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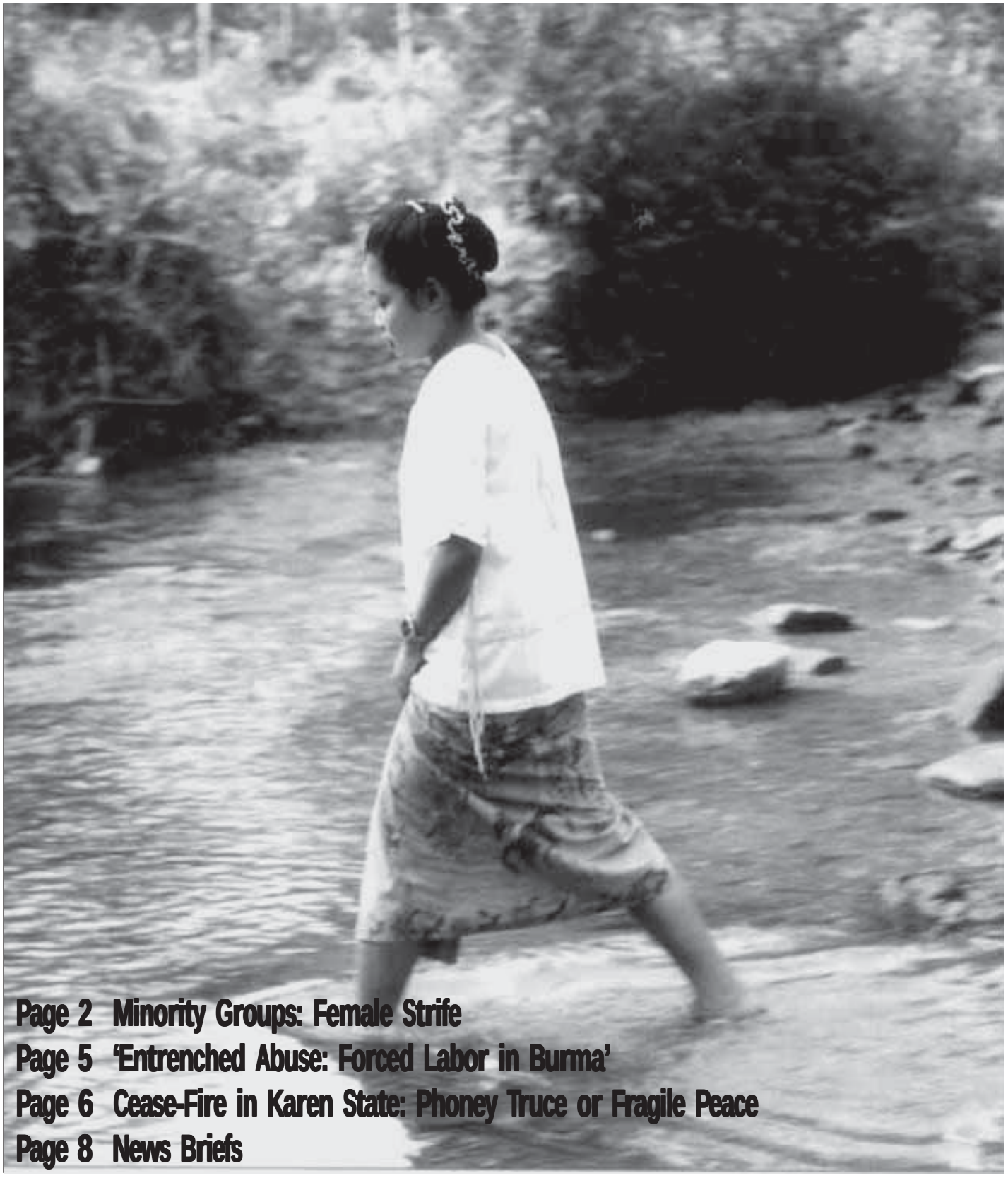

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Minority Groups: Female Strife

The daily struggles confronted by the ethnic minorities of Burma are arduous and extensive. Burma Issues recognizes the complex and diverse nature of this topic and takes a closer look at the conditions surrounding the women of the Karen and Shan States to reach a greater understanding of their plights.

Women in Karen State: Trying to Overcome Victimhood

By the Karen Women's Organization

Since independence in 1948 and up to the present day, the Karen people of Burma have had to face the prospect of genocide under the Burmese military regime (the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC). During the long civil war many people have suffered from various human rights violations. As a result, thousands of Karen people who can manage the long and dangerous journey to the border cross into neighboring Thailand and become refugees. There are many more who cannot get across the border safely and become Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) inside our own country.

