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DISPLACEMENT IN THE KARENNI CONTEXT: PART 2

The following is continued from last month’s article taken from the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG) report on displacement in Karenni and edited for this newsletter.

Throughout upland areas in Southeast Asia, ethnic groups have a long history of migration and population movements. The Karenni are no different, and like other groups the movements of ancestor have incorporated into their mythology and group identification. Currently three forms of displacements predominate within Karenni; conflict induced displacement, development induced displacements and displacements arising as a result of resource scarcity. These displacements have given rise to forced and voluntary movements of people into relocation sites, into hiding in the state, into the neighboring state of Thailand and further into Burma. These movements are fluid and constantly changing and significant proportion of the population has experienced displacement at least once.

DISPLACEMENT & CONFLICT

The ongoing conflict between State and non-State armed groups has led to large-scale displacement of civilians in Karenni. The causes for this include the widespread presence of State and non-State armed groups; military operations undertaken by all sides, including relocation policies of the State; human rights infringements; and a prevailing climate of impunity. The conflict has also influenced the way other displacements have been carried out since the State’s response has been a military one in which policies are implemented without consultation, participation or even within the civil-legal framework.

While evidence shows that villagers have been displaced by fighting, it is the government initiated schemes, which are aimed at separating people from non-State groups by forcing them into relocations, that has resulted in most displacements since the 1960s. In May and June 1996, relocation notices were sent out on a scale not previously experienced in Karenni. Estimates, both from inside the state and from the border area, suggest that 25,206 people were displaced in this year alone. By the end of the year 11,669 of these had moved to relocations sites and 4,4000 had registered in refugee camps in Thailand, leaving at least 9,137 people unaccounted for.

DISPLACEMENT & DEVELOPMENT

There is very little information about the extent of development induced displacement. Since the 1960s, factors responsible include land nationalization and distribution campaigns, the construction of hydro-electric power plants and large dams and small infrastructure projects. In the late 1980s and 1990s there were fewer development projects in Karenni and very few large-scale projects of the type undertaken twenty years ago. The many small-scale ones, such as road construction are reported to be built with forced labour, often pooled from relocation sites. A related, though separate, area consists of the construction and maintenance of military garrisons throughout the state, which has also relied on forced labour. This has led to displacement of civilians when cultivatable land has been confiscated for military use. In 1990, 745 people from five villages in Loikaw township were relocated to existing villages north of Loikaw. These villages had been situated near to the Lawpita hydropower plant in an area where a second plant (Blauchaung II) was completed in 1992. 

FOOD SCARCITY

Karenni is facing a serious food production shortfall due to structural water scarcity which has been exacerbated by prioritizing water requirements for hydro-electric power plants over local needs and a series of droughts in the last three years. Food scarcity is further exacerbated by military campaigns to ensure that locally produced food is not passed to opposition groups. There is very little information about how displacement has affected paddy production – as few villages from wet-rice growing areas have been relocated the impact is thought to be higher in hilly areas such as Shadaw township where displacements are widespread and there has been a significant reduction in land where paddy is permitted to be grown. The food shortages have forced people into relocation sites, refugee camps or areas where shortages are less acute.

There is an urgent need for a thorough examination into the food security and nutrition status of the population since the small number of health morbidity reports made available to this report indicate a high level of malnutrition amongst the civilian population, whether displaced or not. This
would suggest that the effect of the conflict on the civilian population is perhaps more serious than previously assumed.

**Health & Education**

The remoteness and civil unrest in Karenni have meant that development efforts in all sectors, including health and education, have been impeded. The overall health status of the population is poor with serious malnutrition and food shortages in some areas of the state. Access to public health services is restricted with services primarily limited to urban areas, while remote areas are infrequently serviced on an outreach basis. Although records show that the number of health facilities has increased, in reality some of the facilities may well exist only on paper. Government budget constraints and continued insecurity have affected the quality of services.

