

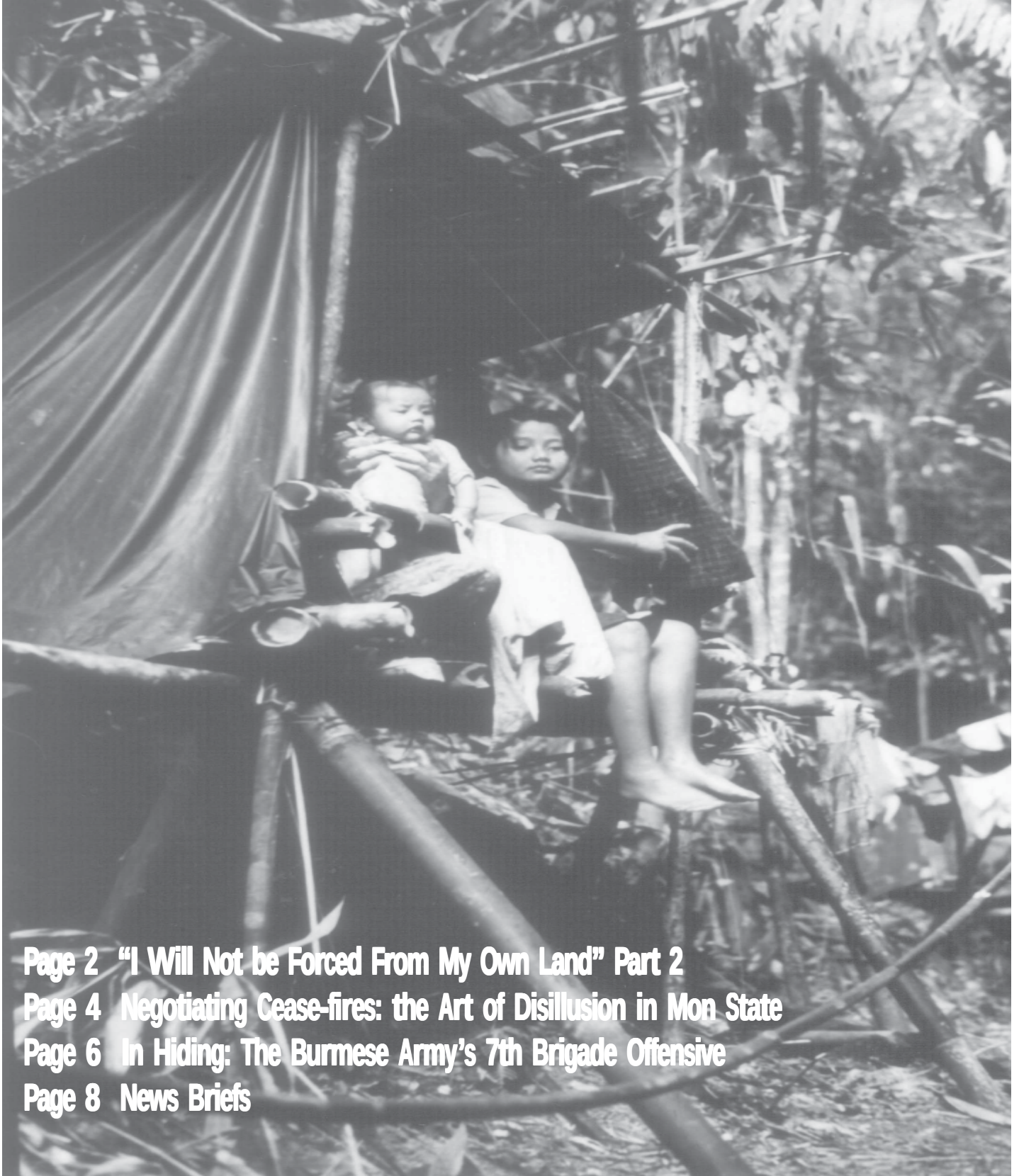


Burma Issues

December 2003

VOLUME 13

NUMBER 12



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"I WILL NOT BE FORCED FROM MY OWN LAND" PART 2

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN BURMA

by R Sharples

This is the second and final part in a series on internal displacement in Burma. Last month's article looked at some of the root causes and outcomes of those who are displaced. This week's article will look at what remedies are available in the movement to try and address and find solutions to this displacement.

