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MYANMAR: KAREN REFUGEES KILLED AND ABDUCTED BY GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED FORCES

Amnesty International deplores the Myanmar military authorities' treatment of Karen civilians, both in Myanmar and across the border in Thailand, where tens of thousands currently seek refuge.

In "No place to hide", a report released today, the organization documents a series of attacks, killings, and abductions by the Democratic Buddhist Kayin Organization (DKBO) in alliance with Myanmar government troops inside Thai territory which took place between February and May 1995. The plight of the Karen refugees on the Myanmar-Thai border is desperate, as the onset of the monsoon makes them even more isolated and vulnerable.

One Karen woman in Mae Ta Waw refugee camp explained her situation: "We have no place to go, no place to hide...everyone is troubled, depressed. But our whole lives have been full of problems so problems are not new to us."

Her camp was later attacked by the DKBO. The Myanmar army and the DKBO initiated escalating armed attacks against refugee camps, which resulted in the abduction and deaths of a number of refugees and the burning of thousands of refugee homes. The attacks were explicitly designed to terrify the refugees into returning to Myanmar. The DKBO broke away from the Karen National Union (KNU), an armed insurgency group, in December 1994 and joined the Myanmar armed forces in offensives against KNU bases in Myanmar.

During the attack on Mae Ta Wa camp, one 18-year-old woman was trapped in a bunker when her burning house collapsed; she died on the spot. Previously "Uncle Jolly", a Karen leader in his 60's, was abducted by the DKBO when they entered Mae Ta Wa. He was badly beaten when he was seized and taken back to Myanmar; his fate is unknown.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned about the future of over 70,000 Karen refugees, whose lives have once again been disrupted. The human rights organization calls on the Myanmar Government to ensure that neither its own troops nor the breakaway Karen group, the DKBO, commit any further human rights violations against ethnic minority Karen civilians.

The organization welcomes the Royal Thai Government's current policy of allowing Karen refugees to stay in Thailand. At the same time it calls on the Thai Government to permit them to remain until they will no longer be at risk of arrest, torture, and killings in Myanmar.

In February and March 1995, incursions into Thailand normally involved 20-30 troops and were aimed at seizing and forcibly repatriating senior civilian KNU officials and camp administrators. Since mid-April, however, the incursions have often involved hundreds of soldiers and the burning of entire refugee camps, leaving thousands homeless. Only after repeated protests from the Royal Thai Government and armed retaliations against the DKBO have the attacks ceased.

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Although the DKBO claimed on 8 May that they would stop attacking refugees in Thailand, they have also publicly stated their desire that all refugees return to Myanmar so that they can consolidate their control in Myanmar's Karen State. Amnesty International is gravely concerned that if they were to be forcibly returned, Karen refugees would be at risk of a full range of human rights violations, including forced portering for the army, torture and even killing at the hands of either the Myanmar army or its allies the DKBO.

For the past eight years Amnesty International has documented the ongoing pattern of such abuses in the Karen State. The decision of the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) at the beginning of 1995 to re-launch its offensive against the KNU meant that the civilian population was once again at an even greater risk of attack.

But even before the SLORC's new offensive in January 1995, the Myanmar army continued to commit human rights violations in the Karen State. One witness described the abduction by the army in November 1994 of a 17-year-old woman living with her mother; over one month later the witness found her decomposing body. No one in the village, including the girl's mother, could imagine why she had been killed by the army.

Thousands of civilians were arbitrarily seized as porters for the offensive against KNU positions, many of which fell to government forces. Ethnic Karen, Mon and Burman men were forced to carry equipment for the army. One former porter told Amnesty International that he was beaten several times if he could not carry his load; he finally escaped after being forced to work for nine months. Such treatment is typical.

Another former porter described what he saw as he was carrying supplies in March 1995: "There were many, many dead, many. I saw people beaten and some others were very tired and just collapsed; ..I guess there were more than 100 dead...They were lying on the mountain path"

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