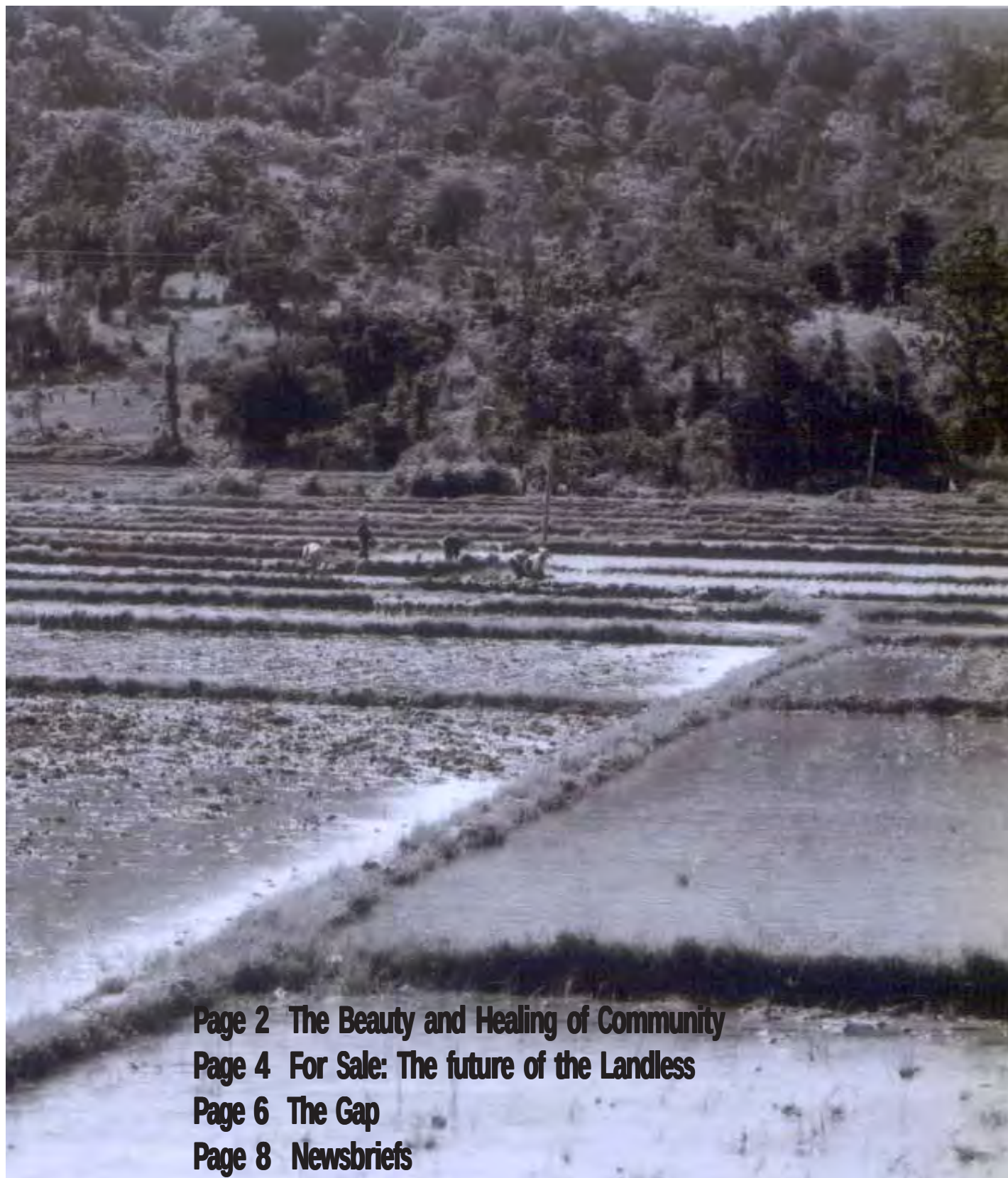




Burma Issues

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THE HEALING MAGIC OF COMMUNITY

The authors spent most of 2003 living and working with people from Burma who are now living in Thailand. They were there to share their knowledge on social issues. Here are some of their reflections and observations regarding their experience and the people they came to know.