Communicable diseases are the leading causes of morbidity and forced relocations have led to a further increase in these diseases. Karenni has one of the highest figures for malaria, morbidity and mortality in Burma. Immunization rates are significantly lower than national averages as is access to safe drinking water.

The number of schools, teachers and students in Karenni is lower than any other part of Burma; however, without reference to school age population, this is difficult to interpret. Moreover the schools are under-equipped and understaffed and most of the teachers are not adequately trained. Precise literacy levels were not available to this report though the government census reported a literacy rate of 57% in Karenni, significantly lower than the national average. School enrollment rates are low with high numbers of dropouts and repetitions. While UNICEF has established national programs for improving the quality and access to education in some parts of the country, it is not known whether these have been extended to Karenni. No information was available to this report on the availability of education programs run by international humanitarian agencies from inside Burma.

Of those displaced, few are able to stay in government allocated relocation sites because services are inadequate and opportunities to make a livelihood are insufficient. Living in relocation sites where there is not enough food and not enough land to grow food has led to great suffering and deprivation. This has resulted in further increased mobility and insecurity among the displaced population, and an increase in the number of refugee arrivals at the Thai border. In the absence of lasting and substantive peace agreements, the displacement of civilians is likely to continue.

**Conclusions**

Coupled with the long history of conflict, is a history of displacement in Karenni which has been exacerbated by economic instability and resource scarcity. Since the 1960s, the State has displaced civilians to secure decisive military solutions where total occupation may be too difficult and protracted to achieve alone. Today, the State remains the leading exponent of displacement in Karenni. Since 1996, at least 15% of the state's population has been displaced for military purposes, including the entire population of Shadaw township (with the exception of Shadaw town).

Rather than providing durable solutions, the displacements have led to the expropriation of vast tracts of land and natural resources, and this has shattered the fragile resource base of the local communities. This has increased the competition for survival, as available resources and opportunities diminish sharply. It has also led to the alienation of the population from their customary rights to land and resources such as water, their agricultural customs and traditional farming techniques.

Assistance should carried out in accordance with the principles of humanity and impartiality and without discrimination. Assistance thus far has been targeted through one or more groups without necessarily benefiting the most vulnerable or reaching all those with needs. Both assistance through government structures and cross-border assistance rely on participants in the conflict to deliver aid. In such situations it is difficult to avoid diversion of resources. An approach that seeks to assess both the humanitarian needs and the political impact of the delivery of such assistance is needed.

So far most humanitarian interventions in Karenni have focussed on relief strategies and short-term physical inputs. While indispensable and significant, this assistance does little to protect the rights of the internally displaced. In the present context where the conflict is both protracted and complex, much more needs to be done. In addition to provision of humanitarian assistance, the international community needs to make a serious commitment to conflict reduction and resolution rather than the present response which aims at containment.

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.
In January 1995, we printed a handy guide to the unwieldy world of Burma’s opposition groups and their acronyms. Much has changed since that time and the list of organizations and their ubiquitous multi-lettered names has also seen significant alterations. We hope that the following guide will aid in your efforts to get a handle on the bewildering array of groups in Burma from the ABSDF to the ZNF.

**ALL BURMA STUDENTS’ DEMOCRATIC FRONT (ABSDF)**

The ABSDF was formed in November 1988 in the Karen revolutionary area. It is composed of students and professionals who took part in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. It formed its own constitution and its members were organized into separate military and political wings. In the early 1990s the ABSDF split under two prominent leaders but were reunited in September 1996 with Naing Aung as chairman and Moe The Zun as vice-chairman.

