

# Suffering in Silence

The Human Rights Nightmare of the Karen People of Burma

**Karen Human Rights Group**

Edited by

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With an introduction by

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Universal Publishers  
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Suffering in Silence, The Human Rights Nightmare of the Karen People of  
Burma/ Edited by Claudio O. Delang

1. Human Rights
  2. Karen
  3. Burma
  4. SLORC
  5. SPDC
  6. KNLA
  7. DKBA
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Cover photo: Villagers in Papun District living in hiding in the forest after their villages were shelled and burned down by SPDC troops who are driving all civilians out of the region. Just before this photo was taken, word came that a large SPDC column was passing nearby and the villagers were preparing to flee further into the hills. Villagers are shot on sight by SPDC troops patrolling the area. [Photo: KHRG]

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## Introduction

Despite being one of the most populous countries of Southeast Asia, in a highly strategic position at the juncture of Southeast Asia, India and China, and steeped in history, diverse cultures and traditions, Burma is a complete enigma to most people in the outside world. Even the peoples of its immediate neighbours have very little concept of what is happening there. To people from more distant countries, it sometimes brings with it vague allusions to World War Two, brutal Japanese occupation and the Death Railway, though more recently they may have heard of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi winning the Nobel Peace Prize and the struggle against a military junta. To Burma's people, to its exiles and refugees, and to those whose work brings them in regular contact with what is happening there, this lack of awareness is a steady source of frustration, particularly when looking at newspapers full of articles about countries where the suffering is not nearly so severe. At times it seems the military junta's policies closing off the country and restricting access to most of it have been successful in wiping it from the world's consciousness.

Burma is home to an estimated 50 million people, somewhere around 50 percent of them being ethnic Burmans (though the junta uses falsified figures to claim 67-70 percent dominance) and the remainder made up by at least 15 major ethnic groups such as the Karen, Shan, Mon, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine, Wa, and others. It is a large country of forests, huge rivers, plains rich in rice, and lower population density than most of east Asia, and until the 1800's various local kingdoms struggled for control of different regions. The British conquered it in the 1800's and made it a single entity, a province of British India. It was occupied by Japan in World War Two, then was given independence by Britain in 1948. Since then it has never ceased to be embroiled in civil war, with Burman-dominated central governments fighting a host of ethnic-based resistance groups and (until 1989) a Communist insurgency. It has been ruled by a military dictatorship since 1962, which transformed itself into a military junta in 1988. This junta was called the State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC) until 1997, when it changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In 1989 the military junta changed the country's name from Burma to 'Myanmar', a name change which is seen by the non-Burman ethnic groups as an act of ethnic cleansing and by the country's elected government (which has never been allowed to assume power) as an illegal act by an illegal regime. Those who do not recognise the military junta as a legitimate government continue to use the name Burma, and this book will do so as well.

This junta has no particular ideology except 'holding the country together' and maintaining itself in power. When faced with massive uprisings for democracy in 1988, it massacred thousands of unarmed demonstrators - a year before Tiananmen Square, and many more people died, but with much less coverage in the outside world. The junta held elections in 1990, only to ignore the results when it lost, and continues to deny every basic freedom to its people. In rural non-Burman areas the situation is much worse, with the Army conducting mass forced relocations, using civilians for forced labour, using torture, rape, summary execution, and the destruction of villages and food supplies as weapons of control.

While the pro-democracy activists in the cities have managed to gain at least some attention in the outside world, the rural villagers who make up most of Burma's population and the poorer sectors of the townspeople have no such voice. Even now it is shocking to see how many people in the outside world have detailed knowledge of the SPDC's harassment of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, but no knowledge whatsoever of the forced labour, Army extortion, arbitrary detention, looting, rape, killings and other abuses which are the daily lot of the general population of Burma. As a volunteer teacher in an opposition-held area of Karen State, I began to come into contact with this reality in 1991 through talking to villagers who had fled forced portorage for the Burmese Army, villagers who had been arrested and tortured, women who had been gang raped by troops, and people whose villages had been destroyed for no clear reason. When a Burmese military offensive destroyed the village where I taught, I was shocked to see the foreign journalists coming only to ask about military advances and take photos of people firing weapons, none of them interested in talking to the villagers. This is what led to the formation of the Karen Human Rights Group in 1992 - the need, in whatever limited way we could, to help the voices of the villagers to be heard in the outside world.

