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COMMENTARY

Extortion and Stealing

For more than a decade now the ruling Burmese military junta have mandated their troops in Shan State to apply their own self-help system to help the State in supporting their own battalions with basic necessities by engaging in income-generating activities such as agriculture and other businesses, etc..

During this time, the junta's troops have been engaging in various types of extortion, stealing and even outright banditry to get virtually what ever they want from the people under their control, rather than trying to earn honest incomes as they have been required to do under the given mandate.

These activities have over the years become more numerous and increasingly burdensome for the people, and have created more and more unbearable conditions which have caused, and are still causing, many people to flee to neighbouring countries, mostly to Thailand, in search of means for survival.

Furthermore, people have also been occasionally forced to contribute to charities intended to help disaster victims in the name of the military junta, while refusing outside help, to boast that they were capable of helping their own people.

The so-called self-help system is only laudable when those who claim to practise it really try to help themselves without bothering others, and not help themselves to others' property like the SPDC troops who are happily helping themselves to the hard-earned property of the people of Shan State.

EXTORTION IN THE NAME OF HELPING CYCLONE VICTIMS, IN SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS IN EASTERN SHAN STATE

During May and June 2008, SPDC authorities of the Special Triangle Regional Command extorted large amounts of money from the people in several townships in eastern Shan State, including **Murng-Ton**, **Murng-Sart** and **Kaeng-Tung**, in the name of helping cyclone victims.

A few weeks after the cyclone Nargis, that had devastated a large area of the Irrawaddy delta region in lower Burma in early May, SPDC authorities of the Triangle Region in eastern Shan State issued an order requiring townships and business companies in the area to 'donate' tractors to help the victims of the cyclone.

Murng-Ton township was required to donate 10 tractors and since there were no such tractors readily available, people had to provide money to the authorities, who would later buy them somewhere in lower Burma and give them to the cyclone victims.

The price for 1 tractor was fixed at 500,000 kyat so that the people of Murng-Ton were required to collect 5,000,000 kyat among themselves and give it to the SPDC authorities. Likewise, Murng-Sart was required to provide 15 tractors, and thus 7,500,000 kyat of money.

A group of 4 small logging companies, working in Murng-Ton and Murng-Sart areas, were required to donate 6 tractors, and therefore 3,000,000 kyat in money. Other townships, such as Kaeng-Tung, etc., in the Triangle Region were also required to donate money for the same purpose.

Although accurate numbers of tractors the other townships had been ordered to provide were not available, altogether the people of the Triangle Region were required to donate not less than 80 tractors, most of which was in the form of money that had to be handed to the SPDC authorities.

In addition to the mandatory donations, the Triangle SPDC authorities instructed members of the USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Association) to set up charity tents at major market places in the centre of the towns and solicit donations from passersby of both money and things. These activities brought together 2 plane-loads of food stuff and other basic necessities, and not less than 12,000,000 kyat of money.

Several respected senior Buddhist monks also helped collect donations from their devotees, including those who were working in Thailand, and gave them to the authorities to help the cyclone victims, with a total amount of not less than 47,000,000 kyat.

There was no way for the people to know whether their money had been used according to the stated aim. What percentage of it had actually reached the victims, if any, or had it been simply swindled by the authorities or/and other corrupt officials, which was more likely? No one was certain, complained many local people.

EXTORTION FOR RECEIVING UNREPORTED GUEST IN NAM-ZARNG

In May 2008, big amounts of money were extorted from a villager for receiving a guest overnight without informing the authorities and from the guest for having gone to work in Thailand, by SPDC troops of LIB543 at Kho Lam village in Kho Lam village tract, **Nam-Zarng** township.

On the evening of 17 May 2008, Nan-Taw (m), who was returning from Thailand to his home town, Lai-Kha, stopped at the house of his friend, Pe-Ti (m), at Kho Lam village in Kho Lam village tract, Nam-Zarng township.

As it was a bit too late to continue his journey, Nan-Taw decided to spend the night at his friend's house after asking permission from him. Since Nan-Taw was to stay for just one night and set out early the next morning, they thought it was not necessary to inform the authorities of his presence.

During the night, however, a patrol of about 5-6 SPDC troops came and searched and found Nan-Taw at Pe-Ti's house. The SPDC troops accused Pe-Ti of receiving an informer of the Shan resistance at his house and extorted 30,000 kyat of money from him as a fine.