After being away from our work now for one week, the experience remains like an early morning dream; intense and joyful, yet sad as the memory fades away. The road leading out through unknown hills and forests twisted and turned as if through time and space. As incredible as it was there, it has disappeared like the flash of a camera. Although the time is behind us, our minds have taken a snapshot, but like all snapshots it only captures a certain image. The reality of the time awake and asleep and the thoughts we had are all but gone. We are left with something new; the camp is the same but we are different. Perhaps some day I can explain what that means.

I really don't know how to describe our life – and I almost don't want to, I want to keep it to myself as a magical memory. It is, however, an experience that must be shared because I think there are powerful messages about the beauty of, and necessity of community, giving of ourselves to others. There are undoubtedly healing aspects of being a part of a community. The Karen people who have suffered such horrible trauma are able to come to this place of community and slowly, over time, many of the gaping wounds, physical, mental and spiritual, are healed. Scars remain, they always do. It is not possible to experience trauma and erase the memory. There are those people for whom the wounds remain fresh, despite the community support.

I had the tremendous opportunity to work with a group of people who are called the "home visitors". These men and women are social workers and do their very best, despite lack of resources and education, to help those people whose wounds remain unhealed. Around 30 of us spent a total of 75 hours together. We talked about their role in the community; how to solve related problems, counseling skills, domestic violence, laws that affect their work, human rights and women's rights. What an amazing

group! There was a wealth in that group that can't be surpassed by any bank account. They have a deep commitment to helping their families, their neighbours, their whole community, and all of those who are suffering. They themselves have suffered unthinkable tragedies. One woman told of when the Burmese military came and destroyed her house. It seems that their personal experiences have given them a motivation and strength to help others who have not been so resilient. They see themselves as the peacemakers in the camp – and they truly are.

When we first arrived in this community a man who is on a committee for a boardinghouse approached me. This boardinghouse has 30 youth who have come from Burma by themselves (as in they do not come with any family) in search for an education beyond the 5th grade. Some of them have parents, but many do not. The boardinghouse does not have any funds and so the man was asking me for assistance. I decided to interview a few of the youth. It was a heart wrenching experience. The girls cried their way through the interview. Two had only recently come to the community and their memories are vivid, they carry with them the constant knowledge that their families and friends are still living through the horror. They have not yet forgotten. The safe place of community has only just begun to work its healing magic. The most tragic memories for them are hiding out from the Burmese military for weeks at a time. During these village rampages they have to hide in the forest with only the clothes on their backs, eating whatever they can find which often means they are close to starvation. These raids happen almost monthly. Houses are burned, fields are destroyed, and any livestock are shot. If anyone is found in the village they will most likely be shot. They all have someone in their family who has died at the hands of the Burmese military. For these young girls it is terrifying. We spent a couple of hours together and they had the opportunity to tell their stories if they wanted to. For me it was a powerful time. Most of the people in the community have been there for years and the intensity of their memories has faded – they have been a part of this healing community for a long time. I have heard many terrifying stories, but not with the emotion that these girls told me about their lives. I

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desperately wanted to share in their burden, and maybe in a small way I did and will continue to do so. By giving them the chance to open up they have broken the silence and the healing can begin. At the end of the time we joined hands in a circle and had a time of supporting each other through encouragement. I wondered how often moments like these happen – or do people suppress the memories?

On one of our last nights with this group we had been invited to visit the home of a delightful young student who had visited us many times. She was the only person of the 9 people living in their small bamboo abode who could speak English. In her excitement to have us over she herself cooked us fried noodle and egg with fried yellow beans (beh cjo) – a little heavy on the fry! While we ate and chatted everyone gathered around and watched with rapture. She has the most darling little brother who entertained us for the majority of the meal – darting behind walls and then peeking out with a huge grin. After the meal our friend began to tell us her story without much prompting. Her father's father had been brutally murdered by the Burmese military when she was a small child, leaving a tremendous scar on the whole family. When our friend was about 10 there was a military raid on her village and her family fled to the jungle where they hid for 3 months. This time was terrifying for her and she said that she wished she would die. Her family was spilt up for a long time, hiding in different places, but when they were reunited they decided that they had no option but to come to Thailand as refugees, for they had no food. How does one endure such terror and hardship and go on living? The human spirit is incorrigible. And she has her whole family with her, and she has an extended community all around her. They support each other. They help each other through. They encourage each other to live another day, to make the most of their opportunities and to be able to go back and help those who continue to live in terror. The lives of many of the people who we met are shaped around this dream to bring freedom, through defense, education and health, to their people and to their country. They are a community that is tight because of their unified compassion.