Like most problems we encounter in life, solutions usually fall into one of two categories. Immediate assistance that will temporarily stop the flow of the problem, and prevention: ensuring that the problem doesn't recur. One puts the Band-Aid over the wound, the other ensures that the wound never appears to begin with. Too often in today's world we are forced by circumstances to be the Band Aid, applying a lot of energy in trying to plug the wound. A more effective remedy to the problem is to deal with the structural issues that created the wound to begin with. In Burma there is a wound called internal displacement. Often we talk about dealing with this problem through immediate assistance to meet the displaced persons' needs – medicine for malnutrition, clothes for those forced to flee without them, money to buy rice and other food substances. Assistance that is necessary if a group who is displaced is to survive the initial trauma. To compliment this, and maybe of higher importance is the need to deal with the structural problems that allow displacement to occur in the first place. For while we may be able to stem the wound with immediate assistance, we have in fact done nothing to ensure that these circumstances are not repeated. Prevention means placing considerable effort into solving the deep-rooted structural problems often based in unresolved religious, ethnic and political representation issues.

I place importance on prevention and dealing with root cause structural problems because I believe there is still not enough attention and effort put into finding ways to resolve this, but in reality the eradication of internal displacement must see a combined effort from many different

groups on many different levels. Effort should be put into resolving root causes and structural issues, and immediate humanitarian assistance must also be implemented to ease the immediate suffering of a marginalised population. It is through the cooperation of these two movements that internal displacement in Burma can end.

Dealing with the root cause structural issues of displacement must revolve around IDP's and how the international community can support them. One group we tend to forget about when discussing ways to assist, is the role IDP's can and do play, in finding ways to deal with their predicament. IDP's employ various methods of survival as displaced people, including subsistence strategies and ways to protect themselves. Of paramount importance is also the simple fact that they have refused to be forced across international borders. While many are forced to flee and become refugees, IDP's often make the choice to stay. Their resilience sees them regrouping, rebuilding and surviving in an environment conducive to an aggressor determined to destroy them. Some of the more intermediate and long-term solutions to this problem should therefore support the grassroots villagers and the IDP's themselves. By helping to build up the capacity of IDP's, by providing them with options, by supporting them to open their minds to non-violent approaches to dealing with the problem of displacement, you are empowering the people themselves to be confident in their ability to survive and find their own solutions. You are encouraging them to not see themselves merely as victims but as people who have a voice that will be heard. Put simply, assistance to IDP's must include supporting the capacity of community-styled organising which can actually deal with some of the root cause and structural issues that cause displacement to begin with.

The first thing most people think of when they learn of a great trauma to others is to ask how they can help to ease the suffering. For internally displaced people their suffering is quite acute. Often they have no food, they have no clothes, they have no access to medicine, and no money to buy it even if they did. The immediate response then is to provide IDP's with some of these life-saving materials which is where humanitarian assistance comes into it. The question is: How to best provide effective humanitarian assistance? The present political

Burma Issues is a publication of the Peace Way Foundation and is distributed on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned with the state of affairs in Burma.

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situation in Burma has required most of this assistance to come from across the border in Thailand: those states bordering Thailand having the most concentrated IDP population. Mobile medical teams and groups like the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) have provided some of these basic materials. Their capacity to support the enlarging IDP population is obviously limited.

The UN Burma office released a report in 2003¹ which suggested an alternative that would see humanitarian assistance provided by those NGO's working inside Burma, which to date have been denied access to IDP areas. It relies on the idea of a humanitarian cease-fire which would entail both government and ethnic opposition troops agreeing to temporary cease-fires that would allow groups to administer desperately needed medicines, food and clothing. This is one of the few new creative ideas put forward but it still remains a distant dream until one, the SPDC is willing to admit that Burma has an IDP problem (currently this is vehemently denied) and two, that both sides who are traditionally bitter enemies, would have enough trust to lay aside weapons temporarily to allow this assistance in. Even if this were possible humanitarian assistance alone portrays people as victims and merely plugs the wound. Temporary and immediate assistance will not give people an education and it will not give people a stable home, it cannot rebuild the fabric of a civil society that displacement inevitably destroys. What it will do though is give people some relief from their suffering and it may even give them some hope. This doesn't undermine the importance of humanitarian assistance but rather highlights why many other solutions are also needed to compliment each other.

