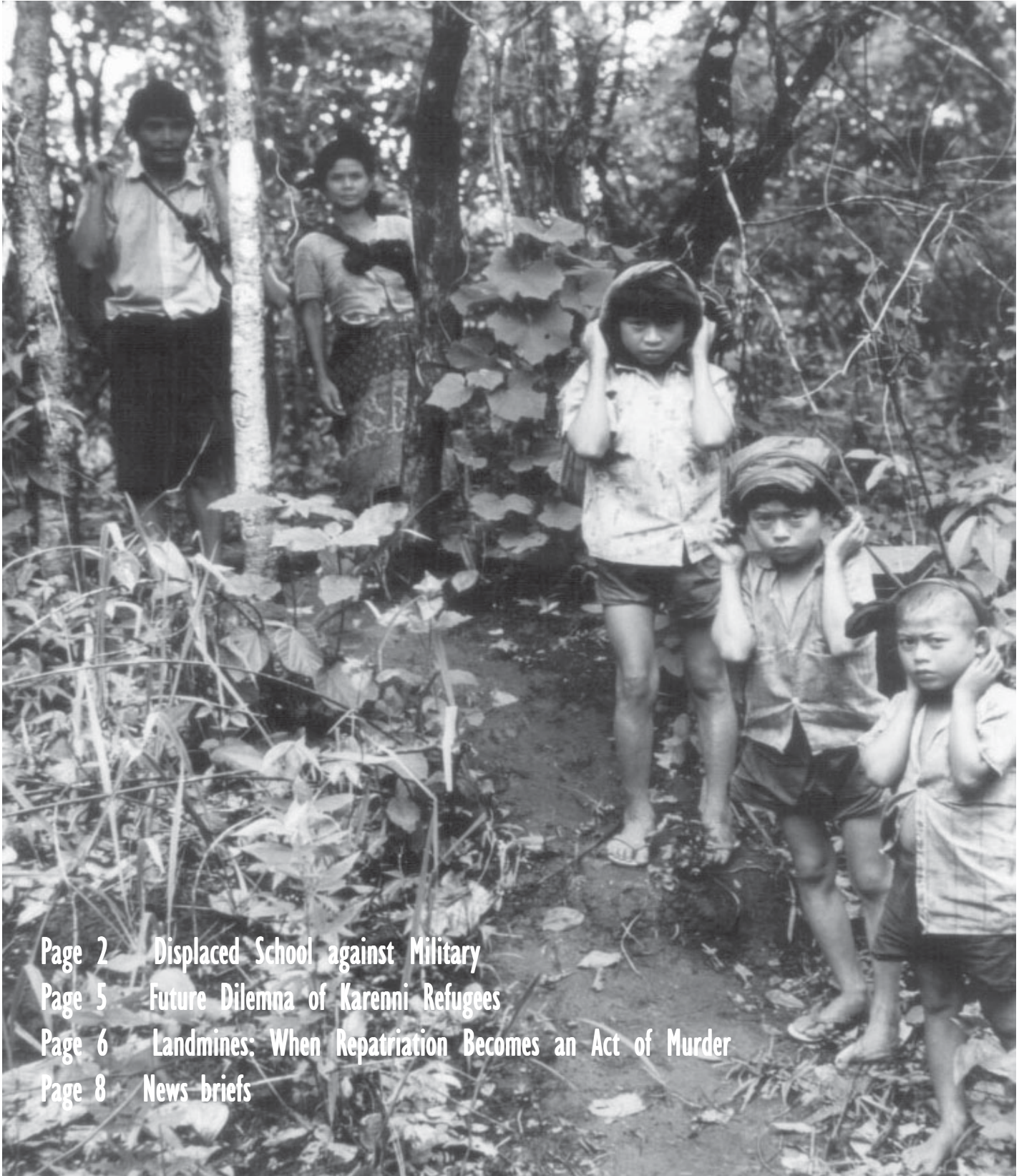




Burma Issues

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DISPLACED SCHOOL AGAINST MILITARY

BY SAW EHNA AND SUNDAY HT00

Though she is young and dreaming of going to school, she has to assume responsibility in the house so that her widowed mother can grow rice for their survival in the deep jungle.

