



SWAN

Shan Women's Action Network Newsletter

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Fickle friends

At the end of August 2009, media across the globe covered stories of the heavy fighting between the SPDC and the Kokang army on the northern Shan border, which broke the 20-year-long ceasefire and drove more than 30,000 refugees into neighbouring China. In a rare admonishment, the junta's long-time ally China urged SPDC to safeguard stability in the border area and protect the rights of Chinese citizens living there.

Tensions had begun to escalate since April 2009 when the SPDC urged all ceasefire groups to transform themselves into Border Guard Forces (BGF), nominally commanded by ethnic personnel but actually controlled by Burma Army officers. The junta first gave them until the end of June to accept the plan, then later fixed October 2009 as the deadline.

Most of the ceasefire groups with territories adjoining China in the north of Burma, including the Kokang, have been resisting the junta's demands. Not long after the Kokang leader Peng Jiasheng publicly rejected the idea of turning his army into a border force, the junta accused him in early August of being behind an illegal arms-and-drugs factory, and used this as an excuse to invade the Kokang area. In fact, the junta had long known about the illicit businesses of the Kokang and the Wa, but had found it politically expedient to turn a blind eye to them while the ceasefire agreements were in place.

The regime had named these Kokang and Wa ceasefire areas "Special Regions," where UN aid agencies, including the World Food Program, UN Development Program and UN Office on Drugs and Crime, as well as

other international NGOs, were allowed to give assistance to vulnerable populations affected by drug eradication programs.

Shan community-based groups had frequently expressed concern at the regime's manipulation of these aid programs: how aid was only allowed to areas controlled by certain favoured

fighting, but we are also now hearing them echoing religiously the SPDC's claims that all is "returning to normal, with schools reopened, and teaching resumed," barely a week after the heavy fighting. This indecent haste to endorse and whitewash the regime's brutal crushing of the Kokang's political aspirations was reflected at the highest level. The Deputy



ceasefire groups, and thus how the aid agencies were being used as part of the regime's divide-and-rule policy. All local leaders and aid agencies had to follow the regime's terms, or there would be no aid. No agencies or their staff dared speak out to criticize the status quo, let alone reveal atrocities committed by the regime in these or other parts of Burma.

Shockingly, after this recent unprovoked attack against the Kokang, we are not only witnessing the classic silence of these agencies, who had over a hundred staff caught amidst the

Spokesperson for the UN Secretary General even stated in a briefing at the UN Headquarters on September 10: "The situation remains stable and normal economic activity is returning to the town."

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If all is normal, then why are refugees still refusing to return back to Burma? Why is no one following up on the refugee accounts in the international media of killing of civilians? Having experienced the regime's war crimes in other parts of Shan State, we are certain that atrocities have taken place during the Kokang assault, but the truth is being buried under the total control of the state media on both sides of the northern Burma border.



If the agencies working in the Kokang area are genuinely committed to the welfare of their target populations, they should be bearing witness to what happened during the fighting in August.

The regime has no loyalty to its "friends." Peng Jiasheng's fall from grace stands as a clear warning. In 2007, he was an honored ethnic leader, chosen by the regime to represent the

"They were shooting ordinary people. I saw it myself. We don't believe what they say. We are afraid to go back," said Li Jun, a 24-year-old farmer who lives with his parents in Kokang. (AFP article, 31 August 2009)

They should be seeking to expose the truth, and helping these people find justice, not condoning and whitewashing the junta's brutality.

China too should carefully re-evaluate its relations with the Burmese junta, and understand that it will not hesitate to destabilize China's borders in the interests of hanging on to power.

ethnic nationalities in Burma to meet UN Special Envoy Gambari. Now all of a sudden, he is a reviled drug dealer, with the Burmese media reporting the seizure of over 150,000 methamphetamine pills along with equipment and chemicals in his son's house. Allies of the regime should be prepared to face a similar fate.



MESSAGE FROM SWAN



During 2009 the regime has been tightening its grip on power in preparation for the 2010 election.