There is of course a role for various international entities to play here as well. If we talk of preventing the practices that lead to displacement this prevention must be based in the practice of good governance. "Crisis of displacement inevitably stem from a failure on the part of governments to discharge their responsibilities to their citizens through good and legitimate governance." David Korn goes on to say that good governance must include the following elements, "an independent judiciary, an uncorrupted civil service and parliament, free and fair elections, a police force and a military respectful of human rights, free functioning non-governmental organisations and independent media".² Burma possesses none of these elements which would confirm that good governance does not exist.

Pressure on Burma to start addressing some of these issues should therefore be of high

importance. Many international entities like the UN and Amnesty International are already applying this pressure. Another effective form of pressure could come from Asean. There is nothing in Asean's mandate that stops them from participating in such a role, there is nothing that stops them from forming a working group that would focus on internal displacement. All that stops them is their reluctance to interfere in the internal affairs of their member states. Asean has often refused to put Burma on its agenda in general, let alone focusing on specific issues such as refugees and IDP's. It is highly unlikely that Asean would take

on such a role but there is little doubt that it could be highly effective in applying pressure upon the Burmese military. Resolving the issue of good governance is about attacking the causes of internal displacement at their very core.

If we are to reach some kind of conclusion about the issue of internal displacement in Burma then it is that it cannot be addressed without also offering solutions to the root cause and structural patterns that are often the cause of displacement. The starting point for Burma is admitting that internal displacement is a serious concern that needs to be addressed not only by international entities but also by the Burmese government. Support that aims at eradicating this problem must then be funneled through at many different levels. As discussed above this can be from many different groups addressing the different levels of causes. Meaning assistance to find solutions for structural and root cause issues must compliment immediate solutions such as humanitarian assistance.

By dealing with the structural problems that cause displacement we are keeping the best interests of the people of Burma and its future as a country in mind. We are saying that



"Crisis of displacement inevitably stem from a failure on the part of governments."

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NEGOTIATING CEASE-FIRE: THE ART OF DISILLUSION IN MON STATE

by C Guinard

Despite numerous cease-fire agreements reached since 1994 between the Rangoon government and some ethnic rebel groups, peace still appears far away in Burma. Resentment is widespread that underlying issues have not been addressed and there is yet to be meaningful negotiations toward eventual peace accords, with attendant disarmament, development and political empowerment. After more than ten years of cease-fire talks, a lack of trust in this process is growing day by day because of an obvious unbalanced and distrustful environment. Most of the ethnic groups which had agreed to a cease-fire are today weakened both politically and militarily. They lost territory and strength. Human rights violations are still perpetrated by the Burmese Army and despite Rangoon's promise, not a single development project has been implemented in ethnic areas. In many cases, fighting continues, leading to further loss of life and a deteriorating social environment. If cease-fires are not respected, how will it be possible to build new trust and start true negotiations to reach a balanced and genuine peace process in the future? Why has such a stalemate occurred in Burma? What are the underlying causes of such cease-fire failure?

If we want to address these issues, a deeper analysis of one cease-fire agreement negotiated by the ruling military government State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is needed. The worst disillusionment from a cease-fire agreement may have resulted from the one negotiated by the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Burma government in June 1995. Today, the eight-year-old cease-fire in Mon State is still holding but barely.

Nai Shwe Kyin formed the NMSP and its armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) in July 1958. Operating in southern Mon State, northern Tenasserim Division and the southernmost tip of Karen State, the NMSP has fought Burma's army for more than forty years. In 1989, following the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma and cease-fire negotiations with around fifteen other rebel groups, the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was able to launch full-scale military offensives against the different armies which were active members of the National Democratic Front (NDF) such as the MNLA and the Karen National Union. Thus, the NMSP lost control of

its headquarters located near Three Pagoda's Pass in February 1990. This region represented their main source of income. At least, 30,000 people fled from the area at this time.

Weakened, the NMSP also faced growing political pressure from Thai officials willing to invest in Mon State. Foreign oil companies had also proposed a natural gas pipeline through contested areas of Mon State. This caused the Rangoon regime and Thai government to exert even greater pressure on the NMSP to negotiate a cease-fire. The Yadana gas pipeline started to be built in 1991. Surveying for the pipeline route caused an immediate result of forcibly relocating the local population to villages with military outposts. At that time, military authorities also forced more than 20,000 Mon people to work as slave labourers on a new rail line connecting the southern cities of Tavoy and Ye. The railway was built to allow supplies to be delivered to the Yadana gas field. Increasing its pressure, Thailand decided in 1994 to forcibly relocate Mon refugee camps back inside NMSP controlled territories in Burma. Shortly after the repatriation, Burmese troops torched some of these camps.