Women in particular suffer from terror, loss, displacement and homelessness, diseases and poverty, and are often the victims of sexual violence. Because of our gender role, women suffer specific violations in addition to those suffered by the whole community.

Life as a woman in IDP areas is very difficult. We have very restricted access to health care services, security, and education. Under these conditions we have to fight for our lives. Our lives are routinely in danger. Women with children very often have to go from one place to another to reach a safe place which is only temporary and is sometimes deep in the forest.

Pregnant women in particular do not have access to basic health care such as healthy food and safe delivery conditions. There is a lack of medicine to treat diseases and a lack of health workers to assist women through pregnancy and delivery.

Sexual violence is frequently committed against women. When Burmese troops come to the village they often suspect men of collaboration with rebel groups, so the men will flee before the soldiers arrive. The women are then forced to work for the soldiers and are often raped by those soldiers. Sexual violence against Karen women is used as a weapon of war by the Burmese military. To be free from these kinds of violations, women have to flee from their villages. Fleeing home is especially difficult for pregnant women and for mothers with infants. Running through the jungle can mean risking premature birth. Even gathering vegetables or firewood is not safe for women, as we can easily be attacked or raped.

In IDP areas, life is especially hard for children, who usually do not have a chance to study because their schools are often destroyed every time SPDC troops attack the village. Even when there is a chance to attend school, boys will be sent to school by the family and girls more often have to stay at home and help their mothers with housework and taking care of smaller brothers and sisters. This has resulted in a high rate of illiteracy among women.

In the refugee camps at the Thai-Burma border Karen women also have to struggle for basic human rights, although the situation is better here than in Karen state. Many of our rights are not recognized and true equality has not

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been achieved in the community. There are very few women leaders in the camp committees, although we are now making progress. However, there are still very few women who get to know their rights. Women are expected to be housewives and to care for their families. They are busy weaving and taking care of other things in order to earn some money and use it for their family's basic needs.

In order to empower women, the Karen Women's Organization has started many activities in the camps. One such project is "Women as Peace Builders". The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) promotes the role of women in the peace and reconciliation process by working together and encouraging cooperation between the different ethnic women's groups. In 1999, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) was formed and the Karen Women's Organization is a member. Through education, the KWO is now in the process of providing different training sessions to women in the community. Examples include human rights training, counseling training, peace building.

Further Reading

~ The KWO has also recently released a report called ***"Shattering Silences"***, which is about sexual violence against women in Karen state, and the use of rape as a weapon of war by the Burmese army.
You can find it at:
< http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Shattering_Silences.htm > .

~ In 2002, the SWAN released the ***"License to Rape"*** report which detailed the systematic use of rape against women in Shan State.
You can find it at:
< http://www.shanland.org/HR/Publication/LtoR/license_to_rape.htm >

Shan Women in Need of Protection

By L. Hancock

The Shan are a minority group that inhabits Shan State, along the Eastern side of Burma, bordering China, Laos and Thailand. Like all minority groups within Burma, the Shan are often subject to discrimination, torture and daily human rights violations. Within this group, women are particularly vulnerable. In June 2002, the Shan Women Action Network (SWAN) and Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) released the "License to Rape" report, which brought the harrowing experiences of Shan women onto the world stage. It reported that out of the 173 rape cases documented 83% were committed by SPDC officers, 61% were cases of gang rape, and 25% resulted in death. Reading report after report, it becomes apparent that age and pregnancy did not deter the rapists, as the SPDC were in fact using rape systematically, as a weapon of war. Since the report was released, the rapes have not ceased, or even decreased. SWAN has documented a further 138 rapes of women and girls in Shan State (SWAN newsletter Sept. 2003), a deplorable pattern that contradicts the SPDC's refusal to accept responsibility for, or even acknowledge, such criminal acts.

