



# Burma Issues

March 2001

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 3



Page 2 Perpetrators: The Other Side of the Equation

Page 4 Non-Violent Struggle and the Grass Roots

Page 6 Lashio: A Township in Transition

Page 8 March News

## PERPETRATORS: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE EQUATION

*I heard gun shots and heard people shouting, "Pa Yaw! Pa Yaw!" (meaning "Burman"), and I saw other villagers fleeing. Suddenly, I saw many Burmese soldiers run on the road, and spray bullets at the houses. After a while, I heard my mother's cry and I saw one of the Burmese soldiers dragging her. In her hands, she held my little sister. I did not dare to go to my mother even when I saw her. I still hid under a big tree. I saw my father go to my mother, and a soldier shot him, and he fell down. I heard my mother cry out another two times and then I never saw her again." From Internally Displaced People, CIDKP, Issue 2.*

This is a shocking tale, but what can we learn from it? Usually we would view this event from the victim's perspective. Yet how can people actually be brought to commit these acts? In most publications on human rights, there is no image of these people beyond them being 'perpetrators'. No motive is given. An examination in how people can be led to perpetrate such acts can assist us to gain an understanding of the problems faced within Burma.

At the outset it must be noted that the distinction between atrocity and war can often be extremely blurred, especially in a guerilla war where there is little perceived difference between civilians and soldiers. For example the Burma Army's 'Four Cuts' policy sees little distinction between civilian and soldier. Land mines are particularly insidious weapons that do not distinguish between soldiers and civilians. However, this fine line between human rights abuses committed under the auspices of war and those perpetrated

on helpless civilians won't be discussed in this article. Armed groups on both sides of the fight commit many serious physical human rights abuses, either in combat situations or on civilian villagers, with the *majority* of abuses committed by the Burma Army. Consequently, this article will primarily examine perpetrators in the Burma Army.

### RESISTANCE TO KILLING

Contrary to what many people think, there is a fairly deep physiological resistance to killing another human being. Studies undertaken after World War II showed that 75 to 80 percent of soldiers did not fire their weapons in actual conflict situations, even to save their own lives or the lives of their friends.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, army commanders were highly concerned with this "deficiency", and considerable research was undertaken. Evidence suggested that a similar resistance to killing had also existed in previous wars. Books such as Dave Grossman's "On Killing" have sought to explore this phenomenon. They have found that the resistance to killing was directly related to how close the soldiers were from the intended



How might this boy be trained to be a perpetrator?  
(BI, 1997)

victim. For instance, the crews of bombers very rarely failed to unleash their bombs, even when it was on civilian targets. Similarly, artillery crews adequately distanced from their targets did not to feel resistance to killing. Firing a rifle at a visible target is clearly a different proposition, as is hand to hand combat. With human rights abuse such as extortion, rape, beating or killing, the victims is close and 'real'. The victim is often helpless and unarmed, an additional barrier.

Disturbed by the apparent 'inefficiency' of their soldiers, armies around the world (led by the United States) began to investigate and implement new 'boot camp' style training techniques. As a result of these new techniques, firing rates were raised from around 25% in World War II to 95% during the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> One unexpected outcome of the increased efficiency of American soldiers in Vietnam, however, was the high rates of psychological problems that those sol-

*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)

dieters encountered after the war. While the soldiers were trained to kill, and did, they were often emotionally unable to deal with their actions. Similar consequences of close, armed conflict will have to be faced for many years to come in Burma.

So what were these techniques that permitted soldiers to kill without compunction? There are two main elements: the need to "dehumanise" the victim and the need to make the act of killing a "conditioned" and therefore almost insignificant action. I will examine the first of these in this article, and the second factor in the next issue.

## DEHUMANISING

In any case of state violence, sections of the population (or other nations) are typically depicted as being 'less than human.' This is a form of extreme chauvinism, a topic that has been covered extensively by the Burma Issues newsletter. Social, religious and ethnic divisions are exaggerated by the SPDC, and in reaction, by many of the ethnic opposition groups. (See "Transition and National Reconciliation" by Chao Tzang Yawngwhe - BI, Feb 2001) But, if we are examining how people can be led to kill, then we must look at two issues. Firstly, how prevalent are such sentiments within the general Burmese society. And secondly, how is that used within the Burma Army.