After several inconclusive rounds of talks, the NMSP finally agreed to a cease-fire in 1995, admitting that the organisation was no longer able to guarantee the safety of its own people. Forced labour had dramatically increased in the area and Mon IDPs living in the relocated camps were harassed daily. At that time, the NMSP and Mon people thought that the cease-fire could open a way for a forthcoming political settlement that recognised the rights of Mon people and encouraged development programs. The cease-fire agreement was only made orally and nothing was signed between the parties. The NMSP was allowed to keep its arms and some territory. But, the group had to cede large tracts of land as part of the agreement where the MNLA was located before. Only 20 permanent Mon areas were delimited. Within one year, the NMSP gradually handed over eight of them, including two strategic outposts in Tavoy district, where the Yadana pipeline was planned to cross to Thailand. After the cease-fire was reached, MNLA soldiers required travel-passes to go through SPDC controlled areas. The same condition was imposed on SPDC troops to go into Mon areas but this was never respected. The NMSP was also

granted seventeen business concessions in 1997. However, the regime cancelled the majority of the contracts by 1998. Finally, some development programs in Mon territory that were also promised by Rangoon were never implemented. These failed promises cultivated a growing distrust among the Mon population of the actual benefits of the cease-fire agreement. The NMSP also became increasingly weaker and life conditions deteriorated in Mon State. The SPDC has always refused to negotiate a political agreement. The result of the cease-fire on NMSP and Mon people was devastating in terms of territory, strength and life conditions.

If we want to address the root causes of this failed settlement, several factors must be analysed.

Firstly, a valid cease-fire is an agreement that organises cessation of any kind of military activities at a precise time in a given place. It is an initial confidence-building measure agreed on between the parties. It needs to be agreed on under the monitoring of a neutral mediator and written down and signed by both parties. This never happened during the Mon negotiation. Disarmament is also a fundamental step that must be followed. The SPDC offered the NMSP to "Exchange Arms for Peace" without ever asking for those arms to be given back. How can peace be guaranteed when soldiers retain their weapons and uniforms? How can fighting not resume in such a "militarised" state? Disappointed by the result of the Mon cease-fire, many former NMSP soldiers broke away and formed splinter groups such as the Monland Restoration Army. It was a fragile and fake peace.

Secondly, besides Rangoon's total unwillingness to negotiate a sustainable cease-fire, the NMSP cease-fire process was also undermined by the critical influence and pressure of Thailand, foreign companies, and business interests. In 1993, NMSP representatives declared that Thai authorities had offered to mediate peace with Rangoon and clear the way for a gas pipeline. The Thai National Security Council has always rejected reports alleging such pressure. But later in 1994, Thailand which usually held a liberal policy of accepting Burmese refugees began to send Mon people back to camps inside Burma. Thailand's policy reversal was based on its desire to pursue commercial ties with Burma, including the major natural gas agreement which was signed later in 1995. By forcing repatriation of more than 10,000 Mon refugees inside Burma, Thai authorities also "offered" free labour to the Rangoon government for the construction of both projects: the Ye-Tavoy railway and the Yadana pipeline. Both governments benefited



Mon forced labours on Ye-Tavoy rail road, 1990.

from this repatriation and use of forced labour. Today the railway and the Yadana pipeline are built and both Burma and Thailand are enjoying huge financial profit.

The environment surrounding the Mon cease-fire agreement was totally biased, unbalanced and violent. The NMSP and Mon people faced growing pressure from both Burma's army and Thailand. It was a non-voluntary agreement of a 'take it or leave it' offer. A legal cease-fire is supposed to stop the armed conflict in order to bring a start of confidence building between parties for real peace talks. A cease-fire agreement is one of several confidence-building measures, which are supposed to be followed by a long process of peace negotiations. It is just a first step towards peace. It is not possible to make such progress when one party faced great pressure from the other, when those at the table were already on unequal footing. Confidence cannot emerge from such circumstances. The Mon cease-fire process was only another way to control people within the actual constructs of the cease-fire itself. In the end, the Burmese troops were deployed to gain further territory and the Rangoon Government gained more power over ethnic areas.

In Burma, the so-called cease-fire process has nothing in common with a legal cease-fire. In the Burmese context, a cease-fire is understood and managed as a final measure in itself which must establish lasting peace. Burma's government never really intended to implement a valid peace process: from the strict beginning of the pre-negotiation phase where a cease-fire agreement must be reached, to the substantial negotiation of the peace agreement, and finally the crucial implementation phase.

