

Myanmar: Exodus from Shan State to escape forced labour

Killings, torture and forced labour of civilians from the Shan State at the hands of the Myanmar army are detailed by Amnesty International in its report released today: Exodus from the Shan State.

Shan civilians have suffered the consequences of internal armed conflict for over four years, when the army of Myanmar began a massive forcible relocation program as part of their counter-insurgency measures against the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South), the main armed opposition group in the state .

"Civilians are most often the victims of the army's brutal counter-insurgency tactics as fighting between the army and the SSA-South continues," Amnesty International said. "Regretfully, despite extensive documentation of abuses and widespread calls from the international community, no improvements in the Shan State or in any other area of Myanmar are apparent."

Shan civilians have suffered the consequences of internal armed conflict for over four years, when the Myanmar army began a massive forcible relocation program. Yet despite extensive documentation of abuses and widespread calls from the international community, no improvements in the Shan State or in any other area of Myanmar are apparent.

"At the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) annual ministerial meeting in Bangkok beginning next week all ASEAN members should raise the ongoing human rights crisis with the Myanmar government, also an ASEAN member," Amnesty International said.

Earlier this year Amnesty International interviewed refugees in Thailand from the central Shan State, every one of whom was forced to work for the army without pay. They said that forced labour, relocations and extrajudicial killings had caused them to flee their homeland. A Shan man said "They didn't give us anything and we were treated just like dogs or pigs" when describing typical forced labour.

Many refugees had worked alongside children as young as 10. Children were forced to split smaller stones, and to carry rocks and sticks on road-building projects. One man told Amnesty International: "They don't let anyone stay idle."

The vast majority of these victims of forced labour and other abuses are Shan rice farmers who have been deprived of their lands and their livelihoods as a result of the State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) counter-insurgency tactics. A Shan woman explained how killings take place: "The soldiers won't allow us to farm. They said if we find anyone in the forest we will shoot them on sight because there are only rebels in the forest." Since 1996 over 300,000 civilians have been displaced by the army in an effort to break up any alleged links with the SSA-South.

One woman told Amnesty International about the killings in January 2000 of a 40-year-old man, his 11-year-old son and his 18-year-old daughter, her friends from the same village in Nanzing township. The three had initially been forcibly relocated but sneaked back to their farms to grow rice and were shot dead in their field hut.

"Security issues, including refugee outflows to Thailand, caused by endemic human rights violations in Myanmar should be discussed at meetings between ASEAN and its dialogue partners," Amnesty International said in advance of meetings at the end of July, which will

include the European Union and other Western nations, and Japan and China.

Background

Unpaid forced labour of civilians by the army is endemic in Myanmar and has occurred over the past several decades. The practice is particularly acute in the seven states where most of Myanmar's ethnic minorities live. Forced labour duties include road-building and carrying heavy loads of equipment for the army for days or weeks at a time.

For more than 50 years armed opposition groups representing various ethnic minorities have engaged in insurgency activities against the Burman-dominated central government in an effort to gain greater autonomy or complete independence. Although a reported 17 cease-fires have been agreed between the SPDC and armed groups, three ethnic minority opposition groups are still fighting with the Myanmar army, including the SSA-South.

Ethnic minorities in Myanmar run a greater risk of being subjected to a wide variety of human rights violations simply because they are a member of a particular group. They are frequently seized for forced labour duties, and those living in areas of armed conflict are at risk of extrajudicial killings and torture by the Myanmar military, who suspect them of supporting armed opposition groups

In the context of the massive forcible relocations of the past four years, hundreds of Shan civilians have been killed when they attempted to return to their farms, and thousands have been seized by the army to work without pay on roads and other projects.

During the first five months of 2000, over 5,300 Shan civilians fled to one area of Thailand alone. The Thai authorities do not permit

Shan refugees to live in camps, so they seek employment in agriculture and other low paying jobs. Over 100,000 Shan civilians have sought refuge there in the last four years.

In spite of widespread documentation by Amnesty International and calls by United Nations bodies and other intergovernmental organizations to put an end to such practices, the SPDC still allows the army to act with impunity. Flows of Shan refugees into Thailand remain at a high level and demonstrate most eloquently the need for an immediate improvement in the human rights situation in Myanmar.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>