

Myanmar: A new human rights problem for ASEAN

As ASEAN members admit Myanmar into the regional grouping, they must accept responsibility for the protection of human rights there, Amnesty International said today.

In a report issued on the eve of the ASEAN ceremony, the organization details atrocities committed by the Burmese army against ethnic minority groups in eastern Myanmar -- including killings and beatings of forcibly seized porters and using death threats to relocate entire villages.

“The Burmese army regularly kills and tortures civilians and the SLORC government coerces women, children and the elderly to build roads, railways and dams in slavery-like conditions,” Amnesty International said.

“The high level of human rights violations and political instability in Myanmar is having a major regional impact on its new ASEAN partners -- for example, more than 200,000 refugees have fled into neighbouring countries.”

“ASEAN claims that constructive engagement with SLORC will lead to improvements in human rights in Myanmar. With Myanmar’s admission to ASEAN, that approach is now going to be put to the test.”

Amnesty International called on ASEAN governments to put the human rights situation in Myanmar on the agenda at all regional meetings and to ask for regular reports from the SLORC, to pressure the government to allow entry to the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar, and to ensure that any ASEAN investment in Myanmar does not lead to further human rights violations -- in particular investments in projects using forced labour.

In extensive interviews with refugees living along the Thai-Burmese border, Amnesty International has documented testimonies of the *tatmadaw* (Burmese army) killing and torturing men it has kidnapped and forced to work as porters if they do not perform their duties ‘satisfactorily’, and the shooting of villagers who are alleged to have supported armed opposition groups.

Cases include Pa Nya Paw, who was arrested in April 1997 by the army. During interrogation, he was allegedly punched, kicked until his limbs were broken, smothered with plastic and had boiling water poured over him until he died from his injuries. Hla Du was seized from his village with nine other men and forced to carry ammunition and food supplies. According to a fellow villager, he was beaten, had his eyes gouged out, limbs broken and then was stabbed to death.

As part of its counter-insurgency campaign against armed ethnic minority opposition groups in the Kayin (Karen), Kayah (Karenni) and Shan States in eastern Myanmar, the *tatmadaw* has forcibly relocated entire villages in ethnic minority areas using death threats and harassment. Since 1984, the army has forcibly relocated tens of thousands -- the most recent relocations resulted in at least 16,000 Shan refugees fleeing to Thailand in April and May 1997.

In March 1997, the army arrived in a Gyadown township village in Kayin State, and told the 300 Muslim families: “*you have 50 minutes to leave this town. You have no place in this country. If you don’t leave within 50 minutes we will shoot you*”.

The report also documents the widespread use of forced labour throughout the country. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese citizens have been forced to work on projects including building roads, railways, dams and military structures for up to 12 hours a day. Most of the refugees in neighbouring countries interviewed by Amnesty International had been forced to work by the army.

Amnesty International has published information about 16 work sites around the country including Ye-Thawair Railway in Tanintharyi Division, the forced building of a Buddhist Temple in Gout Kyi township, Kayin State, prison work camps in the Mon State and the forced building of army barracks in Shadaw and Ywa Thit relocations sites in Kayah State.

ENDS.../

For further information, to receive a copy of the report, *Myanmar, Ethnic minority rights under attack* (AI Index: ASA 16/20/97), or to arrange an interview, please call:

Mark Ogle, Press Office, International Secretariat: Tel.: (44) 171 413 5729/5563

Fax: (44) 171 313 5815/5835