Human rights violation documentation is one of the most common and pervasive of all human rights activities in Burma. Dozens of groups collect and distribute information on the extensive abuse of the rights of the Burmese citizenry. Extra-judicial killing, rape, forced relocation, forced labor, religious persecution; the reports, like the violations themselves, are regular occurrences. Too rarely, however, is the nature of conventional human rights reporting examined by organizations involved in documentation. While traditional methods of human rights documentation are ideal for international tribunals and other legal institutions, such methods necessarily relegate this issues to the realm of international and intra-national organizations. While the limitations of conventional human rights reporting have been raised before in this newsletter (see "Human Rights Documentation: Suggestions for a Burmese Agenda", Burma Issues, March 1998), discussion of these limitations are extremely pertinent for all those concerned with the empowerment of oppressed people.

Conventional human rights reporting draws its strength, its standards and its vocabulary directly from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international law conventions. A factual record of the incident is reported in terms necessary for legal proceedings: the victims name, the perpetrator, the perpetrator’s rank or position, dates, times, locations, forensic data, and a detailed overview of the episode. Stripped of all contextual data; of the identity of the individuals involved; of the psychological, cultural and economic realities of the situation; the incident becomes universal and quantitative in nature. In this regard, conventional human rights documentation serves well as a tool for legal appeals toward the punishment of perpetrators and the recompense of victims of abuse. However, the social and psychological side-effects of conventional human rights methods are seldom acknowledged.

Since the 1988 uprising, there has been an increased focus on human rights documentation work in Burma. Frequent trainings on international human rights standards and correct methods of human rights violation documentation are held for individuals and organizations along the Thai-Burma border. As more and more organizations are sending "information collectors" inside Burma, the process of human rights abuse documentation is becoming institutionalized both on the organization and on the village level. The enthusiasm on the part of international human rights organizations for reports of human rights violations is reflected both in international funding for local human rights documentation organizations and the methodology of the documentalists. With an understanding that their funding largely depends on the quantity and quality of violations collected, it becomes imperative for information collectors to vigorously seek out incidents of human rights abuse. One friend of Burma Issues, who frequently travels in the civil war zones, noted that after years of this type of documentation villagers automatically relate stories of human rights abuse whenever prompted for any information. Essentially, continued on page 7
WORKING FOR THE MOTHER OR WORKING FOR THE OTHER

international money and new expectations within the border camps

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o, do you like your teaching job?” “No, not really.” “Why not?” “I don’t think that I am a very good teacher, and I don’t enjoy teaching. I want to stop.” “So what would you like to do instead?” “Oh, I hope to study more or maybe work for an NGO. I will keep teaching until I can find better work. Do you know of anywhere that I can work?”

This is a perfect example of many a conversation that I had with Karenni teachers from inside Refugee Camps 2 and 3, when I spent some months in the Mae Hong Son area on the Thai border in late 2001. Almost all of them had worked just a year out of Post-Ten, a post-high school program in Camp 3 which is entirely run in English language, and most were just my age.

Some young teachers were even more blunt with me. “They pay very little for teachers, we have to work twice as hard as other people. You work in the day and you prepare for the next day at night, the pay is not enough.” One young teacher even described his teaching position as a “duty” to the Karenni people, as he explained that it wasn’t what he wanted to do, but it was what was expected of him, and hoped it would get him to better places in the future.

In an effort to retain teachers at least for a little while, the Karenni Education Department has told teachers that they are first in line for NGO positions when they appear. While this might get some more qualified people into the schools, it has also caused problems in that a teacher will just leave halfway through their teaching year to join an NGO, leaving the other teachers to rearrange the classes to accommodate.

“We are seeing a shift from people working for their “mother” organizations to some of the most promising young people working for other internationally based NGOs.”

This has not only affected the Karenni people, but also the Karen who have by far and away the largest refugee population in Thailand. A more experienced member of Burma Issues described a trip he made into the Karen National Union (KNU) controlled area inside Burma in the early 1980s. He was taken to a school up in the mountains that had just been built by the KNU and where classes were being given to the children in that village for the first time. Two young Karen women from Rangoon University were teaching. They taught for no pay, receiving rice and some other foods from the villagers. Not only did they teach, but they took care of about ten children who lived too far away to travel back and forth every day. It seemed obvious that the teachers were there because of their commitment.