Our beautiful friend is inspiring and the community as a whole is inspiring. They have what we need. We are so caught up in making sure that our own needs are met that we only give once we make sure that we have enough

(enough by western standards, that is). Even for us, our stinginess was constantly being challenged. People who had nothing were constantly bringing us gifts of bananas and inviting us to eat gourmet Karen dinners at their houses. They gave whatever they had without any hesitation. And we with our stash of treats hidden away and hoarding our goodies like misers! It seemed that over our time there we were able to really understand relationships more deeply - it has nothing to do with how we dress, how we do our hair, what we eat, if our house is big or small, tidy or messy, it has nothing to do with a profession or lack of. Here, it is all about desire to know and to be known, to give and to be given to, and in that there is a purity that I have seldom encountered before. Every other superficiality was stripped away and we really *knew* people, even without being able to understand much of each other's language. They are people who know how to be a part of a living and breathing, effortless, community. Not that they don't have their problems – believe me, I've heard many stories (social work training!) – but it doesn't stop them from communing together.

Most people asked me how I felt about being in this community. My response always was, "I am very happy to be here and to meet people and especially to help with education. But, I also feel very sad because this place is a refuge and all of you are forced from your homeland. I think that I am like you: happy and smiling for the most part on the outside, but very sad on the inside." They nodded in understanding. As much laughter and lightheartedness as we try to create, deep down inside there is an incredible and solid sadness.

I am happy to be with these people, not only for the new adventure, but also because it is an incredible chance to really feel what it is like to live on the unfortunate side of life. However, I feel strange in my happiness because they want nothing more than to be safely home in their village and to have a free homeland. They remember their homes very well. One young student was near tears when he talked about

Community is all about desire to know and to be known, to give and to be given to, and in that there is a purity that I have seldom encountered before.

FOR SALE: THE FUTURE OF THE LANDLESS

Burma's agrarian land is fast becoming a haven for Burmese military bases and their cash crops as reports continue to surface of the forced confiscation of villagers' land: 40 acres confiscated in Myitta area of Tenessarim Division, 300 acres from San-pya and Donephi villages in Mon state, 72 acres in one month in Pa-pun district. Isolated cases but it tallies up: over the past 10 years it is estimated that 2500 acres of land has been confiscated in just one township of Pa-pun district of Karen state alone.

What happens to this land and what are the ramifications for future land-related issues? A simplistic analysis could point to two possible reasons for this forced land confiscation. One, to support the military's self-sufficiency program that encourages battalions to support themselves, usually at the cost of villagers who live in the operating area of the battalion. Second, especially in Burma's often troublesome border areas, it supports the increasing militarization of these areas. But the matter is far more complicated than that, for confiscating villagers' lands, whatever the intended purpose has run-on effects that contribute to many of Burma's social, economic and political inadequacies. This article will only touch on some of these effects: food production and food scarcity, loss of livelihood, militarisation of the border areas and a look at some of the problems Burma will face in the future due to this landlessness.

Despite half of the state budget being devoted to the military, very little of this seems to reach personnel and their families. An increasing number of Burmese Army deserters tell of the harsh conditions that face those in the Burmese

Army: insufficient or rotten food, outdated uniforms and equipment, little or no benefits for your family and little prospects for an adequately provided for future. The prospect of obtaining a sufficient livelihood becomes very real when allowed the opportunity to take villagers' land, with no compensation, and install your own cash crops. Villagers' are increasingly faced with this scenario. Their lands and their livelihood taken, rubber, coconut, bean and sugarcane plantations appear in their place. These cash crops are intended for fast economic growth. On the large scale they are created for export and the cash flow that goes with it, on the smaller scale for individual economic gain.

Can we really believe Burmese military statements that this land is confiscated in attempts to increase food production and therefore consumption for an increasingly starving population? On the contraire it is contributing to a reduction in food production, for farmers are restrained from producing adequate levels of food to support themselves and their community. To add insult to injury villagers are often forced to work on these cash crops with no compensation or wages. They have effectively lost their source of income and livelihood and are then forced to work on their own land for profits that will undoubtedly line the pockets of the Burmese military.