In the beginning, we scribbled down or recorded the words of villagers, translated them into English, banged them up on an old typewriter with candlelight and carbon paper, and handed them to whomever we could make contact with. Now we have a network of Karen volunteers scattered throughout Karen State, recording hundreds of interviews on tape for processing, gathering SPDC order documents and snapping photos for evidence, all to be processed on computers by a translation and editing staff, then published and distributed to agencies throughout the world in print form, by email and on the World Wide Web. KHRG is and always has been apolitical and completely independent of any other

organisation. Though focused on Karen regions, we have also repeatedly documented the situation in other areas throughout rural Burma. Our direct distribution now reaches people and groups ranging from the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma, the International Labour Organisation, and a range of embassies and governments, to international human rights organisations, trade unions, Burma activist groups, journalists and academics. Though our processing, distribution and the appearance of our reports have changed, their content remains essentially the same. Those first reports contained little but the raw translated texts of villagers' stories, and this year's reports are still based entirely around the same type of testimonies, translated sentence by sentence from cassette tapes recorded in the field. To round out the reports and make them more meaningful to those in the outside world, we now add a significant amount of analysis, and also publish Information Updates, summaries and Commentaries on a regular basis to look at trends and relate our detailed regional reports to the broader situation. The purpose remains simple, to provide a conduit for the villagers to get their voices to the outside world so that others can better understand their situation.

This book has come about as an additional way to further this purpose, by providing the reader with a digestible sample of some of our reports in the hope that this can provide an overview of the struggles of rural villagers, and maybe stimulate a further interest. Claudio Delang approached KHRG with the original idea in 1999, and then followed through by doing almost all of the work to make it happen, including selecting and editing the most representative reports, maps and photos, doing all of the formatting and arranging for publishing. Both KHRG and myself are extremely grateful to Claudio for all of his work on this. Months of correspondence by email followed, and you now hold the end result.

The book is based around three of our 1999 regional reports: ***“Death Squads and Displacement”*** (May 1999), ***“Caught in the Middle”*** (September 1999), and ***“Beyond All Endurance”*** (December 1999), which document in detail the situation in three different Karen regions. Taken together, they give the reader a broad spectrum idea of the abuses being inflicted on villagers and their struggle to survive in the face of these abuses, both in areas where opposition armies are active and where they are not.

***“Beyond All Endurance”*** describes the situation of the villagers in a classic conflict area, eastern Pa'an District of Karen State, where the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) is in active guerrilla resistance

to the SPDC junta's forces. The SPDC has responded by forcing villagers into the centre of villages, destroying many villages, rounding up both local villagers and townspeople from afar as military porters for frontline operations, and forcing these civilians to march in front of their columns as human mine detonators and shields against ambush across one of the most heavily landmined patches of ground in all of Asia.

*“Death Squads and Displacement”* speaks with villagers from Nyaunglebin District, not far northeast of Rangoon. This region is divided between the SPDC-controlled Sittaung River plains in the west and rugged hills in the east where there is extensive KNLA activity. The two types of terrain have brought about two very different SPDC strategies for control. In the hills, SPDC forces have had difficulty rounding up the villagers, so since 1997 they have pursued a campaign of systematically shelling and burning villages with no warning or provocation. Approximately 200 villages have been destroyed in this area and neighbouring Papun District since 1997, and the troops have followed up by trampling or uprooting crops in the fields, burning rice storehouses, and shooting villagers on sight in the fields and forests where they have fled into hiding. Further west in the SPDC-controlled plains, there is little guerrilla activity but the SPDC is still engaged in a struggle to control the civilians, in this case by forcibly relocating entire villages to military-controlled sites and constantly using villagers for forced labour on roads and other infrastructure, at Army camps and as porters. As a further weapon of intimidation, the regime introduced the ‘Guerrilla Retaliation’ execution squads in the plains in 1998. These small squads have the sole purpose of executing anyone, Karen or Burman, with any perceived past connection with the Karen opposition. The squads have already executed many former village elders, and their methods are brutal - dragging victims into the forest to cut their throats, and sometimes displaying severed heads as a warning to other villagers. As a result, people of the plains have been fleeing to the hills, where the hill people are already living in hiding, in hungry desperation in the forests, their villages destroyed.

*“Caught in the Middle”* gives us a glimpse of an area more firmly under SPDC control, where there is little opposition guerrilla activity. Yet even in this area, villagers are finding it difficult to survive under the burden of forced labour, extortion and other demands imposed by SPDC forces in the area. At the same time, there is just enough of a perceived guerrilla presence in the area to bring heavy SPDC punishments and retaliations on the heads of the villagers on a regular basis.

To place these reports within a broader context and give the reader some background information, we have begun the book with the chapter *“Understanding Burma”*, which gives a brief summary of Burma’s history and an overview of the mentality and tactics currently used by the regime in controlling the civilian population.