Why is there a higher incidence of rape and abuse amongst the Shan women? Over a quarter of the Burmese military is situated in Shan State, due to the presence of Shan armed groups, and also to the rich food resources in the region. Since 1996 the SPDC has relocated 1400 villages: over 300,000 people have been forced to move at the barrel of a gun. As in Karen state, Shan women and children are usually left to face the military alone. A Shan woman may be ordered to become a guide or a laborer, where she is at great risk of being raped or even murdered. If not, she will have to move with the remainder of her village to a location situated closer to a military base, to live under close and constant scrutiny. On this journey 6% of rapes occur at checkpoints between villages. At the relocation premises, a further 6% of rapes occur. If she is brave enough to question the regime and voice her fears she

Continued on the next page

can be taken away by officers and gang-raped at the military bases. If she dares to return to her old village, she enters a "free-fire zone", where another 14% of rapes occur. Within the villages, if a woman reports a rape, village elders will encourage her not to speak out, as she and her family will be fined for slandering an officer. The consequences of speaking out are grim, as it is inappropriate for her to become sexually active before marriage; that it was forced is irrelevant. So not only is her body violated, but her pride, her sense of self, and her acceptance amongst her own people are all in jeopardy. It appears that she has nowhere to turn and no one to support her. Like 13% of rape victims in Burma, she is forced to move on, unable to cope, and begins the perilous trek to the Thai border in search of freedom.

Before she even starts her journey she will probably be malnourished, as food is so difficult to come by, especially since the military has stolen most of whatever may have been cultivated. If she has children with her she is slowed down in her journey, heightening her fear of being caught, risking not just herself, but her children as well. Upon reaching the border she will have to enter as an illegal immigrant. Whilst Karen and Karenni minority groups are recognized as refugees, the Shan are not allowed to set up refugee camps and are therefore placed in an extremely vulnerable position. She will have two options: one is to work illegally in a factory; the other is to enter the sex trade. As a prostitute she may encounter exploitation, physical abuse, exposure to HIV/AIDS, illegal confinement, and debt bondage, but she has a greater chance of earning enough money to support her family and has greater protection against being arrested and eventually deported. Although there have been massive crackdowns on illegal immigrants working in factories in places like Chiang Mai and Mae Sot in Thailand, the brothels are rarely raided, and the Thai police are prone to accepting bribes. In 1991, a brothel was raided in Chiang Mai and nineteen girls were "rescued" and returned to Shan State; seventeen of the girls were HIV positive (UNICEF 1995). Due to a lack of education in the region about causes and means of prevention, and the authorities' refusal to address the near epidemic spread of HIV/AIDS, there is a lack of understanding of victims and they are often perceived as cursed, and will not receive the appropriate medication. The officers may be unaware that by raping so many women and threatening innocent girls' lives they are in fact killing themselves, as gang-rape and the sex trade are the leading means of spreading disease.

A recent study showed that in a number of Shan State communities, up to 20% of girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five are to be found in Thai brothels (Gender Issues, Myanmar, by Dr Leena M Kirjavainen). If the Shan were recognized as refugees and were provided with the humanitarian support they deserve and require, these numbers could be greatly reduced. It seems that the only freedom these Shan women gain from crossing the border is the liberty to tell us their stories and provide us with an insight into the horrific ordeals they have endured. Out of the women who have been lucky enough to escape and survive, only one in five speak out. Each Shan woman has a story to tell. If she has the strength and bravery to break the silence and stand up to the SPDC's abuses and denials-denials belied by the scars that have not yet healed and the memories that never will-then we owe it to her to listen, and to hear her, and to tell her story to others.

Karen women gathering wood, Karen State, 2001.

WITNESS Highlights Forced Labour in Burma:

Watch the Rights Alert 'Entrenched Abuse : Forced Labor in Burma' at www.witness.org

'Entrenched Abuse: Forced Labor in Burma' is a recent WITNESS-Burma Issues production, documenting how hundreds of thousands of people across Burma are forced by the SPDC to work against their will, and without pay, on the regime's development projects, as porters and human minesweepers in the military, and in other forms of compulsory labor. The International Labor Organization (ILO) - the UN agency that monitors forced labor worldwide - has identified the SPDC regime as one of the world's worst perpetrators, and repeatedly censured it. The incidents of forced labor in this video show how - despite its claims to the contrary - the SPDC has continued to use forced labor. They were recorded by Burma Issues documentors during 2003, among three different ethnic groups - the Karen, Karenni, and Burmans - and in different regions of Burma.

'Entrenched Abuse' was shown recently in Washington DC, at the first working conference of the U.S. Campaign for Burma. It was screened for an audience of over 120. Additionally, eighty copies of a video that included 'Entrenched Abuse' and another recent WITNESS-Burma Issues production, 'No Place to Go: Internally Displaced People in Burma' were distributed to attendees for use in their own campaigning and awareness-raising. Both videos are products of the Burma Issues Video Project, which seeks to share the voices of the grassroots people directly affected by the conflict in Burma with key international publics. 'No Place to Go' has been distributed widely to campaigners, government officials, and other decision-makers working for justice in Burma, and we aim to reach similar audiences with 'Entrenched Abuse', as well as organize targeted screenings for key decisionmakers in governments and intergovernmental organizations.

