

EXTERNAL

AI Index: ASA 03/03/97

12 March 1997

Further information on EXTRA 26/97 (ASA 03/02/97, 26 February 1997) - Fear for safety / Fear of refoulement

THAILAND Thousands of refugees from Myanmar

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that the Royal Thai Government has continued to forcibly return Karen refugees back to Myanmar, in spite of widespread international protests. The organization fears that the Thai authorities may repatriate all Karen refugees once fighting between the Karen National Union (KNU, the last major ethnic minority armed insurgency group) and the Burmese army has stopped. If such a Thai Government policy change is implemented, some 100,000 Karen refugees would be pushed across the border to face serious human rights violations at the hands of the Burmese army. For the last nine years Amnesty International has documented a clear and persistent pattern of torture, ill-treatment, and extrajudicial killings of Karen civilians by the Burmese military.

In the past the Thai Government has allowed refugees from Myanmar to seek asylum inside Thai territory; however, recent reports indicate that there may be a shift in official Thai policy. Amnesty International appeals to the Royal Thai Government to allow all refugees to remain in Thailand until such time as they will no longer be at risk of human rights violations in Myanmar. A halt in armed conflict does not in any way guarantee that the Burmese army will stop ill-treating or killing Karen civilians. In ceasefire areas the army continues to seize civilians for forced portering and other labour duties and to forcibly relocate them under threat of death.

On 28 February around 900 mostly women and children Karen refugees who had sought refuge at Ban Pu Nam Rawn were forcibly repatriated to an area around Htaw Ma Pyo and Paw Ma Pwu villages five kilometres inside Myanmar. The repatriation was widely criticized by human rights and refugee organizations, as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United States Government. In response to this widespread criticism, General Chetta Thanajaro, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, ordered an immediate halt to all movements of Karen refugees. At the same time, some Thai military sources are reported to have denied that any refugees had been involuntarily repatriated.

On 9 and 10 March, some 3,300 recently-arrived Karen refugees in Kanchanaburi province, Thailand, were returned to Myanmar by the Thai army. It is unclear whether this repatriation was voluntary, and Amnesty International is seeking further information about it. While the current situation on the Thai-Myanmar border remains unclear, reports indicate that thousands of displaced Karen civilians are still gathering at unsafe locations inside Myanmar close to areas of armed conflict between the KNU and the Burmese army.

Amnesty International is also concerned that those refugees who remain in Thailand are at risk of cross-border attacks by the Burmese army and by a breakaway Karen armed group, the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA). On 28 January DKBA troops crossed into Thailand and burned down Wangka and Don Ma Piang, two refugee camps, leaving some 10,000 people homeless. Since that time the DKBA has threatened to attack other camps unless refugees agree to return to Myanmar. On 11 March refugees from Don Ma Piang Camp were relocated to join other homeless refugees at the site of Wangka Camp, where they are

clearly still at risk of further attacks. In light of this development, Amnesty International urges the Thai authorities to provide adequate protection and security for these refugees and others seeking safety along the Thai-Myanmar border.

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

- 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;
- noting that the Thai authorities have already provided safety and protection to tens of thousands of Burmese refugees fleeing conflict and human rights violations;
- asking the Thai authorities to provide safe and secure locations to all refugees from Myanmar, and to allow such refugees to remain in Thailand until they are no longer at risk of human rights violations when they return. Noting that a halt in the current fighting in Myanmar will not in any way mean that this risk will be diminished.

APPEALS TO:

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

3. General Chetta Thanajaro,

Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army

Army Headquarters

Thanon Sanam Chai

Bangkok 10200, Thailand

Telegrams: Commander-in-Chief, Royal Thai Army, Bangkok

Salutation: Dear General

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

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 April 1997.