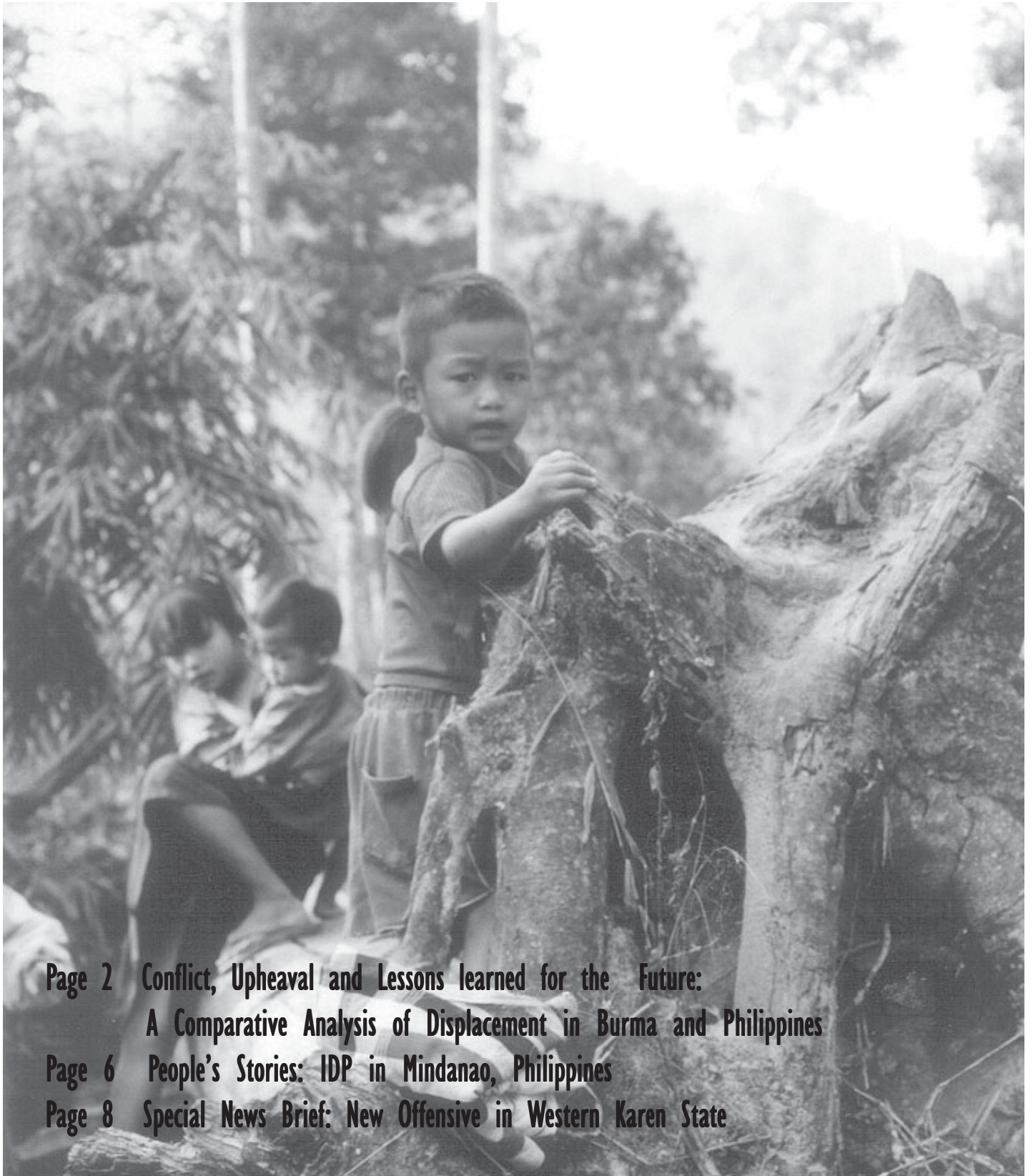




Burma Issues

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CONFLICT, UPHEAVAL AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DISPLACEMENT IN BURMA AND PHILIPPINES

BY C. GUINARD

Cycles of violence and peace have been the shared history of many regions of the world. For centuries, internal conflicts have occurred, not only in Burma but in many countries. The resolution of intra-state conflicts is often difficult and long because they involve a variety of actors and stakeholders with differing and frequently incompatible aims and objectives. In many cases, parties seem to favour a stalemate in the conflict over true negotiations which could lead to a lasting peace. With nearly 25 million people uprooted within their own countries by civil war and human rights abuses, internal displacement is one of the first consequences of civil war and one of the great catastrophes of our times.

