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This statement was presented on behalf of the National Democratic Front of Burma (N.D.F.). The N.D.F. is a member of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples by virtue of its membership in the PACIFIC-ASIA COUNCIL OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.

The representative of the N.D.F. was unable to be in Geneva for the actual presentation of the statement. He has since arrived and hereby endorses the statement.

Saw Mae Plet Htoo

Saw Mae Plet Htoo 4/8/88
Chief Representative
National Democratic Front, Burma

Honorable Erica-Irene Daes:

It gives me great pleasure to have this opportunity to address you and the members and observers of this august body, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

Yet, it gives me great sadness to have to present this review of the horrors which continue to be perpetrated against another branch of our human family, the indigenous non-Burman people of a place called Burma.

It is indeed a sad comment that on the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, others are observing the anniversary of 40 years of civil war and other human rights violations behind a curtain of silence and official denial.

I. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the Agenda set for this meeting, I would like to review developments pertaining to the issues of human rights and fundamental freedoms of the indigenous peoples of Burma. As you know, a situation of civil war and a state of belligerency has existed in Burma for the past 40 years resulting initially from basic human rights issues and leading to further violations of human rights, particularly the rights of the non-Burman indigenous nationalities.

Burma is the 2nd largest state in Southeast Asia with an area of approximately 261,789 square miles. It is potentially a very rich country with abundant natural resources and was once even known as the "rice basket of Asia". The population, composed mostly of non-Burman indigenous minorities, has a total estimated population of about 38 million people. Since the last published census was in 1931 and considered incomplete, it is indeed difficult to get an accurate picture of the numbers and composition of the population.

There is no historical evidence indicating the existence of any political integration of what was known as Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas - namely territories and states controlled and inhabited by the non-Burman indigenous peoples - prior to independence in 1948 when the Union of Burma was first formed.

Just prior to independence, special hearings were organized to discuss the issue of independence and the possibility of forming a union of states belonging to the different nationalities. Some of the indigenous minorities participated in the talks, and some even signed a treaty called the "Panglong Agreement" which guaranteed equal status and full rights to participation in the political process in the new union government. Two indigenous groups were to have the right to secede if they so chose, these were the Shan and the Karenni. The hearings were rushed and inadequate and tended to ignore opposing views from the indigenous minorities and even some of the British officials. With the Agreement in hand, the British granted independence to the Union of Burma and handed over the reins of power to the Burmans. With the tragic death of General Aung San (prior to independence), the so called "father of modern Burma", the fate of the new nation was sealed and died a premature death even before it was born. When negotiations between some of the indigenous leaders and the leaders of the new state broke down and their rights and demands were trampled upon, the new nation was thrown headlong into the devastating fury of a civil war that has raged unabated for the past 40 years. Despite contrary claims, less than half of the country is administered by the central Rangoon regime.

In 1976, the National Democratic Front (NDF) of Burma was formed to help unite the different minority organizations fighting for their rights and resisting the invasion of their homelands. The NDF is made up of 10 major minority resistance organizations. They include:

1. Arakan Liberation Party (ALP)
2. Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)
3. Karen National Union (KNU)
4. Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)
5. Lahu National Organization (LNO)
6. New Mon State Party (NMSP)
7. Pa-O National Organization (PNO)
8. Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP)
9. Shan State Progress Party (SSPP)
10. Wa National Organization (WNO)

II. REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT

The examples in this discussion reflect a common experience of suffering due to atrocities carried out by the Burmese government throughout indigenous areas.

A. Forced Labor of the indigenous Minorities

The Rangoon regime has forcibly conscripted local civilians in indigenous areas to perform manual labor and act as beasts of burden for the Burma Army

when it goes on military operations against indigenous held areas. Conditions for these civilian porters are extremely difficult and dangerous, not mentioning the hardship and mental anguish caused on the families back home and the loss of time for working in their fields and gardens.

