

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Forcible repatriation

26 May 1994

THAILAND

Forcible return of Burmese refugees

Hundreds of Burmese refugees are being forcibly returned to Myanmar's (Burma) Shan State by Thai authorities in Mae Sai, Chiang Rai Province. Amnesty International fears that those sent back are at grave risk of being ill-treated or tortured by Burmese government troops while being forced to serve as army porters.

Fighting has escalated in Myanmar in recent weeks between troops of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC - Myanmar's ruling military authorities) and the Muang Tai Army (MTA). The MTA is an armed opposition group headed by Khun Sa, who controls some territory east of the Salween River in Myanmar and is believed to be heavily involved in opium trafficking.

In recent months SLORC troops have been forcibly taking civilians throughout the Shan State to act as porters for the military in these battles. Since 18 May 1994 troops have been seizing civilians in the Tachilek area, which is opposite the town of Mae Sai in Thailand. As a result, hundreds of Shan and other Burmese civilians have fled to Thailand to avoid being taken to the front line. They have sought refuge in Wat Wianghom, a Buddhist pagoda in Mae Sai district. Since 23 May, local Thai authorities, including the Border Patrol Police and troops from Army Region 3, have reportedly been escorting them to the Mae Sai River, which marks the border between Thailand and Myanmar.

Amnesty International is calling on the Thai authorities to stop immediately the forcible return of these refugees.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The practice of arbitrarily seizing civilians to carry ammunition and other supplies for the army is common in Myanmar, particularly in areas where armed opposition groups are active. SLORC troops routinely beat and kick porters who have become weak and cannot carry heavy loads of ammunition. Porters are usually not told how long they will be forced to serve, are typically given little or nothing to eat, and are often tortured and sometimes killed by SLORC troops.

Since 1984, and possibly earlier, tens of thousands of Burmese civilians, including thousands belonging to various ethnic minority groups such as the Shan, have sought refuge in Thailand. Currently over 70,000 Burmese remain in Thailand, fleeing forced portering and labour, political detention, or ill-treatment by the SLORC.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express and airmail letters either in English or Thai or in your own language:

- pointing out that the 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;
- calling on the Thai authorities in Chiang Rai Province to stop immediately the forcible return of Burmese refugees in northern Thailand and to grant them the necessary protection.

APPEALS TO

Kamron Booncherd, Governor
Chiang Rai Province,
Thailand

Telegrams: Governor Kamron Booncherd, Chiang Rai, Thailand
Saluation: Dear Governor

General Chawalit Yongchaiyut, Minister
Ministry of Interior
Asdang Road
Bangkok 10200
Thailand

Faxes: + 66 2 224 6191 or + 66 2 223 2215

Telegrams: General Chawalit Yongchaiyut, Minister of Interior, Thailand
Saluation: Dear Minister

General Wichit Sukmak, Minister
Ministry of Defence
Sanamchai Road
Bangkok 10200
Thailand

Faxes: + 66 2 226 3112

Telegrams: General Wichit Sukmak, Minister of Defence, Thailand
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 10 July 1994.