Few intra-state conflicts in this world have succeeded in managing a peace process. Surrender, or the elimination, of the rebel group is the most common way for a ruling government to end a civil war. In such a context, the civilian population remains displaced, living in continuous fear of being subjected to the violence of the government forces or the rebel armies.

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Displacement overview in Asia Pacific

During the year 2003, military campaigns launched by governments to quash insurgencies were a major cause of displacement in Asia-Pacific region, notably in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Philippines and of course in Burma. With some 3.6 million displaced, the Asia-Pacific region ranks behind only Africa in terms of conflict induced displacement. It is also a region subjected to many natural disasters such as typhoons and flooding, which are another direct cause of massive displacement. Large-scale development projects such as dam construction schemes have also forced thousands people out of their homes and villages.

Most alarmingly, among those countries affected by internal displacement, Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) frequently cannot count on their governments for protection at all. In the world today, in 13 of the 52 countries where IDPs are present, government authorities are hostile or indifferent and do not provide any protection for IDPs¹. In 2004, Burma was once again the country with the worst record in regards to treatment to IDPs. Up to one million remain displaced within the country with more than 500,000 people in hiding in the eastern Burma border region². Being continuously suspected of supporting rebel groups operating in the area, national minorities face the brutality of the Burmese military everyday. Villagers are often trapped in between and have virtually nowhere to go to escape attacks and find safe shelter. They are just able to take few belongings and flee through the jungle.

Displacement in Burma: strategic military tool of the Burmese Regime

Fighting between rebel movements and the ruling government has been a main cause of displacement not only in Burma but also in Sri Lanka, the Philippines (southern island of Mindanao), Nepal and in western Indonesia (Aceh). Indeed, it is often part of the strategy of government troops to forcibly displace civilians as a means of weakening the resource base

of insurgents. In Burma, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the ruling junta, openly declared and implemented such a military strategy when they launched the "Four Cuts" policy in the 70s. For more than 30 years, the SPDC has been gradually depriving opposition armies of food, funds, recruits and intelligence by burning down villages, and displacing and terrorizing thousands of civilians. Displacement in such a context cannot be seen only as a practical consequence of a civil war but also as a strategic tool which directly benefit the ruling government which instigates it. By forcibly displacing people, the government weakens rebels' resources and their military forces and progressively gains more and more control over contested areas.

There is another aspect of displacement of benefit to the SPDC. Villagers who are fleeing their villages are often forcibly relocated by the Burmese army into camps where they live under constant SPDC surveillance. In eastern Burma, it is estimated that there are currently 77,000 people living in 167 relocation sites³. These people represent free and accessible labourers for government development projects. Between 2001 and 2003, the Burmese army forcibly relocated tens of thousands of people in advance of dam construction schemes in Shan, Karenni and Karen States. Many more people will lose their land and become IDPs or will live in relocation sites if planned projects such as the damming of the Salween River go ahead. The same kind of massive displacement and forced labour occurred during the 90s when the Yadana gas pipeline was built in the Tenasserim division.

Thus, displacement in Burma benefits the SPDC from upstream to downstream. By displacing people, they directly enjoy free labourers for development projects while at the same time weakening rebel armies and gaining territories where they can launch more development projects, and/or organise other businesses such as jade and teak trading.

Under international law, national governments have the primary responsibility for protecting and assisting their internally displaced citizens. However, in reality only one third of governments are trying to address this issue. Many countries such as Burma don't even recognise the reality of the problem and continue to deny the existence of populations fleeing combat and living in hiding.

Recent reports have testified that the humanitarian crisis that IDPs are facing inside Burma is dramatic. People lack everything: food, clothes, shelter, medicine, education and are subjected to continuous violence, human rights abuses and separation from their families. Any hope for a future is seriously jeopardised.