In February 2003, 11 villagers came across the Thai border after fleeing forced labour on a Burmese military cash crop plantation. The military had first confiscated the land from the villagers' and then planted cashew and banana plantations on the land. Afterwards, the Burmese army commander forced those he had originally stolen the land from to work on the plantations. One person from every household must attend the plantation every day. If one person failed to appear they would be charged 1500 kyat. The military gave no compensation to those they took the land from and they paid no wages to villagers' they forced to work on the plantation. The villagers' had no food source and no time to work for their own livelihood. This group fled to Thailand hoping to find a source of income for their family. More villagers' were likely to follow.¹

We are talking about substantial areas of land here, land that the military often takes and then attributes to their need to



establish new army bases or expand existing ones. In Mudon Township of Mon State the Burmese military confiscated 200 acres of mostly rubber plantation to supplement the income of their military base. The military base was established in what they called a strategic area and in order to support the staff of the base they also took local farmers land and consequently its income.

The proliferation in land confiscation attributed to the Burmese military and the drive to establish more bases, especially in the border areas, implies that the presence of the military is desperately needed in these areas. For what? For the protection of innocent civilians against the armed opposition groups? Considering the SPDC confidently and proudly proclaims the cease-fire agreements made with 17 of these opposition groups one must question the credibility of this reasoning. Fewer and fewer groups are actively offering armed resistance. Surely this should mean a reduction in military presence, not the increasing militarisation of the border areas. Unless of course, the Burmese military are not serious about reform, regime change and increased benefits for the general population at all. They are merely intent on consolidating the power and strength of their military state.

With less people being able to pursue farming and therefore their livelihood, and with more Burmese military bases that benefit from their cash crops, forms of land ownership and the link between land and culture must also be questioned. Little time appears to be given to land ownership laws in Burma and even less of an inclination to review and implement such structures. The matter is further complicated by the different levels of ownership and the different reasoning for the confiscation of land. A villager in Mon State tried to reconcile the reasoning behind the confiscation of his land: "The commander told us these lands are owned by the government. We are only the owners of the trees and crops on this land and we do not own the land at all. However, he said after the lands are taken by the government, we have also lost the chance to harvest our crops."²

Many accounts share similar experiences. A farmer in Karenni State may be told that his land is required by the military for the purpose of protecting his (the villagers') own interests; a man in Rangoon that his property is required for development; another in Tenasserim that a road will be built through his paddy fields but that ultimately he will benefit from it; a man in Shan state may get no explanation at all, just a

curt order to move or be killed. In some cases people have property ownership and documents, in many more cases the idea of land ownership is not laid out in law but rather traditional social customs that have stood as a community's form of law for hundreds of years. For example, swidden farmers (slash and burn farmers commonly found in Burma's border areas) usually don't have a concept of individual ownership but community ownership.

Many swidden farmers, not only work their land as a source of livelihood, but also have close cultural links associated with it. Traditional forms of medicine from trees and plants, religious rituals for births and deaths, elaborate ceremonies that precede and conclude the harvest seasons. These important factors for cultural identity are at risk of being lost when the tie between man and the land is severed through land confiscation.

How will these issues be addressed both now and in the future? Currently, there is no real form of redress for villagers who have had their land confiscated; the impunity with which the military is allowed to act guarantees that. While it seems unlikely that any legal avenues will be addressed while the current military regime remains in power, organised local resistance to this illegal and forced occupation of their land must determine future actions and courses for redressing this issue.