If you are interested in using 'Entrenched Abuse' in your own work please contact WITNESS or Burma Issues.

'Entrenched Abuse' is based on evidence provided mostly through interviews with people living in Burma, about their feelings about and experiences with the SPDC government. They talked about forced labour, its effect on their lives, the conduct of the Burmese government, and many other topics. Here is a sample of what some of the people involved had to say:

~ They abused us and tortured us in many ways. They make us poor and we starve. The people have been suffering too much. (Karenni village leader)

~ Now we have to stop our normal daily work, because the SPDC ordered us to work on road construction. It is our village which has to do this work, as we live close to this road. (Karen villager)

~ We would call people from the villages…we caught or arrested people who were traveling along the road, and we would enter teashops and forcibly arrest men and put them on our truck. And we would take people whenever we went through a village. (Burmese Army deserter)

~ I don't understand why they come and order us to work. We have to do it because we are afraid. (Karen villager)

~ When there are irrigation projects we have to go again to "volunteer." They don't even provide a hoe. We have to come up with our own equipment, and bring our own food. On a canal project we have to be away working for 20 to 25 days, bringing all our own food. We are forced to work like that. So it is very difficult to survive, get food and shelter, and stay healthy. (Burman man)

~ Nowadays, the people don't want this government. I don't know about the whole population but to speak for my village and myself we definitely don't want this government. They say they will give democracy, but they never do. They are dishonest and they lie. (Burman man)

The video 'Entrenched Abuse' is available for purchase at:
www.witness.org
www.burmaissues.org

CEASE-FIRE IN KAREN STATE:
PHONEY TRUCE OR FRAGILE PEACE?

BY C. GUINARD

Burma Issues, Field mission in 6th Brigade area, Southeastern Karen State.
~Mid-March 2004~

Following the recent cease-fire talks between the Burmese Government (SPDC) and the Karen National Union (KNU) in December 2003 and January 2004, field staff from Burma Issues (BI) recently went inside Karen State in the KNU 6th Brigade area to collect information and updates on the situation in this remote region. Interviewing villagers, workers, and Karen officials, BI tried to assess the real nature of this tense and crucial period, and whether the SPDC and KNU can build mutual trust based on mutual respect for their agreement. Has any fighting broken out again between the sides? Has any military activity taken place in this region? How do villagers, the people most affected by this cease-fire, feel about the recent changes?

Reports from the 6th Brigade area show that most of the fighting between governmental forces and Karen troops has ceased, for the time being. Even the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a breakaway faction of the KNU which is now serving jointly with Burmese troops, has halted its actions against Karen rebels. There have clearly been some improvements in the situation, which villagers are quick to point out. Many villagers from Kawkareik Township and the surrounding area in the 6th Brigade reported to BI that no more fighting had taken place between SPDC and KNU troops. One villager also told BI that "the DKBA don't fight against the KNU if the KNU doesn't fight them first (...). We feel more comfortable. We can travel freely. We are happy to see peace. Maybe we can visit town if we have the money." At least the violence has ended. Villagers no longer have to flee into the jungle to avoid combats between the three groups. After all the doubts surrounding these cease-fire talks, such progress undeniably heralds hope for the future.

Many other aspects of the picture are not so idyllic, however. All villagers interviewed reported massive and continuing use of forced labour and portering. "Since cease-fire talks, the SPDC stopped demanding the villagers to carry ammunitions, now it is only supplies such as milk, rice and other things we have to carry. We go when they forcibly demand us to go. They start to send their supplies in January 2004." As usual, no financial compensation is given to any villagers who are forced to carry these supplies. In the 6th Brigade area, the SPDC is currently building a new road near Sukali area. Because of the cease-fire agreement, Burmese troops do not use villagers's labour anymore. But villagers remarked that the SPDC had forcibly recruited more than one hundred prisoners for these roadworks. Villagers recognised convicts porters because of their blue uniforms. Previous reports from the 7th Brigade area in Karen State[1] confirmed that most prisoners are given blue uniforms when they are "requested" by the army to become porters. Although Burmese troops now spare villagers from forced labour, the use of convict porters is also deplorable. It shows a total lack of intention, on the part of the Burmese government, to put a real end to forced labour.

