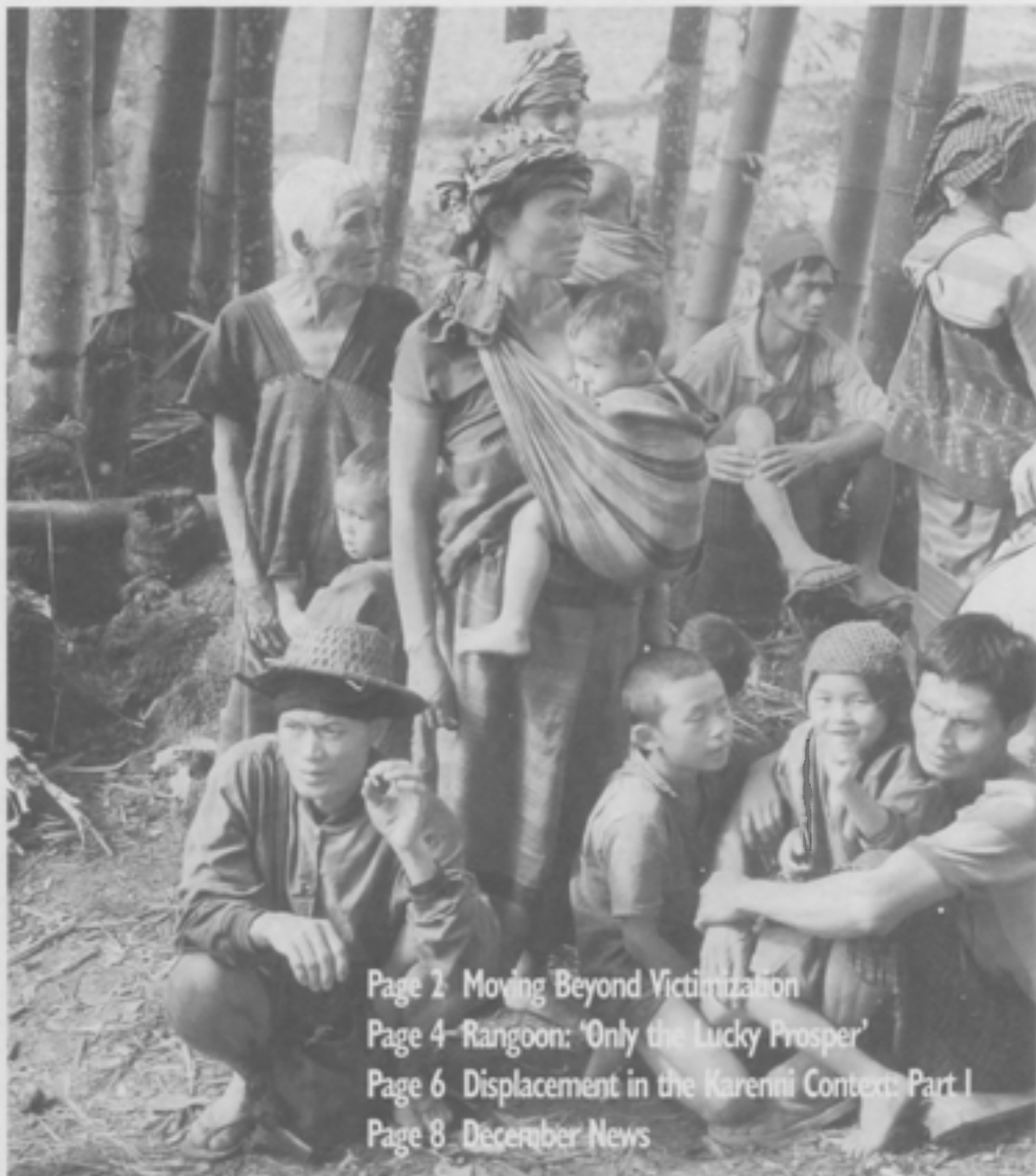




# BBC Burma Issues

December 2000

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## MOVING BEYOND VICIMIZATION

After a century in which the people of Burma experienced colonialism, the destructiveness of World War II, a divisive fifty-year civil war and the more recent struggle for political freedom and human rights, Burma is a deeply divided country. Deep ethnic, class, religious and political divisions have left the country in shambles. In a country where the military leadership is almost universally despised, Burma's fragmented people have been unable to build a freer and more representative society. A look at the past 100 years reveals some of the roots of such deep division.