Already the effects of land confiscation and its displacement and destruction of people, livelihood and culture, is blatantly apparent. Burma's population is increasingly faced with poverty and starvation caused by food scarcity that can be partially attributed to land confiscation. Farmers are unable to work for their livelihood and military owned cash crops that could be of economic benefit to the greater population really only benefit those who own and export the produce, the Burmese military. People go hungry because they have nowhere to grow their food or they are forced to work

"I owned two spaces of land in that area. Now, the Burmese Army confiscated both spaces. I am left with nothing to eat. My children cried when they heard the bad news. We had no food anymore. Only my son, who is a monk, has fed our family with small amounts of food." A Karen villager who had his land confiscated by the Burmese military in Ye Township, Mon State

THE GAP

When one comes to work for the human rights movement in Burma, they most likely will be exposed to one of the two struggling sides of the conflict. If they work along the border in Thailand, they will have close contact to the different ethnic Burmese that live and work there. If they work inside of Central Burma they will most likely be exposed to the life and struggles of the Burman and urban populations. Both these groups suffer under the same government. Both live within the borders of the same nation. Both people chew beetle nut, smoke cheroot and wear the Longgyi, and both for the most part + -worship Buddha. But after these and other common practices, a gap separates the two sides. It is not only a geographical or physical gap, but one that separates the whole structure of a people's society.

When I first came to South East Asia to learn and experience, I was exposed to the struggle of Burma's ethnic groups. I traveled to the border and visited the camps and the people involved there. I read stories, saw the photos and videos and listened to people's accounts and learned about the IDP situation. I was allowed to learn as much as I could about the Shan, Karen, Karenni and other ethnic people's. All the while, I read the reports and articles in the media that discussed the issues of Central Burma. I was able to follow along the state of the countries politics as well as what was reported about the oppression that is effecting central Burma.

Recently I had the opportunity to travel inside Burma as a tourist. For the first time I would leave the border area that I thought I knew a little about and venture into the area I knew even less about. This trip was a valuable experience for so many reasons including that it helped me to gain a greater understanding for the gap that separates the Ethnic Burmese from the Central Burmese. While the Burmese population has minimal access to health and education, the ethnic minorities often have none. While food is hard to get for the Burmese it is rarely available at all for the IDP. Where Aung San Suu Kyi is the voice for the Burmese, the ethnic political groups have little voice at all.

When an international person is asked what they know about Burma, they might only know about Aung San Suu Kyi, whatever the media might report on Burma or nothing at all. The gap appears in all areas: economically, socially, politically and even structurally. I am not saying that the Burmese people have a good life, they are suffering and struggling too, but many people will agree that the ethnic minority groups live under a worse oppression than the Burmese of the central areas.

The government has successfully widened the gap that exists between the people of this nation. The government has always allowed the Burmese people to have just enough to keep them alive, and perhaps striving for more, without ever obtaining it. The government speaks of the ethnic political groups as terrorists who are only interested in disrupting and destroying the unity of the nation. The government tells the people only what they want them to know and all the while the Burmese citizens never see the existence of ethnic groups for themselves. While traveling inside and among the tourist friendly areas of the ethnic states it was difficult to get any information or opinion of the ethnic border situation from local Burmese people. They had little to say or seemingly knew little. This could come from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the situation as well as a concern for ones own daily struggles. Even ethnic people living in these areas had expressed little knowledge about the issues in the border State areas.

It works both ways though, while misunderstood and negative opinions are expressed from the Burmese side, the same is true for the ethnic side. Many ethnic people have expressed a negative opinion of the Burmese having only ever heard stories and never really knowing what their life is like. It is very difficult for anyone to travel anywhere in Burma which allows the government to dictate peoples perceptions. Tourists are allowed to travel in certain areas of Burma and the Ethnic States. The openness of the government to this can create an illusion of stability for the nation in the minds of many who travel there. The fact that no one can travel to the border areas indicates that there is much the government does not want anyone to see or know.

"If people only view themselves as victims then it will be difficult for the conflict to end. People must listen to each other and recognise each others sufferings, victims carry on."

Having worked with and among the border areas and traveled in Central Burma, I have a better understanding of the overall picture on both sides of the gap. What I understand is that working at the grassroots level is very important and must continue and increase. Not only must we educate about, and speak up for the ethnic minority states now, but there must be preparation for when democracy does come into play in the future. If there are ill feelings and a lack of understanding among all groups now, the instatement of democracy will not make all of that go away. Work will have to continue in order to avoid further conflicts among the oppressed groups of today. What one peace worker observed in war-torn Israel can be applied to Burma also. "If people only view themselves as victims then it will be difficult for the conflict to end. People must listen to each other and recognise each others sufferings, victims carry on." The gap that exists today needs to be narrowed or even better it needs to be closed.