Pwe Htee, 14, said, "I want to go to school very much, but I can not. I have to look after my two younger siblings while my mother works in the rice plantation. I want to study in the refugee camp".

She is one of the many Karen people who are hiding from the Burmese Army in the east of the Tenasserim jungle after they were forcibly moved out of their villages to one of the various army controlled relocation sites. However, many villagers refused to move to such places and escaped in the forest. The army branded these farmers as "enemies" or "rebel supporters" and constantly searched them, terrorized them and uproots their rice plantations.

Pwe Htee and her mother are currently hiding in the area known as Ler Mu Lah Township, in southern Burma. Her father died of sickness in the jungle while her mother was pregnant with her second child. They fled from their village about six years ago. In 2001 they were captured by Burmese soldiers and taken to a relocation site nearby. Then, they escaped to this hide out.

While hiding, her mother was raped by a man causing her to become pregnant with her third child.

Lack of School

There is no school near where Pwe Htee is hiding. There are two informal schools in this remote jungle but they are too far away for her to walk there everyday.

Many children hiding here are in a similar situation. They have to support their parents. Although most parents are eager to send their children to school, they also fear Burmese troop movements. Going to schools represents a big risk for those children.

According to the latest assessment on the education of internally displaced villagers in 2001 by the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG - a teachers group which provides education among displaced Karen people), poverty, lack of food, insufficient security due to military activities and disease contribute to the fact that students are not attending school.

Te Saw Nor, father of three children in Ler Mu Lah jungle said that because of the difficulties of insufficient food and clothing, he could not send his three children to school.

P'doh Lah Say, head of the KNU Education Department confirms that situation, "lack of security is a major problem for the displaced people wishing to go to school, because they often have to flee". The KNU or Karen National Union is an ethnic Karen group which has been fighting for self-determination against the Burmese military government or State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) for over five decades. Currently it has reached a verbal cease-fire agreement with the SPDC.

A seventeen year old, Saw Eh, said "The Burmese troops search to kill and destroy our homes. Now I am like a blind man. I would like to read and write like others do. But there is no time left for me".

This is typical of the lack of basic education that has been affecting thousands of Karen in conflict areas. The rate of illiteracy is high. There is no exact data available, but Saw Ehdoh Wah, KTWG Documentation Coordinator, has said, based on his own experience working with the communities, "In a village, only about nine to ten people are literate". He estimated that about 80 percent of Karen in the war torn areas are illiterate. ¹

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Jungle School

Schooling is often disrupted by army offensives, forced relocation and military operations against displaced people. However, many people have the courage to face the challenge of survival and to provide basic education to their children.

In Karen areas, even without security or a stable residence, parents who arrived in the jungle are trying to encourage their children to learn so that at least they would be able to write and read their own language. In some hiding sites parents manage to set up temporary makeshift schools under the trees, using rocks, plastic sheets as blackboards and whatever other material is available.

P'doh Kwe Htoo Win, a member of Commit-

tee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), said that for the displaced children to be able to go to school properly, a long term solution is needed. There must be a peaceful

solution to the civil war so that the displaced people can start new lives. "In the short term, we can bring to them school materials and books which allow them to learn for a month or two, but if



IDP school in Karen State, March 2002

the Burmese troops come, they have to move again", he added.

Endnote:

1 Burmese Border Consortium (BBC), a relief NGO for refugees and displacement in Burma, estimated that over 100 000 displaced Karen villagers in Karen State and Tenasserim division were in hiding in 2002.