Example: Operation "Yan Myu Aung", Summer of 1987

A massive attack was launched in the summer of 1987, with over 20 Burma Army regiments participating in an operation to attack and destroy the headquarters of the Free Kachins and the thriving communities under their administration. Over a period of a month, about 14,000 men, women, and teenagers from the Myitkyina-Wai Maw areas of Kachin State were rounded up at gunpoint and forced to carry the food supply, ammunition, heavy weapons, and other equipment, as well as the many wounded Burmese soldiers along the way. Forced marches at all hours of the day and night sapped the strength and health of the porters. If a porter became sick or too weak to carry the heavy loads, they were either abandoned or as is more often the case, killed. The operations were not aimed only at the Kachin armed forces but were aimed at the civilian government administration and at the civilian communities living in the liberated zone. As a result, close to 30 thousand Kachin refugees sought safety and refuge along the borders in China. Countless atrocities against indigenous civilians have been reported to date and continue to come in. Due to lack of accessibility, the true extent of human rights violations by the Burma government and its Army and intelligence departments is difficult to assess, but it can be safely assumed that various reports being circulated (Amnesty International, Anti-Slavery Society, etc.) have barely uncovered the tip of the ice-berg.

Porters are often used as human mine sweepers, thus providing a "curtain of legs" for the Burma Army. They are often forced to walk ahead of the troops when in territories controlled by the resistance fighters. Porters are also used as human shields during action against the freedom fighters, and they are forced to walk in front of Burmese soldiers who use them as protective shields and as gun rests when they are firing their guns. When marching in hostile areas where the Burmese Army is frequently ambushed by the indigenous resistance fighters, the troops often march in between the porters for protection. Despite special care taken by the indigenous forces, many civilians caught under fire get injured and killed during a fight with government forces.

Recently some Shan porters forcibly conscripted from the Hopin area west of the Irrawady river were taken on operations against the Kachin headquarters on the east side of the river. They managed to escape during the night and were later picked up and assisted by the freedom fighters. Their account has been documented and even taped on video, telling how they were rounded up, forced to carry heavy loads, and forced to march for long distances under very difficult conditions. The spokesman for the group of porters was a man in his late 60s. They also told of how they were beaten and tortured by the Burma Army, and how they were forced to endure extreme hardships, hunger, and lack of even simple medical care.

Example: Torture, Rape, and Murder by the Burma Army

On May 24th, 1987, the Burma Army, 1st Kachin Rifles Regiment, caught Mr. Lau Pau and his 23 year old wife from Nam Bang village. They were both beaten and then the husband was tied to a tree after which the soldiers proceeded to rape the young wife before his very eyes. After every Burma Army soldier had had his turn at raping the young woman, they stabbed her to death! The husband was then beaten with large clubs until he lost consciousness. He was left for dead, but later recovered his consciousness and succeeded to escape.

Example: Forced Labor, Rape, and Murder by the Burma Army

On January 11th, 1988, Kachin villagers from N'Braw Yang were forced to carry rice and supplies to a company outpost of the Burma Army regiment 51 on Bum Krin Bum. After the villagers arrived at the military camp, the Burma Army company commander ordered that a young Kachin girl named La Mai Hkawn should stay behind to give a coin-rubbing treatment to the company commander who was claiming to be sick. That evening the young woman was first raped by the company commander who, when he finished with her, turned her over to his soldiers to be brutally gang-raped throughout the night. Incredibly, she escaped and made it back to her home at N'Braw Yang, torn and shattered, on January 13th. She was immediately taken to the Mogaung Hospital but she died on January 14th, 1988, at the hospital.

B. The Use of Science and Technology Against the Indigenous Peoples

In the war against the indigenous peoples of Burma, it is becoming increasingly apparent that science and technology are being employed to detract from the cause of respect for humanity and to deny basic human rights.