During the colonization of Burma the British did away with the Burmese feudal structures and staffed the civil service primarily with Indians and Burma's ethnic minorities. Industry in Burma was also primarily the domain of the Indians and by 1930 Rangoon was second only to New York City as the largest 'immigration' port in the world with a large influx of people from the sub-continent seeking work and business opportunities. The higher education system served as many South Asians as Burmese, with more Indians than locals graduating from Rangoon University in 1945. Due to several years of poor yield, by the 1930s Indian Chettyar bankers had been able to buy up half of the agricultural land in lower Burma. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, lower Burma, as a part of British greater India, was largely controlled by Indians and the Burman people felt justifiably threatened.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, in the ethnic "frontier regions" the British encouraged local administration and a fair degree of independence for the ethnic people. Due to the efforts of British and American missionaries many of ethnic minority people were formally educated for the first time. Karens, Kachins and Chins filled the ranks of the armed forces and the civil administration and received the benefits of

these professions. In 1939 there were 1,448 Karens, 886 Chins and 881 Kachins in the British Burma Army, and only 472 Burmans.<sup>2</sup> Burma's ethnic minorities, who had been relegated to the margins of history like so many upland peoples in the world, found patrons in the British under whom they were able to develop while maintaining their language, customs and sense of identity. By the early part of this past century the people of Burma had been split into two, one group feeling victimized by outsiders, the other receiving attention it felt was long deserved.

The fortunes of the ethnic people changed considerably during World War II, when the British were driven from the country and the people lived under a brutal Japanese occupying-force. Following the war in 1946, ethnic and Burman leaders met at Panglong in Shan State to talk over the future of independent Burma. The Burmans were trying to unify the country and the ethnic leadership were working to strengthen the positions of their respective peoples. U Nu, a leader of the independence movement and later Prime Minister of Burma, made his contribution in giving a strong anti-British speech, which didn't meet well with the ethnic minority groups. A contin-

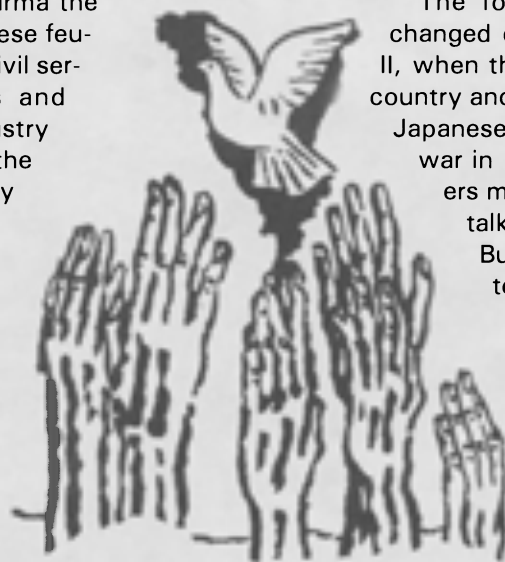
gent of Kachin elders in attendance responded skeptically:

*What have the Burmese public done towards the hill people to win their love and faith? It was through the influence of a section of the Burmese public who, while saying that we all belong to the same race, blood and home, called in our enemies, the Japanese, that the hill peoples have suffered miserably during those dark years that followed.*

However, they offered their own analysis of the problem and a path toward a solution.

*For the hill peoples the safeguarding of their hereditary rights, customs and religions are the most important factors. When the Burmese leaders are ready to see this is done and can prove that they genuinely regard the hill peoples as real brothers equal in every respect to themselves shall we be ready to consider the question of our entry into close relations with Burma as a free dominion.<sup>3</sup>*

More than 50 years of civil war have passed since that first Panglong meeting with ever increasing acrimony between the different ethnic and religious



*Burma Issues*, the monthly newsletter of Burma Issues, is distributed on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned with the state of affairs in Burma.