PEOPLE'S STORIES: ACUTE LACK OF TEACHERS FOR IDPs

When I was inside Burma's eastern jungle, I met my friend Theh Ray Paw Neh, who arrived from Thailand to help the people. She stayed in a bamboo house that the people had built for the teacher and students. She told me, "Sister, I arrived yesterday; I took a bath and dried my sarong behind the house; then I lay down for a rest. I heard children talking to each other whilst they were approaching. They said 'look, do you see our teacher's sarongs hanging over there. She comes to teach us.' One said to others, 'I am happy that our school will start and I will come and stay with my teacher. Let's go and have a peek!' Then I stood up to look and they all ran away."

But neither my friend nor I are here to teach. We have come here for health relief and training for the displaced people.

This is a place where people who have fled Burmese troops oppression are in hiding. It is in the east of Mergui-Tavoy District (Tenasserim division), Ler Mu Lah Township. They survive here through farming, planting sugar cane, and collecting wild honey to sell in Thailand. There are about ten families and they live very far apart from each other, in order to remain safe and hidden from the Burmese patrols.

People here are eager to send their children to school. They built a house for the teacher. For more than three years they have been waiting for a teacher. And they are still waiting...

At another displaced hiding site, which is about a half-day's walk away, they are lucky enough to have a teacher since last year. It is the only school the displaced people living in this area have. Unfortu-

nately this school must move to another place because of the unstable security situation.

While I was at this hiding place, I met the only teacher named Paw Poh. She has just returned from the refugee camp for a teacher-training course. She looked sick and weak. Since couple of days, she had been waiting for the people who help her to carry her schoolbooks. There she told me about her teaching.

Paw Poh, 23, is from a Karen village in Burma. She fled to Thailand and became a refugee in 1997. She had only reached grade five standard and went to the bible school in the camp. In 2003, some Karen leaders from Ler Mu Lah Township came to her and requested her help to teach to displaced children. She accepted and left the camp.

"During the 2003-2004 school years there were 18 students. We used black plastic sheet roofing as a black board" said Paw Poh. "Parents were enthusiastic for their children's education and they looked after me. Students themselves were disciplined and they work hard."

She said that some children wanted to come to school, but they couldn't. They had to help their parents to survive.

"When I saw these parents and children, I wanted to help them, but I was belittled because I don't have adequate educational qualifications. In addition I get sick regularly, and people had to treat me and find medicine for me."

Disappointed, Paw Poh said, "when I was in the camp I asked many friends to come with me, but nobody was willing. Some people wanted to come, but their parents forbade them; some said their health was not good enough, and some said they would come with me next time. Some people asked me how much I earned for this job. Frustrated, I returned to teach alone."

There are many reasons which contribute to the lack of teachers. The assess-

ment by KTWG showed that teachers did not have time to work in the paddy fields, so they depend on the displaced communities for food and financial support. When the communities cannot provide a teacher's basic needs, it becomes difficult for the teacher to remain in their teaching job. The Burmese Army destroys paddies and live-stock, making it impossible for the displaced community to provide enough food for their teachers.

P'doh Lah Say, head of KED agreed on this reason, "Finding teachers for internally displaced children inside Burma is very difficult" He said that some teachers from refugee camps returned to Karen state to teach. They found it very difficult to survive because they could not get support. They need some support to be able to do the job".

He further added that the lack of qualified teachers is another problem. Teachers who have been teaching in the jungle areas are mostly people who only completed primary school-grades four and five.

KTWG also reported that teachers in the jungle school have little or no formal training. They also don't have educational texts to rely on. Even though they do their best, their lack of skill and experience adversely affects the children.

Responding to this, KTWG has trained a group of mobile teachers who are traveling from place to place to provides support services to teacher who are living in the jungle. They also train them about basic teaching skills.

Confronting all the problems that hinder the fight to eradicate illiteracy among displaced Karen people, Paw Poh said that, "it is time for young people to get involved to fight the illiteracy that is overcoming our people. There is no parent, sickness, mountain or river so great as to stop us loving and helping our people. We need to dedicate ourselves to help the people, to join hands, to be victorious in justice and fill all our people with the hope they are longing for."



FUTURE DILEMMA OF KARENNI REFUGEES

BY BEH REH

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Two delegates from United Nation High Commission on Human Rights (UNHCR) in mid-August met some top leaders from KNPP for a success resettlement (repatriation) of Karenni Refugees in their homeland.