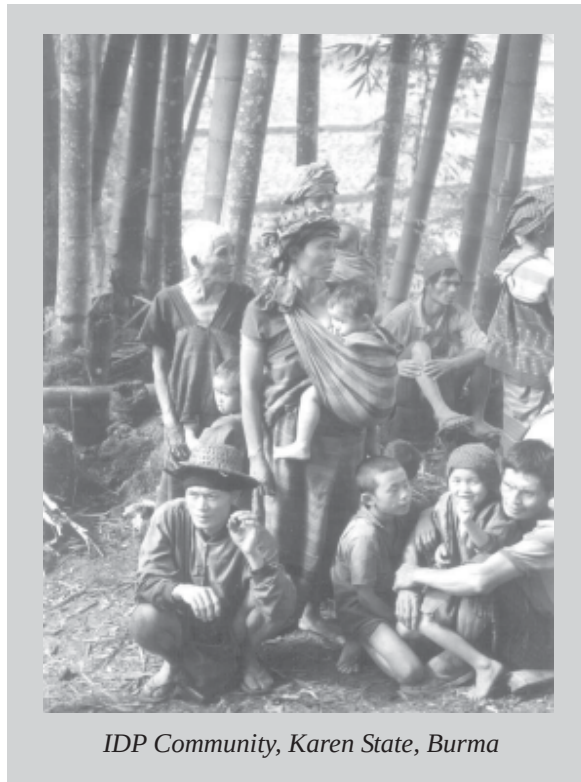
What can be done to resolve this crisis or at least decrease its appalling effects? What position the international community must adopt to push Burma for a change in this deadly policy?

As we already mentioned, Burma is not the only place in South-East Asia where a civil war is ravaging a country and where displacement of population takes place and protection is denied. Indeed, intra-state conflicts have been a main cause of displacement in Mindanao (Philippines), Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Indonesia. None of these countries managed to fully implement a successful peace process and resolve the issues surrounding IDPs.

But, some such as the Philippines, did try, and their experience can be useful to look at. It can be a way to elaborate recommendations for Burma and find possible solutions which have already been implemented in a comparable conflict.

The Filipino experience

Civil war in the southern island of Mindanao in Philippines has ravaged the region for more than three decades. Tensions had been present from Spanish and American colonial times but started to grow between Christian and Muslim (or "Moro") communities during the 60s. The underdevelopment of Mindanao region, the unequal distribution of wealth and the lack of

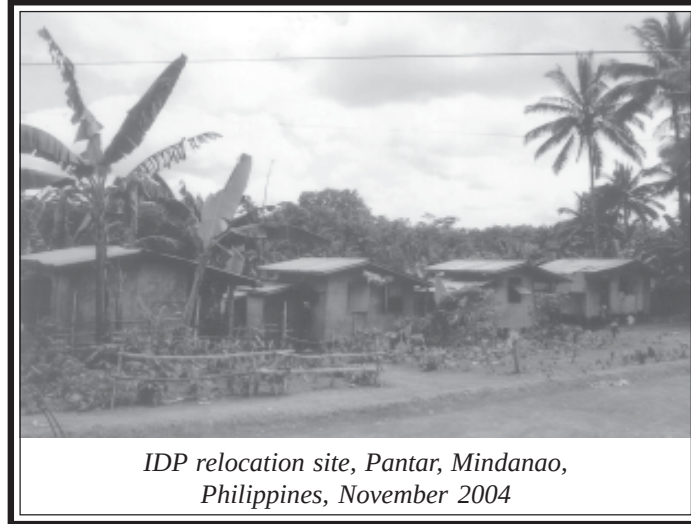


IDP Community, Karen State, Burma

strong support from the central government in Manila for the integration the Muslim population into the political structures of the country led to the creation of the Moro secessionist movement. The Jabidah massacre, where 28 Moro soldiers were killed, marked the beginning of the conflict in March 1968, between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (the AFP is the national army) against the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and a more radical group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The intensity of the civil war strengthened in 1972 and continued until a peace agreement between the government and the MNLF was finally reached in 1996. This agreement organized a cease-fire and the creation of a priority development zone comprising 14 provinces and cities considered to be the poorest in the country. For a while, relative stability was enjoyed in the country. But by 2000, an increasing number of militants were leaving the MNLF to join the MILF which was still fighting the AFP despite an agreement about a general cessation of hostilities reached in 1997. In March 2000, President Joseph Estrada declared an "all-out war" against the MILF. A violent war rapidly spread out through all Mindanao forcing more than 900,000 people to flee their homes and become IDPs. A cease-fire was finally signed between the MILF and the government in June 2001, followed couple of months later by explicit guidelines providing protection for the safe return of the IDP population⁴.