For those already interested in Burma or those who develop an appetite for more information on the subject, there are many places to look. The Karen Human Rights Group web site ([www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org)) is regularly updated with all of our published reports and photo sets. For other information about the Karen people, a good starting point is [www.karen.org](http://www.karen.org). To find links to many other web sites covering various aspects of the Burma situation from widely differing perspectives, start with [www.freeburma.org](http://www.freeburma.org) or [www.soros.org/burma.html](http://www.soros.org/burma.html). To see a regular (several times a week) news roundup on Burma, go to [www.burmanet.org](http://www.burmanet.org), which also tells you how you can subscribe to a free regular email newspaper on Burma.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of the difficult and dangerous work of our people in the field, without whom none of this reporting would be possible, the patient and endless efforts of our office staff, who have to handle such a mass of information coming in that we can never catch up with it all, to our contacts and supporters worldwide who keep up our morale by using our material so effectively, and to Claudio Delang for putting together this book and making it possible. Most of all, though, it is the villagers in Burma themselves who need to be acknowledged, not only for their courage in struggling to survive in the face of a myriad of abuses, but even more for their courage in refusing to be silenced, in trying to get their story to the outside world. Many people have asked me how we manage to convince villagers to talk despite their fear of retaliations by the junta, and the answer is that in the vast majority of cases no persuasion is required or used, because the villagers are eager to have their story heard. For many it is one of the only ways they can release their sadness, their frustration, their grief and their anger after a lifetime of suffering and fleeing.

As in any situation, there is no shortage of people in the outside world who readily pontificate on the solutions to Burma’s problems without ever having listened to the voice of a villager. Many government and corporate leaders in the outside world argue that we should ‘engage’ the military junta in Burma, to seek an accommodation with them, because isolation and sanctions ‘don’t work’ or because the junta is too entrenched to lose its grip on power. Using this logic, one could also

argue that because the rule of law has never 'worked' to eradicate organised crime, we should abandon the law and seek an accommodation with organised criminals - which is essentially what Burma's generals are. Perhaps rather than trying to dictate to the people of Burma what is best for them, what 'works' or 'doesn't work', foreign leaders should listen to what the people of Burma want. Stop listening to the generals, and start listening to the villagers. Diplomatic protocol has taken precedence over the loss of innocent lives for far too long already. In my experience, once people hear a group of villagers describe how the junta holds on to power around their village, they want to do something about it. If it affects you this way, you can make a difference. Go to your political leaders, your corporate executives, those who say they have no time to hear the voices of villagers, and make them hear it whether they like it or not. You may not bring about change in Burma single-handed, but your action will not go unnoticed and you may be surprised by how much effect it will have. It will also make you feel good, strong, and alive, because you will be on the side of the villagers. And they will appreciate it - just listen to them.

Kevin Heppner  
Coordinator  
Karen Human Rights Group  
June 2000

## Understanding Burma

In order to fully understand the day-to-day suffering of Burma's villagers and the mentality of the ruling junta, it is essential to have some idea of the country's ethnic makeup and its historical development. This chapter presents a brief summary of Burma's people and historical development, followed by a summary of the current human rights situation. For more detailed historical background, see the suggested readings listed at the end of the chapter.

### A Land of Ethnic Diversity

Burma is a country of great ethnic diversity, its estimated population of 48-50 million being divided between at least 15 major ethnic groups, many of them with several distinct subgroups. These groups come from very different origins: for example, the Muslim Rohingyas of Arakan (Rakhine) State are related to Bengali and Indian traders of centuries ago, the predominant Burmans originally migrated from the Indo-Tibetan region, the Shan are a Sino-Thai race originating from what is now China, the Karen, Karenni and Pa'O originated from the region of Mongolia, and the Mon are closely related to the Khmer of Cambodia. The extent of these differences is partly visible in the differences in culture and language, with languages such as Burmese, Shan and Karen having virtually no similarities at all. There is no reliable census data for Burma at present, because the last real census was conducted in the early 1930's and all of the census data since British colonial days has been collected by Burman-dominated regimes keen on exaggerating the dominance of the Burmans; for example, in many areas anyone with a Burman name (which many people adopt to avoid official discrimination) and anyone who is Buddhist has been listed down as a Burman. Using data collected this way, the SPDC and its predecessor regimes have claimed that 67-70% of the population is Burman, while in reality it is more likely that at most half the population is Burman, with 50% or more of the population divided among the other ethnic groups. After the Burmans, the most populous groups are the Karen with an estimated 6-7 million (when taken including the Karenni and Pa'O), and the Shan and Mon with about 4 million each.<sup>1</sup> Even these figures, however, can only

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on population figures and breakdown see for example Smith, Martin (1999) "Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity" Bangkok: White Lotus/Zed Books, chapter 2, especially page 30.

be taken as rough estimates.