Grossman outlines a number of ways in which a society can dehumanise a group of people.

- Cultural distances, where racial, religious or ethnic differences are exaggerated, which permit the killer to dehumanize the victim.
- Moral distances, where an intense belief in moral superiority is emphasised, and vengeful/vigilante actions are encouraged.
- Social distances, where a lifetime of thinking that a particular class is less than human in a socially stratified environment is utilized.<sup>3</sup> (Grossman p 160)

To portray your enemy as the 'other' is a crucial element. If 'we' are good, and on the side of right, then 'they' are evil and on the side of wrong. "If your propaganda machine can convince your soldiers that their opponents are not really human but are 'inferior forms of life,' then their natural resistance to killing their own species will be reduced."<sup>4</sup> Often medical terminology is employed to heighten this sentiment. The victim populations are often described in medical terms – as a cancer or disease that needs to be eliminated, amputated or cured. For example, a South African torturer justified his actions: "If

you had a bad foot and the surgeon had to cut it off to save your life . . . that is the person I was."<sup>5</sup>

Just what the different groups within Burma think of each other is a point of innumerable arguments, and is ultimately impossible to measure. Many opposition groups and individuals are convinced that the SPDC is set on committing physical and cultural genocide upon the ethnic groups. The severe human rights abuses perpetrated upon segments of the population is cited as evidence for that opinion. Yet among the general population, can it really be said that they hate the ethnic groups enough to want to kill them? In many parts of the country, different groups and religions live along side each other, for the most part, peacefully.

In the mainstream Burmese media there is remarkably little rabid anti minority group rhetoric. In a country wracked by internal strife, there is little anti-Karen (for example) propaganda. Any vitriol is usually reserved for the leadership of the armed groups, not the ethnic group as a whole. Such chauvinist opinions are, however, undoubtedly held by many people, despite the fact that they are rarely stated in public. Typically, the ethnic groups, and various religious groups are depicted as being backward, primitive, and even antagonistic.

Also important here is how the opposition groups, and Aung San Suu Kyi in particular, are portrayed. They are typically seen as the puppets of neo-colonist forces, - Western forces that are bent on destroying the unity of Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi's infamous 'axe handle' (the stick that helps destroy the forest) label is an example of this. Such rhetoric may at times seem even comical, but it must always be remembered that such a play on nationalist ideals, and a fear of foreign influence has caused some terrible genocide in the world. Cambodia is a close Asian example, though I would not suggest that the rhetoric or situation in Burma parallels the Cambodian experience. Nevertheless, nationalism and xenophobia can be powerful and dangerous forces.

Within the military, these chauvinist sentiments are stressed and exaggerated. The process of de-humanisation is easier if the enemy looks distinctly different, or has a distinct culture or identity. During the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese were called 'gooks' by the US military, yet another example of ethnic groups being portrayed as backward, uneducated and primitive. Evidence suggests that this is also true in the Burmese context.<sup>6</sup>

Continued on page 7

## NON-VIOLENT STRUGGLE AND THE GRASS ROOTS

I am just an ethnic person from Burma and have been suffering from military rule like everybody else. In my area, people have had to deal with many terrible things in their daily lives such as: torture, killings, forced labor, relocations and forced portering. Even though we knew that something was going wrong as we faced these problems in our community, we were unclear as how to solve them. I thought I should do something for my people and believed that to find some way to solve our problems, I should leave my community. Finally, I joined a revolutionary [insurgent] group for several years. Then I went to an NGO and attended training there for a year. From that training, I became very interested in non-violent struggle (among many other things) and I saw that it could bring true justice and peace.



