

MYANMAR

1988 TO 1998

HAPPY 10TH ANNIVERSARY?

ETHNIC NATIONALITIES

Introduction

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) has stated on numerous occasions that there are 135 "national races" in the country, including the majority Burman group. Other groups make up roughly one third of the population, and live primarily in the seven ethnic minority states, but also in the seven divisions which comprise the Union of Myanmar. The seven states, named after the largest ethnic minority group in that area, are: the Kayin (Karen), Kayah (Karenni), Rakhine (Arakan), Kachin, Shan, Chin and Mon. These states form a horseshoe of mountainous regions around the central Burman plain.

Ethnic minorities have their own languages and customs which are distinct from the majority Burman, or Bamar group. Differences in ethnic origin have been the basis for internal conflict, which has increased significantly since Myanmar gained its independence from Britain in 1948. During negotiations between Britain and Myanmar about independence, ethnic minority leaders demanded guarantees of minority rights in return for an agreement to join in a Union of Burma, as it was then known. This was conceded in an agreement between the Burmese Government and the Shan, Kachin, and Chin representatives in 1947, in Panglong, a town in the Shan State. However after independence many ethnic minority armed opposition groups began to fight for greater autonomy or independence from the ethnic Burman-dominated central government.

The Burmese army has committed widespread human rights violations against ethnic minority civilians in the context of its counter-insurgency tactics. Under the strategy known as the "Four Cuts", the military attempts to cut intelligence, food, money, and recruits between armed opposition groups and local civilians. In the process large areas are declared "free fire" zones, villagers are forced to move to "strategic hamlets", and the army extrajudicially kills civilians and takes others for forced labour and portering. Amnesty International is also concerned with abuses committed by armed opposition groups, and has documented executions, extrajudicial killings, and torture by some of them.

When the State Law and Order Restoration Council reasserted military control over the country and suppressed the pro-democracy movement in 1988, they began to negotiate cease-fire agreements with various armed ethnic minority groups. To date

17 groups have agreed cease-fires. However the agreement in 1995 between a Karenni group and the SPDC broke down after only three months; breakaway Shan resistance forces continue to fight with SPDC troops in spite of a cease-fire with Khun Sa; and the SPDC has still not negotiated an agreement with Karen National Union (KNU). In the material which follows Amnesty International briefly describes ten of the many ethnic nationalities, who have each suffered from severe human rights violations at the hands of the Burmese army. Ethnic minorities in both cease-fire areas and areas of armed conflict are subjected to forced labour and other violations.

Internal armed conflict and accompanying human rights violations have caused refugee outflows to all of Myanmar's neighbouring countries, which includes China, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand. Although there are no longer any refugees in China, the other three countries face substantial refugee burdens. This has led to periodic forcible returns, or *refoulement*, of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, and of Karen, Shan, Mon, and ethnic Burman refugees from Thailand.

The Karen

“...We have no place to go, no place to hide...What will I do if the DKBA come again? If they burn my house, then I’ll build a small house in its place. If they take us, we won’t go. If they shoot us, we’ll have to die...Everyone is troubled, depressed. But our whole lives have been full of problems so problems are not strange to us.”

(A 38-year-old Buddhist Karen woman who had lived in a Thai refugee camp several years)

The Karen ethnic minority inhabit the Kayin State in the east of the country, and there are also large numbers in the Ayeyarwady Delta area. The Karen people are mostly Buddhist or animist although much of their leadership are Christians. The Karen National Union has engaged in armed insurgency since 1949 but in recent years has lost almost all of the territory it once controlled. In December 1994 a Buddhist group of Karens broke away from the KNU and formed the Democratic Buddhist Organization (DKBO, the armed wing is known as the DKBA), allied itself with the government, and began to attack refugee camps in Thailand.

During a series of major offensives against the KNU in 1992, 1995, and 1997, the Burmese army has taken thousands of ethnic Karens as porters, often mistreating them, and has also displaced hundreds of villages. Beginning in 1984 significant numbers of Karen civilians fled to Thailand from widespread human rights violations, and were allowed to remain by the Royal Thai Government. There are now over 100,000 Karen civilians living in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, as the Burmese Army controls the vast majority of the Kayin State and continues to forcibly relocate tens of thousands of people.