**CEASE-FIRE GROUPS**

The following groups have signed cease-fires with the military government (date in parentheses)

- Myanmar National Democracy Alliance (31/3/89)
- Myanmar National Solidarity Party (9/5/89)
- National Democracy Alliance Army (30/6/89)
- New Mon State Party (29/6/95)
- Shan State Army (24/9/89)
- New Democratic Army (Kachin State) (15/12/89)
- Kachin Defence Army (11/1/91)
- Pa-O National Organization (Shan State) (18/2/91)
- New Mon State Party (25/7/95)
- Palaung State Liberation Party / Army (21/4/91)
- Kayan National Guards (Karenni) (27/2/92)
- Kachin Independence Organization / Army (1/10/93)
- Karenni National People’s Liberation Front (9/5/94)
- Karenni National Democratic Front
- Kayan Pyithit Party (26/7/94)
- Shan State Nationalities Peoples Liberation Organization (9/10/94)
- Restoration Council of Shan State/ Shan State Army (Partial)
- United Wa Organization/ Army (89)

In recent years the ABSDF has shifted its focus towards peaceful methods towards change in Burma. Nonetheless, recent crackdowns by Thai authorities have deeply affected the group. Moe The Zun was arrested for having improper documentation when he attempted to leave Thailand for an overseas meeting in early 2000 and a train-

**NDF, DAB & NCUB**

The National Democratic Front, the Democratic Alliance of Burma and the National Union Council of Burma were all set up as umbrella groups for various opposition organizations and armies. The NDF is the oldest, formed in Mannerplaw, Karen State as an alliance between Pa-O, Mon, Kachin, Wa. Lahu, chin, Arakan and Karen insurgent armies in May 1976. In November 1988, during the coup and uprising the formation of the DAB brought together the NDF groups as well as Burma opposition groups in an attempt to serve as a bridge between the different groups. The NCUB was created in August 1992 under the leadership of Bo Mya (KNU), Brang Seng (KIO) Sein Win (NCGUB) and Nai Shwe Kyin (NMSP) to correct the perceived imbalance between Burman and ethnic organizations in the DAB. All these organizations were based at Mannerplaw until January 1995. The SLORC’s policy of negotiating with individual groups was very damaging to all three of these groups, with the cease-fire agreements between the important New Mon State Party and the Kachin Independence Organization and the government presenting particularly difficult obstacles for the group. The DAB and NDF have been quiet during the last several years, while the NCUB has retained a slightly higher profile.

**DEMOCRATIC KAYIN BUDDHIST ORGANIZATION/ ARMY (DKBO/DKBA)**

A group of Buddhist Karen who broke away from the KNU in December 1994 under Buddhist abbot U Thuzana, headquartered near the Karen capital of Hpa-an. The DKBA aided the Tatmadaw in taking the KNU headquarters at Mannerplaw in January of 1995 and since that time has been responsible for cross-boarder attacks into refugee camps in Thailand. The DKBA is a loosely structured group and despite common wisdom, not all DKBA commanders have cordial relations with the military government.

**KACHIN INDEPENDENCE ORGANIZATION/ ARMY (KIO/ KIA)**

The Kachin Independence Organization was formed in February 1961 by a group of Kachin students from Rangoon University. Zau Seng, an older brother to two of those students and a vet-
eran of an earlier Kachin insurgent army, became the first president of the KIO. Under the leadership of Zau Seng and subsequently Brang Seng, a school headmaster and activist, by the 1970s the KIA became one of the strongest insurgent armies in Burma. In late 1993 the KIO/KIA signed a peace-fire with the military government. The following August Brang Seng died of a stroke and was replaced by Zau Mai, at that time KIO Chief-of-staff. After years of silence the KIO has once again entered the news with reports that Zau Mai was replaced by General Tu Jai on February 25, 2001. The former leader had a reputation for corruption and self-benefiting business dealings.

**The Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA)**

The KNU was formed in July 1947 under the leadership of lawyer Saw Ba U Gyi to safeguard Karen interests upon Burma’s independence. In November 1953 the party was reorganized into a front organisation (the KNU), a vanguard political party (KNUP) and an army (KAF, later KPLA). In 1968 the eastern units broke away to become the Karen National United Front (KNUF) under Mahn Ba Zahn (Chairman) and Gen. Bo Mya (Vice-Chairman) and both factions of the army in 1975 became known as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) under the reunited KNU.