Seeing that his friend had got into trouble because of him, Nan-Taw tried to explain to the SPDC troops that he was not an informer of the Shan soldiers but an ordinary villager who had gone to work in Thailand and was now returning to visit his relatives in Lai-Kha township, and that he and Pe-Ti were friends who had known each other for a long time.

The SPDC troops then turned their anger on Nan-Taw and rebuked him, accusing him of having higher regard of Thailand than his own country. They said Nan-Taw had gone to Thailand without permission and also forced him to pay a fine of 30,000 kyat.

The SPDC troops threatened to arrest both Pe-Ti and Nan-Taw and put them in jail if they did not pay the fine and left the house only after they got all the 60,000 kyat from the villagers, and warned Pe-Ti not to fail to report to the authorities when he had guests next time.

PEOPLE FORCED TO BUY PHYSIC NUT SEEDS IN KAENG-TUNG

During late April and May 2008, people in **Kaeng-Tung** township were forced to buy physic nut seeds from them by the SPDC authorities of the township and told to grow them on empty lands in and around their villages in the whole township.

In late April 2008, Kaeng-Tung township SPDC authorities summoned all the village tract leaders, 10 village tracts in all, to a meeting at the SPDC township office in Kaeng-Tung town. At the meeting, the village leaders were told to grow more physic nut in their village areas and ordered to buy the seeds from the authorities, without fail.

The following is the list of the village tracts and the amounts of physic nut seeds each of them were required to buy at the rate of 45,000 kyat per baskets:

1. Kaad Pha village tract = 15 baskets
2. Yaang Kaeng village tract = 12 baskets
3. Kaad Tao village tract = 15 baskets
4. Wat Saao village tract = 12 baskets
5. Kaad Thaai village tract = 15 baskets
6. Loi Long village tract = 15 baskets
7. Yaang Kham village tract = 12 baskets
8. Murng Zaem village tract = 15 baskets
9. Murng Laab village tract = 12 baskets
10. Murng Lang village tract = 15 baskets

According to the local people, some of the physic nut plants that were grown in the village areas during the previous years had already born fruit but the villagers could not sell them because the authorities had so far not bought them as they had once promised.

"We are now being forced to buy more physic nut seeds from the authorities while not being able to do anything about the seeds already in our possession", complained many villagers whose physic nut plants had born fruit.

VILLAGERS' RICE SEIZED AS THEY WERE ABOUT TO BE HARVESTED IN HO-PONG

In April 2008, villagers' rice plants in 3 plots of rice fields that were about to be harvested were seized by members of a ceasefire group on the orders of the SPDC troops, in the area of Nam Khok village in Nam Khok village tract, **Ho-Pong** township.

During the last dry season, many farmers in Ho-Pong township were forced to grow a dry season rice crop on their own rice fields by the local SPDC troops, who said they would buy back on a quota basis and the rest would be for the farmers' own consumption.

When the rice plants turned yellow and heavy rice ears drooped towards the ground, ripe for harvest, SPDC troops and members of a Pa-O ceasefire group in the area seized 3 plots of rice fields from 3 of the farmers.

Each plot of the rice fields seized was big enough for growing 1-2 baskets of

rice seeds. The reason for the seizure given by the authorities was that the farmers had deliberately grown different strains of rice other than the one specified by them.

The farmers lost all their rice in the fields including the rice seeds they used to plant. Local farmers said that incidents such as this often happened to some farmers in the area almost every year and they simply lost all their rice because they had nowhere to complain to.

MONEY EXTORTED FROM RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES IN HO-PONG

In March and April 2008, SPDC troops from IB249 extorted money from villagers of Nawng Wawn village in Nawng Wawn village tract, **Ho-Pong** township, who organized a Buddhist novice ordination ceremony at the village monastery.

As the villagers started the ceremony, SPDC troops from IB249 came and told them that they needed to pay taxes to the troops as protection money for organizing the religious ceremony. The parents of those who were to be ordained as novices were required to pay 40,000 kyat for each novice-to-be.

The other villagers, including the organizers and the participants, about 200 households in all, who were not ordaining any novice, were required to pay between 3,000 and 30,000 kyat per household, in accordance with their economic status.

According to the local villagers, the SPDC troops almost always extorted money from the villagers even when there were other small individual ceremonies such as housewarming, merit-making, etc., as protection money.