Rudy Huffer

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his home and family. He is like most Karen, he hasn't seen his family for years, but he feels that education and training are very important to help his family and his people.

Outside the community now, my life is strange. The months flew by, and now it seems as if it never happened. The road through the rugged forests makes it seem like this place doesn't even exist. As much as I dislike the word "time-warp," it is the best to describe the feeling of coming out. It was much more than time that was traveled during the past month, and I think I still need some time to fully grasp the experience.

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on military cash crops and therefore have no time to work on their own crops. They are forced to earn some small livelihood by working on other people's farms or moving to cities and neighbouring countries in search of work, thus creating a whole host of problems related to mass displacement. And then, there is of course the destructive erosion of farming practices and the culture that inevitably goes with it.

The effects of land confiscation cannot be assessed without including the problems that spring from this action. In an article in this newsletter in 1998 the author wrote, "Throughout much of the developing world, landlessness has similarly led to a vicious cycle of rural poverty, environmental degradation and decreasing farm productivity; and wherever it has begun, the problem has proven far easier to identify than to resolve."³ Land confiscation does impose a vicious cycle of inter-related problems that will affect the stability of Burma's political, economic and social future. Foremost of which is the obvious reluctance the Burmese military have for reforms to the current political and economic situation. The increasing militarisation of the border areas only highlights this.

Endnotes

1. Monthly Human Rights Situatuiou Report, MTDID, June 2003
2. The Mon Forum, Issue No.4/2002
3. Land and Survival: Pacifying Burma's upland farmers, Burma Issues, July 1998



R Sharples

news briefs

china maintains "friendly" relationship

China pledged to strengthen ties with the military junta in Myanmar, which is starting to feel the pinch from aggressive sanctions imposed after the arrest of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. "China is keen to develop the long-standing, friendly, neighbourly and cooperative ties with Myanmar in the new century," said Guo Boxiong, vice chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission. China hosted a six-day visit by Myanmar's number-two leader Deputy Senior General Maung Aye, amid international pressure to push the military state towards democratic reforms.

refugees moved from camp

Authorities are gearing up to relocate 16,000 Burmese refugees from a camp close to Salween forest in Mae Sariang district in attempts to end deforestation. Governor Supoj Laowansiri said 16,857 refugees at Ban Kongkha-Sala camp would be moved to Ban Mae La Un village in Sop Moei district in October-December. A new venue covering 800 rai of land in Ban Mae La Un is about four kilometres away from the Thai-Burmese border. The governor said relocation costs of 22 million baht would be met by

international NGOs. A representative from UNHCR urged authorities to consider other venues, saying Ban Mae La Un might not be suitable because it used to be a bastion of the Karen National Union and was too close to the border.

mtv launch campaign

Some of the music industry's biggest names are joining a global campaign by MTV and Burma Campaign UK being launched on 21 August 2003. The campaign, which will be broadcast on MTV branded channels around the world, features a series of appeals backed so far by Chris Martin, Bono, Bob Geldof, Macy Gray and Lenny Kravitz. "We have to make a stand against this gross violation of human rights." Chris Martin said, "The world's leaders aren't doing enough to rectify the situation in Burma and this campaign can provide a global call for Aung San Suu Kyi's release."

cabinet reshuffle

Myanmar's military regime named the country's intelligence chief as prime minister in a major cabinet reshuffle this month. Gen. Khin Nyunt, the country's third most powerful figure, will take the prime minister's

portfolio formerly held by Senior Gen. Than Shwe, who heads the junta. Than Shwe remains the chief of the ruling State Peace and Development Council and also holds the job of defense minister. General Maung Aye was made Vice President. A state radio and television broadcast said the shift was aimed at "effective administration of duties." Removed from their positions were five ministers and two deputy ministers, most of them aging veterans.

US sanctions cancel US\$200 exchange

Foreign visitors no longer have to exchange US \$200 upon arrival at Burmese airports. As part of stuffer US sanctions, banks in the United States stopped trading dollars through Burma's three main exchange banks, a move which has made the greenback scarce inside the country. People in Rangoon's business circle also confirmed that officials were no longer demanding foreigners change money at the airport, and said the government was trying to find a way for the economy to cope without access to dollars. The euro is now being promoted by officials as the new currency for trade.

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