When I came back from the training and worked in my area, it was very hard to test my ideas about non-violence with my people because these ideas were very strange to them; I think they were afraid to accept the ideas. I used many tactics and was careful to be clear when I worked among them and many friends came to understand me. I also understood them and I did not refuse to accept their [violent] struggle because their ideas came from their own situation and their own beliefs. Sometimes I was very disappointed with my work as I faced significant obstacles. From my little experience, I think the following things are obstacles for the non-violence movement in Burma:

### 1) WRONG APPROACHES

Many people have been talking about non-violent struggle, but the question is, do these people really believe in it? If they don't, it will be dangerous and there will be bigger losses than in the violence struggle.

In Burma, people have suffered torture and oppression for many years. At first, they felt they had no choice in protecting themselves. They believed deeply that only a counter-armed struggle could solve their problems and bring

them freedom. They were so oppressed that they never dared to think about the non-violent way. But many years later, when the violent struggle had gone on for a long time and they had still not reached their aim, some of them began to search for new ideas that would solve their problems and lessen their suffering. Most of the time they wanted to solve their problems by negotiating for peace, instead of participating in the violent struggle. Some of them entered into negotiations with the military government, some tried cease-fire agreements, some surrendered, but the situation became very different from what they had thought prior to dealing with the government. For some it was worse than when they were in the jungle with their armed struggle. Many people in the countryside suffered more than before the cease-fires, but the worst thing was that the military regime used them [the cease-fire groups] as tools to oppress their own people and to fight their friends still in the jungle. They also gave up their new ideas about solving their problems. This not only affected them but also led the people still fighting in the jungle

to despair in and disregard the non-violent struggle.

A non-violent struggle by people without clear beliefs or dedication to it is also a problem. Some people working with issues of non-violence are only doing so to get international support. Other non-violence programs are not compatible with the local people's ideas and culture. These workers do not support the people's struggle, but end up giving up their own ideas of non-violence, driving them to despair. These kinds of people can create big losses for the non-violence movement.

### 2) HUMAN DIGNITY

The people from Burma, especially ethnic people, have never had the experience of living with human dignity and previously had never thought about it. When they met people from the other countries who had a sense of dignity, they wanted to be like them and to find a way to make people respect them. Finally, they found a way — just by holding a weapon. Consequently, they felt that if they had no weapons, nobody would respect them. To solve this problem, they

chose armed struggle. When they have weapons they feel they can live with human dignity and have a better chance than people without weapons. Some people justify their weapons by saying that they are protecting their people, but we can see all of them are just trying to protect their human dignity. However, in the end when they have no weapons, they will be hopeless and fall into feelings of despair and victimization because there is nothing left to their faith.

### 3) "THE WAY IT'S ALWAYS BEEN"

"We started our revolution with armed struggle, so we will have to conclude our struggle that way," said one leader. Others have said, "We should keep our armed struggle, because that means we are honoring our old soldiers and leaders." The ideas of these people are like dead water which doesn't flow, and this creates difficulties for the struggle. Perhaps they are weak in their analysis of their struggle and the current international situation. They don't want to seek out or adopt any new ideas (such as the non-violence struggle). They are scared of outside ideas because they think these ideas will destroy their struggle.



However, they should understand how well their way is working. They just are reacting, waiting for something to happen to them and then adjusting their work based on that. A lot of time, money and people's faith is invested in the work but it only creates losses. Their struggle should be proactive in a way that always predicts the future through analysis of past experiences and the current situation. So that they can reduce future losses. Not only should they use the old way, but to be more effective they should find and practice new ways as well.

### 4) NON-VIOLENCE AND "LOSING"

People also compare the losses between the violent and non-violent ways. Under the harsh military regime they are afraid to think about the possible future engaged only in a non-violent struggle. Some feel that if they don't engage in armed-struggle they would lose everything, including their own culture, literature and history. They also feel they will have no chance to open their mouth in politics. They have chosen the armed struggle and have stopped thinking about how effective the non-violence way could be.