FARMERS ACCUSED OF GROWING OPIUM, MONEY EXTORTED, IN MURNG-KERNG

In April 2008, Palaung villagers in Murng Khun village tract in **Murng-Kerng** township were accused of growing opium without paying taxes by SPDC troops from LIB514 and large amounts of money were extorted from them.

Sometime in April 2008, a patrol of about 18 SPDC troops came to a Palaung village called Khaam Phurk in Murng Khun village tract, Murng-Kerng township, and accused the villagers of avoiding to pay taxes while secretly growing opium.

The SPDC troops threatened the villagers with arrest and extorted money from some of them as a fine. Paw Naang Khawng (m), aged 40, was forced to pay 150,000 kyat and Aai Kha (m), aged 37, was forced to provide 100,000 kyat. Each of 5 other villagers were forced to give not less than 50,000 kyat each.

After extorting money from the villagers, the SPDC troops said that if they heard that any of the villagers later sold as much as up to one viss (1 viss = 1.6 kg) of opium, they would come back and collect more taxes.

There were about 30-40 houses in Khaam Phurk village and all of them were farmers. They mainly cultivated taro and corn, but also grew some rice for their own consumption. Although some of them grew some small amounts of opium as a supplementary cash crop, no one would get up to one viss, they said.

EXTORTION RELATED TO CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM IN MURNG-YARNG

In early May 2008, SPDC authorities in **Murng-Yarng** township extorted money from the people to pay for the transport fares of those who they sent to attend a training about the coming Constitutional Referendum at Kaeng-Tung town in Kaeng-Tung township.

On 1 May 2008, SPDC authorities in Murng-Yaang selected 4 persons to attend a one-day-training about the Constitutional Referendum that was to be held nationwide on 10 May 2008. The training was held in Kaeng-Tung township and a van was hired by the authorities to take them to the training.

Although the SPDC authorities said they hired the van, they gave the driver only 3,000 kyat to buy fuel. Since the fuel cost 20,000 kyat for the journey between Murng-Yarng and Kaeng-Tung, the driver had to pay for the rest of the cost of the fuel, which was 17,000 kyat, and also had to buy his own food, with his own money.

After the training, the SPDC authorities in Kaeng-Tung also hired a van for 60,000 kyat and sent them back to Murng-Yarng, telling the driver to collect his fare from the authorities in Murng-Yarng. However, the driver had to wait for 2 days to get the money which was forcibly collected from the townspeople.

The SPDC authorities collected 30,000 kyat each from 2 of the town quarters, Kaeng Laek and Ho Kaad quarters, saying that they took only from 2 quarters this time and the rest of the townspeople would have to take responsibility some other time in the future.

MONEY CONTINUALLY EXTORTED FROM LIVESTOCK OWNERS IN KAENG-TUNG

For several years up to the present, owners of rubber plantations in Kaad Pha village tract, **Kaeng-Tung** township, with the cooperation of SPDC troops and police, have extorted money from local villagers whose pigs and cattle happened to roam into their rubber plantations.

About 12 years ago, 5,000 acres of land, comprising rice fields and wood lands, belonging to the local villagers in Kaad Pha village tract, Kaeng-Tung township, were confiscated by the SPDC troops and given to a business man who turned the land into a rubber plantation.

Since then the rubber plantation owner, in cooperation with the SPDC troops, had extorted money from the villagers of the surrounding villages whose pigs and cattle wandered into the area of the plantation, until 2006 when it was divided in half and sold to 2 other businessmen.

The 2 new owners of the 2 rubber plantations have continued to do the same as the former owner in extorting money from the villagers, but with the cooperation of the SPDC police instead of military troops, who both no doubt received the lion shares of the spoils.

Villagers of several villages situated around the rubber plantations, e.g. Nawng Hawng, Kaeng Sen, Nawng Ngern, Nawng La, Wan Pok, Pa Khaam and Huay Saai, were often forced to pay fines for letting their livestock into the plantation areas by the owners and members of the local police force stationed in Kaad Pha village tract.