They are claiming that they are proceeding according to their 7-step road map towards democracy and "national reconciliation." In reality, they are increasing political repression, arresting political activists, and sidelining Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In the ethnic states, they are escalating offensives against the non-ceasefire resistance groups, and pressuring the ceasefire groups to become Border Guard Forces under their full control.

The reluctance of the ceasefire groups to give up their autonomy without any political concessions has led to the recent renewal of fighting in northern Shan State, and now full-scale civil war is threatening to spread once more throughout the ethnic states. This will lead to further devastation and human suffering spilling over Burma's borders.

Now is a critical time for Burma's neighbours to seriously reconsider their economic and political support of the Burma's military regime. We urge them to increase pressure at every level on the regime to immediately stop all forms of aggression against all political actors and the people of Burma, and to implement a genuinely inclusive political process.□

Reaching out to our neighbours

Many of us at SWAN come from parts of Shan State adjoining China. Our families cross over and trade in China. Some of us have recent Chinese ancestry, and some speak Mandarin.

Thus, we regard the Chinese as our close neighbours, and understand the importance of developing friendly relations with those living beside and among us. Regrettably, however, national political interests over the past half century have often served to drive a wedge between us and our neighbours. People of Shan State have suffered the impacts of fighting between the Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang) and the Burma Army in the 1950s, then between the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma and the Burma Army until the 1980s.

resource exploitation, but we realize that it is mostly benefitting only a small clique of investors from China. In fact, we have learned from Chinese friends that those in China who are aware of the impacts of this investment in Burma strongly disagree with it.

Our friends in China realize only too well that short-term investment that is socially and environmentally damaging to Burma will ultimately impact their own security and future. Our rivers, mountains and ecosystems are all linked, and damage to one part will impact the whole. Likewise, increased landlessness, poverty and social unrest in Burma will inevitably lead to greater flows of refugees and migrants into China. A clear example of this is the recent fighting in the



"Healthy Rivers, Happy Neighbours" published in Chinese by the Burma Rivers Network

Rivers Network to produce and distribute the Chinese language report: "Healthy Rivers, Happy Neighbours." This report details the plans by Chinese companies to build 20 large hydropower dams on Burma's rivers, and exposes the social and environmental impacts of implementing these projects under the Burmese military regime

We have been delighted by the strong interest by many Chinese in this publication. In July of this year a Chinese journalist even published an article in Beijing Today on this issue, highlighting our concerns, and urging Chinese companies to stop construction of hydrodams in Burma, which are threatening local peoples.

This kind of solidarity and support from ordinary Chinese citizens gives us strong incentive to further engage in people-to-people links and exchanges between our two countries. Together we must seek ways to bring about the policy changes that will help ensure a sustainable and just future for our peoples and for our shared environment. □



More recently, the Burmese military regime has authorized a massive influx of Chinese investment into Shan State and the rest of Burma. This has been mainly in the sectors of mining, logging, hydropower, and agriculture. The foreign investors and the regime are gaining direct profits from these investments, while local peoples are suffering the grave and often irreversible social and environmental impacts.

We are resolutely opposed to this kind of damaging and unsustainable

Kokang Chinese area of northern Shan State, where the Burma Army attacked their former Kokang allies to ensure control of the area, and enable Chinese investors to build a giant hydropower dam on the Salween River and proceed with the trans-Burma oil and gas pipelines. The attacks drove 37,000 refugees into Yunnan.

We believe that investment and development in Burma must benefit the long-term interests of the local peoples on both sides of our borders. Hence, this year we worked with the Burma

Renewed scorched earth cam

At the end of July 2009, the Burmese military regime launched a new scorched earth campaign in central Shan State, the largest since the mass forced relocations in 1996-1998 which uprooted over 300,000 villagers.

communities donated food and supplies to assist those at the temples. Then, in mid-August the SPDC authorities abruptly ordered all the villagers to return immediately to their homes, including those whose houses had

been burned down. They also ordered people to say that it was the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) which burned down their houses.

The SPDC have tried to block affected villagers from fleeing to the Thai border. However, some refugees from this area have managed to travel to Thailand. The following is testimony from "Sai Naw," aged 30, one of these new arrivals.