Early in 1995 two leading KNU strongholds, Manerplaw and Kawmoora, were overrun by the SLORC army and a break-away Buddhist Karen group, the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA). While preliminary discussions have been initiated at various times between the KNU and the government of Burma, they have yet to come to a cease-fire agreement. In January 2000, Gen. Bo Mya who had led both the political and military wings of this Karen opposition movement stepped down from the KNU and the government of Burma, they have yet to come to a cease-fire agreement. In January 2000, Gen. Bo Mya who had led both the political and military wings of this Karen opposition movement stepped down from the KNU but retaining his post at the head of the KNLA. Padoe Ba Thein, a civilian, replace Bo Mya as president of the KNU at that time.

**Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP)**

The KNPP was formed in 1957 with the goal to re-establish the independence clause in Burma’s 1947 constitution. It was considerably weakened in 1978 when the Karen National People’s Liberation Front (KNPLF) broke away over disagreement about whether to seek an alliance with the Communist Part of Burma (CPB) at that time the most powerful of the insurgent organizations. KNPP leadership verbally agreed to a cease-fire in March, 1995 with the government of Burma but it broke down several months later in renewed fighting. In recent years the KNPP has lost ground to Burma’s armed forces, but remains the sole insurgent group still fighting in Karenni State.

**National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB)**

A ‘parallel government’ set up in December 1990, composed of MPs elected in May but later prevented from assuming government in Rangoon. Their leader, Sein Win, is based in Washington DC, from where he serves as a representative to the United Nations, national governments and other democracy and human rights groups on behalf of the opposition in Burma.

**National League for Democracy (NLD)**

A pro-democracy movement formed in September 1988 in the wake of widespread unrest, violently suppressed by the Burmese army, and the abolition of the 1974 constitution. In the 1990 general election this party won 392 out of the 485 parliamentary seats. Aung San Suu Kyi is general secretary of the NLD.

**Shan State Army – North (SSA)**

The SSA was founded in 1964 and for many years was the strongest insurgent group in Shan State. The SSA long held an awkward position between the powerful Communist Party of Burma, the KIA and the government forces. The SSA signed a cease-fire agreement shortly after the SLORC came to power in 1988.

**Shan State Army – South (SSA)**

Formerly the Shan United Revolutionary Army

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**Non-Cease-Fire Groups**

The following groups have not signed agreements.

- Arakan Liberation Party/Army
- Arakan Army of Arakan Land (NUPA)
- Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) / Rohingya Army
- Democrat Party Arakan/Arakan People’s Army
- Arakan Rohingya National Organization/Rohingya National Army
- All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)
- All Burma Muslim Union
- Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP) – Broken Cease-fire
- Karen National Union / Karen National Liberation Army
- Chin National Army (CNA)
- National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)
- Zomi National Front
- People’s Liberation Front (PLF)
- Tavoyan Army (TA)
- Wa National Organization (WNO)
- Various smaller groups
PARTICIPATION, PERCEPTION & CHANGE

With India having finished its first cross-borders road with Burma and talking of opening another three border checkpoints, Japan looking at extending a US$ 9 million infrastructure development grant and the new Thai government pushing for even stronger trade and business ties with Burma, it seems that proponents of investment and trade as a pragmatic approach to change are gaining momentum. But how feasible is this approach in Burma. To consider the question of investment as a impetus for change requires a serious examination of the dynamics surrounding development, resource extraction and the social and political conditions in the country.

Burma today is a country that has been shaped by war, and the vines of conflict planted over the past century have borne abundant fruit. Currently there are no less than 30 independent armed groups operating in Burma. Of those groups that have entered “cease-fire” agreements with the government, most retain their weapons and a degree of control over their territory. Approximately one out of every seventeen men between the age of 15-64 serves in one of Burma’s various armies. The military institutions in Burma cast their long and sobering shadows over all aspects of life in the country.