"We do not have specific or contingency plan regarding the resettlement (repatriation) of Karenni Refugees yet, but this issue was raised during one of our meeting last year December", said Abel Twin, an central executive committee member of Karenni National Progressive Party.

There are more than twenty thousand (20,000) Karenni Refugees taking refuge in Thailand as a result of Burma's military crises and there are around three hundred thousand people left inside Karenni State.

The UNHCR will be able to support any technical assistance for the success of the drafting of the contingency plan for resettlement.

The re-integration of people who have been separated for differences within a society is more important than logistics needs of the people in the resettlement (repatriation), only the re-integration is successful the plan of resettlement (repatriation) will be a sustainable, said a UNHCR's consultant for Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Hugo Raemi further said, "It is necessary that, UNHCR conduct an information gathering with the support of the Burmese military along the

border to ensure that, there is an life insurance, no risk of landmine, and the insurance of livelihood for those who volunteer to return. " Only these information and data are gathered, than there can be a full protection for the life insurance of the repatriated refugees.

Karenni National Progressive Party do not want the management of sending back refugees to be handled by the Military government unless there is a political change in Burma. And it is the desire of KNPP that, the UNHCR monitor closely the resettlement program of refugees until there is a peaceful living.

The chairperson of the Karenni National Progressive Party expressed that, not only a genuine peace talk between KNPP and the Military is necessary before the repatriation could take place. But only when there is peace in the whole country, than the implementation of sending back the refugees to their homeland should be implemented

There was a cease-fire agreement reached between the KNPP and the Military government in March, 1995, but the fight broke out again between the two sides after

three months as a result of the advancement of Military troops toward Karenni controlled area. The agreement was broken as a result of the resume fights between the two sides.

Again, there was an attempt by KNPP to restart the peace talk with the Military government in April of 2004, but it failed.



Village children, central Karenni State, December 2003

ERRATUM: BURMA ISSUES NEWSLETTER JULY, VOL. 14, No. 7

All our apologies for the wrong figure that we published in our article "Too Scared to Access: HIV Epidemic among Karen Refugees".

Please, rectify the sentence "Doctors Without Borders (MSF) fears a secret HIV epidemic among **one million** Karen refugees along the Thai-Burma border." **By** "Doctors Without Borders (MSF) fears a secret HIV epidemic **among thousands** of Karen refugees along the Thai-Burma border."

LANDMINES:

WHEN REPATRIATION BECOMES AN ACT OF MURDER

BY SANTIPAP

As the cease-fire talks continue between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burmese military junta, the issue of refugee repatriation keeps emerging. Previously, once a ceasefire agreement has been reached between two conflicting parties, Thailand has forced Burmese, Laos and Cambodian refugees across the border back into their homelands. However, as Karen state is one of the most heavily mined areas in Burma, once the process of repatriation begins the refugees will constantly be wondering: is this step going to be their last?

Presently there is a verbal 'gentlemen's' ceasefire, however, talks to make this tentative agreement permanent are continuing. The fourth round of talks, which were due to occur in August have been rescheduled to take place next month¹. Karen rebels have been waging a revolution against the Burmese government for more than half a century. Whilst the ongoing dialogue is seen as a positive sign, it has come under some criticism from Karen villagers because of the lack of involvement of external organisations such as the United Nations². Regardless of whether a ceasefire is reached, it will take time before the people trust the agreement. In recent interviews, some internally displaced people (IDPs) living in Karen state admitted that they would return to their village, only after the ceasefire had been sustained for at least four years³.

One reason for this mistrust is that the principles of a 'gentleman's' ceasefire are very different from the realities. Ideally, the estimated 200,000 IDPs in Karen state would be able to return to their homes, rather than continue precariously living in the jungle without food, shelter, clean water and medicine. The battles between the Karen National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the KNU) and the junta's troops would have ceased. There would be no more forced labour, including making people act as a human mine sweepers, at least in the ceasefire area. And neither side should be laying anti-personnel mines, especially in areas where civilians live and travel.

