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Burma: displacement continues unabated in one of the world's worst IDP situations

The internal displacement crisis in Burma affects mainly ethnic minority groups, and is particularly acute along the border with Thailand. The military regime's objective of increasing control over minority areas through a policy of forced assimilation and repression of autonomy movements has resulted in decades of conflict that has devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians. The largest concentration of internally displaced people (IDPs) is found among the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon ethnic groups in Eastern Burma. As of October 2004, at least 526,000 people were internally displaced in the east of the country, either in hiding or in relocation sites, as a result of widespread human rights abuses committed by the Burmese army and its allies, and – to a lesser extent – insurgent groups. Thousands of Karen and Shan people have also been displaced due to army operations since November 2004. Elsewhere in Burma, displacement has affected large numbers of civilians, but no firm estimate exists on the extent of the problem. In western Burma, the Muslim Rohingya people and other minority groups along the borders with Bangladesh and India continue to suffer harsh discrimination and forced relocation. In addition, hundreds of thousands more have been displaced in schemes to resettle the urban poor and the building of large-scale infrastructure projects.

Despite an impressive variety of local initiatives to provide assistance to the internally displaced, it is well documented that IDPs in Burma face severe food shortages and lack of basic medical facilities. Exposed to ongoing state-sponsored violence and systematic human rights abuses, they lack protection by both the government and the international humanitarian community which is denied access. It is crucial that international actors, in collaboration with local groups, develop a common policy vis-à-vis the government to improve protection and assistance to the internally displaced.

Background: military regime tightens grip on ethnic minorities

Following independence in 1948, Burma was plunged into a civil war between the central government and various armed opposition groups. The most protracted armed conflict has been between the Burman controlled state and ethnic non-Burman nationalities demanding increased political autonomy from the centre.

The military regime in Burma, presently known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), seized power in 1988, renaming the country Myanmar the following year. In 1990, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming majority in multi-party elections. She was prevented from taking power by the military and has spent most of the years since the elections under house arrest. The military regime has since stayed in control by crushing any sign of political opposition. Repression has been particularly harsh in areas populated by the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon ethnic groups. The Burmese army has been deployed throughout the ethnic minority-populated states to fight against insurgency groups.

Since 1989, 17 informal ceasefires have been agreed between the regime and ethnic minority armies, but the eastern border with Thailand remains a conflict zone. This is complicated in some areas by a drugs war involving the Burmese army and rival armed groups. The three main insurgent groups in control of pockets of territory within the border states are the Karen National Liberation Army (armed wing of the Karen National Union

- KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and the Shan State Army (South) (SSA-S). In January 2004 the KNU held peace talks in the capital Rangoon that resulted in an informal ceasefire. However, skirmishes and human rights violations by the Burmese army have continued to displace people and prospects for a formal peace agreement look bleak.

A violent attack on Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade on 30 May 2003 that killed several NLD officials led to strong international condemnations. Soon after the attack, the government launched a "roadmap" for political and constitutional reform in August 2003, including plans for the resumption of the National Convention in order to draft a new Constitution. However, when the Convention met in May 2004, most political parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), remained excluded, and the process has been widely seen as illegitimate both nationally and abroad (ALTSEAN, 16 February 2005; UN CHR, 7 March 2005). Twenty-eight insurgent groups having signed a ceasefire with the government participated in the Convention, 13 of which raised issues about greater local autonomy. This issue has since been excluded from the National Convention agenda by the SPDC.

On 19 October 2004, internal divisions within the SPDC culminated in the arrest of the initiator of the roadmap: Prime Minister and Intelligence Chief Khin Nyunt. While Khin Nyunt had been closely associated with the ceasefire deals signed with a number of ethnic groups, his successor, Lt-General Soe Win, is widely seen as to have consolidated the

hard-line fraction of the SPDC (Asia Times, 24 March 2005).