Following 1988 and the arrival of international assistance, the same Bl worker was told by some Karen friends that some of those distant and extremely important schools had to close because no one wanted to teach there any longer. The teachers wanted to come to the border where they could get salaried positions.

Apart from education, the medical field has experienced similar problems. The KNU has had a group of health workers for a long time who have gone inside Burma to give attention to Karen villagers in need. As other important groups such as Medecins Sans Frontieres have firmly established themselves along the border and have given stipends to their inside teams, the KNU is now experiencing many problems in getting people to fill positions in their health department.

So what has happened that has so radically changed the landscape of how young Karen and Karenni are feeling? In both of these examples, we are seeing a shift from people working for their “mother” organizations (or organizations run out of their own people’s movements and governments) to some of the most promising young people working for other internationally based NGOs. But these changes can be seen in other areas as well. One of these is article writing for a vast arena of newsletters that are currently being published.

One friend of mine is quite active in the Karenni Students’ Union in the camps. The KSU has a newsletter which usually searches for different
students to write articles on different themes. Lately, they have had a hard time getting students to write. A growing response among students is, "Would you be able to pay me for my article?"

Similarly, this response is growing more and more common as more NGOs in Mae Hong Son are using a policy of giving a "gift" to writers so that they will be sure to have plenty of writers and articles of good quality. For organizations like KSU that do not have the means to pay, that means that making quality newsletters is becoming more and more difficult.

Another area is training. In the multitude of training that occurs in the Karenni Camps, more and more groups are paying people to participate. This is to make sure that there will be high turn out and the largest number of people can gain from the training. The difference between a training which pays or provides food and a training which doesn't can be a great one indeed. Yet this was never an issue when the camps first started.

The question arises out of all of these activities.... what is your expectation of your activity? Why are you involved with it? From my perspective and observations, it seems that the ingestion of foreign money into salaries for refugee people has confused these questions for many young people growing up in the camp system. Is it to become self-reliant and help your people? Is it service? How does this help your family?

In my conversations with refugees from southern refugee camps such as Tham Hin, this issue has not reached them yet. Tham Hin does not have the contact with foreign NGOs that its Karenni counterparts have in the North, largely because of differing Thai policies in these areas. Questions of expectations do not seem to be so confused, according to the responses from different people whom I have come to know well in this area.

Of course this must all beg the question, what is wrong with paying people money for their services? If we take the position of the NGOs, this seems quite reasonable. Why should NGO staff pay their foreign workers so much higher while not giving anything to local staff? In order to change this unfair imbalance, many NGOs have started giving higher salaries to local staff. For some people in leadership positions, these salaries can approach B8000 (USD190) a month, an incredible sum considering the less than B1000 that teachers working for the Karenni Education Department make per month.

When dealing with situations and people in poverty it is not too difficult to see why many are starting to choose the former rather than the latter of these two options when planning their future. This is not just something that has become a change in the mentality of the younger generation, but is something which I have seen pushed many times by parents and family in the camps. They now consider NGO work and the perks which come with it as much higher status than an equivalent job working for a "mother" organization. Different newcoming Karenni NGO workers will tell of the difference in their family as soon as they had started to work for the NGO. I myself have seen fathers celebrate grandly when their son or daughter was selected to work or participate in an NGO. There is definitely an expectation that you will be helping your family as it experiences problems or wishes to get ahead financially or with job opportunities for relatives.

And what is wrong with all of that? I have talked with other people who have written similar articles raising questions related to money and foreign NGOs and they have received serious criticism by many of the camp leaders. What is wrong with finally getting more money into the Karenni families? They maintain that
this is something that will help them move out of the situation that they are in, as well as giving some leaders vital skills such as writing or public speaking or relating to the international community, all of which can really make a big difference for the Karenni people in the future. 

There is no question that these changes are very good for the individual and their family, but I think its effect on the greater ethnic population is much more controversial. How much are we distancing these leaders from their own people as they become accustomed to working out of larger Thai cities like Mae Sot, Mae Hong Son or Kanchanaburi, at levels of lifestyle which are drastically different from the majority of their own people whom they are serving? 