Unfortunately the realities are some what different. Since January there have been more than 200 armed skirmishes between the KNLA and

the junta's troops⁴. IDPs continue to live in the jungle, with the idea of returning to their villages being little more than a dream. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) still regularly use villagers and prisoners as forced labour. And sources have recently confirmed that the junta's troops continue to lay landmine on paths used by villagers and in IDP areas⁵.

These are the harsh realities of the SPDC/KNU ceasefire. And this is the life the Karen refugees will return to, if they are repatriated back into Burma. As Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the main international treaty protecting refugees, the Karen people who have been living in camps along the Thai-Burma border have no legal status in this country. The Thai government is merely obliged to allow these people to take temporary shelter while hostilities occur in their own countries. Once the fighting has subsided Thailand is legally allowed to force the refugees back across the border.



Handmade landmines, Karenni State, December 2003.

And for decades this has been the principle that has influenced the Thai government's attitude towards refugees. During the Khmer Rouge days, Cambodian's fleeing fighting were allowed to enter Thailand until the hostilities ceased, and then, regardless of landmines or whether they were entering a free-fire zone, they were forced back across the border, to wait for the next lot of fighting to begin. Similarly, in 1994, the Thai government forcibly repatriated Mon refugees into Burma once a verbal ceasefire agreement had been reached between the SPDC and the New Mon State Party, an armed Mon ethnic insurgent group. Following the Mon repatriation many people, however, were used as forced labour and suffered from the militarization of their homeland⁶.

And the Mon people did not return to their homes. The SPDC military troops are known to burn and loot villages that people have had to flee. Instead of returning to their villages, the Mon refugees are still today forced to live in relocation sites, which are under constant military surveillance. For those who did return to their villages, they discovered that the SDPC had laid landmines around villages, on paths used by villagers and in rice paddies and fields. If Thai-

Atrocity Demining: Human minesweeping

“SPDC troops made me walk across landmine fields. By walking over the minefield it is hoped that the porters will detonate any mines.”

“We were told (by SPDC soldiers) to go out and clear the landmines but I didn’t even know what a landmine looked like and I didn’t know how to clear the mines.”

BI Interviews of forced porters used as human minesweepers during the offensive in Eastern Karen State, Burma, September-October 2003 .

land repatriates the Karen refugees, they will return to a similar fate.

After 50 years of civil war in Burma, Karen state and other ethnic border areas are littered with landmines. The use of anti-personnel mines has been an effective strategy for all parties troops, their subsidiaries and at least 15 ethnic insurgent groups, such as the KNLA. Despite claims on both sides of the conflict that they mark mine fields, there is no systematic recording system of landmines in Burma. Partially because there are so many different groups using them, but also because the Burmese Ministry of Defense denies that their troops use landmines or even the existence of them within the country. There are allegedly some indicators to let villagers know that the path has been mined, such as crosses on trees and branches being broken across a paths, but there is no sign or symbol which that solely represents minefield. Combatants allege that they give verbal warnings to villagers of where landmines have been planted. But victims interviewed by Nonviolence International, a Bangkok based non-government organisation and representative for the LandMine Monitor Burma, have never mentioned receiving such warnings.

While the true extent to landmine incidents in Burma will always remain hidden, what is known is shocking. Half of the people injured by landmines die, one-third are civilians and more than half are under 26 when they are wounded. More than 90 per cent of landmine survivors loss at least one limb, 40 per cent receive eye injuries, such as blindness and impaired vision, and 21 per cent suffer from complete or diminished hearing loss⁷. It is estimated that in Karen State there is one civilian landmine amputee every day.

Following injury it takes, on average, a 12 hour journey through jungle and militarized areas to receive medical treatment. One man traveled 21 days after stepping on a landmine before he reached a jungle hospital⁸. Medical facilities in Burma are very limited, especially in ethnic areas. That is why 46 per cent of landmine vic-

tims travel to Thailand where they receive treatment. However, for the people who remain in Burma, receiving medical attention can be a matter of luck, because permanent, well stocked clinics with trained medics are rare.

