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MYANMAR: Time to end forced labour

Amnesty International today welcomed this week's hard hitting report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) into forced labour in Myanmar. The human rights organization called on the Burmese government to cease the widespread ill-treatment of forced labourers, and urged governments and companies investing in Myanmar [Burma] to ensure that their operations do not lead to human rights violations.

"Amnesty International and other NGOs have for a long time campaigned against the killings, ill-treatment and misery inflicted by the army's use of forced labour in Myanmar," the organisation said. "Now, with the publication of this report, companies and governments investing in the country -- many in projects with the army as partners -- can no longer claim ignorance of the situation on the ground."

"The Directors of these companies must seriously examine their operations in Myanmar to ensure that their presence is not contributing to human rights violations. Consumers, shareholders, investment trusts and members of the NGOs and the public will hold them to account for their actions."

The ILO formally established a Commission of Inquiry into forced labour in Myanmar in March 1997, following a complaint by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). This Commission of Inquiry, which is the strongest legal action that the ILO can take against a member state, found the government in breach of ILO Convention 29 which forbids the "*exaction of labour under the menace of a penalty, from residents who (had) not offered themselves voluntarily...*"

Amnesty International has documented and reported on forced labour by the *tatmadaw* (Burmese army) for more than 10 years, and interviewed hundreds of victims of the practice. As a result of the dramatic increase in the size of the army over the last decade, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been forced to work under very harsh conditions.

The majority of victims are from ethnic minorities, who make up one third of the population in Myanmar. They include the Karen, Mon, Shan, Rohingya, Karenni, and Chin people, who have been rounded up as part of counter-insurgency activities by the *tatmadaw* against armed opposition groups.

During these offensives, soldiers have seized thousands of villagers to act as porters -- carrying weaponry, munitions and provisions for the army. Hundreds have been either killed or left for dead if they try to escape or cannot perform their duties due to old age or illness such as malaria.

As well as portering, the army forces civilians from all ethnic groups to work on roads, dams, quarries, and railways throughout the country, all in the name of “development” for the people. Villagers of all ages, including women and girls are forced to work long hours in sometimes dangerous conditions without pay, adequate food or medical care.

Those unable to perform their duties to the satisfaction of the army face beatings and deprivation of food. Many have been killed or have died from neglect and ill-treatment, and those who are forced to labour on a regular basis cannot tend their farms or otherwise earn their living.

Amnesty International welcomed the report as being a very significant tool for governments, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unionists, and individuals around the world to use to raise awareness of the dire human rights situation in Myanmar.

“Amnesty International, along with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, welcomes this report which we see as an extremely significant statement by the international labour movement on forced labour in Myanmar. It highlights the importance of International human rights organisations, national human rights organisations working together with trade unions in order to combat these practices,” the organization said.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS:

For broadcast use, AI has available b-roll including exclusive images of forced labour in Myanmar, interviews with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Pierre Sané (Secretary General of Amnesty International) and Bill Jordan (General Secretary of the ICFTU).

To receive a copy, or to arrange an interview with AI’s Myanmar researcher, please call:

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