P.O. Box 1076  
Silom Post Office  
Bangkok 10504, Thailand  
[durham@mozart.inet.co.th](mailto:durham@mozart.inet.co.th)

groups in Burma. Trust has been broken repeatedly and the dream of an equitable society for all the people in Burma is more distant than ever before. Now, even more than in 1946, Burma is a country of victims. Not just the ethnic people, but all the peoples of Burma have had their rights abused. This feeling of victimization extends from the grassroots all the way to up to the highest echelons of the military leadership to such an extent that the act of proving "damages" has almost become a game. Meetings between western human rights groups and opposition organizations are frequently precluded by a presentation of all the appropriately gruesome and photogenic abuses, to establish the true extent to which the group has been victimized. Likewise, members of the junta are quick to bring out the list of all those who have victimized them: the British colonizers, Western governments, Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD, the KNU, and various other ethnic insurgent armies and opposition groups. The upshot of this is that victimization is used to justify any action taken and avoid responsibility for these actions.

A commentator on the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict has noted that one of the biggest obstacles to resolution of conflict occurs when both sides feel like they are victims. In such circumstances, steps taken towards peace are thwarted as no matter what is agreed upon, each side feels it is getting less than what it deserves and perceives any actions it takes to secure its interests as justified.

In Burma this sense of justification has led to shortsighted solutions to complex problems. Experience of abuse has allowed some armed groups to evade responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Use of landmines has become epidemic in some parts of the country with many armed groups all laying mines to protect their territory, despite the fact that these mines often affect their own populations.<sup>4</sup> The United Wa State Army (UWSA) justifies its drug production because of the past neglect experienced by the Wa people. And ultimately, the Burma Army justifies their oppression of the people as necessary to keep the country together. Armed groups who lay landmines, the UWSA and the Burma Army are correct in their analysis in the immediate sense. Mines are an effective weapon to protect a retreating army or secure territory; drug production has allowed the Wa to develop to an extent previously unheard of; and oppressive tactics have kept Burma from disintegrating into a group of smaller states. However, the methods used to achieve these desired ends, stemming from feelings of victimization, have only led to conditions that are unsustainable and ultimately damaging to the people of Burma.

In addition, ethnic groups have found that being

a victim is a valuable commodity. Various ethnic, political and insurgent groups vying for support from the international community have used stories of human rights abuse as an important sympathy grabbing tool. The international human rights community has only fed this trend by rewarding attention and money to those with the appropriately horrifying human rights abuse stories.

In the end, Burma's recent history has been defined by the lack of trust between groups at all levels. Many ethnic minority people privately express fear of democracy because in democracy "the majority rules" and the majority is Burman. However, mistrust does not only lie between ethnic minorities and Burman people. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which split away from the Karen National Liberation Army, serves as just one very notable reminder that there are many divisions within ethnic groups as well. Indeed this mistrust has risen to the level that differences of opinion within the oppositions movements are not tolerated, stunting the kind of dialogue and brainstorming needed to overcome the difficulties in the country. Division in Burma has bred further division.

These divisions and mistrust between the people of Burma are deeply rooted in the soil of Burma's society. If these issues aren't addressed they will continue to haunt Burma long after the SPC has been relegated to the pages of history books. Moving beyond the inhibitions of being a victim to building trust at all levels needs to be priority of those groups seeking a prosperous and peaceful future for Burma. Those people working towards reconciliation need to be encouraged. Groups around Burma should take a lesson from the Shan State nationalities that have gathered to collectively write a constitution for their area and other efforts to act positively in building bridges between people. The words of the Kachin elders at Panglong need to be taken to heart, and priority placed on working towards safeguarding "hereditary rights, customs and religions" and the genuine regard of all people as "real brothers in every respect."

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E. Miller

## ENDNOTES

1 Taken from a Speech by Robert H. Taylor, "Thailand and Myanmar: Freedom Inside or Outside the State?", Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 30 November 2000

2 Smith, Martin, "Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity," White Lotus, Bangkok 1999

3 Smith, Martin, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. White Lotus Books, Bangkok, 1999

4 See Landmine Monitor Report on Burma for more information.

## RANGOON: 'ONLY THE LUCKY PROSPER'

Rangoon can be likened to a can of soda that shook up has been sat back on the shelf. Tightly regulated without, tension bubbles through simple daily interactions. Conflicts rage over minutiae, as minutiae collectively shape lives, and people are bereft of avenues for complaint, other than one another. The army is rarely on the streets, but police are everywhere and are widely feared, although subject to private humour and ridicule the likes of which are not extended to the army. Jokes are qualified, "I'm talking about police, not soldiers, okay? Don't misunderstand."