Without an alternative to war or militarisation Burma will be condemned to endless rounds of armed conflict.



IN HIDING: THE BURMESE ARMY'S 7TH BRIGADE OFFENSIVE By Pah Paw Klo

The Burmese Army offensive against the Karen resistance in the east of the country has increased the amount of displaced people who are now hiding in fear and without protection.

The offensive, code named "Power Over the Land", was launched by the ruling military government State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) troops with cooperation from its militants the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The offensive began in mid-July 2003 in the area of Paan District, Karen State opposite Thailand's Mae Sot, about 512 kilometers northwest of Bangkok.

The operation's goal was to capture the Karen National Union's (KNU) 7th Brigade military base on the west bank of the Moei River and then control both the population and the resources in this area.

A three and half month military campaign has forced about 500 people from their homes in nine villages throughout Mae Ple Doe area, opposite Mae La in Thailand.

159 people fled from this fighting and managed to cross into Thailand's refugee camps. Those remaining were either in hiding in the jungle or had returned to their villages and were being forced to carry military supplies by DKBA and SPDC troops.

Relief team Free Burma Rangers (FBR) which brought medical assistance to those who were fleeing reported that they had treated over 200 people who suffered from Malaria, Dysentery, ERI and skin infections. They were living under stressful conditions in makeshift tents in the jungle.

Naw Khin Nyain, 40, told FBR relief workers that the SPDC and DKBA troops began shooting into her village. She and her pregnant 19 year-old daughter Naw Paw ran from their home in the gunfire. Her daughter was killed. Other people managed to escape but without any belongings.

Another mother Naw May Own, 18, said the troops entered their village at night and began shooting indiscriminately. She and her five day old baby ran into the jungle. Her mother-in-law was shot and wounded. She looked very weak.

Saw Dee Klo, 30, father of three children told the FBR relief workers a group of DKBA soldiers lead by Maw Hla Wah entered Htee Wah Klay

village on 22 September and tried to rape two women. But the women managed to escape. The DKBA then burnt down five houses and took two pigs and all the chickens in the village.

These people came from a KNU controlled area. SPDC troops have branded communities in resistance-controlled areas as rebel supporters and shoot them on sight without question. Whether they cooperate with guerillas or not, communities in resistance active areas face a systematic destruction of their livelihood by SPDC soldiers. Whenever they enter villages the soldiers burn and destroy farms, livestock and houses and leave people with empty hands. They partially do this to cut off support to rebel groups like the KNU.

Saw Hla Henry, secretary of the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) said the SPDC junta launched this major operation in KNU's Paan district to divert the interest of people from their interior problems after the incident of Depeyin.

It was where opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her convoy were attacked by the junta's mobs on May 30 creating international attention on Burma's political situation.

Hla Henry said, "There is no sign that shows the situation is better. The internally displaced people (IDP) problem is related to the political problem. If we can not solve the political problem, we can not solve the IDP problem."

Displacement of Karen people in the jungle has existed for more than 30 years, since the Burma Army's 'Four Cuts' operation against the Karen ethnic resistance in Pegu Yoma range. This 'Four cuts' operation continues until today. The 'Four Cuts' operation is a copied tactic from the US 'Strategic Hamlets' in the Vietnam War. The aim is to undermine the rebels by cutting off the villagers support—to stop recruitment, access to the intelligence, food and finance.

The plight of displaced people is rarely paid attention to by the outside world. Their suffering is only learned about when the fighting has forced them to cross into Thailand. But in reality these people are suffering everyday from the insecurity of livelihood and food scarcity. The Burmese troops try to find their hiding places and destroy everything they find, such as crops, houses, and household implements.

The exact number of those displaced is hard

to collect because of their unstable situation. They move from place to place all the time to avoid the Burma Army's search operations.

A Researcher with the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC) said his organisation estimated around 268,000 displaced villagers were displaced and in hiding in 2002.

IDP's are in hiding especially in the eastern part of the county in Shan, Karenni, Karen Sate and Tenasserim Division where the ethnic resistances are still fighting the military government.

BBC estimates that one million people have been displaced in eastern Burma since 1996. It includes refugees, villagers hiding in the jungle, in forced relocation camps, migrant workers in Thailand as well as people who have migrated from the rural areas into the urban areas in Burma.

Unlike Burma refugees in Thailand, there is no official assistance for displaced people. So far no official organisation is working directly with the government to solve the problems of displacement.