Even if Burma had the world’s best medical facilities, prevention is without a doubt better than any cure. However, there is no humanitarian landmine removal occurring in Burma, and what is being conducted by the military is undertaken for the benefit of the military only, not the civilian population. The worst method of mine clearance used by the SDPC troop’s is forcing villagers to act as human mine sweeps. They make the villagers walk across minefields with the aim that they will detonate any mines. If the human mine sweeps are made to clear the mines, it is done with their hands, without any landmine clearing training.

Landmines do not discriminate between their victims – they kill and harm all people equally. With one amputee in Karen state every day, it is obviously not a safe environment to repatriate refugees back. If the Karen refugees could return home, and remain in one piece, they would. They do not want to return to death, or amputations. Their homeland has become a battle ground for a civil war that has been raging for over half a century. The very least they deserve is to be able to return home without constantly playing a game of Russian roulette with their feet, and their lives.



Endnotes

- 1 Interview with BI Field Staff, September 2004, Mae Sot
- 2 “Cease-Fire in Karen State: Phoney Truce or Fragile Peace”, *Burma Issues Newsletter*, April 2004
- 3 Information from Kwe Ka Lu Staff (Karen Newspaper), September 2004, Kanchanburi
- 4 “KNU to resume ceasefire talks with Junta”, *The Irrawaddy*, July 29, 2004
- 5 Information provided by Kwe Ka Lu Staff (Karen Newspaper), August 2004, Kanchanburi
- 6 “Negotiating Cease-fire: The Art of Disillusion in Mon State”, *Burma Issues Newsletter*, December 2003
- 7 “Analysis of the Impact of Landmines in Burma”, Nonviolence International, 2002, Thailand
- 8 Ibid

news briefs

Burmese workers awarded compensation:

A Thai labour court ordered the Thai owner of a garment factory in Mae Sot to pay 1.17 million baht in compensation to 18 Burmese migrant workers. The plaintiffs were among 60 Burmese employees who had been fired from the Nut Knitting factory in October 2002. The dismissed workers were severely beaten by gangs linked to the company after they protested against the unfair treatment they were receiving.

Burma to attend ASEM:

EU foreign ministers agreed to attend a key summit with Asian states next month after breaking a deadlock in a row over Burma, but warned against Rangoon's participation at top level. The ministers also threatened to tighten sanctions on the military regime in Burma, including extending a visa ban and cutting funds, if it has not made progress on meeting key demands before the October 8-9 summit in Hanoi.

China and Burma reach agreement for oil exploration:

A Chinese oil company and a state-run Burma oil company reached a production-sharing agreement on co-operation in petroleum exploration. Under the contract, signed between the Dian-Qian-Gui Petroleum Exploration Bureau of SINOPEC of China and the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, petroleum exploration will be carried out on an onshore block in Burma's western Rakhine state which covers about 12,000 square-kilometres. Since Burma opened to foreign investment in late 1988, such investment in the sector had reached 2.5 billion dollars as of the end of 2003.

Magazine closed for being too pro-american:

Burma's military government denied allegations by a press freedom group that it had shut down a magazine, saying the journal had temporarily stopped publication because of financial difficulties. The Paris-based group Reporters Without Borders (RWB) said

the junta's censorship bureau ordered the privately owned fortnightly Khit-Sann to stop publication on September 1. RWB said no reason was given for the magazine's closure, but that in August censors warned its editor, Kyaw Win, that the magazine was too pro-American.

Burma's foreign minister and deputy allegedly quit:

Foreign Minister Win Aung and Deputy Foreign Minister Khin Maung Win were "permitted to retire" in mid September, and were replaced by military officers with little diplomatic experience two weeks before Burma is due to attend its first Asia-Europe summit. The removal of Win Aung and his deputy, both long serving diplomats, is perceived as a hardening of the military's stance in the face of growing international pressure on human rights.

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