What a visitor to Rangoon is likely to misunderstand is the apparent openness exhibited towards them by people. Most tourists go home with genuine stories of Burmese warmth and hospitality. Coming from outside the system, a visitor holds no threat to a local, and at best a relationship with a foreigner may be both economically and personally enriching; the inverse of typical dynamics in a relationship between locals. Amid the stifled political atmosphere and intense competition for the scarce

seen as the ideal destination, and private tuition courses in Japanese language rival those for English. Chinese also is popular. Others learn Italian or German, nursing hopes that the domestic tourist industry may at last take-off.

Money means private enterprise. Along main roads, cigarette and beer billboards cast shadows over the notorious red and white government slogans. Supermarkets for the elite and foreign workers stock almost exclusively imported produce, most from other parts of Asia. While private computer teaching centers open up in small spaces around the city, in government offices batteries of women shuffle thousands of limp brown documents from one pile to the next.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

Forging ahead with the Stalinist-style development model that has characterized its policies and claims to a mandate, the government continues to coordinate construction of bridges and dams around Rangoon. Big projects are of course worthy of opening ceremonies with speeches, ribbon-cutting, balloons and thronging masses. Granted that such structures have a function and place, generals are strolling across new bridges in a city where the majority of people have no running water, no sewage and part-time electricity (an improvement on previous years). In Rangoon, the "three joys" are "The electricity is on"; "The water is running" and "The rubbish has been cleared." By night, at least, bridges serve a greater purpose, as local residents gather to talk and read under lighting used to illuminate the new structures.

Foreign investment plans have emphasized construction of new industrial and elite residential developments (mimicking those in neighboring Thailand) particularly at Mingalardon (close to the airport), and Hlaingthayar, where the prestigious FMI City is located, which happily also houses a "designer" 18-hole golf course. The roads and other infrastructure leading to and from these areas, however, are invariably in dismal condition. Amid the promise of future prosperity, landless migrants from rural areas labour long hours inside factory walls and construct tiny dwellings for entire families in ditches outside.

## BUDDHISM

The International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) is a government scheme to promote the country's religious heritage by inviting overseas students to study Buddhism in Rangoon. As an added incentive, the program is free. Not-



(photo from the Myanmar Times)

social and economic advantages to be found in the capital, there is less and less room for either loving kindness or public debate.

## ECONOMY

Unsurprisingly, atop the list of social concerns is the rising cost of living. While housewives queue in muddy tax-free markets set up by the government as an attempt to alleviate growing discontent, emaciated homeless lie comatose in gutters adjacent the ubiquitous teashops. The perception of wealth in Rangoon is that the "haves" have it either due to military connections, by working overseas, or both. Consequently, it is a city of people wishing they were in another country. On street corners hawkers flog US immigration lottery forms. Visitors are regularly asked "How can I get to your country to work? Can you help me?" Japan is still

withstanding, the attempt has to date been unimpressive. While construction of new edifices continues, the number of students has dropped from around 100 during the first year to half that at present – the majority in fact being Burmese monks wishing to study in English – the remaining handful consisting students from the region, particularly Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This must be a disappointing development for the institution's architects. According to one ex-student: "They really want white men. Last year there was an Australian monk and one day they came with a camera and video and took more than 200 photos of him to use in newspapers and magazines. Now he's gone to Thailand already." Complaints include that teaching is purely by rote, that students' passports are retained, to prevent them from leaving the country before completing the course or travelling without approval and that mail is inspected and some students have been subjected to interrogation. Nonetheless, the ex-student observed, "But who will tell all this when they go back to their country? Who is going to say that they got a diploma from a banana-university? What will it be worth then?"