While the regime has insisted that the roadmap should move forward, the SPDC has since November 2004 increased its pressure on ceasefire groups to surrender their weapons and launched military offensives in the Karen and Karenni states in an effort to increase further its control over ethnic groups. A 17-year old ceasefire with the Shan State National Army (SSNA) has reportedly ended and military action has again displaced thousands of people in Shan state (HRW, June 2005, p.20).

Number of internally displaced

Estimates of the numbers of internally displaced in Burma vary. According to the most reliable survey which was published in October 2004 by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, at least 526,000 people were displaced at that time in the eastern border areas of Myanmar, namely in the Tenasserim and eastern Pegu divisions and the Mon, Karen, Karenni and southern Shan states. The report says that 365,000 people are in temporary settlements in ceasefire areas controlled by ethnic minority groups, while 84,000 civilians remain in hiding in the forests and mountains of eastern Burma, and another 77,000 are in relocation sites after having been forcibly evicted from their homes (TBBC, October 2004, p.2). In 2002, it was estimated that approximately 2,500 villages had been destroyed, relocated, or otherwise abandoned in eastern Burma. During the past two years the pattern has continued, with at least 240 villages emptied (BBC, September 2002; TBBC, October 2004, p.16). Other human rights groups esti-

mate that 650,000 are still internally displaced in the border areas and that at least one million are internally displaced countrywide (HRW, June 2005).

Main causes of displacement

In most parts of Burma, the primary agent of displacement is the Burmese army (the Tatmadaw). However, non-state armed groups have also been responsible for forced displacement. The most prominent example in recent years has been the United Wa State Army (UWSA) rebel group. Between 1999 and 2002, at least 125,000 Wa and other villagers were relocated from northern Shan State to the UWSA's Southern Command area, opposite Thailand's Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. This movement of Wa people in turn led to the forced displacement of those originally living in the resettlement areas, mostly groups of Shan and Lahu people (LNDO, April 2002).

Although it is difficult to obtain precise and up-to-date information from conflict-affected areas as humanitarian access is denied by the government, there are regular reports of torture, arbitrary executions, sexual violence, indiscriminate use of landmines, and forced recruitment by both government troops and armed rebel groups (UN CHR, 2 December 2004). Peoples' livelihoods are further undermined by the systematic use of forced labour, restricted access of farmers to their land and the systematic confiscation of land and property. The widespread use of forced labour by the Burmese army has resulted in many civilians being unable to earn their living as farmers or labourers, and thus being forced to flee. Forced labour is also a major protection

issue for people after they become displaced. Since 1998, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has continuously documented how forced labour is directly linked to military operations, including the forced recruitment of porters and their use as human mine sweepers.

People forcibly relocated by the Burmese army are commonly given about one week's notice to leave their village, after which government troops loot any remaining belongings and destroy buildings and food crops to discourage return. Civilians have to provide their own means of transport to relocation sites, where they are generally given little or no assistance in resettling.

In many areas (e.g. Tenasserim division, central/southern Shan state), relocation sites are simply empty stretches of land, where families are expected to erect their own makeshift shelters (RI, 10 October 2002; NCGUB, 2003-2004). Other relocation sites are situated in existing villages or towns. Entry to and exit from relocation sites, including access to work and farmlands is tightly controlled by the Burmese army. Conditions in relocation sites vary, but there is rarely adequate access to safe drinking water, or to health and education services. Forced relocation is closely linked to forced labour, as people living in these sites are frequently made to carry military supplies, build and maintain nearby army camps, and work on road and other infrastructure projects (NCGUB, 2003-2004). As the economic and social welfare conditions in many camps are so poor, local military authorities (e.g. in Karenni state) have in some cases allowed people to drift back to their old villages, or elsewhere in Burma. However, those who manage to return are

often subject to further rounds of forced relocation (Vicary/BEW, 14 May 2003, BBC 2002).