The Karenni

“We couldn’t imagine the treatment of the SLORC. They even shot at us to try to kill us as we tried to get away. But I want to find some way to go back to my home. I want to live in my home again.”

(A Buddhist Karenni refugee who had fled from Shadaw forcible relocation site in the Kayah State, and witnessed four villagers who were shot dead as they were making their way to Thailand in August 1996)

The Karenni people live in the Kayah (Karenni State), just north of the Kayin State, and are closely related to the Karen people. The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) agreed a cease-fire in March 1995 with the Burmese army although it broke down three months later. Beginning in April 1996 the army began a forcible relocation program of some 100 villages, causing 5,000 Karenni to flee to Thailand, where they sought sanctuary in established refugee camps.

The Chin

The Chin people live in the Chin State and Sagaing Division in western Myanmar. They inhabit small mountainous villages and are predominantly Christian. Since the early 1990's reports have indicated that the Burmese army has increased its presence in the Chin State and has attempted to forcibly convert Chin civilians to Theravada Buddhism, Myanmar's dominant religion. Chin civilians have also been forced to work on massive infrastructure projects in the Sagaing Division and in the Chin State itself. In the last six years hundreds of thousands of civilians of all

ethnicities throughout the country have been forced to work on roads, dams, railways, and military bases. In recent years Chin refugees have fled to Mizoram and Manipur States in western India. An armed opposition group, the Chin National Front (CNF), was formed in 1987.

The Kachin

The Kachin people, the majority of whom are Christian, are actually a group of several different ethnic minorities, the most dominant being the Jinghpaw. They live in the Kachin State in the far north of the country, which borders China and India. The major armed insurgency group, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), agreed a cease-fire in 1994 and some development in the state is taking place. However reports continue of Kachin civilians being taken by the military to perform forced labour. After the cease-fire agreement over 30,000 Kachin refugees returned from China to Myanmar.

The Rohingya

“When we were beaten at different times we were often told that we should leave and that we weren’t wanted in Burma. They said also that we would be killed if we tried to go back.”

(A Rohingya refugee who had fled to Bangladesh to escape a mass campaign by the Burmese army against Rohingyas in 1991 and 1992.)

The Rohingya, who are Muslims, live in the Rakhine (Arakan) State, in western Myanmar bordering Bangladesh. Beginning in 1991 they were subjected to massive human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, forced portering and labour, and forcible eviction from their villages. As a result, some 260,000 of them fled to Bangladesh where they were housed in refugee camps. Beginning in late 1992 they were repatriated back to the Rakhine State, sometimes against their will. In 1993 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed an agreement with the Myanmar Government which enabled them to establish a presence in the Rakhine State in order to monitor the situation of the repatriated Rohingyas. However concerns emerged that Rohingyas were still being subjected to forced labour and relocation. Presently 20,500 Rohingyas remain in camps in Bangladesh and there are

thousands of others there who have in the past two years fled poverty and human rights violations. The main Rohingya armed opposition group is the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO).

The Arakanese (Rakhine)

The Arakanese, a predominantly Buddhist group who speak a variant of Burmese, form the majority of the population in the Rakhine State. The Rakhine, or Arakan State, was independent from Myanmar until the 18th century. Various insurgent groups there have engaged in armed conflict since the end of World War II. The Arakanese, like the Rohingyas, have also been subjected to forced labour by the military, as it dramatically increased its presence there and throughout the country in the 1990's.

The Mon

“The biggest burden in our village is the porter fees and the forced labour we must endure...I am willing to work for my country. The SLORC has good meals, they stay in good conditions, they have good facilities. Villagers are forced to work like cows. It’s not fair. They force us like slaves. That’s why we left.”

(A Mon day labourer from Than Bu Za Yat township, Mon State, who had been forced to work every day for several months by the army)

The Mon people are related to the Khmer (Cambodian) people and have lived in Myanmar longer than any other ethnic group, where they established their own kingdoms before being conquered by the Burmans. They are predominantly Theravada Buddhist and live in the Mon State. The armed opposition group there, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) agreed a cease-fire with the central government in June 1995. In 1995 and 1996 10,000 Mon civilians were forcibly returned by the Thai authorities to Myanmar without international monitoring. Although there is no longer any fighting in the Mon State, reports have continued of Mon civilians being forced to work on infrastructure projects.