Example: Carcinogenic Herbicide Spraying of Indigenous Territories

The chemical compound 2,4-D, a broadleaf herbicide and a component of the dreaded "Agent Orange" has been found to be carcinogenic in a number of epidemiological studies conducted in Sweden and in the U.S. This controversial chemical is now being used to spray fields and villages in opium poppy growing areas belonging to the indigenous peoples of the Shan and Kachin States where the poppy has been grown for generations. The aerial spraying program was initiated under the guise of carrying out a war against the production of the opium poppy but in reality is being used as a form of chemical warfare to annihilate the indigenous peoples of the area. A close neighbor of Burma has rejected the aerial spraying of 2,4-D in its opium eradication program because they consider it inhumane and dangerous for people, animals, and the environment. In most programs to eradicate opium, it has been found that certain existing conditions must be changed first before any successful program can be implemented and can take root. There is no short cut! Efforts must be taken to develop carefully researched and carefully planned crop substitution programs, education programs, health and social service programs, and programs to develop the non-existent infrastructure such as roads and bridges to take the new cash crops to market. The present aerial spraying program totally ignores these first steps and concentrates only on crop destruction as follows:

1. The Burma Army first goes into an area to "secure" the area so that the planes and helicopters will not be damaged by hostile fire. The villagers are then rounded up. If they show the least sign of resistance such as running away, they are shot and killed. Occasionally the villagers are able to buy off the Army commander.
2. As the people are watching, their fields and villages are sprayed by the fixed wing aircraft employed for this purpose from an elevation of over 1000 feet. Owing to wind and mountainous conditions, it is very difficult to accurately direct the spraying, resulting in indiscriminate spraying of fields, livestock, gardens, and people. Recent examples of spraying have been reported from the Nam Hkam and Keng Tung areas of the Shan State where even deaths of people and livestock have been reported. It should be pointed out that the Burmese do not prepare the people prior to the spraying, nor do they provide compensations for the destruction of their fields, crops, and livestock. This is tantamount to an act of genocide!

The herbicide 2,4-D is normally broken down in the environment by a bacteria called Pseudomonas which is found abundantly in moist and warm soil.

But in the high mountains where opium is grown (over 3000 meters above sea level), the soil is neither warm nor moist, thus chemicals being sprayed during the cold and dry season remains in the environment affecting the ecology for up to one year.

It should be pointed out that aerial spraying of opium fields is neither cost productive nor very effective in view of recent reports that indicate that there has actually been a doubling of opium production since the spraying program was first initiated about 5 years ago. We find the ethical and humanitarian questions and issues very difficult to reconcile with such a chemical spraying program. In addition, Kachin forces recently captured about 650 pounds of opium from the Burma Army when they over ran the regiment headquarters of the Burma Army based in Man Je near Bhamo. They have since offered to turn it over to the DEA or any other legitimate organization but so far there has been no takers. The capture of the opium provides further evidence of Burma Army complicity in the narcotics trade.

Example: The Use of High-tech Anti-personnel Mines

When the Burma Army launches an operation into indigenous areas, they leave behind anti-personnel mines and booby traps as they retreat, literally seeding the paths, fields, and abandoned villages belonging to the indigenous populations. This has resulted in countless injuries and deaths among the indigenous minorities. It was also recently discovered that a new kind of mine was being introduced during the operations last year resulting in rapid onset of gangrene and death. Kachin doctors were stymied by the problem and were forced to amputate even for minor injuries. There are two theories being advanced to explain this new phenomenon:

1. The mines contain some kind of toxin or poison that is fatal to human beings.
2. Exploding mines release high velocity shrapnel causing severe micro-vascular damage to surrounding tissue, resulting in rapid onset of gangrene, shock, and death.

C. Ethnocide

The Rangoon regime is directly engaged in a program of ethnocide as has been reported earlier with the conduct of a 40 year old "war of annihilation" against the indigenous minorities. In addition, a pervasive national program called "Burmanization" has been implemented at all levels in an attempt to assimilated into one homogenous race all the diverse non-Burman indigenous peoples of which the country is richly blessed with over 70 different races.