Religious persecution in Burma continues to be closely linked to ethnic and political conflicts, with the military regime in tight control of religious activities. Muslim communities are increasingly targeted with acts of religious intolerance, leading to displacement. Reported incidents include the burning of entire villages, mosques and houses as well as the killing and wounding of people. In western Burma, particularly in Arakan state, the Rohingya and other ethnic groups are often displaced as a result of brutal discrimination policies, including the construction of "new villages" for transmigrants from central and northern Burma. Many of those displaced in Arakan state flee to Bangladesh, where conditions of asylum are very harsh, and where they face the prospect of forced repatriation (Forum Asia, June 2003; FIDH, 9 March 2004; AI, 19 May 2004). Human rights abuses in Arakan state are reported to be on the increase, and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar has expressed special concern about the situation in the state. The worst affected area during 2004 was north-western Arakan state where major human rights violations were reported throughout the year. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, the authorities have taken no action to stop the attacks (UN CHR, 2 December 2004 paras. 38-39; UN CHR, 4 January 2004, para 41; Rogers, 17 August 2004).

Development projects and forced urban relocation are also common causes of displacement. Forced relocation is often carried out to provide labour for road-

building and other infrastructure projects. Communities have also been forcibly displaced without compensation as a result of other types of development projects, including the construction of mines, irrigation systems, and natural gas and oil extraction facilities (HRW, June 2005, p. 42). For example, between 2001 and 2003 the Burmese army forcibly relocated tens of thousands of people in advance of the dam construction in Shan, Karenni and Karen states. Many more people will lose their land if planned projects go ahead (Salween Watch, March-August 2003). In October 2003 Global Witness issued a report that documented how forced labour was linked to the military's involvement in the timber trade.

In urban areas, communities have been forced to move to make way for infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges and "urban development programmes". Hundreds of thousands of residents of Rangoon and other towns and cities have been required to move to "satellite towns" that have been established in recent years (MRG, May 2002; KWN, September-October 2003).

Forced displacement continues unabated

In the Karen and Karenni states, intensified displacement was reported on several occasions while ceasefire talks were being held between the Karen National Union and the government at the end of 2003. The forced displacement of ethnic minorities is continuing in several border areas of eastern Burma. Thousands of villagers have fled their homes in Karen, Karenni, and Shan states since the ousting of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in Oc-

tober 2004. In December 2004, it was reported that some 4,700 Karen people from the Papun district of Karen state were displaced due to army attacks in November 2004. The army also burnt 338,000 kilos of paddy rice, which means that the local population will face food shortages (AHRC, 29 December 2004; COE-DMHA, 14 December 2004). While no overview exists of the total number of displaced, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium estimates that more than 8,000 people were newly displaced in northern Karen state and the Eastern Pegu division by May 2005. Civilians who remained in their villages were forced to build new SPDC camps and to work on the roads. Many of the people who fled this area during fighting in 2000 had just recently returned after ceasefire talks started between the SPDC and the KNU (TBBC, May 2005; KHRG, 4 May 2005). One source says that most Karen displaced since November 2004 had returned by May 2005 (FBR, 10 May 2005).

In Shan state, where fighting is ongoing between the Shan State Army and the Burmese army, villagers continue to be displaced due to forced relocation and land confiscation (Shan Human Rights Foundation, monthly reports; HRW, 27 May 2005). The last military operation started after two of Burma's ethnic Shan rebel groups, the Shan State National Army (SSNA) and the Shan State Army (SSA), merged – the latter breaking a cease-fire with the military government. During April and May 2005, an offensive launched against the SSA by the Burmese military and the United Wa State Army displaced thousands of villagers. There were reports of entire villages being burnt down, summary executions, torture, rape

and forcible relocation. More than 1,800 Shan people took shelter close to the Thai border, where Thailand-based NGOs tried to assist them (COE-DMHA, 27 May 2005).

Confiscation of land in Mon state is also reported to have displaced hundreds of families in 2005 (Kao Wao News, 19 April 2005). Many more may be forced to flee in the future as opportunities for livelihood have been destroyed by the military. Furthermore, a Mon human rights group reported that hundreds of Mon women fled to the border areas to avoid being used as "comfort women" for Burmese commanders (HURFOM-WCRP, 31 March 2004).