The militarization of Burma will continue to haunt Burma in the long term and demands attention in discussions of change. The British split the country administering central Burma and the frontier areas separately, and in many ways the two parts have remained separate. The wet rice growing lowlands have had more access to capital and have developed more quickly. Highland people must eke out a living on the hillsides with less profitable crops, with even opium growers earning negligible amounts for their efforts. Most of the people in the highlands are ethnic minorities with the lowlands occupied primarily by Burmans. While most of the early insurgencies arose from student and professional groups in Rangoon, they quickly moved to the highland areas where insurgent armies continue to hold out.

The highland areas, however, are some of the most resource rich areas in Burma. Unfortunately, realizing the benefits of the plentiful metals, gems, uncut forests and rivers (dammed for electric power) of the highlands requires capital, equipment and knowledge beyond that of most local people. On the other hand, it is these resources from the border areas have been and will continue to be the object of most investment and trade with Burma. International investors provide the capital, and the equipment and the knowledge come from Burma’s urban centers. Unsurprisingly, the benefits go back to those urban centers and overseas, with the local ethnic groups benefiting little. As foreign investors are required to have local partners, much of the profit that remains in the country goes into the pockets of the military personnel that head both “private” and state enterprises. The precedent set during the 1990s is that large scale development and industrial projects initiated through the central government, such as the Yadana Gas Pipeline, the Ye-Tavoy railroad or the current Salween Dam project, have had negative impacts on local populations while the benefits accrue primarily to Rangoon. Alienation of a portion of the citizenry is a problem in any country, but it is particularly dangerous when those people who are being alienated have independent armies of experienced fighters and access to arms.

As proponents of investment are quick to point out, the answer to this conundrum is to insure that the ethnic groups receive benefits from resource extraction and development activities in their areas. However, in Burma this is more easily said than done. The military government would claim that they are attempting to do this through the Border Areas Development Program (BADP). However, at the very best BADP projects are perceived by ethnic people as too little too late. More commonly BADP activities are seen as attempts to forcibly assimilate ethnic people into the majority Burma population and further central government domination of border areas. Road and bridge projects allow greater extraction of resources and rapid army deployment, schools are seen as attempting to indoctrinate ethnic youths, and understaffed, under-equipped and overly expensive hospitals offer little benefit to local people.

Bridges, roads, schools and hospitals are resources that ethnic areas are badly in need of. The problem is that infrastructure is a value neutral tool. It can provide benefit to or wreak havoc upon local communities depending on use and administration. Circumstances aside, people see any project of Burma’s military government as automatically suspect, and they have good reason to feel this way. Ultimately, any project initiated from outside a community by such a widely despised source, is not going to find acceptance. And the problem is as much a matter of perception as it is the intention of the government. The
crucial element missing from government projects is real local participation, a problem which’s importance can’t be underestimated. A single road project is seen in entirely different light when the degree of local input is increased. The attitude towards infrastructure projects in cease-fire areas, where local groups are at least informed of the process are significantly different than in the civil war zones, because the local people feel they have a marginal degree of control over the situation.

So what does this all mean? No matter what path is taken toward change, the future of Burma presents some serious obstacles. Anthropologists have long revealed in the Burma’s ethnic and linguistic diversity, but the problems springing from that diversity have plagued the country politically. The military government’s answer to this problem has been to weld the country together with force and with fear and, ironically, divisive tactics. While some may argue that these technique has been successful in preventing separatist groups from leaving the “Union of Myanmar,” it is untenable under a process of democratization. Investment and development are neither inherently good, nor inherently bad. Development at the complete discretion of a hated central authority in a highly polarized cultural and political environment does not lend itself to a positive process of democratization. Several decades of exterior investment in Indonesia did indeed lead to a democracy movement among the middle class Javanese population. However, once the restraints of the Suharto regime were lifted the ethnic populations exploded into protest and violence and the disintegration of the country looks increasingly likely, with people so disenfranchised that they feel democratic representation is impossible. Investment that is equitably distributed could potentially go a long way to healing the wounds of conflict in Burma, but development without the participation of those “benefited” is problematic to say the least.