The DKBA is also managing the building of another road close to the Thai border between Baledo and Zayat villages, and in this case hundreds of villagers have been forced to work on the site. Excluded from the KNU-SPDC cease-fire talks, the DKBA argues that it is not bound by the agreement. They stopped fighting but continue to use villagers for road construction with impunity. Such an exclusion of a significant player, during the cease-fire phase of this or any peace process, is troubling. The DKBA is effectively controlled by the SPDC, but its leaders maintain its separation from the Burmese government, where the cease-fire is concerned. In the meantime, it remains an armed group in itself, with heavy weapons and threatening activities, terrorising villagers and seemingly set to continue abusing them until it is brought into peace talks. Clearly, any meaningful peace talks in the future will have to include the DKBA.

Another alarming fact reported to BI is that the SPDC is now sending more supplies to its frontline military bases, relative to previous summers. When asked about the situation, a KNU officer reported that "the SPDC has started

sending their supplies and constructing a road. There is a good opportunity for them to prepare themselves during the talks. If the talks fail, they can easily fight us because we are not strong enough. It is not good for us if there is no decision." This apparent hypothesis may in fact constitute a real threat. It wouldn't be the first time that SPDC troops have arranged a period of "truce" with the KNU to strengthen its forces and fight back, as they did in the early 90's.

All villagers interviewed also explained the dire and dramatic living conditions that they live under. All reported a constant lack of adequate food and medicine. Recurrent looting from Burmese soldiers continues: "they [SPDC troops] never ask villagers for animal like chicken, they just steal them all the time." There is also forced taxation levied by the DKBA: "we sometimes have to give them rice but they always ask for money for building pagodas."

However, in spite of all the difficulties they face, "villagers are so happy about the cease-fire talks, because they have been living in a free-fire zone for such a long time. They have been persecuted all the time as long as there is war…They are happy and want to be free from oppression," as a village headman informed BI, who nonetheless expressed his doubts about the process, as long as the United Nations (UN) does not support it: "I really want the UN to get involved during these cease-fire talks. Because I believe that it wouldn't be a true cease-fire without UN help." If the UN could cooperate at the grassroots level in such a way, perhaps then we could talk about an emerging, sustainable peace.

***Note**: All quotes cited in this article are from interviews carried out by BI field staff during mid-March in Kawkareik township, Duplaya district, Karen State, Burma.*

Endnotes

1: Burma Issues: Interviews with forced convict porters used during the 7th Brigade Offensive, Karen State, November 2003.

Fishers returning home in Kawkareik Township, 6th Brigade, Karen State, 2004.

news briefs

Opposition Wants SPDC's Assurance All Views Will Be Heard

Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, debating whether to join the constitutional convention in May, is concerned about principles that the SPDC says will lay the foundation for the constitution, which guarantee the military control over the executive and legislature. The NLD wants the right to object and put forward its views. Suu Kyi, still serving house arrest, was recently allowed to meet with other NLD leaders in Rangoon.

Thailand Plans to Register Illegal Workers

Thailand plans to give immigrant workers and their families a chance to register with authorities. The planned registration aims to fix the underground labour problem in Thailand, while giving illegal immigrants and their families official recognition. Illegal workers that register during this program would face reduced penalties so as to encourage as many as possible to participate. Burma has yet to confirm its cooperation.

KNU and SPDC Plan Third Round of Talks

The KNU and SPDC are already negotiating a date for the next talks. KNU first secretary Htoo Lay will head the delegation, but no venue for the talks has been chosen yet. The KNU agenda has not yet been set, but they are likely to raise the issue of designating the group's territory. These talks follow a surprise December agreement to cease hostilities.

Bangkok Process Postponed

The second Bangkok Process meeting faces a hiccup, with SPDC officials asking that it be postponed. Rangoon was apparently busy preparing for the May 17 National Convention and did not want to withdraw from the Bangkok Process, which it considered to be important in supporting its engagement with the international community.

Ukrainian Arms Factory Setting Up In Burma

A Ukraine government-owned arms dealer is setting up a factory to assemble 1000 armored personnel carriers in Burma. If the model to be assembled is one that includes American parts, this would break American law, which forbids American firms from selling weapons or dual-use goods to Burma. The scale of the project is surprising: Burma currently has less than 400 APCs in total. The SPDC does not normally use them for frontline insurgent fighting operations.

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