Civilians lack protection

Exposed to ongoing state-sponsored violence and systematic human rights abuses, civilians lack protection by both their own government and the international community. This has particularly affected the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon ethnic groups. The counter-insurgency operations have created a human rights situation in the border areas of Burma that is considered to be one of the worst in the world. Instead of adhering to Burma's obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians in the territory under its control, government troops are systematically subjecting people to harassment, direct violence and other human rights abuses. Chronic insecurity is a major problem for displaced populations both in hiding and in relocation sites. Although the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has gained some access to zones of on-going armed conflict (ICRC, 6 December

2004), the absence of independent observers in most conflict areas increases the extreme vulnerability of the displaced populations. People in hiding in the rural war zones are at risk of being shot on sight by Burmese army patrols, which seek out communities suspected of aiding the insurgents.

Anti-personnel mines are a major issue in Burma, affecting nine out of 14 states. Landmine mapping and clearance is a particularly urgent need (HRW, June 2005, p.13). The concentration of landmines is especially dense in Karen state. Internally displaced people who have to be constantly on the move in order to avoid military patrols are particularly vulnerable, as most mine fields are unmarked. Also, the army allegedly lays mines close to areas of civilian activity to prevent relocated villagers from returning to their native villages. Some Karen villages in the Pa-an District were burnt down, mined and relocated three times (LM, September 2003). There is no systematic collection of information about mine casualties, but there is evidence that Myanmar is among the countries with the highest number of casualties each year (LM, November 2004).

Local and international non-governmental organisations have documented widespread and continuing sexual violence against ethnic minority women by the military in Burma. Documentation gathered from Karen, Shan and Arakan states concludes that sexual violence is being systematically used as a weapon against the ethnic minority population (HRW, Annual report 2005; UN CHR, 2 December 2004; KWO, April 2004; SHRF/SWAN, May 2002).

Those who seek refuge in neighbouring Thailand have most often endured several years of internal displacement before crossing the border. This is usually a final option, chosen only when the alternatives for protection inside Burma have been exhausted. In December 2004, more than 143,000 people lived in refugee sites. In addition, well over 200,000 Shan refugees, whose status as such is not recognised by the Thai authorities, are believed to be living unofficially in the north of the country (TBBC, December 2004, pp. 2-3). Estimates of the total number of illegal Burmese immigrants in Thailand range from 800,000 to 1.5 million (CA, May 2004). The Thai government implements a strict asylum policy, and only offers protection to refugees fleeing direct fighting. The Thai military has forcibly repatriated refugees to Burma on a number of occasions (ALRC, 10 March 2003; HRW, February 2004). There is also evidence that the Bangladesh government is using "intimidation and harassment" to pressure Rohingya refugees back to Arakan state inside Burma (MSF, 17 September 2003).

Humanitarian conditions remain poor

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium concludes in its latest report that internally displaced people in eastern Burma are extremely vulnerable, exposed to hunger, inadequate shelter and lack of medical services (TBBC, October 2004). In some areas where ceasefires are observed, NGOs and local people have begun the task of rebuilding their war-ravaged communities (HRW, June 2005, p. 11; Ratana Tosakul-Boonmathya, 28 August 2002). The Kachin and Mon

ceasefires of the early to mid-1990s resulted in a slight overall improvement in the human rights situation. However, villagers continue to be displaced as a consequence of natural resource extraction and "development" projects, and their land has been confiscated to build army bases.

Living conditions of internally displaced people hiding in the jungle are usually extremely harsh, with even basic foraging for food constrained by the presence of predatory government troops. Fires for cooking are avoided for this reason. Malaria and anaemia are frequent causes of death and medical facilities are often lacking. Water and sanitation facilities are often inadequate or non-existent. Some internally displaced people live in hiding close to their villages, and try to continue cultivating their fields. Some are subsequently able to return home. Others flee further into the jungle, where they attempt to farm small plots of land. Some groups have managed to maintain basic education and other services for their children without outside aid (CA, May 2004; CSW, April 2004; Cusano 2001).

