make ends meet.

That is why we fled to Thailand. We left our two young children with relatives and borrowed money (200,000 kyat or over US\$200) to travel to the Thai border. We have to pay it back with 100% interest within one year.

It took seven days to travel to the border. I was already pregnant, and

gave birth soon after I arrived so I couldn’t work straight away, and had to rely on my husband. Now we are living and working in an orange plantation in northern Thailand. I can earn 100 baht a day, but I can’t work every day because I have to look after my baby. Living in the plantation, we have to bear the strong smell of the pesticides. They even store them next to our hut, so we can’t escape the smell. I don’t have any legal documents, and I daren’t leave the farm.

Also I worry about my children back in Shan State all the time. We have to send back money to support them, and we are worried we won’t be able to pay back the money we borrowed to travel here. If not, they will double the interest again. I worry about this all the time. □

News Briefs

Worldwide vigils for release of Shan leader Hkun Htun Oo

On February 10, 2008, Shans in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, USA, UK, Australia, Canada and other countries held prayer ceremonies and candlelight vigils for the safety and health of imprisoned Shan leader Hkun Htun Oo.

The 64-year-old elected leader of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy is currently serving a 93-year sentence in Putao prison in northern Kachin State. He has long been suffering from diabetes and now has serious prostate problems. He was arrested three years ago with other Shan State leaders peacefully advocating for political reform.

The Shans urged governments around the world to pressure Burma's military regime to immediately release Hkun Htun Oo, other Shan State leaders, and all political prisoners in Burma, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. □

Cuts to refugee rations narrowly averted

In June, 2008, SWAN and eleven other community-based organizations issued an urgent appeal to the international community for funds to enable the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) to continue providing sufficient food rations to the over 140,000 refugees in camps along the Thai-Burma border.

Owing to rising rice prices and poor exchange rates, the TBBC had experienced a budget shortfall that would have necessitated drastic cuts in refugee food rations. Fortunately, however, various governments stepped in with funding pledges which enabled the crisis to be averted.

While humanitarian aid continues to be needed for refugees and IDPs fleeing ongoing atrocities by the Burma Army, SWAN urges continued international pressure on the regime to end all military offensives, implement a nationwide

ceasefire and begin tripartite dialogue with the NLD and ethnic representatives. Only in this way can a lasting solution to the refugee problem be found. □

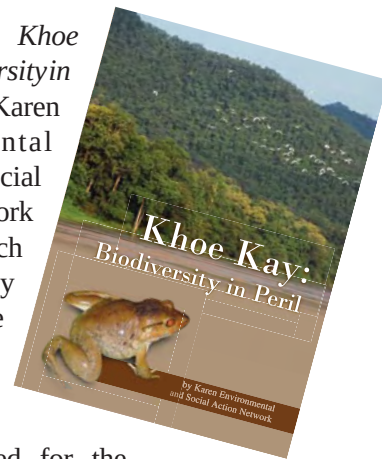
Salween dams threaten biodiversity

A new report by a Karen environmental group has identified over forty endangered plant and animal species which are being threatened by plans to build a series of large hydropower dams on the Salween River.

The report *Khoe Kay: Biodiversity in Peril* by the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network details the rich biodiversity around the site of one five giant hydropower dams planned for the Salween River in Burma by Thai and Chinese investors.

According to KESAN activist Ko Shwe, "The proposed dams will ruin the ecosystem and the free flowing river, kill the surrounding forests and destroy the lives of thousands of people."

The largest of the Salween dams, the 228-meter-tall Ta Sang Dam in southern Shan State, will create an estimated 870 sq km reservoir that will dissect the entire state. Burma's military regime is planning to sell the electricity from the dam to Thailand. □



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Local leaders as well as aid agencies have had to bow to the terms of the regime to implement aid programs, or else deliver no aid at all.

As a result, international aid agencies in Shan State have been remaining silent on the policy failures and systematic

human rights abuses that are causing the humanitarian crisis in Shan State. Diplomats and UN dignitaries are flown in to "model projects" and led to believe that it is only a shortage of funds that is preventing such development from being replicated in other areas.

In fact, as we have said repeatedly, aid

alone will not solve Burma's problems. Political reform is urgently needed to address the structural problems at the root of Burma's humanitarian crisis, and to ensure that future victims of natural disasters receive the assistance they deserve. □

Empowerment through networking

As indicated by our name -- the Shan Women's Action Network -- we at SWAN are firmly committed to the concept of networking -- building alliances to promote solidarity and action to further the rights of our communities.

Even before forming SWAN, many of us had been involved in various informal networks carrying out different activities to address the needs of our communities, particularly women and children. Then, nine years ago, realising that we all had a common goal of social and political change in Burma, to enable our people to live in peace and exercise their rights of self-determination, we formalized our network and founded SWAN.

Soon afterwards, with eleven other women's organizations of different ethnicities and backgrounds from Burma, we were able to jointly set up a network of women from Burma, namely the Women's League of Burma.

SWAN believes that networks provide a much needed space for both individuals and organizations to voice their concerns and to take action or campaign together against injustice in different situations, at different levels. Therefore SWAN belongs to a range of networks, not only those focusing on Burma's democracy movement and women and children's issues.

Over the years, particularly after our "Stop Licence to Rape" campaign was launched in 2002, we at SWAN have been consolidating our links with Thai and

regional networks working on different issues including migration, environmental protection and international aid.

With Thai net-works, we have advocated for recognition of the Shan as refugees, and their right to access services and support from humanitarian aid agencies. These Thai networks have raised public

networks in Thailand are spearheading the advocacy campaign for the rights of migrant workers and recognition of the contribution of the migrant workforce to the Thai economy, while regional networks are working to influence policies on migrants at the global level.

Working and networking with so many groups has been a very valuable learning experience. At the same time, solidarity actions have been very morally empowering for us. We feel that we are not alone: we support others, and they do the same for us.

In recent years, we have become more involved in ASEAN networks. SWAN was one of the first network members of Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA). Through this network, SWAN has been able to become engaged in the

ASEAN Charter process as well as the ASEAN Civil Society Process.

Currently SWAN is working closely with Thai networks and also regional SAPA networks for the ASEAN People's forum, a People-to-People platform to be held prior to the 14th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok from 15-17 December 2008,

where civil society organizations and social movements from all ASEAN countries will discuss issues confronting peoples in the region.

We believe such close cooperation, coordination and communication have strengthened our networks and built more alliances for our struggle towards a peaceful and just society in Burma, Thailand, and the region. □



awareness about the plight of Shan people through the media, literature and songs and by lobbying at the parliamentary level for the safety and protection of the Shan refugees in Thailand. We have been greatly heartened by their support and generosity.

Through migrant networks, we have been able to raise the issue of migrants from Burma, not only in Thailand but also regionally and internationally. Migrant



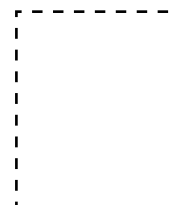
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