In May 2008 alone several villagers were forced to pay large amounts of money by the plantation owners and the police as below:

1. Zaai Laa (m), of Wan Pok village was forced to pay - 30,000 kyat
2. Zaai Seng (m), of Wan Pok village was forced to pay - 10,000 kyat
3. Zaai Khek Noi (m), of Wan Pok village was forced to pay - 30,000 kyat
4. Zaai Naan Yi (m), of Pa Khaam village was forced to pay - 30,000 kyat
5. Zaai Sai En (m), of Pa Khaam village was forced to pay - 60,000 kyat
6. Zaai Kham (m), of Pa Khaam village was forced to pay - 20,000 kyat
7. Zaai Saam (m), of Pa Khaam village was forced to pay - 120,000 kyat

According to the local villagers, the rubber plantations have no fences to keep away the animals and it is a long-standing tradition in the area for villagers to let their livestock forage around their villages. Those who do not want animals to get into their property need to put up fences.

But the plantation owners have so far refused to build fences to protect their property and in cooperation with the SPDC troops and police have been persecuting the local villagers. The villagers said they have lodged complaints several times with the SPDC authorities in Kaeng-Tung town, but nothing has been done about it.

OVER 100 MOTORCYCLES CONFISCATED IN TA-KHI-LAEK AND KAENG-TUNG

In early July 2008, SPDC troops and police confiscated more than 100 motorcycles from people in **Ta-Khi-Laek** and **Kaeng-Tung** townships even after they had announced that licences would be issued for motorcycles.

In June 2008, after SPDC authorities spread news that they would issue licences to the owners of licence-less motorcycles who paid the fees, many people in Ta-Khi-Laek and Kaeng-Tung townships brought in many motorcycles from Thailand and China.

Although most people intended to acquire licences for those motorcycles and keep them for their families' use, because licences could not be acquired immediately, they had to keep the licence-less ones at their houses until they could get the licences for them.

However, in early July 2008, patrols of SPDC troops and police searched the houses in Ta-Khi-Laek town and seized more than 40 licence-less motorcycles from the townspeople. At about the same time, more than 50 licence-less motorcycles were also confiscated from the people's houses in Kaeng-Tung town by SPDC troops and police there.

Even though the authorities later actually issued licences to other motorcycles, those that had been confiscated only a few days earlier were not returned to their owners, but kept by the SPDC troops and police for their own use.

VILLAGERS FORCED TO PAY FOR GOVERNMENT CIVIL SERVANTS' EXPENSES IN KAENG-TUNG

Since late last year up to the present, villagers have been required to pay for the expenses of inspection trips conducted by members of the government Agriculture Department in **Kaeng-Tung** township.

When ever members of the Agriculture Department, often in groups of several persons, went around the village tracts in Kaeng-Tung township, on what they called inspection trips, which were quite frequent, they always required the village tract leaders to pay for their expenses.

After they had eaten a meal at a food shop in any of the village tracts, they never paid for the food but told the shop keeper to get the money, whatever the cost, from the respective village tract leader at a later time.

They did the same when they needed to buy fuel for their vehicles which they used to go around the township. They would buy it anywhere they liked and would tell the dealers to ask for the price of the fuel from their respective village tract leaders.

The village tract leaders dared not refuse to comply with the demands of the

government officials and had to collect money from the villagers and pay for their expenses every time it was required.

VILLAGER'S COW SHOT AND STOLEN IN LAI-KHA

In June 2008, a cow belonging to a villager of Maak Kok village in Wan Saang village tract, **Lai-Kha** township, was shot, cut up, and stolen away on a forcibly-conscripted mini-tractor by SPDC troops from IB64.

On 1 June 2008, a patrol of 12 SPDC troops, led by commander Htun Than, from IB64, forcibly conscripted a mini-tractor belonging to a man who lived in the quarter 3 of Lai-Kha town, saying they needed it to patrol the rural areas.

The SPDC troops drove the tractor away without the owner and headed towards the east of the town. When they got near Maak Kok village in Wan Saang village tract, they saw a herd of cows grazing in a meadow.

The SPDC troops stopped and shot dead one of the cows, choosing the largest one in the herd, which happened to be a draught ox of a villager of Maak Kok. The troops then cut up the dead cow and put the pieces on the tractor and took them to their camp near the town.

A few days later, some of the meat of the cow, that had been dried, was sold to Lai-Kha townspeople at the price of 12,000 per viss (1 viss = 1.6 kg) by the SPDC troops. Even though the owner of the cow knew all about the incident, he did not dare to do anything for fear of reprisal.