

UNITED NATIONS  
Economic and Social Council  
Sub-Commission on Prevention of  
Discrimination and Protection of Minorities  
Working Group on Slavery  
13th session

Geneva  
August 1988

Statement on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society

Babies are being kidnapped in Thailand and smuggled over the border into Malaysia in what has become known as the cross-border baby trade.

Although police on both sides of the frontier have recently become more active and have allegedly arrested some 60 kidnappers, no Thai government agency is officially charged with ending the trafficking. Credit for uncovering the infamous trade is due to the Bangkok-based Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights (CPCR), which is nearing the end of its investigations - a project with which the Anti-Slavery Society is proud to have been associated, albeit in a minor way. The CPCR is revising upwards its estimate of the number of smuggled babies from 6,000 to in excess of 10,000.

The trade is lucrative in local terms but it highlights that life is cheap when it is a commodity. A baby on the Thai side of the frontier will fetch about £55; in Malaysia prospective parents will pay ten times that amount and sums of £1,000 are not unknown. Adoption is difficult in Malaysia and light-skinned children, particularly girls, are highly prized. Thai girls have the reputation of being hard-working and obedient both as daughters and, later, as brides.

Minders are paid about £1 per baby per day in safe houses until the human commodity is taken across the border. The babies, usually kidnapped but bought from prostitutes, are frequently drugged to keep them quiet while they are carried across the border in shopping bags. As the CPCR says, it's better paid than smuggling cigarettes.

The Anti-Slavery Society joins the CPR in calling for stricter observance of international law and for higher penalties than the 10 years in prison faced by convicted smugglers in Thailand. The Society also welcomes the Thai government's intention to raise the minimum employment age to 13 and hopes this new-found concern for child welfare will be extended to stopping the kidnapping and smuggling - and avoidable deaths in the process - of babies.

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Statement on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society

For about a decade and a half the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh have been administered under either de jure or de facto martial law. In the tracts at the moment there are just under 10,000 armed troops and police as well as the ordinary police force, members of which are to be found, particularly, in every area of Bengali settlement.

The tribal population of 600,000 has been augmented by 300,000 Bengali plains-dwellers 'encouraged' to settle by Dhaka. This influx has been accompanied by landgrabbing, torture, rape, desecration of holy places, and the displacement of tribal peoples currently living in unofficial refugee camps in the Indian state of Tripura and who now number over 40,000. The Bangladeshi army has even attacked an orphanage in Dighinala run by Buddhist monks.

The Anti-Slavery Society has in its possession over 100 cases of violent human rights abuses perpetrated in the six month period up to April this year. It now takes the opportunity in this forum to invite the Bangladeshi authorities to investigate just one of these cases, that of the headmaster of Babu Chara High School. On or about 6 April this year 40-year-old Mr Ranjan Kumar Chakma was reportedly subjected to severe physical beatings and torture by a Major Mahfuz of the 20 East Bengal Regiment. As far as is known, the headmaster is still being held in custody in the army camp at Babu Chara. It is hoped, Mr Chairman, that the investigation will begin as soon as possible and that the outcome will be forwarded to the Centre for Human Rights as well as to the Anti-Slavery Society.

The recent decision to declare Islam the state religion of Bangladesh has caused consternation among the non-Muslim population and particularly among the hill tracts people, most of whom are Buddhist. Their fear that the move will be followed by a policy of Islamicisation has already led, according to the political party the Jana Samati Samiti, (JSS) to increased oppression in the tracts.

Meetings, the first since December 1985, between representatives of the government and the JSS broke off in February this year without any agreement being reached.

In order for a start to be made to ending the unrest and bloodshed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and bearing in mind the ethnic and religious differences between the hill people and the majority Bengali population, and noting the widespread fear that their existence as 13 separate hill tribes is put at risk by the policies of Dhaka, the Anti-Slavery Society recommends:

1. The end of Bengali settlement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts;
2. The removal of the Bengali settlers except those comparatively few families who pre-date the Bangladeshi state;
3. The withdrawal of all Bangladeshi armed forces including non-tribal policemen;
4. Financial and other help for the rehabilitation of tribal refugees.

