
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 27/95

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MYANMAR: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS FORCED PORTERING

Amnesty International today condemned the Burmese military's seizure of hundreds of civilians as porters in their offensive against the Karen National Union (KNU) -- Myanmar's largest ethnic minority armed opposition group.

The human rights organization also expressed concern about other civilians who may be at risk of killing and torture by Burmese troops.

"In the past week, scores of escaped porters have been fleeing across the border to seek refuge in Thailand, many of them in terrible condition as a result of beatings and other ill-treatment by the army," Amnesty International said. "They are among thousands of Karen refugees who have left their villages to escape the fighting."

For over 10 years the army has forced tens of thousands of civilians to carry supplies during counter-insurgency operations against various armed groups. Those who are taken are frequently beaten and kicked if they are too weak to carry their load or attempt to escape.

Porters often fall ill with malnutrition or malaria, but receive no medical treatment. Some are even killed by troops if they do not obey orders. Villagers have also been accused of supporting the KNU and are tortured or killed by troops patrolling the area.

Amnesty International is calling on the Burmese military authorities to immediately release all those arbitrarily seized for forced portering.

In spite of repeatedly stating that they were seeking a peaceful solution through negotiations, the government launched a massive attack against the KNU in December after a split between two KNU factions. On 27 January Manerplaw, the KNU headquarters, fell to Burmese troops in the heaviest fighting since the military government declared a ceasefire in April 1992.

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