The Shan

“Only a woman could catch his bullock [it was temperamental] so he took Aye Pong [the witness’ niece] and another along. They caught the bullock and came back with the cart. While they were harnessing the bull to the cart SLORC troops came and shot him in the chest and he fell down and died. They took the two women and raped them and killed Aye Pong...I was frightened and full of pity for my niece.”

(A 60-year-old refugee from Nam Zarng township, Shan State, who described the killing of his nephew and niece in September 1997)

The Shan, most of whom are Buddhist rice farmers, live in the Shan State, which is the largest of the seven ethnic minority states. They are ethnically related to the northern Thai and Lao peoples and have a similar language. Under British colonial rule, the Shan areas were administered separately from the rest of Burma. Since 1958 various Shan armed opposition groups have taken up arms against the government, the largest being the Muang Thai Army led by Khun Sa. Although he surrendered in 1996, other Shan resistance fighters have continued their armed struggle. In March 1996 the central government launched a massive forcible relocation program in the central Shan State in an effort to break up any alleged civilian links with the insurgents. Some 300,000 have been relocated, approximately 80,000 of whom have sought refuge in Thailand. Hundreds of Shan were killed in the relocation process and hundreds of others were forced into hard labour and portering for the military.

The Tibeto-Burmans, or Bamars

“If the corpses of prisoners who lost their lives working on the Yangon to Mandalay express highway are lined up it would be longer than the mileage of the road already completed.”

(Burman political prisoners in Insein Jail, Myanmar's largest prison where hundreds of political prisoners languish, describing forced labour conditions for prisoners on the Yangon to Mandalay Road)

The Tibeto-Burmans, who comprise two thirds of Myanmar's population and are mostly Theravada Buddhist farmers, live mainly in the seven divisions which form Upper and Lower Myanmar in the central plain. Kingdoms in Ava and Mandalay existed until the British annexed the country in the late 1800's, and since independence from the British the Burmans have continued to control the central government. However, they too have suffered at the hands of the SPDC. There are hundreds of Burman political prisoners, and thousands of Burman civilians have been forced to work on infrastructure projects in central Myanmar.

The Pa'O, Palaung, Wa, Lahu, Kokang and Akha peoples

“The Burmese tied his hands and told him to carry a mortar but he couldn't do it. So the soldiers started kicking him. They kicked him on his arms and back, initially several soldiers, later only one. After he was already dead his body was thrown over the mountain ledge.”

(An Akha village elder describing the killing of Ana, a 25-year-old Akha man who was already suffering from malaria when taken as a porter in early 1995)

These ethnic minority groups live in the hills of northern and northeast Myanmar. Pa'o, Kokang, Palaung and Wa armed opposition groups have agreed cease-fires with the central Burman authorities, and maintain nominal control over their cease-fire areas. The Wa and the Kokang armed groups are widely believed to be involved in heroin and amphetamine production and trafficking. The Pa'O and Palaung are primarily Buddhist and the Wa practice animism. Amnesty International has documented human rights violations of the Lahu and the Akha peoples in the Shan State by the army.

Amnesty International urges the Myanmar Government to take immediate action to put an end to the human rights violations against members of its many ethnic nationalities which has caused hundreds of thousands of them to flee the country during the past 10 years. They have the right to human dignity and to respect the individual.

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Λ You can add your voice to the many others who have been campaigning for the rights of ethnic minority peoples in Myanmar during the last 10 years.

Write to:

**Senior General Than Shwe
Chairman
State Peace and Development Council
c/o Ministry of Defence
Signal Pagoda Road
Yangon
Union of Myanmar**

or

**Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt
Secretary 1
State Peace and Development Council
c/o Ministry of Defence
Signal Pagoda Road
Yangon
Union of Myanmar**

or to the Myanmar Embassy in your country

You could also ask your own government what it is doing to promote human rights protection in Myanmar by writing to your elected representative.

"All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination".

(Article 7, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)