### 5) NO CLEAR VISION

They have no clear vision for their future, and haven't really analyzed how fully they can achieve their aim with the armed struggle and how likely it is that they will get real peace through armed struggle. They just believe deeply that one day they will get their freedom with armed struggle, and they should protect themselves every day while they wait for that. While they are waiting for that day to come, they seem to have no clear visions of:

- *what they want for their communities in the future*
- *what happened in the past and what their weakness and strengths are*
- *how they should change their struggle to make it better*
- *how people should participate in important issues and what skills they will need*
- *the long term plan for their movement*
- *which strategies and tactics they will need*

They have weaknesses in analyzing their work and predicting the future. If they had a clear vision of the future, they would know that non-violent approach is also needed as a part of their struggle to get real justice and peace.

### 6) CULTURE OF OPPRESSION

Due to culture and beliefs, people are heavily dependent on their leaders. This is the reason that the people do not participate in problem solving with their leaders. All things depend on the leader's decisions, as the people don't contribute their own good ideas. Maybe they have some new ideas, (including ideas about non-violence), however, because they just depend on their leaders, they are not trying to contribute these ideas to their struggle. They just blindly support their leaders. Consequently, their movement doesn't improve. People should cooperate with their leaders to come up with ideas, and together they can do many positive things for their future. They should know the best future should come from their own minds.

### 7) LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

Most people think the non-violence way is a very soft idea that is the same as surrendering

Continued from page 5



## LASHIO: A TOWNSHIP IN TRANSITION

**L**ashio, the second largest city in Shan State, is located in a valley basin in north central Shan state. Located on the old Burma Road, 45 miles (72 km) North East of Hsipaw and 30 miles (48 km) West South West of Hsenwi, it has long been an ideal trading center for goods from within Shan State and from China. It is also a town that has seen a lot of tumult and change.

### INSURGENCIES & CEASE-FIRES

While Lashio isn't currently under the control of any one insurgent group, numerous different groups exert influence over the township and it has a long history of insurgent activity. Lashio played an important role for the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), as it was an important link to China and the well-endowed and highly supportive Chinese communist party. Even since the CPB's disintegration in 1989, Lashio has served as a meeting point between insurgent groups with the Kachin Independence Army, the Shan State Army (SSA) and the United Wa State Army all controlling territory contiguous to this township. Naturally, the signing of cease-fires by all these groups in the early 1990s marked a huge turning point in the recent history of Lashio. With the CPB out of the way and the insurgent groups safely in "the legal fold," the government opened up the border with China and encouraged trade. Since that time the town has grown quickly and has been taken over by traders of all ethnicities, especially the Chinese who now make up a majority of the population. With agricultural products arriving from other local communities; and appliances and other products coming from China, as well as considerable cross-boarder smuggling, there is a lot of money to be made in Lashio. All the area insurgent groups, many of whom have shifted their focus from fighting to profit-making, have offices in Lashio to insure that they aren't left out of the action.

### OUTSIDE LASHIO TOWN

Life in the local countryside is considerably different from that in Lashio town. Most of the local villagers are simple ethnic Shan farmers, most of whom grow rice. Other crops grown in the area include: groundnuts, vegetables, oranges, sugar cane, soy beans and even some corn. While the villagers in this area don't suffer the same kind of human rights abuses as those in free-fire zones, they have more than their share of problems with the military. Villagers in this area are subject to forced labor, both on 'development projects' and on military-owned farms and forced portering. They also often have their vehicles "borrowed" for military purposes. Like so many

farming communities in Burma these people carry the burden of rice procurement, by the military and, to a lesser extent, by some of the cease-fire groups. Farmers are required to give or to sell rice at prices far below market value to local government officials and other armed groups. All together these "lessor" types of human rights abuse, too, can become an unbearable weight on the shoulders of the country people.

### LAND LOSS

Since the socialist period, the government of Burma has held the policy that all agricultural land belongs to the government - continued tenure on the land by individual farmers being dependent on the continued use of the land. As cultivation of the land becomes too much of a drawback for the local people and they choose to leave their farms fallow, local army commanders and government officials quickly move in to confiscate them. Once confiscated, the army may keep the land to be used as a military farm, or they "sell" the land to companies or wealthy individuals. Companies (such as the Asia World, run by drug lord Lo Sing Han or Hong Pan, controlled by the UWSA) then cultivate the land, hiring day laborers at good wage rates. This process further tempts local people to give up farming their own land.