This is not a matter of whether NGOs should be working on the border or not, it is a question of how. After having provided the fundamental necessities to refugees, how can we really work to support the people’s movements as they try to change the root problems in Burma? One of the challenges that we as the NGO community must always be discussing is how we can find ways to contribute to fostering the people’s movements rather than competing with them. If we enter with good intentions, it is still very possible that in many cases we end up competing with the people’s movements and, even worse, creating obstacles for them. 

NGOs must look at the big picture, see what the struggle is all about and what it is trying to accomplish, and then find positive ways to contribute. Max Ediger, one of the founders of Burma Issues, states that “our problem often is that the people’s movement doesn’t always articulate their aim and objectives clearly for us so we get confused or frustrated, thinking they don’t have any strategy. Then we start doing our own thing. When we start doing our own thing, the long-term movement really does suffer even though a few people and their families might benefit immediately from salaries etc.”

From what I can see, there are significant ramifications from salaries on which organizations are getting the best and the brightest and there has become a lot of confusion on the question of people’s expectations. These are topics which are only spoken about behind closed doors with friends, never something that is talked about in the open due to its sensitive nature. I would encourage all of us working in NGOs, whether foreigners such as myself or local staff, to be more open in talking about these ethical issues, acknowledging that this is changing the landscape of refugee populations in some significant ways, and that it must be of utmost importance to have confidence that we are genuinely working to empower a people to stand on their own two feet, and not weakening their culture or aggravating their already considerable difficulties.

Furthermore, if we can project this present trend into the future, what can we see? Probably an even deeper dependency on foreign NGOs and their money to keep anything, not just the schools and hospitals afloat. The concept of the value of service for the struggle for self-determination will dissolve more and more completely.

How is our work valued? In our capitalist world, people are valued by how much money they make. NGOs have a great role in determining how much of this thought will also enter into refugee populations at this critical time for them. We must not let salaries affect expectations, the further I think about it the more my conclusion stands that there should not be a differential system between the salaries of “mother” organizations and “other” organizations, if we are truly interested in keeping the larger collective committed. And if we have ethical arguments about why foreign staff are paid so much higher than refugee staff, perhaps we must tackle this from the other side and we as foreigners need to live closer to the level of the people whom we seek to serve.

Whether we as outsiders can see it or not, there is a nonviolent people’s movement for justice going on, and it is the responsibility of all foreign NGOs to take the time to see it, hear it and understand it so they can work in ways which help build it up and encourage it. Even if our actions are based on wonderful and pure intentions, if those actions hurt the larger population in any way, they are in fact the enemy of the people.
The following article is drawn from the reflections of two Karenni friends of Burma on issues about the games young Karennis play and their role in socializing children to embrace violence.

Many children in the villages usually play games, but the games are not like in other countries. Many villagers live quite far from the city. There is civil war in Burma, especially in the rural areas. The villagers often hear the sound of gun fire and bombs. It becomes second nature for people to fight. So most children play games such as fighting. Whenever they play games, they usually divide into two groups, Burmese and Karenni, and then they fight each other.

For example, when we were children in our village we usually played a game made of guns with bamboo. We divided into two groups and we fought each other. In my village, there was a very popular game where you threw dried gourds at each other. We used to put ash inside the dried gourds and throw them at the opposite group. When the dried gourds hit something, they exploded and the smoke came out from the dried gourd like the real bombs of the army fighting in the battle. So many young people become violent, because of the lessons of these games. The other villages play a similar game, especially in the rural areas of Karenni State and as a result many people come to use this violent method.

When they grow bigger they only want to do the real thing. They become violent because everyone is created from their situation. An old adage said that “People who live by the river can swim very well and people who live by the forest can climb the tree very well”, they rely on learning the things closest to where they live. The villagers who live in the war zone have learnt how to fight against their enemies.

I think the people in the rural areas of Burma do not have many different sports to play as we are only able to gain knowledge from our neighbors or a few games. Let’s view back to my younger days when I was living in my rural village in Karenni State. I always heard the sound of bombs and gun-fire during the day and at night-time.