"I am from the town of Laikha. I came to Thailand one month ago with my wife and our three young children. I used to work for a local trucker, but before I left I was forced by the SPDC to train as part of the local militia. I couldn't earn enough to support my family, and I didn't want to fight in the militia, so I decided to come to Thailand.

I was in Laikha when the SPDC burned the villages north of the town. One of my close friends "Sai Leng" is from Ho Lom, one of the villages that was burned down. He told me what happened.



On August 13, 2009, Shan community based organizations held a press conference on SPDC's latest scorched earth campaign

Over 500 houses were burned down and an estimated 10,000 villagers ordered out of their homes in Laikha, Mung Kerng and Ke See townships. Over 100 villagers were arrested and tortured. At least three villagers were killed. One young woman was shot while trying to retrieve her possessions from her burning house, and her body was thrown into a pit latrine. Another woman was gang-raped in front of her husband by an officer and three of his troops.

Most of the relocated villagers sought refuge with relatives and at temples in the nearest towns. Local



Campaign in Central Shan State

There had been fighting between the SPDC and SSA-S in the area about 5 days before the burning. After the fighting, about 200 SPDC troops camped near the village, keeping watch for any support by the villagers for the SSA. Some of the villagers were really scared and moved out to stay with relatives in other villages or in the town of Laikha.

Suddenly one evening, at about 7 pm, the soldiers moved into the village and began setting fire to the houses. The people didn't have time to move their things out of houses.



Affected villagers sheltering in a temple

Every house in the village was burned down. Only the temple was left standing. My friend Sai Leng lost his rice mill.

We saw hundreds of people from Ho Lom and other villages which were burned coming to stay with their relatives in Laikha. Those who didn't have relatives stayed at

temples. About 16 temples were crowded with people.

The monks had to support them, and other local people also donated goods, food and money to the temples for them. We too donated salt, soy bean and chilli to the monks, to give to the refugees. We did not dare give anything directly

because the SPDC were watching everyone. There was an evening curfew in the town too.

Many people want to come to Thailand, but they don't have enough money to travel to the border. We borrowed about 200,000 kyat (about 200 US dollars) from a relative, but it was not enough for all of us to travel, so we had to borrow 600,000 kyat (about 600 US dollars) from a local money lender. We have to pay it back with 100% interest. If we can't pay it back within a year we will have to pay 200% interest.

On the way to Thailand there were many checkpoints. We had to pretend we were travelling to the next township, not to the border.

Now my wife and I are working in an orange plantation in Fang. We can earn 100 baht per day, but work is not available every day, and we have no work permit. My employer has asked us to apply for a work permit, but we are already in so much debt that we can't afford it."

Developing Shan language textbooks

Over the past ten years SWAN, together with other Shan community groups, has been setting up educational opportunities for the Shan refugees and migrant children living along the Thai-Burma Border. Currently SWAN is running fifteen schools for 2,200 students along the Thai-Burma border. Seven of the schools are based in Shan IDP areas. In these schools, which go up to grade nine, Shan is the main language of instruction.

One of the main difficulties in operating the schools has been to establish a standardized school curriculum and upgrade the skills of

there were none produced for the secondary level. Teachers have had to seek books from Thailand, Burma and the Karen refugee camps, and then translate each lesson word for word into Shan. This has been very time-consuming, especially as the teachers usually teach eight lessons a day without a break. It has also led to confusion for the students, as teachers have translated even basic terms in different ways.

To address this problem, teachers' committees from the five IDP camps came together early in 2009 and drew up plans to develop a standard school

translation and editing team. This included experienced school teachers, journalists, writers and graduates in the respective school subjects. On their advice, we held a workshop to draw up standard guidelines for translation, editing, and development of new vocabulary, particularly for technical terms.

One of the problems faced by translators is that there has been random usage of foreign terms within the language, even when original Shan words exist. For example, even for a simple word like "flag," some have been using the Burmese term "a-lan," while others have used a new Shan word "jom pyi" (meaning "fly on the top"), when in fact there is an original Shan word "tong" for flag, which has mainly only been used in a religious context. Since "tong" is already used in both Thailand and Laos for flag, and is an original Shan word, it was decided to establish this as the standard term.

