

EXTERNAL

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EXTRA 158/96

Refoulement / Fear of refoulement

15 October 1996

THAILAND Forcible return of Burmese refugees to Myanmar

On 12 October 1996 some 40 Thai Rangers forced approximately 200 Akha and Lahu refugees from the Shan State, eastern Myanmar, back across the Thai border to Ban Ai Long, their village located half a kilometre inside Myanmar. While Amnesty International fears for the safety of these returnees, the organization is also concerned that the Thai authorities may forcibly return to Myanmar other refugees from the Shan State, who are fleeing widespread human rights violations there (see background).

At 8.00am on 8 October members of Myanmar army battalion 256 entered Ban Ai Long village and detained male villagers, apparently in order to interrogate them about the presence of Shan insurgents in the village. The following day troops reportedly beat 10 of the men with their fists, as a result of which one young man was said to have lost consciousness. The soldiers left the village in the evening of 9 October, taking with them Ah Jwe, the 33-year-old ethnic Lahu headman and two other men. The three men have not been heard from since that time, and Amnesty International is gravely concerned for their safety.

At 6am on 10 October all 200 villagers fled across the border to the Doi Tung area, northern Chiang Rai province in Thailand, where they encountered Thai rangers, who are members of the security forces often deployed in border areas.

According to credible reports, on 12 October the commanding officer of the Myanmar army battalion 256 met with the Thai Ranger commanding officer, declaring that it was safe for the refugees to return. They were then ordered to leave Thailand by the Rangers and returned to Ban Ai Long at about 11.30am on 12 October. The 100 Myanmar troops remaining in the village forced the returnees to accompany them to their camp at Aye Tee in order to carry food, livestock and other supplies which the Myanmar armed forces had looted from them. The returnees were later permitted to go back to their village, but Amnesty International remains concerned that they are at risk of further arbitrary detention and possible ill-treatment.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In January 1996 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, Myanmar's military government) agreed a cease-fire with the Shan Muang Tai Army (MTA), led by Khun Sa. Since the cease-fire thousands of MTA troops have surrendered their arms to the Myanmar armed forces; however, others who did not agree with the cease-fire have continued to retain their weapons, along with other Shan nationalist armed opposition groups. The SLORC reacted to continued Shan resistance by forcibly relocating tens of thousands of villagers in an apparent attempt to sever any civilian links or support for these Shan armed opposition groups. According to reliable and detailed reports, since early March 1996 the Myanmar army has forcibly relocated at least 450 villages, comprising some 50,000 people, in central and southern areas of the Shan State.

Since early 1996 some 20,000 refugees from the Shan State fleeing from forcible relocation and other human rights violations have sought protection in Thailand. Amnesty International calls on the Royal Thai Government to allow these refugees to remain in Thailand until it is safe for them to return to the Shan State.

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

- expressing concern that some 200 Akha and Lahu refugees were forcibly returned to Myanmar by Thai rangers on 12 October 1996;
- pointing out 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 are at risk of serious human rights violations;
- calling on the Thai authorities not to forcibly return Burmese refugees and to grant them the necessary protection.

APPEALS TO:

Banharn Silapa-archa, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior
Office of the Prime Minister
Government House
Nakhorn Pathom Road
Bangkok 10300, Thailand

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Bangkok, Thailand

Faxes: + 66 2 280 1443

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

General Chawalit Yongchaiyut
Minister of Defence
Ministry of Defence
Sanamchai Road
Bangkok 10200
Thailand

Telegrams: Defence Minister, Bangkok, Thailand

Faxes: +66 2 226 4371

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 November 1996.