
REPORT FOR 1985
to the
UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST ETHNIC MINORITIES IN BURMA

WGIP 85/SEA-HMR/1

The Anti-Slavery Society wishes to express concern about the fate of the civilian Karen and other ethnic minorities of Burma. During the last 18 months there has been increasing evidence of serious human rights violations being perpetrated against unarmed villagers by the Burmese armed forces. This has led to thousands of Karen refugees fleeing their homelands to seek temporary sanctuary in neighbouring Thailand.

About one quarter of the population of Burma is composed of ethnically distinct hill people. They consist of eleven main groups of which the largest are the Karen, Shan and Chin. In total they number seven million people. At independence in 1948 the Panglong Agreement gave the Kachins, Chins and Shans semi-autonomous status within the Union of Burma with the option to secede at the end of a ten year period. No plebiscite was taken in 1958 and in 1962 a military dictatorship under General Ne Win was established. In 1974 a new constitution created centrally-controlled administrative districts and formally dismantled the minority states. The Karen people, despite being the largest threatened ethnic group in Burma, were excluded from the discussions that took place between the British Government under Clement Attlee and the Burmese Nationalists at the time of independence in 1948.

The socialist government of Burma has confronted the Karen independence movement since 1948, and in the 1960s it faced armed resistance from the Shan, Kachin and Chin. Since 1976 the military and political organizations of the nine main ethnic groups have formed the National Democratic Front whose objective is the establishment of a federal union of Burma providing full political, social and economic rights to all the indigenous minorities. The present Karen state (Kowthoolei) has a well organized military and political structure, and although not recognised by the Burmese government, has its own annual budget, taxation system, elected civilian government, armed forces and education and health services.

However, the costs of the war which has now endured 36 years is high on the civilian population. Burmese offensives into the hills of the Dawna Range, occupied by the Karen and other hill people, have brought countless deaths - possibly as many as 300,000 since 1948 - and acts of brutality. Since early 1984 the Burmese government has escalated its military activities and increased its attacks on civilian villages, accusing villagers of supporting the Karen National Liberation Army. The violence against the civilian population seems to have been undertaken to sow terror, empty the villages and, thereby, reduce support for the Karen army. It has resulted in massive flights of Karen and other minorities into Thailand where they have settled in refugee camps. Today some 15,000 refugees are living in seven main camps on the Thai side of the border.

The experiences of the refugees are a testimony of the horrors which they have faced. Men, women and children have been indiscriminately shot and killed, villages have been shelled without warning, and villagers have been rounded up and placed in concentration camps. Men and women have been used forcibly as porters for the Burmese army and many have been employed to precede Burmese patrols as living mine sweepers. One woman described to a representative of the Anti-Slavery Society how the Burmese troops attacked her village near Mae La Tha without warning in May 1985, killed her pregnant daughter and shot and wounded her grandson in the eye. The woman had carried the grandson for four days until she reached the refugee camp and got treatment. In another case, one woman refugee explained how a 75 mm shell had been fired into the middle of her village, Yo Poo Tha, and killed 5 people outright. All the villagers had fled to the forests. Another refugee described how the Burmese troops visited her village of Kyaw Te Ley Ko in June 1985 and accused two old women of being the mothers of Karen soldiers. Although the women denied this, the soldiers tied them up with ropes and dragged them around the village by their necks. Finally they beat them to death in front of the other villagers. Such stories are common fare in the refugee camps.

Many villages now lie abandoned, thousands have succeeded in escaping into Thailand but 100,000 or more Karen are believed to be eking out an existence in the mountain jungles hiding from the Burmese armed forces. As the rainy season gets under, many of these people will be forced through starvation to abandon their hideouts and run the gauntlet to the safety of Thailand.

In the view of the Anti-Slavery Society the situation of the Karen and other minority peoples in Burma has gone unnoticed too long by the international community and it has cost too many lives. The recent escalation of human rights violations, especially against civilians, the influx of refugees into Thailand and the likelihood that many more victims of Burmese military attacks will swell those camps still further, leads the Anti-Slavery Society to recommend to the Working Group that it urge the Commission on Human Rights to use its influence to find a rapid and peaceful political solution to the conflict.

We further urge the Working Group to recommend to the Commission of Human Rights that it facilitate international travel documents for representatives of the Karen people so that they can attend and inform these meetings. At the present time, they have no rights to a Burmese passport nor would they be permitted by the incumbent government to travel.

We also call upon the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to visit the refugee camps at Mado Muta, Sho Klo, Mae Tha Wa, Wang Kha, Old Maela, Kamo Layko and Naw Pah Doh and inform himself of the situation and provide whatever assistance he deems necessary.