

EXTERNAL

AI Index: ASA 03/02/97

EXTRA 26/97

Fear for safety / Fear of refoulement

26 February 1997

MYANMAR / THAILAND

Thousands of refugees from Myanmar

---

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of thousands of refugees fleeing a Burmese army offensive against the insurgent Karen National Union (KNU). Ethnic Karen from villages in the area of the offensive who may not be allowed to seek refuge in neighbouring Thailand or are returned to Myanmar are at risk of ill-treatment, being taken as porters, or possible unlawful killing by the Burmese army.

Since 22 February several thousand Karen refugees have fled from an area in Tanintharyi (Tennasserim) Division where the KNU Fourth Brigade Headquarters is located, and between the towns of Mergui and Dawei (Tavoy) as the Burmese army has advanced. They have sought refuge in two villages in Kanchanaburi province, western Thailand -- Ban Bong Tee and Ban Pu Nam Rawn.

On 24 February around 500 men out of a group of Karen people seeking refuge were not allowed to enter Thailand. Women, children, elderly and sick people were allowed to cross the border to Ban Pu Nam Rawn. On 25 February, officers of Thai Army Region 9 informed refugees at both Ban Bong Tee and Ban Pu Nam Rawn that they would only be allowed to stay for three days and that the men would be sent back to the conflict area and the women and children to a "safe corridor" further south. Unofficial sources dispute that the "safe corridor" is secure, given the movements of the Burmese army.

On 25 February about 230 men at Ban Bong Tee were sent back over the border into the area they had fled. The remaining around 600 women and children were put onto trucks and taken to Amphur Suan Pung, located further south in Ratchaburi Province, opposite the "safe corridor" area, from where it is believed they may be forcibly repatriated to Paw Ma Pwu village. Thousands of Karen refugees currently remain at Ban Pu Nam Rawn, and it is feared that the men will also be repatriated into an insecure area and the women and children sent to Amphur Suan Pung for repatriation to Paw Ma Pwu village. Hundreds of Karen refugees in two camps in Sangklaburi province, north of Kanchanaburi have also reportedly been told by local Thai authorities to either return to Myanmar or agree to be taken to Amphur Suan Pung, presumably prior to repatriation to the "safe corridor".

Over the last eight years, Amnesty International has well-documented evidence of a pattern of forced portering, torture, ill-treatment and unlawful killings of unarmed civilians during counter-insurgency operations by the Burmese army against ethnic minority opposition groups, including the KNU.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The KNU has been fighting against the Myanmar armed forces for greater autonomy or independence for the last 40 years. In recent years cease-fire agreements have been reached between the Myanmar Government and almost all other armed opposition groups. Although talks have been held with the KNU, these broke down at the end of January 1997. The government launched a new offensive against the KNU on 2 February 1997. Since the beginning of the offensive an estimated 15-20,000 people have sought refuge in Thailand, bring the total number of Burmese refugees to 90-100,000.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:**

**1. APPEALS TO THAI AUTHORITIES:**

- noting that the Royal Thai Government is bound by the internationally-recognized principle of *non-refoulement*, which prohibits states from returning refugees against their will to countries where they risk serious human rights violations;
- expressing concern at reports that the so-called "safe corridor" cannot be considered safe given the movements of the Burmese army;
- urging the Thai authorities to halt the forcible return of Karen refugees and to grant them all necessary protection;
- noting that the Thai authorities have already provided safety and protection to tens of thousands of Burmese refugees fleeing conflict and human rights violations.

1. General Chaowalit Yongchaiyut  
Prime Minister  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Government House  
Nakhorn Pathom Road  
Bangkok 10300, Thailand  
**Telegrams: Prime Minister, Bangkok, Thailand**  
**Faxes: + 66 2 280 1443; 282 5131; 281 2536**  
**Salutation: Dear Prime Minister**

2. Sanoh Thienthong  
Minister of Interior  
Ministry of Interior  
Asdang Road  
Bangkok, Thailand  
**Telegrams: Interior Minister, Bangkok, Thailand**  
**Faxes: + 66 2 223 8851**  
**Salutation: Dear Minister**

**2. APPEALS TO MYANMAR AUTHORITIES:**

- urging the Myanmar authorities to take immediate steps to ensure that the Burmese army does not engage in deliberate and unlawful killings, torture, ill-treatment, or arbitrary arrests of any civilians, including members of ethnic minorities.

1. General Than Shwe  
Chairman  
State Law and Order Restoration Council  
Ministry of Defence  
Signal Pagoda Road  
Yangon, Union of Myanmar  
**Telegrams: General Than Shwe, Yangon, Myanmar**  
**Telexes: 21316**  
**Salutation: Dear General**

2. Lt General Maung Aye  
Vice Chairman  
State Law and Order Restoration Council  
Commander-in-Chief of the Army  
Ministry of Defence

Signal Pagoda Road  
Yangon, Union of Myanmar

**Telegrams: General Maung Aye, Yangon, Myanmar**

**Telexes: 21316**

**Salutation: Dear General**

**COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of Myanmar/Thailand accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 29 March 1997.