In the end, for investment to lead to democratization requires a “democratic” distribution of resources. An equitable resource distribution, in turn, requires participation on the part of those receiving those resources. It is possible for this process to occur in tandem with foreign investment, but it is a distinct process. Recently, foreign investment has served to disenfranchise portions of the population that most need to be brought into greater participation in the national political and economic dialogue toward paving the way for a peaceful transition to a democratic Burma. Issues that led to the civil war and those that resulted from 50 years of conflict need to be addressed as first priority. As these are addressed, investment may indeed have a positive effect in Burma.

E. Miller

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(SURA), this southern Shan State based armed group joined Khun Sa’s Mong Tai Army (MTA) in 1985. When the MTA dissolved in early 1996, the SURA was reformed under Yawd Serk who pledged to stand “firmly against dictatorship and drugs.” A year later the SURA leadership joined the SSA along with second MTA splinter group Shan State National Army (SSNA). However, the military government refused to extend the SSA cease-fire to this new southern branch and fighting continued. Recently fighting has intensified as UWSA troops have move increasingly into areas controlled by the SSA – South. The recent fighting in the area of Tachilek/Mae Sai which extended into Thailand, was only the most recent incident in a long series of SPDC/SSA South conflicts.

UNITED WA STATE ARMY

The UWSA was formed when the Burma Democracy Solidarity Army, a Wa group that had mutinied from the Communist Party of Burma early in 1989 and immediately signed a cease-fire agreement with the government, joined with the Wa National Council that same year. After 6 years of conflict with Khun Sa and the MTA, the UWSA became the largest heroin producer in Burma in the mid 1990s and also started a highly profitable trade in amphetamine tablets. The UWSA is currently the largest non-state army in Burma.

Sources: Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity by Martin Smith
BURMA IN REVOLT by Bertil Lintner
DAB Newsletter, No 1, Jan 1995
Burma Alert, No 12, Vol 5, Dec 1994
**January News**

**Suu Kyi and junta in talks.** After several months of rumors UN envoy Razali Ismail confirmed reports that the government of Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi were in talks for national reconciliation following a visit during the first week in January. No details, however, were divulged. As a result of the meeting Burmese authorities ordered attack on the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi by the state-run media halted during the talks and NLD members agreed to reciprocate. As the talks continued NLD Vice-Chairman Tin Oo and 85 other party members were released from government detention on January 25. Groups both inside and outside Burma are cautiously optimistic about the talks.

**India to buy Burmese gas.** The Gas Authority of India signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Brown & Root, Cairn Energy and Shell to buy Burmese gas in 1998, and now the two countries are reported to be exploring possibilities of bringing gas from Burma into India. There have been discussions about bringing the gas from Arakan State through a corridor in Bangladesh to Burma, but Dhaka has been reluctant to give such permission for fear of a domestic political backlash.

**Khin Nyunt recognizes AIDS problem.** In an interview with the Myanmar Times SPDC Sec. 1 Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt said that AIDS is “a national cause” and acknowledged the danger of the epidemic in stark contrast to his attitude during a October 1999 interview where he claimed that AIDS was point used as a method of political attack against Burma. The UN AIDS program has estimated that more than 440,000 people in Burma are infected with the virus that causes AIDS. Burma’s government has been criticized for its denial of the problem.

**UNHCR cut refugee allowance.** The UNHCR office in India has informed Burmese refugees living in New Delhi that it won’t be possible to continue providing subsistence allowances to everyone due to funding issues in the refugee agency. UNHCR had provided a monthly allowance of 1,400 Indian Rupees (US $30) per person. There are about 800 refugees living in New Delhi. This news met with dismay from the refugee community which demanded UNHCR continue the allowances or resettle them in third countries.

**Burma businessmen look to counter ILO.** U Zaw Min Win, general secretary of the Union of Myanmar Chambers of Commerce and Industry said that a 10 member business group had been formed to look at strategies to counter the effects of ILO sanctions. The group will monitor negative impacts of the sanctions and liaise with the government over possible tactics. “Our workers want to be protected, as well as our employers from the effects of the sanctions,” he said.