Burma: International community ignores government-caused displacement

Notorious across the world for its suppression of Aung San Suu Kyi’s democracy movement, the military regime in Burma is less known for displacing hundreds of thousands of its own people. Between 600,000 and one million people remain internally displaced in Burma because of the military regime’s brutal policies to control border areas populated by ethnic minorities. Exposed to ongoing violence and systematic human rights abuses at the hands of government troops, these people are without protection from either their government or the international humanitarian community. This has affected the eastern border areas in particular, and especially the Karen, Karen, Shan and Mon ethnic groups. In western Burma, the Muslim Rohingya people and other minority groups along the Bangladesh and India borders have also suffered from the military campaign. In addition, thousands more have been displaced in schemes to resettle the urban poor and the building of large-scale infrastructure projects. With their traditional livelihoods ruined and humanitarian assistance blocked by the army, the situation of Burma’s displaced people is desperate. In order to improve both the democratic process and the humanitarian situation, more active international diplomacy, and attention towards the situation in the ethnic minority areas is required from the UN, its agencies and international NGOs.

http://www.idpproject.org/
Affected Villages (Burma-Thailand border)

Source: Burmese Border Consortium, September 2002

More maps are available on http://www.idpproject.org/
Background and main causes

The military regime in Burma, presently known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), seized power in 1988, renaming the country, Myanmar. Two years later, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming majority in multi-party elections but were prevented from taking power by the military. Since then Aung San Suu Kyi has spent many years under house-arrest, and the NLD has been forced into political opposition.

Since seizing power, the military regime has more than doubled the strength of its army, using its military might to keep the country under its control, particularly in areas of ethnic minority-led insurgency. Troops are deployed throughout the ethnic minority-populated states, many of which run along the border areas. Since 1989 some 17 ceasefires have been agreed between the SPDC government and insurgent groups, but three main armed organisations remain active, and control pockets of territory within the border states. These are the Karen National Liberation Army, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and the Shan State Army (SSA).

Counter-insurgency operations in border areas directly target civilians. There are regular reports of torture, arbitrary executions, sexual violence, indiscriminate use of landmines, and forced recruitment by both the government troops and armed opposition groups. The livelihoods of people are further undermined by systematic use of forced labour, restrictions placed on farmers’ access 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 forced to flee.

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). Between 1999-2002, 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 forceful displacement of those originally living in the resettlement areas, mostly groups of Shan and Lahu people (LNDO, April 2002).

Between 1996 and 2002, according to information provided by local NGOs working along the Thailand border, as many as one million people became displaced in eastern Burma. At least 150,000 of them fled as refugees or joined the huge ‘illegal’ migrant population in Thailand. By 2002 approximately 268,000 people remained in hiding in the forests and mountains of eastern Burma, and another 365,000 people had been forced to move to more than 176 forced relocation sites. Approximately 2,536 villages are known to have been destroyed, relocated, or otherwise abandoned in eastern Burma because of Burmese army activity during this period (Burmese Border Consortium September 2002). As of October 2003 no available information indicated any major return of these IDPs.
But the fighting on the borders is not the only cause of internal displacement. Rohingya and other people in western Burma are often displaced as a result of brutal discrimination policies, including the construction of 'new villages' for trans-migrants from central and northern Burma. In most cases, displaced people in Arakan state flee to Bangladesh, where conditions of asylum are very harsh, and from where they face the prospect of forced repatriation (Forum Asia, 15 June 2003).

Another main cause of internal displacement in Burma is forced urban relocation. In the early 1990s, and occasionally throughout the decade, communities have been forced to move away from 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 during recent years (MRG May 2002; KWN September-October 2003).

There is often an overlap between conflict-induced and what is often characterised as "development-induced" displacement. For example, between 2001 and 2003 the Burmese army forcefully relocated tens of thousands of people in advance of the dam construction in Shan, Karenni and Karen states. Many more people will loose their lands if planned projects go ahead (Salween Watch, March-August 2003). Similar displacement took place in the Tenasserim Division during the 1990s when people were forced to leave their villages in order to create a 'security corridor' on either side of a new gas pipeline. In October 2003 Global Witness issued a report that documented how forced labour was linked to the military's involvement in the timber trade.

Although there has not been any major flow of refugees out of Burma, 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. The Thai government implements a strict asylum policy, and only offers protection to refugees fleeing direct fighting. The Thai military has forcibly repatriated refugees back to Burma on a number of occasions (ALRC, 10 March 2003). In the west, it has been reported that the Bangladesh government is using "intimidation and harassment" to pressure Rohingya refugees back to the Arakan state inside Burma (MSF, 17 September 2003).