### POSSIBILITIES

For those who do give up the farming life, the possibilities are somewhat limited. Many younger people migrate to Thailand to work in the agricultural sector and in service jobs, sending money to parents and relatives back home. Others work in the jade and gem mines, while still others choose to work for the local companies. Lashio has little industry with only one cement factory owned by the regional army commander and a couple of underground factories run by "insurgent" armies. Lashio has a degree college, but there is little work available for its graduates. Previously, it was possible for anyone to go into commerce, but due to greater government control of the border and the rise of large trading companies, it is now impossible for an independent trader to compete.

### CONNECTIONS

To be successful in Lashio you have to have connections. Most desirable are connections with the generals themselves, then the Military Intelligence officers (MIS), the cease-fire groups, other government officials and the USDA (the "social group" run through the government). For those with company connections, they may be able to

use company important licenses to do their own business. However, relationships with powerful people and groups often require large sums of money, which encourages smuggling and corruption, and Lashio has become known as “a town where you can buy anything”.

If you are caught smuggling heroin, the first person that you ask to see is the local MIS officer. If you can meet his demanded price he'll tell the arresting officer that you are one of his informants and that you are to be freed immediately. This isn't the case, however, for those who have committed political crimes or who are in trouble with those higher-up the local power chain. The story is told of one man in Muser (on the Chinese border north of Lashio) who had been arrested. Before the trial the local army commander instructed the judge that regardless of the evidence or strength of defense this person should receive at least 20 years in prison, which is exactly what happened.

However, there are options open even to those who are convicted. Those sentenced to years of hard labor can have their families and friends approach the officer in charge of the work location and, for a sum of money, the official records can be altered to show that the convict died of malaria, while he goes free. Options are always open for those who have connections and money. Without these two important commodities, the people are open to abuse by any of the more powerful people or groups around them.

## CONCLUSION

The loss of land, the migration of people out of the area, the influx of traders and trading companies, the increase of government control over the area, and the subsequent corruption and cronyism are negatively effecting the local population. The young people who leave their communities often don't return, forgetting the traditional life and social institutions. The future doesn't look good for the Shan people in this area. The Shan people survive by their communities, but their communities are only becoming weaker and weaker.



B.I. Staff

## Continued from page 5

to the enemy. Consequently, they do not want to learn more about non-violence or participate in non-violence trainings, which they view as ineffective. Even though they have heard about the effectiveness of some non-violent struggles, like Gandhi's struggle in India, they don't know in detail how they were carried out. They don't understand how Gandhi got the power and how

much recognition he got from the world through non-violent methods. They also don't realize how non-violent struggles all over the world have been helped by what Gandhi did. If these people come to understand clearly the non-violent way as well as the violent way, they would dare face any situation without weapons, because they always hold the non-violent weapons in their mind. Their struggle would be like a flowing stream and would achieve its aim.



T.R.

## Continued from page 3

Yet there is remarkably little information on how the Burma Army trains its soldiers. One rare investigation, the Earthrights report on rape, found that soldiers are often indoctrinated to view ethnic minority groups in Burma as inferior to ethnic Burmans.<sup>7</sup> Exactly how severe this indoctrination is is difficult to determine. There is no clear evidence to suggest that the Burma Army is taught specifically that the ethnic groups should be eliminated, and that soldiers should feel no compunction to kill or torture helpless victims. One deserter was asked if he had ever been ordered to abuse people. He replied that there were no such orders, but that “they have shown the way in oral and practice.”<sup>8</sup> So we need to examine other less explicit factors involved in training troops.

## CONCLUSION

The chauvinist sentiments found at a fairly ‘low level’ (compared to other ethnic conflict situations) in the general Burmese society are highlighted and accentuated within the Burma Army. But this alone cannot lead soldiers to kill as freely as they seem to. In the next issue I will discuss perhaps the more crucial elements of this process – Conditioning.



