

TRADE UNION ACTION 1999

Solidarity Action for Universal Rights

Stop Forced Labour in Myanmar!

Government seizes civilians for forced, unpaid labour

Myanmar's military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), routinely seizes thousands of ethnic minority civilians, including women and children, to work against their will and without pay to build so-called "development projects" such as roads and military installations. Members of the Shan, Karen, and Karenni ethnic minorities living in the east of the country bordering Thailand are forced to "contribute" their labour -- many must spend so much of their time working for the military that they cannot support themselves and their families.

Forest clearance, building roads & barracks

Earlier this year Amnesty International interviewed over 100 ethnic minority civilians who had recently fled to Thailand -- almost every one of them reported that they were compelled by SPDC troops to clear forests, build roads and military barracks, and even cultivate crops to feed the military. But forced labour in Myanmar is not a new phenomenon -- Amnesty International has been documenting it for over 10 years. In the last seven years the scale of forced labour has increased dramatically, involving hundreds of thousands of civilians, including criminal and political prisoners, as the SPDC has initiated massive infrastructure projects throughout the country. The government claims that these projects are for the good of the people in outlying areas, but those who were forced to do the work often comment that the projects are solely for the benefit of the military.

'Not voluntary' say labourers

Although forced labour has decreased in central Burma, it is still being reported on a large scale in the seven ethnic minority states which surround the central Burman plain. SPDC troops usually contact the village headman for labourers, who then organizes a rotation system whereby each family must provide one person for a project. Teenaged children are frequently sent to do forced labour because their parents must earn a living for the family and cannot spare the time. The length of time spent per month varies from place to place, but it usually interferes with the family's ability to support itself. Yet the government claims that these civilians contribute their labour voluntarily as part of their civic duty, an assertion which is contradicted by the hundreds of forced labourers who have given testimonies to Amnesty International.

'Relocation' centres

In the Shan, Karen, and Karenni States hundreds of thousands of civilians have been forced by the SPDC to move off their land and live in relocation centres in order to break up any support or contact with ethnic minority armed opposition groups. Civilians in these relocation centres controlled by the government are sitting targets for forced labour - the military use them as a labour pool to draw on for work in military bases, to build roads, and clear land. Naw Reh, a 15-year-old Karenni girl¹, told Amnesty International that when she was forced to move to the Nwa La Bo relocation centre in Loikaw township at age 13, she could no longer attend school and had to work for the military. She was forced more times than she could count to cut grass and carry heavy stones for road-building. An orphan who was living with her aunt and uncle, she said she would like to go to school again.

Forced porters in counter-insurgency operations

Perhaps the worst form of forced labour is forced portering. Forced portering occurs in the context of counter-insurgency activities against armed ethnic minority opposition troops who are engaged in guerrilla activities. As is typical in modern warfare, it is the civilians who are caught in the middle between warring groups and forced portering is just one of the many abuses they suffer from. Civilians, usually but not always men, are taken from their villages and fields and made to carry heavy loads of supplies and ammunition through

¹Names and other identifying factors have been changed to protect the victims from reprisals

mountainous jungle for troops patrolling the area. They are often tied up and guarded at night, are never paid, and are given very little food.

Porters are often beaten if they become too weak to carry their loads and cannot keep up with the military column. Sai Harn, a 42-year-old Shan farmer who had sought refuge in Thailand, told Amnesty International that he had been taken as a porter for 10 days in October 1998 by SPDC troops and forced to carry ammunition. Because he was given so little food, he became weak and could no longer walk. A soldier slapped him across the face several times, catching his finger in the porter's left eye. He managed to escape by rolling down the mountainside and hiding in the forest nearby. Eventually he made his way back home but was too frightened to seek medical treatment. As a result of his injury he has permanently lost the sight in one eye.

International Convention on Forced Labour

Myanmar ratified the Forced Labour Convention 1930 (No 29) in 1955, yet it has continually flouted its provisions. Several years ago the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the largest trade union federation in the world, filed a complaint against Myanmar about its widespread use of forced labour. As a result in June 1996 the International Labour Organization, which meets every year, took the rare step of establishing a Commission of Inquiry under article 26 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organization (ILO). A three person Commission of eminent international jurists was appointed in order to investigate the practice of forced labour in Myanmar. It published a comprehensive report in August 1998, which found the Government of Myanmar "...*guilty of an international crime that is also, if committed in a widespread or systematic manner, a crime against humanity.*" When the report was made public, Amnesty International and the ICFTU released video footage of forced labour in Myanmar and welcomed the report.

In the global economy

From 1962 to 1988 the Burmese Government isolated itself from the world both politically and economically. Beginning in 1989 after the military's violent suppression of the 1988 massive pro-democracy movement, the military government began to open up the country to trade, tourism, and joint ventures with foreign companies. Since that time the government has permitted various transnational oil companies to operate there, including Total of France and UNOCAL of the USA, who have built a natural gas pipeline from offshore sites through the country and into Thailand. The government also declared 1996 as "*Visit Myanmar Year*" in an effort to promote tourism; however, because of tourist boycotts, the campaign was not a success.

Sanctions

In May 1997 the USA instituted economic sanctions against Myanmar, which prevents new US businesses from investing in the country. The European Union (EU) has also instituted various punitive measures against the SPDC but has stopped short of instituting economic sanctions. However, China and ASEAN countries have conducted trade with Myanmar, although the Asia-wide economic downturn has limited investment in the past 18 months. In July 1997 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)² admitted Myanmar as a full member amid widespread protests from Western governments.

Discontent and protest

At present the economy of Myanmar is extremely weak. Inflation is 30-40% annually, electricity is rationed in cities and non-existent elsewhere, and farmers are forced to sell a large percentage of their rice to the government at very low prices. At the same time salaries of civil servants and others are very low and universities have been closed since June 1996 due to student protests. According to reports the government is very short of money, which is one of the reasons it uses unpaid forced labour to such a large degree in ethnic minority states. Troops also live off the population in these states -- they steal livestock, crops, personal possessions, and land from villagers.

²ASEAN comprises Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Increasing trade union and public awareness of forced labour in Myanmar will help to improve the chances that the authorities are obliged to end it. The issue can be pursued directly with the country's government and via international and inter-governmental organisations. Raise the issue of forced labour in Myanmar within your union, at local branch, regional and national level. Get a resolution on to the union's agenda, distribute information on May day, organise a public meeting, arrange a visiting speaker, plan a joint lobby or demonstration to bring pressure on Myanmar's representatives in your country. Show solidarity and work with other NGOs concerned with Myanmar. Eg: Burma Centrum Netherlands - e-mail bcn@xs4all.nl; Burma Campaign UK - tel: 0171 281 7377; France Birmanie). The IS can provide copies of the video 'Forced Labour in Myanmar'.

Check out relevant websites which can offer further information and ideas : <http://www.icftu.org/>;
<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/54/015.html>; <http://www.freeburma.org/> ;
Burmanet: <http://www.falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~jrchien/burmanet.html>

Individuals and trade unions can write to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the Governments of the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, which are ASEAN member countries, and their home governments. The SPDC should be pressed to implement the recommendations of the ILO Commission of Inquiry's report. These recommendations include that:

- È All Myanmar legislation be amended to expressly forbid the use of forced labour
- È No more forced or compulsory labour be imposed by the authorities, in particular the military
- È Those found responsible for imposing forced labour be brought to justice

Other governments should be asked to urge the SPDC to implement these recommendations immediately.

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