



# Burma Issues

June - July 2006

VOLUME 16 NUMBER 6/7



# CRISIS IN KAREN STATE:

## THE HUMAN COST OF THE LATEST OFFENSIVE

By Moo Ko HTEE

As the heavens opened with the monsoon rain, the thousands of Karen villagers hiding in the jungle from the Burmese soldiers thought their prayers had been answered. However, their relief was soon washed away as they realised that the rains did not mean the end to the offensive, as happens most years. This offensive was different.

With the southern part of Burma effectively under the control of the military junta, the army launched a large scale offensive in the northern districts of Karen State, to gain control over villagers who have always managed to evade the junta's rule.

Sadly, military attacks are a regular feature in the lives of villagers in Burma. Over the past three decades the military regime has launched numerous offensives directly targeting the civilian population, undermining their ability to survive. Since this latest offensive began in November last year, more than 18,000 people have been displaced from their homes<sup>1</sup>. Villagers have become so accustomed to having to flee, that they have developed non-violent coping strategies, such as storing food in hiding places.

Regardless of their preparation, villagers who are internally displaced live a precarious existence hiding in the jungle, until they can safely

return to their villages – only to wait until the next time they have to flee. Heavily armed columns of soldiers are being sent to find villagers and “flush them out” of the hills. Troops are systematically destroying villagers and internally displaced persons (IDPs) rice supplies and are killing innocent people on sight. Villagers, who have been able to return home for a short time to collect food and supplies, have found their villages desecrated. Abandoned villages have been looted and burnt down by the Burmese soldiers. Crops deliberately destroyed and animals taken or killed. The soldiers have planted landmines around the villages and in the fields to deter people from coming back.

In order to perpetrate these attacks the Burmese army has deployed additional battalions to the three districts in Karen State, Toungoo, Muthraw (also known as Papuan) and Nyaung Lay Bin, where the offensive is underway. There are reports that a significant portion of these troops are child soldiers<sup>2</sup>. Additional military bases are being built (with forced labour) to house the extra troops, and are a sign that the increase

“While there are no mass graves, this is genocide”

in troops is not temporary. Furthermore, in addition to the troops, military equipment, supplies and rations are being stockpiled in the area.

This military build up has not just occurred recently. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has been increasing its military presence in Karen State since a verbal “gentlemen’s” ceasefire agreement with the Karen National Union (KNU) was reached in January 2004. Due to the terms of the ceasefire the Karen National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the KNU, could do nothing to stop the Burmese army without breaking the agreement<sup>3</sup>.

As a result of the on-going large-scale offensive, and the increased militarization of the area, the human rights abuses perpetrated against the villagers have amplified. The systematic use of villagers as forced labour and porters is well documented. During this offensive more than 800 villagers, including women, elderly and

*Burma Issues* is a publication of the Peace Way Foundation and is distributed on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned with the state of affairs in Burma.

Editor Z. Brake  
1/11 Soi Piphat 2  
Convent Rd, Silom  
Bangkok 10500, Thailand  
durham@mozart.inet.co.th  
www.burmaissues.org

The Peace Way foundation appreciates your on-going support. If you wish to make a donation, please use the following bank account references:

Bank: BANGKOK BANK  
Branch: SILOM  
Account name: Peace Way Foundation  
Swift: BKKBTHBKA  
Account No: 101-7-478072

children were used to carry supplies and equipment for the military<sup>4</sup>. Prisoners are also being brought to Karen State to be used as porters. Alarmingly the SPDC is using people conscripted for forced labour as human mine sweeps - making them to walk in front of soldiers to detect and remove landmines by hand.

After eight months of this offensive what is clear is that there is no singular reason behind it. Some analysts and groups have made links between the creation of a "security zone" around the new capital Pinyinman and the offensive. However, Muthraw, which is south-east of Pinyinman, is being attacked but would not be considered within the parameters of the security zone, while other places in Karenni and Shan State that would be within the security zone are relatively peaceful.