Coinciding with the offensive in Paan district, the Geneva-based Global IDP Project released a reported on 13 November saying that although there has been considerable attention on Burma's political crisis the brutal displacement of hundreds of thousands of people by the military regime has gone largely unnoticed by

the international community

The report said, "the situation of Burma's displaced people is desperate" and "without protection". "Their traditional livelihoods are ruined and humanitarian assistance is blocked by the army".

This leading international body that monitors internal displacement world-wide, has criticised the regime's "brutal policies" to control border areas populated by ethnic minorities, especially the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon. Its report stated that the government created a human rights situation that is considered one of the worst in the world.

The organisation called for improvement in the protection of IDPs, "more active international diplomacy and attention towards the situation in the ethnic minority areas is required from the UN, its agencies and international NGOs."

"Long-term solutions to the crises of internal displacement will only be possible in the context of a settlement to the deep-seated political conflicts in Burma that has the commitment of both the military rulers, the National League for Democracy and representatives of the ethnic groups." said the report.

Several attempts to call the SPDC's Ministry of Home Affairs failed to get any comment from it's spokesman.



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prevention is the key to ensuring that internal displacement is no longer practiced in Burma.

We are saying that the people of Burma have a right to security, have a right to food, have a right to housing and have a right to a livelihood. Overall displacement in Burma is the concern of IDP's themselves, local communities, the state government, regional leaders and the international community, all of which have a role to play. But most importantly, any support we give should place the primary responsibility with the interests of the local community, it is this area that needs strength, it is this area that can play the most decisive role in preparing displaced communities for prevention, survival and a future.



For further reading:

Masses in Flight, The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement, Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng, Brookings Institute, 1998.

Forced Migration Review www.fmreview.org

Internally Displaced People News, CIDKP.

A Report on the Conditions of Internally Displaced Persons in Shan State of Burma, Shan Human Rights Foundation.

Conflict and Displacement in Karenni: The Need for Considered Responses, BERG.

Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma, Images Asia and BERG.

www.idpproject.org

(Endnotes)

1 *Humanitarian assistance to Burma – How to establish good governance in the provision of humanitarian aid – ensuring aid reaches the right people in the right way*, Research paper of the Burma UN Service Office, March 2003.

2 *Exodus Within Borders: An introduction to Internal Displacement* by David Korn, Brookings Institute, 1999.

news briefs

Nine people sentenced to death for high treason: Nine people, including the editor of a weekly sports journal, were given death sentences on November 28 after a judge found them guilty of attempting to assassinate military leaders and provoking an uprising. On July 17, military intelligence officers raided the office of *First Eleven* and arrested Chief Editor and four other staff members. The four were eventually released, but in July the junta arrested 12 more people of suspected involvement in a planned coup attempt. Burma's last execution was in 1988.

UNOCAL stands trial: A trial pitting Burmese villagers against US-based oil giant Unocal Corporation began in California on December 9. Unocal is the first American company to stand trial in a US court for alleged human rights violations committed abroad. The California Superior Court in Los Angeles began hearing claims that

13 Burmese villagers were beaten, tortured and forced to provide free labour by Burmese army troops which provided security for a gas pipeline project in southern Burma.

16 NLD members freed from detention: Burma's military regime confirmed in early December that it had released 16 members of the pro-democracy opposition who were taken into detention along with their leader Aung San Suu Kyi in May. Fourteen NLD members, including the party's vice-chairman Tin Oo, remained in jail following the May 30 unrest in northern Burma, which triggered a crackdown on the opposition party.

ARNO and NUPA agree on a total landmine ban: The Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), the two component organisations of the Arakan Independence Alliance (AIA),

had separately signed the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action (DoC). The ARNO and NUPA are the first rebel groups in Burma to sign the Geneva Call DoC. Nine (7 States and 2 Divisions) out of 14 states and Divisions in Burma are heavily mine-affected.

Burma's road map forum: Burma's Foreign Minister has praised Thailand for its initiative in hosting a multilateral forum held in Bangkok on December 15. He added that Burma was grateful for the roles played by Thai Prime Minister, Mr Thaksin Shinawatra, and the Thai Foreign Minister. The forum brought together representatives of Australia, Austria, China, Japan, Italy, the EU, India, France, Germany, Singapore, Indonesia, the ASEAN, and UN special envoy to Burma, Mr Razali Ismail.

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SILOM POSTOFFICE
BANGKOK 10504
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