

AI INDEX: ASA 16/15/99

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## **Myanmar: Military keeps ethnic minorities “like chickens in a basket”**

In three major reports released today, Amnesty International details how the Burmese military has killed dozens of unarmed farmers from the Karen, Karenni, and Shan ethnic groups.

Over 100 refugees interviewed by Amnesty International in Thailand described how their friends and relatives had been shot by the *tatmadaw*, or Burmese army. *The vast majority had been forced to do unpaid labour, and to leave their traditional lands in a tatmadaw campaign to break up alleged links with armed ethnic minority groups fighting for autonomy or independence in the Karen, Karenni, and Shan States.*

“It is civilians, not armed insurgents, who have suffered the vast majority of casualties in these conflicts,” Amnesty International said. “Forced relocation ruins ethnic minorities’ traditional ways of life and condemns them to a life on the run, in refugee camps, or as forced labourers.”

“The Burmese army has devastated the lives of thousands of Shan, Karen and Karenni people by targeting them simply because of their ethnicity or perceived political beliefs. Many have been killed, others tortured, and thousands have fled to neighbouring countries.”

The military have forced thousands of civilians, including children, to work on massive building projects. An estimated 10 per cent of the workforce at a Buddhist temple in Khunhing in the Shan State are children. Civilians are also frequently beaten while doing forced portering duties -- carrying equipment for Burmese troops on patrol.

In 1996, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar’s military government), began a massive civilian relocation program in the Kayah (Karenni) and Shan States in eastern Myanmar. Some 300,000 Shan and over 20,000 Karenni villagers were forced from their village homes into designated relocation sites where the military kept them, in the words of one former resident, “*like chickens in a basket*”.

Forced to live in life-threatening conditions, without safe drinking water, food and medical care, hundreds of people have since reportedly died from treatable diseases. Thousands have fled to Thailand, and still others are hiding in the forest. Most of the refugees interviewed by Amnesty International had been forced by the military to work for without pay and fled because this made it impossible for them to work to support themselves.

Similar tales emerged in interviews with Karen refugees from the Kayin State, who had fled to Thailand in late 1998 and early 1999 in the face of village burnings, constant demands for forced labour, looting of food and supplies, torture and killings by the military. Many had feared being shot on sight because they occupied “black areas”, where the armed opposition was allegedly active. All of these people were farmers who usually grew small plots of rice on a semi-subsistence level.

Thousands of Karen villagers have also been forced off their land, unable to farm and provide for their families. Dozens of Karen civilians have been killed by the *tatmadaw*, because they hid in the forest, could not perform their duties as porters, or were suspected of supporting armed opposition

groups. In November 1998 one Karen widow saw her son shot dead in front of her when he tried to prevent Burmese troops from beating her.

The widespread human rights violations in Myanmar's ethnic minority states have a negative impact on neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand, Bangladesh, and India, which have all been affected by large refugee flows. Incursions by SPDC troops and various armed opposition groups into Thai territory has resulted in several Thai nationals being killed during the last four years.

These issues have become particularly acute since Myanmar's admission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 1997. ASEAN countries then claimed that such a move would encourage the SPDC to improve its human rights record.

In fact, the opposite has been true. The SPDC has stepped up its repression of the opposition party the National League for Democracy and increased forcible relocation programs. Forced labour in all seven ethnic minority states continues at a high level, and forced portering -- one of the harshest forms of forced labour -- occurs wherever there are counter-insurgency activities.

"As ASEAN members gather in Singapore in July 1999 for their annual Ministerial Meeting, it behoves them to come up with a new strategy for dealing with the SPDC's intransigence regarding human rights," Amnesty International said.

The organization is also urging the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which deals with Asian security issues and will meet at the same time, to address this security issue. In particular, China should end its substantial arms transfers to the SPDC.

Amnesty International is urging the SPDC to investigate all reports of torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions and bring those found responsible to justice. All military units should immediately receive clear orders to stop these practices and to use force and firearms only when strictly necessary to protect life.

Myanmar has ratified the International Labour Organization Convention No 29 and the SPDC should therefore take immediate measures to end ill-treatment and torture in the context of forced labour and portering, and to abolish forced portering. The SPDC should also abide by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits the economic exploitation of children.

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**For copies of the reports, or to arrange an interview, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566.**