However, the cease-fire was frequently violated. In February 2003, the government launched a massive offensive against MILF camps in North Cotabato accusing the front of supporting a kidnap-for-ransom group. Intense bombing, burning of thousand of houses and militarization of the whole area, forced more than 400,000 people, usually the same who had been displaced earlier, in 2001, to flee again en masse to safer places. Afterwards, new rounds of talks took place between the government and the MILF. A new cease-fire was agreed in July 2003, but fighting resumed in December. Finally the MILF and the government agreed



IDP relocation site, Pantar, Mindanao, Philippines, November 2004

at the end of February 2004 on the deployment of a Malaysia-led international cease-fire monitoring team in Mindanao (IMT) in mid 2004. Fighting did decrease but tensions remain acute. Thousands of people remain displaced today facing harsh living conditions. IDPs in Mindanao often live in relocation sites and re-

ceived little support from the central government. They are living in extreme poverty with little food, medicine and supplies. Getting an education is already difficult for the local population, so usually IDP children don't have access to school. They are often too afraid to go back to their homeland and continue to fear military forces. With the support of the government, international organisations and grassroots organisations work close to those communities. Emergency relief assistance and rehabilitation programmes have been implemented to improve the living conditions of IDPs and organise their return. But after 30 years of conflict, the lack of trust between the Muslim and the Christian communities is dramatically undermining any peace building initiatives and rehabilitation programs.

What Lessons can be Learned to adopt a common international approach?

In the light of the Filipino experience, Burma should first recognise the existence of the problem: there are IDPs in Burma, some living in hiding; some trapped in SPDC relocation sites. Numerous reports and videos produced by human rights organisations prove this⁵. The SPDC can no longer deny it. To recognise this situation as the Filipino government did by agreeing on a set of guidelines providing for the safe return of IDPs, the SPDC government will show its good will in implementing a proper peace process and not a masquerade of "road map to democracy". The United Nations and every international actor should push Burma to recognise the existence of IDPs and in order to resolve this crisis press for real tripartite negotiations involving the SPDC, the National League for Democracy and ethnic group leaders.

Cease-fire talks did take place during the last

decade. Today, nearly 17 ethnic groups have “exchanged arms for peace” with the SPDC government, some for political reasons, sharing a real will to bring back peace in their region, some others for business and drug trafficking interests. However some rebel groups are still actively fighting SPDC troops, such as the Karenni Army, the Shan State Army-south and the Karen National Union (KNU). When the SPDC approached the KNU for cease-fire talks at the end of 2003, some hopes were raised.

“I was very happy about my leaders making a ceasefire and believed in it. I made a large farm and now I have lost everything.”

IDP villager fleeing SPDC offensive, Naunglybin District, Karen State, December 2004.

Source: Free Burma Rangers

A “gentlemen’s” cease-fire was orally agreed. However, the recent reshuffle of the SPDC leadership interrupted any further negotiations. It is now expected that KNU leaders will meet with the government early next year. The resumption of talks must take place and the issue of IDP must be put on the negotiating table and addressed. Negotiations about the possible return of villagers to their villages of origin have to be organised. Other related issues such as the presence of landmines, the lack of resources and the need for humanitarian support must also be discussed.

The international community must push the SPDC to adopt such an approach if further negotiations go ahead with the KNU and other groups. The Filipino government did that by agreeing with the MILF in August 2001 on a set of guidelines for the cessation of hostilities. These guidelines provided for the safe return of IDPs to their homes and were later reinforced by the signing of the “Implementing Guidelines on the Rehabilitation aspect of the Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001”. In addition to the safe return of IDPs, the agreement provides for financial and technical assistance for displaced people to rebuild their houses, health care centres, and schools. Financial reparations were also awarded by the government for destruction of properties by the conflict. To address the IDPs problem in Burma, the international community has to press the SPDC to agree on such guidelines in any peace negotiations taking place with opposition groups. Peace is the only way that IDPs will be able to go home.

If a cease-fire is finally agreed between the KNU and the other rebel groups, it must then be respected by all sides. After the declaration of a ceasefire, combatants are supposed to stop active armed struggle, and yet in many cases the fighting continues, leading to further loss of life, a deteriorating social environment and a cycle of violence starts again. That was the case in Mindanao. In February 2003, the Filipino national army launched a massive offensive despite the cease-fire agreed between the MILF and the government, again forcing thousands of people to flee their homes. After two years of relative stability, communities were just starting to regain enough confidence to rebuild their lives and livelihood. Once again, everything was lost and a new cycle of violence, trauma, poverty and mistrust hit the people.