Nonetheless, perhaps there is some truth in the "security zone" being part of the reason for the offensive. It is well known that the junta is extremely paranoid and one area of particular concern for them is an uprising from within the army and the government. The clearing



## PEOPLE'S STORIES: SAW EH HTOO

**M**y father, bother and I went to work on our farm cutting down trees. My brother, who was 12 years old, only had one leg because when he was younger a snake bit the other leg and it had to be cut off. The Burmese Army came and began shooting at us while we were working. I had been shot three times, but I could still walk. My father could not walk. He told me to go to the village and send people back to get him and my brother. I made it to the village and told them what happened. The villagers could not go back immediately because they did not know if the soldiers had left or if they were still there. The next day someone told my father and brother had been killed.



Our village is in the mountains so it is not easy to contact other people. There is no clinic but a few people know a little about medicine. I have to take care of my mother and my three siblings that are alive because my father is dead. I hate the soldiers who killed my father, but I cannot revenge my father and brother's death

*Saw Eh Htoo is 16 years old.*

out of "hostile" villagers may not be about creating a fixed security zone, but rather to ensure that if a revolt did occur in Pyinmana that there would not be any sympathetic villagers around to support it.

However there are numerous speculated reasons for the offensive. The three districts that have been targeted, Mutraw, Toungoo and Nyaung Lay Bin are considered the "heart land" of the Karen resistance to Burmese oppression. Thus, bringing this area under the control of the junta would strike a blow to the Karen insurgency and possibly weaken the KNU's position. While some analysts have predicted that this could be the last offensive against the Karen insurgency, with the Burmese army continuing until it has left the KNU in tatters, others believe that it could weaken the KNU, but it will not stop the resistance.

Additional reasons for the offensive relate to development projects along the Thai-Burma border. The Salween Dam is continuing, despite protests from local groups on both sides of the border and the death of a Thai surveyor from a landmine<sup>5</sup>. The SPDC is still securing land around the dam site and transportation routes that will be used during its construction. Furthermore the three districts that the offensives are occurring in are rich in natural resources, which is extremely profitable when exploited with little regard for environmental issues and with limited labour costs as villagers "volunteer" to do the work.

However, the reasons behind the offensive do not detract from the reality that the SPDC is attacking civilian populations without any form of provocation. Not only is the Burmese army directly attacking villagers but they are also undermining the grassroots people's ability to survive. The villagers in the offensive area, who are mainly farmers, were beginning to harvest their crops when the offensive began last November. The crops rotted in the fields because the villagers had to abandon their farms to flee to safety in the jungle. Most of the 18,000 people in hiding have very little, if any, food. Their diets are supplemented with food that they can find from the jungle. However, due to the serve landmine contamination of the area, looking for food is extremely dangerous.

As the offensive continued more villagers had to flee the Burmese troops, while the others remained in hiding. This meant that they could

not prepare for next years crop. Consequently in the coming November and December there will be no crop to harvest and food scarcity will continue next year, regardless of the political situation.

In addition to food scarcity IDPs face serious health problems, especially since the beginning of the wet season. Malaria is prevalent, as is skin disease, dysentery and malnutrition. Children and the elderly suffer the most. Heavily pregnant women have to flee the same as other villagers, walking for days and giving birth to their children while on the run.



*IDPs in Hiding, Karen State, 2006, BI Human Rights Documentation Project*

The areas in Karen State where the offensive is taking place is extremely mountainous and there is very limited access to these areas. All transportation routes, apart from walking, are controlled by the SPDC. The regime prevents non-government organisations and United Nations agencies inside Burma giving humanitarian aid to the villagers affected by the offensive. Also the

junta does not allow organisations to travel to these areas and document the situation. Cross-border aid from Thailand is illegal, and due to the close political and economic relationship between the Thai government and the SPDC maintaining this relationship is a much higher priority within Thailand than helping people in need.

However, the IDPs are receiving some aid from community-based organisations. Whatever aid these groups can give, is only a tiny amount of what is needed. Most of this assistance is very basic medical care and food. The SPDC deems the activities of these groups illegal and if the Burmese army catches workers they will simply disappear – never to be heard of or seen again.