As a result of Burmanization, this treasure house of a rich diversity of human culture and experience is being lost to humanity. It is known that most Burmans respect and appreciate the cultures and languages of their brothers, but that the present policy to "Burmanize" the minorities originates from a few individuals in the top leadership.

Example: Language

Language is being used to "Burmanize" the non-Burman indigenous peoples as only one official language - Burmese - is recognized. No other state or minority language is official anymore.

Example: Education

Education is being used to indoctrinate and forge one "Burmanized" people. Only Burman language, Burman history, Burman culture, and Burman worldview are taught in the schools. Since all schools have been nationalized by the government there are no private schools or indigenous schools.

Example: Freedom of Speech

All forms of dissent or opposition to government policies such as "Burmanization" are quickly and often brutally silenced. The harsh and brutal suppression of student demonstrators throughout the country leading to hundreds of deaths recently serve as stark reminders of the loss of basic human rights by the indigenous peoples as well as all the other peoples of Burma.

D. Least Developed Country (LDC) Status

With some stretching of the technical requirements, Burma was recently granted Least Developed Country status. This new status will allow the government to receive certain benefits such as debt relief and special aid and grants. It is known that over 50% of the national budget goes to support the armed services which form the backbone of the totalitarian regime. With increasing inflation and economic difficulties more funds are expected to go towards the support of these armed services which are primarily used to suppress and put down all opposition and "annihilate" the indigenous peoples. It is hard to imagine how anyone could award a brutal totalitarian regime with favors and a special status. There is the distinct possibility that funds and aid received as a result of being a least developed country will be abused, misused, and rechannelled to other than designated uses. Donar

governments will need to resist the temptation to give funds unconditionally; as the Rangoon regime is unable to meet the strict conditions of funding.

We propose that all aid to LDC nations

1. Be strictly limited for non-military use only.
2. That stipulations be made to end all hostilities by the receiving government towards the indigenous peoples.
3. That neutral observers be allowed to monitor conditions in the indigenous areas.
4. That contributors should be held equally responsible for abuse and misuse of contributions and aid along with those national governments of receiving states.

E. Positive Developments

The National Democratic Front of Burma was organized to unite the forces of opposition and to help them become more effective in their struggle for freedom, dignity, and basic rights. Under the leadership of Chairman Saw Maw Reh, the NDF has issued a call for the establishment of a genuine federal union in Burma, with equality and freedom for all nationalities. The NDF believes that a just and equitable peace can only be found through political rather than military means. With the recent student and civil unrest in the heartland of Burma leading to the resignation of U Ne Win and other top Burmese officials, a time of fundamental changes is taking place and maybe there is a unique "window of opportunity" for ending all hostilities and initiating dialogue and peace talks between the warring factions.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following steps must be taken if Peace and Progress are to be restored in Burma, and national reconciliation and healing can take place:

1. A truce must be declared and peace talks initiated immediately by the Rangoon government with the National Democratic Front to bring an end to the civil war.
2. There must be open and frank dialogue on the status of the non-Burman indigenous minorities and their rightful place in a federal government and their rights to self-determination.
3. A new system of government, a multi-party parliamentary system, must be installed and allow for a peaceful transition in leadership.

4. Only when a new government is established will the time come for the setting of new policies and plans for dealing with the present economic, social, and political crises that are destroying the nation.

The NDF has called for Peace Talks to be held in a neutral country between the Rangoon government and the NDF. The negotiations should take place under international supervision and with international arbitration.

Since the Rangoon representatives have repeatedly denied the allegations of human rights violations, we call on the Rangoon government to open up the country to foreign journalists. Carefully guided "study tours" are a mockery to the intelligence of any thinking person and does not prove anything. If there is truly nothing to hide then the regime has nothing to fear.

IV. CONCLUSION

We call for Peace,

not the peace of death, the loss of identity, of loss of dignity,
of loss of land, culture, etc.

But, we call for the peace of justice, of equality, of mutual respect,
and of unity in diversity.