

Myanmar: Ethnic minorities - targets of repression

As the International Labour Conference meets in Geneva, Amnesty International released a new report highlighting the use of forced labour against ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Ethnic minorities continue to be targets of repression and suffer a wide range of human rights violations, but the most common abuse is forced labour duty, the report said.

"The military frequently forces men, women and children from ethnic minorities to carry heavy loads over tough terrain for days or weeks at a time or to work on construction projects such as building railways, roads and dams. Hundreds have died from exhaustion and beatings."

Recently the Myanmar government has pledged support for an International Labour Organization (ILO) delegation to investigate forced labour in the country in September. Amnesty International is calling on the government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), to ensure full and free access for the ILO delegates and for the protection of any interviewees who give testimony to them.

In October last year the SPDC introduced a law banning the use of forced labour. However when Amnesty International spoke with ethnic minority refugees in Thailand in February 2001, it found that the same patterns of forced labour were continuing.

"The SPDC must demonstrate the political will to implement this law. For as long as forced labour is allowed to go on, thousands of victims will continue to flee to Thailand in despair."

A Mon refugee who was taken for forced labour duty on several occasions told Amnesty International: "I wasn't beaten but my grandfather was. He was 68. He fell down from exhaustion and the soldiers kicked him with boots and hit him with rifle butts. His name is U Ba Si. I was so sad to see my grandfather beaten. I pleaded with the soldiers to let me share his load, but they wouldn't allow it. He died three days after he returned from portering."

Making up a third of the population, ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable in so-called "black" or "grey" zones where armed opposition groups are fighting the Myanmar army, the *tatmadaw*. The vast majority of victims in the conflict zones are subsistence rice farmers living in small settlements.

"While on patrol, Burmese troops seize villagers for forced labour duty, steal livestock, rice, money, and personal possessions, and sometimes torture or even kill them for supposed links with the armed opposition," the report said.

A 49-year old Buddhist woman told Amnesty International she spent several months in the jungle after the *tatmadaw* came to her village and stole all her belongings. In mid-2000, she witnessed the death of her 15-year-old niece Naw Po, shot in the head by troops who came to their hiding place. In September 2000, troops shot into the hut of her nephew Maw Tu, a widower with three children, killing him and then abducting his children.

The report outlines findings and concerns with regard to ethnic minorities living in parts of the Mon, Shan and Kayin states, and in Tanintharyi and Bago Divisions. The information is based on interviews with refugees in Thailand who fled their homes because of demands for

forced labour and arbitrary taxation, torture and ill-treatment during forced portering, and extrajudicial executions of friends and family.

Although the human rights situation in Myanmar remains grave, recent developments are encouraging. In particular, Amnesty International welcomes the recent visit to Myanmar by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, Ambassador Razali.

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For a copy of the report or an interview email mcatsani@amnesty.org or phone Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5729
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>