Despite the aid, the villagers are living in appalling conditions, waiting to see if they sur-

**DISPLACEMENT UPDATE**  
Since this current offensive began in November last year an estimated 16,000 people have been forced to flee their homes. This figure in itself is horrifying, however, prior to this offensive there were nearly 90,000 IDPs in Karen State (Internal Displacement and Protection in Eastern Burma, Thailand Burma Border Consortium, October 2005).





*Man with his belongings, preparing to flee  
BI, Human Rights Documentation Project, 2006*

the international community and the United Nations to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners in Burma, than for the military regime to stop their blatant attacks on the civilian population in Karen State. Pinherio himself, who is suppose to stand up for all victims of human rights abuses in Burma, made reference to the offensive as being part of a counter-insurgency military action being carried out by the regime, suggesting that the villagers are merely collateral damage. IDPs and rural villagers face human rights abuses on a daily basis, as well to military attacks during offensives. In addition to torture, rape, extra judicial killings, forced relocation, displacement and land confiscation, the SPDC are slowing and deliberately eroding the people's ability to survive.

Constant fleeing means people cannot feed their families, provide education and health care or even ensure their safety. Putting this into perspective, it has been occurring for over thirty years. It is not a counter-insurgency against a rebel group, but the slow destruction of a people who refuse to give up their ideals of democracy, equality, justice and freedom. While there are no mass graves, this is genocide. Our silence makes us compliant, and eventually, the voices of the people calling for help will be forever silenced.

**Endnotes:**

1. "Burma Army launches new attacks in Nyaunglebin and Toungoo Districts of Karen State, Burma", Free Burma Rangers, July 19, 2006
2. Information from Burma Issues Field Staff, June 2006
3. "Seeing Through the Smoke of Ceasefires", Karen Human Rights Group, June 9, 2005
4. "Burma Army Captures 800 Civilians and Forces 1,000 Prisoners to Porter for Their Offensive", Free Burma Rangers, June 3, 2006
5. "EGAT stops Salween surveys after worker dies", Mizzima News, May 31, 2006
6. "Burmese Junta Accuses KNU of Forced Relocation", The Irrawaddy, May 15, 2006
7. Ibid
8. "Press Release", United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 16, 2006



**How YOU CAN HELP?**

You can support the movement to get a United Nation's Security Council resolution on Burma. There are two ways to do this:

1. Go to the WITNESS website ([www.witness.org](http://www.witness.org)) and send an email or fax to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan calling for the UN to take action against the military regime.
2. Visit ([www.unscurburma.org](http://www.unscurburma.org)) to learn more about the UN Security Council, their role, the situation inside Burma and past UN Security Council resolutions. The site also a petition calling for a UN Security Council resolution that you can sign.

## PEOPLE'S STORIES:

### NAW LAY LAY PAW

**W**e had to flee our village in March. A person from our village had gone to another place to take medicine and on the way back he saw the Burmese troops. He ran home, avoiding the soldiers, and warned the villagers that the army was near. We started to prepare, then we split into two groups and fled. We slept that night in the jungle and the next day we found the other group and fled again.

The State Peace and Development Council troops had also divided into smaller groups. They had too many groups and they found our camp where we had been hiding. The SPDC group 522 which had split into two groups saw a rice stores and burnt it down. They then went to another place and saw a villager, Saw Thee Sha Paw who was 38, and shot him. He died. When this group of SPDC soldiers arrived at the Klar Khee village they entered the village and caught more than 60 chickens and ducks that the villagers had to leave behind when they fled. They took or killed all the animals. The next morning as they were leaving they saw two grandmothers that were hiding. They threatened them by shooting on either side of the old grandmothers, as well as putting a knife in the barrel of the gun and threatening the women with this makeshift bayonet. The soldiers left the scared women and continued their trip until they saw two tents full of villagers' belongings, which the soldiers stole. When this SPDC group arrived in Klee Cha Khee village they killed a student who was 18 years old. We did not dare bury him for a while after his death because the SPDC usually leaves landmines in the villages where they have been. The villagers were afraid of the landmines and nobody dares go there.