Humanitarian access and international response

Local community-based networks in Burma are active in many ethnic minority-populated areas (both government-controlled and ceasefire zones). Most humanitarian assistance to relocation sites comes from community-based organisations and local NGOs, either through self-help initiatives or low-profile aid programmes. Over the past two years, there has been an increase in the assistance provided by local networks

to internally displaced people in government-controlled areas (HRW, June 2005, p. 60)

The Burmese government generally refuses any external involvement in its border areas and does not allow access to war-affected populations by international organisations. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar was barred from visiting Burma throughout 2004. The UN Special Envoy visited the country in March 2004, but later requests have been rejected (UN CHR, 7 March 2005).

There are about 30 international NGOs and nine UN agencies working inside Burma. They are based in the capital, Rangoon, and operate under tight government restrictions and surveillance (CA, May 2004). A few organisations have access to relocated urban populations. Operational assistance by UN organisations and international NGOs inside the country consists mainly of social development projects targeting the poor in government-controlled areas, including Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and southern Shan states, and to a lesser degree in southeast Burma (Karen and Mon states and Tenasserim Division). Landmine awareness projects are also being implemented in two districts in Karen State. Many of the beneficiaries of these projects were previously forcibly displaced. Some international NGOs in Burma are able to assist relocated populations via local partner NGOs.

The large majority of people needing assistance in Burma are cut off from international relief. Although UNHCR was granted access to some locations of potential refugee return in eastern Burma,

the current political situation in the country is likely to delay any assistance programmes. The ICRC has field offices in Moulmein in Mon state, Paan in Karen state and Keng Tung in Shan state, but its movement within these states is extremely restricted, and it is not allowed into Karenni state at all (CA, May 2004; UNHCR, 12 March 2004).

Local community-based networks in Burma are active in many ethnic minority-populated areas (both government-controlled and ceasefire zones). Some international support is, on a non-official basis, reaching internally displaced people in hiding across the border from Thailand. Basic but crucial medical and food assistance is delivered on an ad-hoc basis by local groups travelling on foot and with back-packs. Over the past two years, there has been an increase in assistance by local networks to internally displaced in government-controlled areas (KTWG, 2003; HRW, June 2005, p. 60).

Forced displacement in Burma has been officially condemned, for example in the UN General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights. The latest resolutions have called on the government to end the systematic forced displacement of civilians and other policies leading to displacement within Burma to provide the necessary protection and assistance to internally displaced people and ensure access to the affected populations (UNGA, 17 March 2005; CHR resolution 2005/10). The UN Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights in Myanmar, whose mandate was established in 1992, continues to press for access to vulnerable populations, and respect for their human rights. NGOs have recently urged the international commu-

nity and the UN in particular to increase pressure on the Burmese government to allow humanitarian access to the east of the country (CA, May 2004).

However, while the military government is being condemned for its suppression of the democracy movement and is subject to some unilateral sanctions, the international community has largely remained silent regarding the forced displacement of ethnic minorities and other grave human rights abuses committed in the border areas. Despite local initiatives to provide assistance to the internally displaced, it is well documented that internally displaced in Burma face severe food shortages and lack of basic medical facilities. It is imperative that the UN and other international actors, together with local groups, now develop a common policy vis-à-vis the government in order to improve protection and assistance to Burma's internally displaced.

Note: This is a summary of the Global IDP Project's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Burma. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the Burma [List of sources](#) page of our website.

About the Global IDP Project

The Global IDP Project, established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1996, is the leading international body monitoring internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Geneva-based Project contributes to protecting and assisting the 25 million people around the globe, who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Global IDP Project runs an online database providing comprehensive and frequently updated information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

It also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In addition, the Project actively advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

For more information, visit the Global IDP Project website and the database at www.idpproject.org.

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