So we, the young people, play the fighting games. Whenever we engaged in recreation we tried to divide into two groups. One group used to play the role of the Burmese troops and another group used to play the role of the Karenni troops. The Burmese troops were always the big group with many soldiers and the Karenni troops the small group with very few soldiers. But nobody wanted to pretend to be the Burmese troops because we believed that the Burmese troops were very bad in fighting war and the Karenni troops were superior in fighting war. The Karenni soldiers used to carry only a few things with them and the Burmese soldiers used to carry a big load such as heavy weapons. In the game, we called some people to pretend to be porters.

In the fighting game, we used fruits as small balls for bullets and threw them at each other. Sometimes we chewed the paper bags, used small fruits and put them inside the small bamboo fruit and then we shot each other.

I think now that I imagine the Burmese young people also played the fighting game in their own communities, but their roles were reversed. They would pretend the Burmese troops were superior and they might try to show the Karenni troops in bad ways in their fighting game. Like the children, it seems that we two groups are blaming each other. One group always thinks of their side in a good way. We two groups suspect each other all the time and just want to overwhelm each other. We never try to listen and look deeply to understand each other. I think if we two groups or people do not have respect and admiration for each other, then we will sow the seeds of violence. To conquer the other groups they have love for themselves only. Those who are weak or losers will be silent for a while but they will still have pain in their heart. There is still injustice alive amongst them. If the losers are strong again one day, they will try to take revenge against the conquerors.

Mostly the ethnic groups, those who are contradictory forces to the SPDC, are inflicted by violence to begin their struggle. They have been threatened by the Burmese military junta for many decades. There is a raging noise of war in Burma and it is clear that we are jarring by the violent ways in Burma that we grew up in. As regards to the fighting game, the ways we the children acted, are very strong in support of this violent way because at that time we just thought that fighting in a war could make people famous and it would be fun. We did not know that violence is suffering.
ventional documentation has led to an inflation in the importance of human rights violation information and the devaluation of the other parts of villagers' lives.

By emphasizing the importance of incidents of human rights abuse, the relationship between villagers and the problems that they face shifts dramatically. Instead of seeing human rights abuse in the context of their larger existence, their communities and their culture, which recognizes them as actors in their own lives, their primary identity becomes that of a victim. At the same time human rights documentation organizations face a conundrum. While they seek to end the abuse of the grassroots people, their existence is contingent on finding continued instances of abuse.

The issues surrounding conventional rights abuse documentation can be addressed through a shift toward a new human rights model. The interpretive mode of human rights documentation focuses not only on abuses of the legally defined rights of individuals, but on the physical, psychological and social well-being of the individual and their community. Interpretive human rights documentation examines larger social forces that surround a specific human rights violation; in short, it places the violation back into its larger context. Indeed, by investigating the social framework surrounding individual acts, the interpretive model gives new purpose to conventional documentation.

In 1999 it was reported that a village in Hpa-an district of Karen State was looted by SPDC troops in retaliation for a nearby Karen National Union attack. An extensive list of the food, money and other valuables were taken was included with the report, along with the names of the people who were robbed. However, this doesn't tell the full story. There was a Buddhist temple in the village and when the looting began all the monks left the temple and went out to meditate among the houses of the village knowing that this would put restraints on the Buddhist soldiers. Many people's possessions were saved by the quick thinking of the monks.

As in this story, contextualization restores the victim's status as an effective participant in their own lives. Interpretive documentation involves looking at the complete life story of individuals within abusive and oppressive situations, recognizing their hopes and dreams, their mechanisms of coping with repression, and their personal triumphs. Instead of appealing to the international community for action, the interpretive model can serve as a tool for change in communities inside Burma. There are no human rights violations, or indeed political problems, which exist outside of a specific cultural context, and cultural change is required to properly address political and human rights issues. While conventional human rights documentation will be a mainstay of human rights work well into the future, adding an interpretive element to documentation work recognizes the necessary role played by the people of Burma in their struggle for change.