We slept in the jungle for nine nights. We have to stay in the place where a lot of wild animals live, such as wild buffalo and many other animals. Moreover, there were no plants that we could eat. There was only one small stream and we worry for the children because the stream has *myi* (very small water-based leeches). The *myi* get into the children's noses, mouth, ears and eyes and it becomes a problem as they suck the children's blood and get bigger and bigger.

After nine nights in the jungle we came back to our own village. Even though we could go back to our village we were still in danger. We get news from the SPDC porters that the SPDC offensive will continue for this whole year. Now many SPDC troops are coming and they are sending many cars with food to the frontline. After sending the food, they will start carrying out their military activities. So we are always very worried about the situation and have to be careful.

When you live in the jungle it is the same as you live in constant trouble. We are surrounded by the army and if they see fire or smoke they will come and find us. The other thing is we are afraid to make a loud noise and stay quiet otherwise the soldiers might come and search for us. We have to stop our children crying and make them play quietly. It is hard for our children to live in this situation and it means they have no freedom when we are fleeing from the SPDC. We always have to be prepared and ready to escape from the army. We have no time to live in freedom and each day we have to be aware of the SPDC situation because we don't know when they will come again.

The SPDC hates us because we are Karen. Whenever they see a Karen person, big or small, young or old, they kill them. They don't analyze anything. The army considers all the ethnic Karen people to be members of the group that fights against them, so big or small, all must be killed. If the children grow up, the army thinks they will fight against them.

What I want the most in my life is liberty. We want to live and travel in freedom. It is really hard for us to continue to survive under the SPDC persecution. So I want to know if the United Nations has any ways to bring peace to our country. If so, I hope they will come and help us now and build up peace in our country.

***\*Naw Lay Lay Paw is a 53 year old, Christian Karen woman from Hsaw Mu Plaw village. Despite spending many years on the run, and numerous personal tragedies, she continues to work as a teacher for IDP children helping her community and dreaming of a better future. She told her story to the Burma Issues video staff and it was translated into English by Naw Cha Mu.***

# news brief

**No peace talks until offensive stops: KNU:**The Karen National Union has ruled out the possibility of peace talks with the Burmese military despite an unofficial offer for dialogue, saying the State Peace and Development Council needed to first stop attacking Karen civilians.

David Taw, head of the KNU's Foreign Affairs Department said that while personnel Lieutenant colonel Mya Htun Oo had offered to enter into dialogue, no agreements would be made until the military stopped their offensives in Karen State .

He said over 20,000 ethnic Karen civilians have been forced to leave their villages and seek shelter in the jungle and in the border areas due to the recent offensive attack.

**Thai Army call Burma to response for shooting helicopter:**Thai military authorities were still awaiting a response from Burma on a proposal to discuss an incident in which

Thailand says Burmese forces fired at a Thai helicopter.

Thailand says small arm fire from Burma hit and damaged a Thai supply helicopter as it was flying over the Pangmapa district in northern Mae Hong Son province near the Shan State border on July 10. It was able to land safely at a military base in Pangkong village and nobody was hurt.

The Thai Third Army has lodged a strong protest over the incident and called for the punishment of those responsible and the payment of compensation for the damage incurred by the helicopter.

The incident recalled a similar case in August, 1997, when a Thai helicopter was shot down by Burma Army fire near Mae Sot . The two pilots and two Thai soldiers died in the crash.

**Thailand studies the feasibility of investment in Mergui and Tavoy:** The National Economic and Social Advisory Council is making a feasi-

bility study of tourism and fisheries investment in Burma's Tavoy and Mergui townships.

The study follows a recent request from local businessmen, who said cross-border investments would generate economic growth and improve the lives of people in the western region.

The Kanchanaburi-Tavoy highway, a joint venture between Thai contractors and Burmese military authorities, would open the area up to investment and development. The construction should have started several years ago but was delayed because of the Thai companies' financial problems and lack of support from the Thai government.

Under the Burmese government's economic development policy, Mergui would be developed into a regional centre for the fishery industry. There are also tourism opportunities in the region.

BURMA ISSUES  
PO BOX 1076  
SILOM POSTOFFICE  
BANGKOK 10504  
THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

PRINTED MATERIALS

AIRMAIL