UNITED NATIONS

Economic and Social Council

Sub-Commission on Prevention of

Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

Working Group on Indigenous Populations

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Statement by the Anti-Slavery Society

General Ne Win came to power a quarter of a century ago in the midst of student unrest and rebellions by several of Burma's ethnic communities. His recent resignation took place in parallel conditions. But there has been an essential change; the country has degenerated from potentially one of the richest in Asia to its present 'L.D.C.' status - a UN-listed Least Developed Country. It is now one of the world's poorest nations with a per capita income of less than £100.

The Anti-Slavery Society urges the new order in Rangoon to take advantage of the changing times and recognise that most non-Burmans, and certainly those forming the National Democratic Front, have suffered long and grievously and have been subjected to human rights violations in addition to the political and economic deprivations that have been the lot of the population as a whole.

The Karen and Kachin peoples in particular have been fighting for the recognition of their ethnic identities for 40 years. They, along with other Burmese minority communities - communities large enough to be nations in their own right - have been bombed, shot, raped, tortured and used as human mine detectors by the Burmese military authorities.

The recent changes in government provide the ideal opportunity not only for the lifting of the bamboo curtain and for Burma to end its international isolation, but also for the restoration of justice to the country's various ethnic peoples and the constitutional recognition of their separate identities.

Statement on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society

The Dumagat people of the Philippines island of Luzon are living in slavery.

Their servitude takes the form of perpetual debt bondage, a practice that has been in existence for at least a century, but which has been brought out in to the open by Father Apolo de Guzman, co-ordinator, the Tribal Filipino Apostolate, Cabanatuan diocese, Luzon.

The information on which this intervention is based, Mr Chairman, was given to the Anti-Slavery Society by Father Apolo personally.

The Dumagats, an indigenous community, live in the mountainous country around the town of General Tinio in the province of Nueva Ecija. The remoteness of the area has enabled the practice to continue and to become accepted as a way of life. The Dumagats, who have no written alphabet and live in leaf and twig huts built so low there is only room to crouch in, have no tradition of agriculture. This, their illiteracy, lack of sophistication and passive nature, has made them easy to manipulate by the tabongs, the middlemen/owners drawn from the lowland peoples, the Tagalogs.

A tabong customarily has between 15 to 40 Dumagats in debt to him. The nature of the debt has become imprecise through the passage of time, but it is made up of debts incurred by ancestors, loans of rice and, occasionally, a little money to buy clothes with. The Dumagats do not make their own garments.

In order to pay back the loan the Dumagats have to gather rattan in the mountains and then walk some six miles to a collecting point with a 35 to 40 kilo load on their backs. In exchange, the tabong gives them about two kilos of rice which, with a little salt, is their only food. An average family of parents and two children subsist on this amount which makes just one meal per day. Unsurprisingly, many Dumagats suffer from malnutrition, goitres, tuberculosis and malaria.

A hundred such slave families have been identified, but there are about 1,000 families in the area who may or may not be in servitude of varying degrees.

The tabongs sell the indebted families to one another for round sums of 1,000, 2,000 or 3,000 pesos. The Dumagats are told they can only be free when they pay off their, rarely specified, debts. This is impossible when the routine payment is a daily ration of rice eaten on the day it is supplied.

Increasingly the tabongs are discouraging the Dumagats from talking to outsiders and, especially, from continuous contact with Father Apolo who is trying to teach rudimentary agriculture to them.

The Anti-Slavery Society calls on the Philippine government authority responsible, the Office for Northern Cultural Communities, Office of the President, to :

1. Free immediately identified slaves;
2. Investigate the prevalence of debt bondage throughout Dumagat territory;
3. Enter into discussions with Dumagat elders to see what form of lifestyle they wish to lead;
4. To bring to justice the tabongs.

By doing to, the Philippines government will be honouring its obligations under both the Declaration of Human Rights and the 1956 Supplementary Convention on Slavery. It will also be ending one of mankind's most abhorred conditions.