Physical security is non-existent

The counter-insurgency operations have created a human rights situation in the border areas of Burma that is considered one of the worst in the world. Instead of adhering to its obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians in territory under its control, government troops are systematically exposing 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 ICRC has gained some access to zones of ongoing armed conflict (ICRC 8 April 2003), the absence of independent ob-
Humanitarian conditions remain poor

People forcefully relocated by the Burmese army are commonly given about one week’s notice to leave their village, following 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 relocations 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, September 2002). Other relocation sites are sited 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, and health and education services. People in relocation sites are reportedly used as forced labourers. They are made to carry military supplies, build and maintain nearby army camps, and work on road and other infrastructure projects (NCGUB, September 2002). 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).

Forced labour is a major protection issue for people also after becoming displaced. Since 1998 ILO has continuously documented how forced labour is directly linked to military operations. In 2003 the UN special rapporteur on human rights pointed out that "living in hiding" was the only way to avoid this exploitation (UN GA, 5 August 2003, para. 52).

Since the last update of this country profile in 2002, numerous credible reports have documented that the protection situation has not improved, for example: 

servers in most conflict areas means that the displaced populations are extremely vulnerable.

There are regular reports of torture and arbitrary executions, forced recruitment by both government and armed opposition forces, and the indiscriminate use of landmines. Ethnic minority women are at particular risk, as rape has increasingly become a tool used by Burmese troops to create fear and punish civilians in the conflict areas.

By 2002 local sources estimate that more than 200,000 IDPs were living in hiding, or living in temporary forest shelters, in Karen areas and in Mon, Karenni and Shan States (Burmese Border Consortium, September 2002). People in hiding in the rural war zones are liable to be shot on site by Burmese army patrols, which seek out communities suspected of aiding the insurgents.

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resettled IDPs, have begun the task of rebuilding their war-ravaged societies (Ratana Tosakul-Boonmathya, 28 August 2002). The Kachin and Mon ceasefires of the early-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 Burmese army bases.

Some IDPs in hiding remain close to their villages, and try to continue cultivating their fields. After some time, they are sometimes able to return home. Others flee further into the jungle, where they attempt to farm small plots of land. When hiding in the jungle, people have to cope with extremely harsh conditions, where even basic foraging for food is often constrained by the presence of government troops (Cusano 2001).

**Humanitarian access and international response**

The Burmese government in general refuses any outside involvement in its border areas and does not allow access to war affected populations by international organisations. Some 40 UN agencies and international NGOs are operating inside Burma, but few have direct access to displaced populations, except for some relocated urban populations. Operational assistance by UN organisations and international NGOs inside the county consists mainly of social development projects targeting the poor in government-controlled areas, including the Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and southern Shan states, and to a lesser degree in southeast Burma (Karen and Mon states and Tenas-srim Division. Many of the beneficiaries of these projects were once forcefully displaced. Some international NGOs in Burma are able to assist relocated populations, via local partner NGOs.

Local community-based networks in Burma are active in many ethnic minority populated areas (both government-controlled and ceasefire zones), and some international support is, on a non-official basis, reaching IDPs in hiding across the border from Thailand. This crucial support is delivered by local partner groups which mainly provide medical and food assistance. Many displaced communities maintain basic education and other services for their children without outside aid (KTWG, 2003).

While there has been consistent focus on the political situation in Burma, the humanitarian crisis has not been given similar attention. However, forced displacement in Burma has occasionally been addressed in international fora and officially condemned, for example in the UN General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights. The UN Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, whose mandate was established 1992, continues to press for access to vulnerable populations, and respect for their human rights. He has recently asked the government to facilitate an assessment of the situation in southern Shan state (UNCHR, 16 April 2003).

However, while the military government is being condemned for its suppression of the democracy movement and is subject to some unilateral sanctions, similar actions are not initiated in response to the crisis of internal displacement. In order to improve the protection of IDPs, more
active international diplomacy and attention towards the situation in the ethnic minority areas is required from the UN, its agencies and international NGOs. Long-term solutions to the crises of internal displacement will only be possible in the context of a settlement to the deep-seated political conflicts in Burma that has the commitment of the military rulers, the National League for Democracy and representatives of the ethnic groups.

Note
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About the Global IDP Project

The Global IDP Project, established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998 at the request of the United Nations, 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.

The Global IDP Project runs an online database providing comprehensive and frequently updated information and analysis on internal displacement in over 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 at www.idpproject.org

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