In Burma, the same chain of events has taken place frequently in cease-fire areas. Recent reports from inside Karen State and Tenasserim divisions confirm that despite the cease-fire or “gentlemen agreement” reached between the KNU and the SPDC in January 2004, there have been more than 200 armed skirmishes between the KNLA and the junta’s troops⁶ since



IDPs fleeing, Karen State, Burma

January. How can villagers trust either side and believe in the positive impact of a cease-fire? It is frequent that villagers who are fleeing combatants move from one place to another more than twice in a year. This has to stop immediately. Ceasefires must be respected to allow people to settle down, regain trust and restart their lives.

To continued on p 7

IDP INTERVIEW IN BUBONG RELOCATION SITE, PANTAR, LANA DEL NORTE, MINDANAO, PHILLIPINES

Buma Issues - Voluntary Service Overseas field trip, November 2004

First name: Casmira

Family name: Tande

Age: 47

Family situation: Married, no children

Occupation: Farmer

Ethnic group: Maranao

Religion: Muslim

Q: Why did you flee your home and come to live in Pantar?

A: The war began in March 2001 in the region of Munai where I come from. Fights intensified between Filipinos marines and MILF soldiers. It was not secure anymore for us to stay in the region as we feared that the Muslim community will be targeted. I arrived in the city of Malawi the last week of November with 64 other families. It took us two days by walk to come here.

Q: What happened when you arrived in the city? What was the reaction of the local community, of the local government?

A: It was very difficult at the beginning. The local government relocated us first in the school of Malawi that they renamed "evacuation centre".

We felt very hopeless at that time. We did find shelter, but we left everything in our village: clothes, furniture, tools, medicines...

In the evacuation centre, we lacked of food, clothes and especially medicine. The living conditions were really difficult. Some of us slept on the floor on a carton sheet. We have to go in town and beg on the street. Local people were suspicious of us.

Q: When did you finally move to the relocation site in Pantar?

A: Nine months later, thanks to one of our leaders who constantly lobbied the local government as well as NGOs to receive a land, food and other support. We moved there because some of us had relatives living already in the area. Today there are only 50 families living in the relocation sites.

Q: What happened when you finally moved here?

A: At the beginning we faced again many difficulties. When we arrived to the relocation site we only received one bag of rice per family to feed ourselves.

There's still no drinking water in the site. We are dependant of the rain fall or we have to walk long distance to get some.

Our children cannot receive proper education in the site. Only Arabic school is provided.

Q: Do you want to go back to your home in Munai?

A: no, I have no plan to go back there. It would be a trauma again if I had to travel back in the area. I'm scared to go back. I would fear for my own security. I don't know what the situation is between the governmental marine forces and local MILF soldiers. Tensions between Muslims and Christian may still occur. Today, I only want to move on.

Corn fields, IDP relocation site in Bubong

Living conditions in IDP relocation site in Bubong:

Water: There is no access to drinking water in the site. IDPs collect rain water from their house roof. If they need more water, they have to walk 1h30 to go to a water-pump located in another village.

Health care: There are no health workers in the IDP site. Only two traditional birth attendances are present. Pregnant women never go to the hospital to attend a caesarean or receive any specific treatment. So there is a high infantile mortality rate. There is one governmental health centre located 40 minutes by walk. In case of emergency, the long distance is a big issue.

Education: There is no school in the relocation site.

Debt: Most of the IDPs are today paying back debts that they contracted three years ago by buying their first seeds, medicines and food three years ago. They usually borrowed from relatives living around.

Incomes: They also have to give 1/3 of their harvest to the landowner from the Muslim clan who agreed to let them live in its land and cultivate it. IDPs only produce corn because they lack of knowledge in cultivating any other crops or in using other agricultural technology.



IDP
community,
Bubong
relocation
site,
November
2004,
Philippines

Continued from p 5:

As in Mindanao, an international monitoring team should be set up and authorised access to ethnic areas where ceasefires have been agreed. In 2004, it was Malaysia which welcomed negotiations between the MILF and the Filipino government and organised such a ceasefire monitoring team. Maybe, it is time now for Malaysia to turn its head towards Burma and push for real negotiations and a secured international presence inside ethnic areas in the country. Stronger involvement from ASEAN countries as a whole would be even more useful and efficient in bringing back peace and democracy in Burma. Malaysia and all other ASEAN members must increase their political pressure on SPDC leaders. One million IDPs in Burma are living in extreme poverty, despair and danger. ASEAN cannot continue to allow the SPDC government to close its eyes to such a dramatic situation, especially if Burma accedes to the ASEAN presidency in 2006.