Taking into account novices and nuns, there may be half a million wearers of the Buddhist cloth in Burma. Life-long monks alone are estimated at 150-200,000. In 1997 the government established the Sangha Disciplinary Commission as a subordinate agency to the standing State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, which centralizes the enormous clergy under a group of monks following state directives. The Commission has representatives at the division, township and ward/village levels. Its role is ostensibly to deal with disciplinary problems among monks like consumption of alcohol, playing of sports, etc., but it may also serve as a device to inhibit politically active monks. In spite of its nationwide reach, little information is available on the Commission's activities.

## EDUCATION

Most schools in Rangoon are running two "shifts" of students per day. Only elite downtown schools operate on a 9a.m to 3p.m schedule. Classes average 40-50 pupils per teacher, but in some cases have up to 70-80. Students are obliged to attend "tuition" outside regular class hours, allowing teachers to supplement their meager in-

comes, but creating resentment among poorer families. While technically non-compulsory, students not attending tuition will inevitably "fail". Schools in Rangoon are now operating under a constant assessment regimen proposed by UNICEF and other international agencies over the traditional annual examination system. Although a more progressive and equitable approach to student testing, it has also greatly increased teachers' workloads, reducing time available to earn through other activities outside school hours and certainly not encouraging new teachers to join what is already a profession of diminished status. Schools are generally poorly equipped and constructed, in contrast to the images of multi-media centers, computers and gleaming rooms shown on state television.

## MEDIA

Many new private publications have appeared during the last few years, but most are trash crime-news spreads, entertainment and movie broadsheets and football [soccer] magazines. Credible publications such as *Thintbawa*, which has tested and tasted the limits of censorship policy for a number of years, are being run out of business. The two-channel government television monopoly persists (MRTV is the central broadcaster and Myawaddi TV is the Armed Forces channel) with a diet of songs and dances, "news", Japanese and Chinese soap operas and football games. A small percentage of the population has access to satellite TV, but for most the only independent news comes via the overseas radio stations, most popularly BBC, which seem widely listened to and hence subject to regular vitriolic attacks in government media.

## WHY NOT JUST TRY YOUR LUCK?

On certain days of the week discussions across town turn on triple or double-digit figures. Not the cost of rice or new bus routes, these are the lottery numbers. Two lotteries are most popular – both technically illegal but tolerated by the authorities – three digits are from the Thai lottery, two from the tail-end of the more recently introduced official government lottery. Everybody plays... young and old, male and female, laypeople and monks. The lottery offers distraction from the difficulties of day to day existence and provides an element of surprise and hope in lives otherwise unsurprising and apparently without hope. Rangoon's lottery obsession characterizes the city. As one punter summed up, "Winning the lottery is the only way we'll ever get out of here. So why not?"



## DISPLACEMENT IN THE KARENNI CONTEXT: PART 1

*The following article is the first part of a two part series extracted from "Conflict and Displacement in Karenni: The Need for Considered Responses," by the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG) and edited for this newsletter.*

Karenni is the smallest state in Burma with a total population of 207,357 people and a total surface area of 11,731.5 sq. km. While land-locked Karenni has a similar surface area to the island of Jamaica it has less than one-tenth the population. Karenni shares a border with Thailand's Mae Hong Son province to the east and with Shan state in the northwest and Karen state in the south-west. It is generally regarded as one of the least accessible and poorest areas of the country.

### AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

Since much of Karenni consists of upland areas, wet paddy farming is limited largely to the Plains around Loikaw and Ngwe Daung where there is approximately 100,000 acres of paddy land. Most of the rice grown in Karenni is upland shifting cultivation of paddy with significantly lower yields per acre than wet paddy. As far back as 1901, rice had to be imported in some areas, as the amount grown was insufficient for feeding the population.

According to the 1993 agricultural census, the average size of land holdings in Karenni was 3.70 acres, with three acres roughly the minimum size holding to allow for subsistence farming. How-



ever, it is likely that upland holdings were not fully reported. A significant percentage of the population in Karenni has no land at all, and the people face difficult prospects. Agricultural work is poorly paid and not always available. There are few off-farm employment opportunities throughout the state. Only 2.16% of farms employ labour on a permanent basis, while 24.16% of farms employ agricultural labour on an occasional basis.

