

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Myanmar: Forced labour, extortion, displacement and land confiscation - the rural life**

Human rights improvements in Yangon have not been matched in ethnic minority areas where insurgents are still fighting the central government. Forced labour, extortion and land confiscation by the *tatmadaw* (Myanmar military) are continuing to have a grave impact on the lives of civilians, Amnesty International said today.

In a new report, the organization describes how civilians in eastern Myanmar are struggling to survive as the *tatmadaw* continues to make demands on their livelihood.

Some 100 migrants were interviewed by Amnesty International, all of whom said they left their homes because they could no longer survive. The vast majority were from the Shan, Mon and Karen ethnic minorities who lived in rural areas and made their living by subsistence farming or fishing.

Many of those interviewed had been subjected to unpaid forced labour in the last 18 months. Types of labour included construction work on roads and in military camps, working on military farms, and acting as porters for soldiers for days or even weeks at a time. One 66-year-old man reported that he had been forced to work intermittently for the *tatmadaw* for the past 50 years, the last time in February this year.

Although the Myanmar government has outlawed forced labour, the orders to stop taking civilians are not always adhered to. "The Myanmar government needs to ensure that the order reaches all levels of the military. In addition they must inform villagers of their rights in languages they understand."

Amnesty International's report also describes how civilians continue to be killed and tortured in counter-insurgency operations. One Shan villager told Amnesty International how her friend Aye Seng died in December 2001, a year after he had been severely tortured by the *tatmadaw*.

"He told me he was beaten for five nights. He was virtually dead, he just managed to get back to our hiding place...Since that time he was always weak and in pain...When he came back his nose and eyes were dripping with blood from head injuries. They accused him of giving rice to the SSA (armed group)...but he didn't even have enough rice for himself. He had no treatment - he dared not go into town."

A 23-year-old Mon woman recalled how her parent's rubber tree plantation was taken, along with the land of some 30 other Mon families, in July 2001. The *tatmadaw* cut down the rubber and betel nut trees, their fees to the military increased, and her family was forced to move into town and work for the military building barracks, without pay.

The migrants also faced constant demands for money and goods by the *tatmadaw*. The army taxed the rice crop in kind which often meant that subsistence farmers were required to give or sell at well below the market rate a fixed amount of their rice, regardless of yields. This meant that farmers often did not have enough rice left over to feed their families.

"The situation for civilians in the east of Myanmar is cause for grave concern. The government needs to show it is serious about human rights improvements throughout the country by taking urgent steps to protect civilians from forced labour, extortion and land confiscation at the hands of its armed forces," Amnesty International said.

Security for civilians is further compromised by a proliferation of various armed groups who also target civilians and are responsible for human rights abuses such as unlawful killings.

The report also describes the life of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, who face various threats as they make their way from their homes in Myanmar to Thailand. Migrant workers face abuses on both sides of the border, often at the hands of human smugglers. In February this year, Thai police found 20 bodies of Karen migrants near the border which were blindfolded, had their wrists tied and their throats cut.

### **Background**

There have been several human rights improvements in Myanmar since the end of 2000. The government has permitted international delegations to visit, including Ambassador Razali Ismael, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Myanmar; Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar; and the International Labour Organization (ILO) High Level Team. The ILO has been able to set up an office in Yangon.

In that period over 300 political prisoners have been released including Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the main political party in Myanmar, the National League for Democracy (NLD), who was released in May this year.

For a copy of the report or an interview contact Amnesty International's press office in London on +44 207 4135729 or in Bangkok on +66 2 7300881.

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