In addition, ASEAN must organise dedicated regional mechanism to deal with problems of international displacement. Today most regional efforts to coordinate and improve the response

to internal displacement in Southeast Asia come from non-governmental and grassroots organisations. However, in Burma, those organisations are refused any access to IDP hiding places or relocations sites by SPDC authorities. From the Thai-Burma border, some dedicated independent organisations send supplies to IDPs and succeed in accessing IDP sites. But such activities are strictly forbidden by Thai authorities which therefore limit any large scale access.

To resolve the humanitarian crisis that IDPs are facing today in Burma, a real peace process must be fostered and strongly supported by the international community - a nationwide cease-fire must be organised and respected. However, first and foremost international humanitarian actors need to gain access to IDPs hiding in the jungle or living in relocations sites. Burma must allow groups to administer desperately needed clothes, medicines, food and supplies. One million people, mostly women, the elderly and children are suffering today and it may be too late when peace hopefully is eventually brought back to Burma.

Endnotes

1 Norwegian Refugee Council, Global IDP Project, *Internal Displacement: A Global Overview of Trends and Development in 2003*, www.idproject.org

2 Thailand Burma Border Consortium, *Internal Displacement and Vulnerability in Eastern Burma*, October 2004, Bangkok.

3 Ibid

4 Norwegian Refugee Council, Global IDP Project, *Philippines: Peace Talks between government and Muslims rebels must provide for return and reintegration of IDPs*, www.idproject.org

5 Burma Issues Videos "No Place to Go!" 2001, "Living in Unsafety" 2004, "Do our lives matter" 2004.

6 "KNU to resume ceasefire talks with Junta", The Irrawaddy, July 29, 2004.

Please, read also our News Brief-Special Issue, p 8, about the last SPDC offensive in Western Karen State.

news brief:

New SPDC offensive in Toungoo, Papun and Nyaunglebin District, Western Karen State, November-December 2004

The SPDC offensive started mid-November in Toungoo District (KNU 2nd Brigade) and Nyaunglebin District (KNU 3rd Brigade) and also in part of Papun District (KNU 5th Brigade), in Western Karen State, Burma. At the beginning of the offensive, four Burma Army Battalions were deployed in the area. Divided into two forces, they launched simultaneous attacks against villagers who were forced to flee and hide in the jungle as IDPs.

Later, two more Battalions joined the offensive, bringing to 1800 (300 soldiers per battalion) the number of soldiers now present in the region.

According to different sources, there are an estimated 10,000 IDPs now hiding in the mountains after having been forced to flee Burmese soldiers who burned their barns and rice stocks in military attacks. According to the Free Burma Rangers, a group of Western and Karen volunteers who provide medical aid to displaced people, there are up to 4000 IDPs in Naunglybin District alone. In this area,

they estimate that more than 388,000 kilograms (853,600 pounds) of paddy rice have been burned and hundreds of rice barns destroyed.

According to Burma Issues sources, the SPDC is controlling or re-constructing four roads in the three Districts where the offensive is taking place. One road is located in the north, on the border of Karen and Karenni States, (Toungoo District - KNU 2nd Brigade) with three others further south in Karen State (Nyaunglebin District-KNU 3rd Brigade, Papun District-KNU 5th Brigade). All these roads are parallel to each other, running from west to east in the direction of the Burma-Thai border. The military presence is permanent on these four roads. In the whole area and in between the four roads, the SPDC is spreading its offensive, trapping thousands of people in between. Because of the high danger of crossing the roads, IDPs are unable to flee to safer places. The immediate needs of the IDPs are security, rice, blankets, cooking pots and medicine.

The weather in this mountainous area is currently very cold and can be rainy. Many villagers have had to flee their houses without any belongings, clothes and food. The situation they are facing is catastrophic.

As the Salween dam will be built close to the area, it seems likely its construction is one of the main reasons for this military offensive. It will allow the SPDC to gain control over the whole area and to start the project without any constraints.

According to Associated Press, this alarming situation in Karen state has attracted the attention of U.S. Congressman Joe Pitts, a Pennsylvania Republican who is vice chairman of the House Subcommittee on International Terrorism, Non-proliferation and Human Rights. "By forcing more than half a million people from their homes, Burma's military regime is responsible for creating a fully-fledged human rights nightmare," Pitts said in a statement in early December.

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