Teak has historically formed a major part of the economic resources of Karenni. Teak was being

extracted and traded prior to the British annexation of Upper Burma and since the 1840s, competition for control of teak forests has been a critical factor in power relations and conflict. This remains relevant today.

### HISTORY

During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial Government of India appeared to guarantee varying levels of independence for the Karenni States, but in the years leading up to independence it was clear that their policy had shifted dramatically in favor of integrating the Karenni States with lowland Burma. Pan Karen efforts to establish an independent Karenni state were rejected both by the British and the major pro-independence party in lowland Burma, the Burman dominated Anti Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). As a result the Karenni States were incorporated into independent Burma and, according to the 1947 constitution, were to be reconstituted into one state with an extraordinary right of secession after a 10 year period.

However, within the Karenni states themselves, a nationalist organization, the United Karenni Independent States Council, had been established in 1946. But in December 1947, against the background of increasing tensions over how independent Burma was to be constituted the movement split and in 1948 fighting broke out between the two factions.

One faction was led by Sao Wunna, who supported the integration of the Karenni States with Burma, together with the right to secession. He was backed by the AFPFL and a unit from the Union Military Police (UMP). The other faction, known as the Karenni National Organisation was led by the administrator of Bawlake, U Bee Tu Reh, who advanced a separatist cause and formed a parallel government, the Karenni National Resistance Government. They received support from the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO)

### CONFLICT IN KARENNI

The first Tatmadaw battalion was sent to Karenni in 1948. Between 1948 and 1961, several battalions were posted there on a rotational basis, although there was only one battalion in the area at any one time. However, this changed in 1961 when Battalion Regiment (BRG) 54 was brought into Loikaw where it remains today. Additional BRGs and seven light infantry divisions were permanently stationed in the state between 1974 and the early 1990s. The battalions in Karenni are all concentrated in major towns and along the main roads in the western half of the state. These companies may

be temporarily rotated into the eastern half of the state, but there are no battalions permanently stationed there.

Over fifty years of civil war the already scarce resources in Karenni have decreased, while the number of armed groups has only increased. These include the *Tatmadaw*, border based opposition groups, cease-fire groups and small splinter groups. The formation of splinter groups has been assisted by the government and accompanied by the reliance on illegal activities such as smuggling and general violence. Very little is known about points of conflict between the various armed groups.

In 1989, four Thai logging companies were granted concessions by the SLORC to extract teak in areas controlled by non-State armed groups adjacent to the Karenni border with Thailand. The companies were forced to negotiate access, 'passage fees' and safety guarantees with the KNPP so that they could transport the logs across the border to Mae Hong Son province in Thailand where officials from the Burma Timber Enterprise registered them. The situation became one in which each party swiftly sought to realise benefits. For five years, the sale of teak stands determined the course of the war. Teak and other tropical hardwoods were cut down at an unprecedented rate without regard to sustainable management. In some cases, trees were clear felled even as battles were fought. Territory changed hands, cash and arms flowed in, and the prospect of further gains intensified the war.

The situation was brought to a halt in 1993 when the SLORC, upset by over-cutting and illegal deals (including the reported delivery of weapons) between logging companies and armed groups, refused to renew the concessions. However, illegal cross-border logging in Karenni continued.

In Karenni, like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the agricultural off-season has been an opportunity for men to fight. Today the heaviest fighting still takes place in the hot season when villagers, farmers and schoolboys have been pressed into service as porters, laborers and fighters; and while there are few job openings and almost no opportunities for further study, joining a military group has become one of the few viable options for young men.

The armed groups in Karenni are known to rely on a network of local levies, village irregulars or militias that can be called on to fight when there are enough weapons or whenever the situation demands it. Some observers have seen these guerrilla style tactics as militarily effective. However, they have brought the war directly to the villages, resulting in increased militarization and retaliatory campaigns (including relocation) aimed at separating communities from armed groups.

## CEASE-FIRES

In 1994, three major Karenni groups signed cease-fire agreements with the State. The involvement of Bishop Soetero of Loikaw as a negotiator as well as the Kayah State Peace association suggests some attempt at non-partisan observation. While little is known of the agreements, it is clear that the groups were able to maintain their armies, conduct business and in some cases attend the national convention. In 1995, the KNPP entered into a verbal cease-fire agreement which broke down within months. In 1999, three small factions of the KNPP signed cease-fire agreement. Further negotiations with other KNPP factions have not been successful and have been surrounded by threats and the deaths of two negotiators.