J. Shnookal

## ENDNOTES: PERPETRATORS . . .

1. Grossman, Lt-Col. Dave, “On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society,” Back Bay Books, 1995
2. *ibid*, p. 250
3. *ibid*, p. 160
4. *ibid*, p. 160
5. Torture Vol 9, No 2, June 1999, IRCT
6. “Interview with a Burmese Junta's Soldier”, Freedom News, Burma Net, 10 May 2001
7. Apple, Betsy, “School of Rape: The Burmese Military and Sexual Violence”, EarthRights International, 1998
8. “Interview with a Burmese Junta's Soldier”

# march news

**Garment imports.** According to the American Embassy in Rangoon, Burmese garment imports into the US grew from US\$168 million in 1999 to US\$ 403.7 million in 2001. A recently declassified document reported that factories in Burma are producing garments for leading US designers and retailers, including Kenneth Cole, Nautica, Jordache, Kmart and Wal-mart. The embassy cable dated July 2000 also noted that police uniforms bound for Montreal Canada were observed in one garment factory. "The Burmese garment industry is booming — growing 45% in the last year," said the cable. "Workers reportedly receive salaries ranging between 5,000 and 17,000 kyat (or \$14 to \$47 dollars) per month for a 48-hour work week." Another reason that the Burmese garment industry is growing so fast is that labor unions are prohibited. *"Memo feeds concern that exports to U.S. help Burmese Junta," Mar 1. New YorkTimes*

*"Who ordered these uniforms? Why Burma?," Mar 6. Canadian Labour Congress*

**Banks thrive.** Even as the country's economy suffers its worst slump in years, the number of private banks is mushrooming throughout the country. It is thought that most of these banks are involved in money laundering for the drug trade and the military leadership. One example is the Kanbawza Bank. Established in 1996, it has grown incredibly since successful business man Aung Ko Win reformed it in 2000. The initial investment in the bank was 1.6 billion kyat (US\$ 13.3 million) and it now has nine branches throughout the country. Aung Ko Win has donated a billion kyat to military projects and has close ties to the top Generals through his wife (a niece of SPDC Sec. 3 Win Myint) and is himself thought to be an "adopted son" to Gen. Maung Aye. Competition between local banks is getting stronger, especially between the Asia Wealth Bank and the Kanbawza Bank. "It is not only a competition between banks, but also a competition between the generals and the drug lords," said Ko Khin Maung Myint, a Burmese trader in Bangkok.

*"Low down on the banks that are 'above it all'. February. Irrawaddy*

**Burma buys ammunition.** Burma is obtaining large numbers of 82mm smoothbore mortar ammunition through international dealers, apparently intending to replenish its supplies in the face of continuing border tension with Thailand. The shipment involves some 50,000 to 100,000 mortar shells that should cost Rangoon around US\$2 million. It originated from Vietnam, although Hanoi may be unaware of its ultimate destination. A Vietnamese-flagged ship was due to land the ammunition in Thailand in mid-March for covert shipment to Burma, according to Bangkok-based intelligence. *"Myanmar stocks up on ammunition," Mar 21. Jane's Defence Weekly*

**Army attacks KNPP.** More than 100 members of Burma's Karenni ethnic minority fled into Thailand March 21 after Burmese troops attacked a stronghold of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Thai provincial officials said. Burmese troops attacked the KNPP rebel camp at Doi Ta Khe, opposite Thailand's Mae Hong Son province. An official of the KNPP said 500 Burmese troops were involved in Tuesday's assault. He said one Karenni guerrilla died and four were wounded, and six were wounded on the government's side. *"Karenni refugees escape fighting into Thailand," Mar 21. AP*

**BURMA ISSUES  
PO BOX 1076  
SILOM POST OFFICE  
BANGKOK 10504  
THAILAND**

**ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED**

**PRINTED MATERIALS**

**AIRMAIL**