E Miller

The passing of a friend - Phi Aoe

On April 6th five members of Burma Issues were involved in a bus accident on their way to Mae Sot where they were to share experiences with friends on the border. Our friend and work colleague Phi Aoe died in this accident. Phi Aoe's contribution to the work of Burma Issues and the struggle for peace and justice in Burma was immense, she never wavered in her effort and strong commitment to working for the people in Burma. She thought this work was the best choice of her life. Throughout my experiences with Phi Aoe, I learned that she never hoped to gain anything in return for the work she did. In a country where civil war is going on, her only wish was to see true peace in Burma, to see refugees along the border and inside Burma return to their homeland in safety. She spent most of her time working, learning and exploring from our Burmese friends along the border. Phi Aoe was part of our community, she was also part of the leadership of Burma Issues. She was our newly appointed Grants Manager and also a member of the Planning Committee. She had been taking on most of the administration and these roles saw her faced with many challenging experiences, all of which she accepted with compassion and diligence. Maybe Phi Aoe was not so special from others, but the day she left our community was a very sad day for Burma Issues. Her friendship, her generosity and her hospitality will never be forgotten. I am sure that Phi Aoe will never forget us; she put so much hope in the remaining friends to continue the work and help the struggle for peace in Burma. On behalf of Burma Issues, I wish that Phi Aoe will rest in a peaceful world where there is no fighting, killing, hunger and the unjust treatment of people.

Sawdee

Burma Issues would like to thank the many friends and organisations who have offered their thoughts and condolences during this time. Phi Aoe was a much loved member of this team and it is evident in the amount of people who were affected by her death. Our thanks to you all.
monasteries take on education. In Shwejedi Buddhist Monastery, near Wingabaground in Sittwe, there are about five hundred students enrolled who are being taught by priests. The students will go on to sit their primary school examinations in government primary schools, according to a monk from Sittwe. All over Arakan State, teaching through Monastic schools is becoming more and more popular as the inability to conduct classes by most government-appointed and non-government teachers’ becomes apparent. Teachers are being forced to reckon with skyrocketing prices of daily necessities and the meagre wages given out by the military regime. At present about forty percent of school-going age children cannot attend primary education due to poverty. According to a state education officer the state had an 87% literacy rate before 1988.

“Private Monastic Education in demand in Arakan”. March 14, Narinjara news

future expressway agreed upon. India, Thailand and Burma have agreed to construct an international expressway, the first of its kind, connecting the three countries. The expressway, as decided by the three countries, will start at More in Manipur and go up to Chiangmai in Thailand. It will pass through Tamu, Kalewa, Monywa, Mandalay, Rangoon and Myawaddy. “There is an abandoned road link connecting these places. Now the three countries have decided to upgrade it to an international expressway. Many road, rail and river bridges will have to be constructed throughout the entire stretch and we might seek an ADB loan for that,” Burma Ambassador to India, Mr Thu told the Economic Times. India and Burma have also agreed to re-introduce the ship link between Kolkata and Rangoon.

“Expressway to Myanmar, Thailand” March 14, Economic Times

government destroys poppy fields. Myanmar authorities have destroyed over 1,000 acres of poppy fields in the country’s northern hillside region, state-run media reported late last week. Some 1,336 acres of poppy fields, located in northern Burma’s Kachin state, were destroyed between February 12 and March 14 by civilian and anti-narcotics officials. Burma’s ruling military has come under harsh international criticism, particularly from western nations, for its failure to clamp down on illegal drug producers and failing to do enough in eradicating drug crops.

“1,000 acres of poppy fields destroyed in Myanmar”, March 22, The Times of India

ne win family attempt coup. The Burmese junta uncovered an attempted coup in March, perhaps the most surprising part being the instigators; the Ne Win family. Aye Saw Win (Ne Win’s son-in-law) and his three sons were arrested while Ne Win and his daughter, Sandar Win remain under house arrest. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has frozen the assets, economic enterprises and financial accounts of Daw Sandar Win and the Ne Win family. If convicted of treason, Aye Saw Win and his three sons could face the death penalty. The SPDC claim the family of Ne Win had been plotting to install a monarchy to keep their family in power for generations. Reports on the reasons behind the coup have been varied but Burma watchers believe the power and influence of the Ne Win family in the business sector contributed to their downfall. The SPDC also believe Ne Win was attempting to undermine the on-going peace talks with Aung San Suu Kyi.