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Myanmar: Atrocities worsen in Shan State

Hundreds of people from the Shan ethnic minority have been tortured and killed by the Burmese army and at least 300,000 people forced to flee their homes during the last two years, according to an Amnesty International delegate who visited the region earlier this year.

“The vast majority of people we interviewed in Thailand lost relatives or friends who were killed by the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese army),” said Donna Guest, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Myanmar.

“Their victims include women, children, the elderly and Buddhist monks. Witnesses described the most horrific methods of killing, including beating and kicking to death, stabbing, smashing heads in, being burnt alive, pouring boiling water over the victim’s body and shooting.”

In March 1996, in order to stop alleged support for the Shan States Army, an opposition group fighting the government, the Burmese authorities began massive relocations of Shan civilians. As a result, 1,400 villages were destroyed and at least 300,000 people lost their homes. Some people have been relocated three or four times and more than 80,000 people have fled across the border to Thailand.

The army usually only warns a village headman that his village is being relocated a few days in advance of the troops arriving. When soldiers do arrive, they often burn houses, steal livestock and food and threaten to shoot villagers on sight if they do not immediately leave their homes and most of their possessions behind.

The *Tatmadaw* killed at least 300 people in a series of massacres between mid-June and mid-July last year. Most were desperate relocated villagers who returned to their homes to look for food. Women captured and interrogated by the military have been raped -- sometimes over a period of days -- and some have died as a result.

Almost all the villagers interviewed, including women, were forced to work as porters for the army or on infrastructure projects -- such as road, dam and railway construction. Men who were seized and forced to act as porters described being severely beaten and being deprived of food.

Because the Burmese government denies access to journalists and independent monitors, the full scale of the tragedy is difficult to gauge. What is clear is that the Shan are being targeted solely because of their ethnic origin or perceived political beliefs, in contravention of numerous international human rights standards.

Amnesty International is calling on the United Nations to press the State Peace and Development Council (Burmese military government) to grant unrestricted access to the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar and to pressure the SPDC to improve its human rights record. It is also

calling on the SPDC itself to immediately halt all forced portering, forced relocation on ethnic grounds, and issue clear orders to the army to halt extrajudicial executions.

“While ASEAN governments have spent the last few years talking about ‘constructive engagement’ bringing about an improvement in human rights, the Burmese government has continued to subject the Shan people, and indeed millions of Burmese of all ethnic groups, to the most horrific human rights abuses imaginable,” said Ms Guest.

“ASEAN governments last year admitted Myanmar into their regional grouping, and promised that the human rights situation would improve there. Now we are nearly a year on – just when will the changes begin?”

Background and cases

The population of the Shan State, the largest of the seven ethnic minority states in Myanmar, is approximately eight million people. Of these, some four million are Shan. The Shan people are ethnically related to the Thai, have a similar language, and also live in southern China and northern Thailand. Most of them are Theravada Buddhist rice farmers. In pre-colonial times, the area that is now the Shan State was ruled by Shan princes who sometimes owed allegiance to Burman or Thai overlords and were sometimes independent. Under British colonial rule, the Shan areas were administered separately from the rest of Burma.

After Burmese independence in 1948 disputes arose between some Shan political figures and the central administration in Rangoon over the handling of Shan affairs. In 1958 the first Shan armed opposition group was organized, and since then various other groups took up arms. Since 1989 some of these groups have agreed cease-fires with the SPDC but the SSA has continued in its armed struggle against the *tatmadaw* in central Shan State.

- When soldiers arrived to relocate the villagers of Tard Mork, Sai Tun was taking his cattle to the relocation site when he was shot and then hung up by his feet near the entrance to the village as a warning. Nang Ing, a 30-year old woman returned to her village to get some rice. She was captured and gang raped by three soldiers who then poured boiling water over her. A few days later she died. Two other villagers were burnt alive in their house, and another tied with a rope and beaten over the head to death.
- In Kunhing township, 24-year-old Nang Mai was seized by the soldiers who raped her repeatedly over five days. She was then covered with pieces of wood and burned to death.
- On 16 June 1997, 30 villagers returned to their village of Wan Sar Lar to retrieve food. On their return, they met soldiers. The troops killed 27 of them and threw their bodies into a river, burned their oxcarts and slaughtered their oxen for meat.

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Amnesty International has secured beta sp footage of recent human rights violations in the Shan State, and an interview on the subject with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. To receive a copy, the delegation’s report or to arrange an interview, please call:

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