During 2009, the translation team has so far produced Mathematics textbooks for grades four and five and Geography for grades five to nine. The teachers are delighted to finally have ready-made textbooks in Shan for these subjects.



Students at an IDP school on the Shan-Thai border

the teachers. Every year we have tried to organize at least two teacher training workshops, which have promoted child-centered and democratic teaching practices.

However, the issue of producing a standardized curriculum and school text books remains an ongoing challenge. Historical efforts to develop an official Shan curriculum in Shan State were thwarted by Burma's military coup in 1962. The Shan Cultural and Education Committee had in recent years produced some Shan textbooks at the primary level, but

curriculum and textbooks for use in their schools. This led in April 2009 to the setting up of the "Border Teacher Support Program" by the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY), in cooperation with other Shan community groups including SWAN. The program aims to assist the teachers in the IDP areas to find funding support, choose textbooks, hold teacher training workshops, as well as translate and print Shan language textbooks.

We invited various skilled Shan community members to form a

"This will really benefit our schools," said Khu Hurng Fah, the headmaster of Loi Tai Laeng school. "We are so glad to be able to give each student their own copy of these new Shan textbooks."

All those involved feel that the process is benefitting not only the students and teachers but each of our respective organizations which are producing Shan publications. We are keen to continue working towards the development of a full standard Shan language school curriculum. □

Community based projects

As refugees continue to flee from Shan State to the Thai border, local community-based groups have been setting up programs that will address their basic needs and empower them to develop their communities. SWAN has managed to find support for some of these initiatives.

Together with these groups, we have been working to coordinate among the different programs, to ensure that resources are used effectively to serve the priority needs of the community.

Production of Shan language handbook on recycling waste



Coffee nursery for IDPs on the Thai-Shan border



Baby kits given to Shan IDPs



Non-formal literacy classes for children of migrant workers in Chiang Mai province

Regional advocacy on socio-economic issues



SWAN gave a presentation on the impacts of the planned Tasang dam in Shan State at a forum held in Bangkok in August 2009 by leading Thai NGOs on "The Salween Hydropower Projects in a Human Rights Context."



SWAN at a conference on impacts of the economic crisis on Burmese migrants organized by the MAP Foundation, Worker Hub for Change, and Network of Action for Migrants in Malaysia in June 2009 in Kuala Lumpur.

“Girl Power” on Air

Starting in July 2009, SWAN has gone on air with a new Shan radio program called “Heng Jai Ying” (Girl Power). It is broadcast from Chiang Mai on FM 99 MHz every Wednesday and Thursday from 1 to 2 pm. SWAN interviewed the head of the radio team Ying Mawk Gorn about the new program.



Q: What was the aim of starting this program?

A: Our main aim is to promote the empowerment of women in particular and provide educational information to the local Tai (Shan) community in general. The program includes news and information about lots of issues, like women and health, women's leadership, gender, and the environment. But of course we also

include Shan songs and jokes, as our audience are mostly migrant workers, who want some entertainment at their workplace.

Q: How did the program get started?

A: The radio station is being run by the Migrant Assistance Program (MAP) Foundation in Chiang Mai. It

have not had much training in radio broadcasting, so we are learning as we go along. It takes a lot of time to research information for the programs, and then translate everything into Shan. We're still quite nervous when we go on air in case we make mistakes.

Q: What has been the feedback to the programs?

A: We are getting many people – men and women – phoning in during the programs, usually to ask for songs, but they also comment on issues we've been talking about. And some women are also phoning us off the air to consult us on various matters, including personal problems. They say they feel really encouraged by our programs.

Q: Have you received suggestions on how to improve the programs?

A: Yes, listeners have asked us to use less formal language, and to make the format of the programs more relaxed and informal in general. We've been requested to focus on day-to-day topics, and not to cram in too much information. They also said it was confusing to have so many DJs on our team!

Q: Any specific feedback from male listeners?

A: Yes, they said we shouldn't focus just on women. They said Shan men need “heng jai” (empowerment) as well!

The programs also can be heard live online at: www.mapfoundationcm.org/fm99



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