These events demonstrate how difficult and dangerous the negotiations have been especially since non-partisan facilitation was not encouraged by the government. In such a situation there is little recourse for the armed groups except accommodation of the *Tatmadaw*, which in some cases has drawn them further into the conflict as they have been mobilized to assist the *Tatmadaw's* efforts to weaken others that are still in opposition. Moreover, a cease-fire agreement with one group does not extend to other groups as well and there have been incidents of fighting between cease-fire armed groups and non cease-fire armed groups.

## CONCLUSION

There is a long history of conflict in Karenni, the underlying reasons for which are complex and diverse. What started out as a movement to regain independence has developed into a situation of rivalry between a myriad of armed groups vying for control of resources, personal protection and a stake in the balance of power. Control of, and access to civilian population is critical for building political support bases and extracting resources necessary to finance the conflict.

In the absence of lasting and substantive peace agreements, the displacement of civilians is likely to continue. The current cease-fires, however, appear to be ad hoc economic deals rather than a process aimed at political resolution and peaceful reintegration of former armed groups. The cease-fires have allowed armed groups to legitimize their role in the extra-legal Sate economy and, in fact, appear to have led to further factionalism in the competition for increasingly scarce resources.



Those who would like to receive "Conflict and Displacement in Karenni," in full form may contact BERG at PO Box 258, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50202, Thailand

# december news

## **No role for UNHCR in refugee return.**

Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt says that refugees from eastern Burma sheltering in Thailand are fugitives and insurgents and will not be allowed to return under UNHCR protection. In a speech marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the refugee protection agency, Khin Nyunt said: "We are aware that our neighbouring country is hosting Burma's so-called refugees in temporary shelters on the eastern borders. ... I wish to underscore that the so-called refugees and their families are fugitives, illegal migrants, insurgents and members of unlawful associations opposing the government." "If these insurgents [were] to be repatriated and re-integrated as refugees, it would be harmful to the peace and stability of the nation," he said. The situation of those along the Thai-Burma was one that would have to be resolved by "bi-lateral means" rather than as a international refugee issue, the general said. NGO sources report that the number in the refugee camps is now more than 127,000.

"Khin Nyunt: no role for UNHCR in return of refugees," Dec 15. AP

**Rice prices fall.** The price of rice has plummeted post-harvest this

year for the first time in more than a decade in Burma. The wholesale price of Emata, the most common rice variety grown here, at only 1350 kyat-2100 kyat per 1.5 basket (54 kg) is less than half the price this time last year. The price of the more upmarket PawKywe variety, and of the top range Pawsanhmwe paddy, has each dropped by 30-40 per cent compared to prices in the 1999. According to U Nyein, a rice merchant in Rangoon Rangoon and president of the Myanmar Rice Wholesalers' Association, "Later grown paddy will come out in early December. The prices of paddy might then be pushed further down." "I think the prices we are facing now are the lowest that I can recall in years," he said. "I don't think farmers will sell their rice as their selling price seems to be less than their growing costs." Besides, most farmers have become less interested in growing winter paddy and summer paddy as they will need fuel oil, the prices of which are rising, to

pump up water or plough their fields with power tillers. "If these costs are added, they would hardly make any profits in growing paddy during non-monsoon seasons," he added.

"Burma: Rice prices reportedly lowest in a decade," Dec 11. Myanmar Times

## **Chinese company to upgrade Burma's phone lines.**

Chinese telecom Shanghai Bell Co. has won a 20 million-dollar contract to upgrade Burma's ageing telephone network, the company said in a statement Thursday. The statement said the contract involved installing a range of high-tech network equipment, including optical cables and ISDN lines, to replace obsolete analogue equipment. It said Shanghai Bell would now have a 40 percent share in the Burmese telecom market, one of the least developed in the world with an average telephone penetration of just one in 200.

"Shanghai Bell wins 20 million dollar contract in Myanmar," Dec 7.

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