### Kingdoms and Colonisation

There is a great deal of debate over who arrived in Burma first, this honour being claimed by the Burmans, Mon, Karen and Rakhine, among others. Most of these claims appear to be based more on racist dogma than on available historical evidence, particularly the claims of the Burmans and Rakhines, but the oral histories of the Karen and Mon appear to coincide more closely with the historical records and artifacts available. According to the Karen version, their people arrived in Burma, a region which at that time was virtually unpopulated jungle, approximately 2,500 years ago (the current year 2000 is 2739 on the Karen calendar) after a migration in several stages from the region of what is now Mongolia, and settled in what is now the Irrawaddy and Sittaung basin of central Burma. Other groups began arriving at around the same time, possibly shortly before or after, particularly the Mon/Khmer. The Mon/Khmer began imposing their feudal kingdom structure on the other peoples, most of whom had little or no political structure. This began the movement of peoples like the Karen from the central lowlands out into the hills. The Shan also had a strongly structured hierarchical society and in time began dominating what is now Shan State, while the Rakhine kingdom dominated what is now northwestern Burma. The Burmans (whose current calendar year is 1362) were probably among the latest groups to arrive, but over the centuries their kingdoms gradually defeated the Mon and the Rakhine. For hundreds of years until the 1800's, there were various warring kingdoms trying to eat away at each other's territories, while less-organised or more peaceable peoples were gradually driven further into the hills toward the peripheries of what is now Burma. In 1767, the armies of the Burman king Hsinbyushin even conquered much of Siam (Thailand), sacking the capital at Ayutthaya and extracting tribute from the existing dynasties. However, none of these kingdoms were ever strong enough to occupy and hold all of this territory, so once they had conquered they generally had to withdraw and life went on.

The British took over what is now Burma piece by piece in 3 wars: 1824-26, 1852-53, and finally in 1886, when 'Burma' became part of the British Empire as a province of British India. Until that time, no one had looked on this diverse region as a single geographic unit, and this is an important point in understanding the historical argument for autonomy or independence of the non-Burman peoples. The British systematically eradicated the structure of the Burman kingdoms, but at the same time

allowed the continued existence of the Shan princedoms and the Karenni *sawbwa*'s. These local rulers were allowed some autonomy because they were seen as less of a threat and because the British did not want to allocate the resources necessary to control such vast and far-flung territories, preferring to gradually implement an indirect rule enforced through local leaders. For peoples such as the Karen, Karenni and Kachin, British colonialism was partly a liberation from the repression of the Burmans, and it gave them their first access to education and some forms of development. British and American missionaries had a great deal of success with some of these peoples, gradually converting a sizable minority of Karens to Christianity (mainly Baptist), many Kachin, Chins (also known as Zo) and Naga of northwestern and northern Burma to Baptist and other Christian faiths, and a large proportion of the Karenni to Catholicism. As opportunities opened, many people from these groups joined the colonial administration, civil police force and army. Although in these colonial institutions they were heavily outnumbered by Burmans (for example, in 1938 the civil police force was 71% Burman and only 8.7% Karen<sup>2</sup>), many Burmans remained resentful of British rule and were not very well trusted by the colonisers compared to the other peoples.

### Nationalism, Japanese Occupation, and Independence

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Burman feeling against the British began to take tangible form in the beginnings of nationalist liberation movements, particularly the *Thakin* movement in which Aung San was a leader. Over the years the *Thakins* looked to outside countries for military help in overthrowing the British, culminating in the trip of Aung San and the '30 Comrades' to Japan for military training in early 1941. By the end of 1941, they had returned and put together an 'army' of a few thousand in Siam, and followed the invading Japanese into Burma. In the face of the Japanese advance, the British Army retreated to India. During the ensuing 3½-year Japanese occupation of Burma, Aung San's 'Burma Independence Army' acted as enforcers for the Japanese forces, and attracted a mixture of nationalists seeking independence and riffraff who wanted to loot villages. A wide range of atrocities were perpetrated by the BIA against Karen villagers and other ethnic peoples, as many Burmans finally had their opportunity to vent their frustrations against peoples they perceived as British 'collaborators'. In areas such as the

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Robert (1987) "The State In Burma", London: C.Hurst & Company, p. 101

Papun hills, Karen villagers feared the BIA much more than they did the Japanese occupation forces.

At the same time, some Karen, Kachin and others had left for India with the retreating British forces, later to parachute back in, and a few British officers had remained behind in Burma. Villagers were organised into resistance units and armed to fight the Japanese and BIA, and the villages suffered heavy retaliations as a result.<sup>3</sup> In 1944-45, when the Allies re-entered Burma, the Karen, Karenni and Kachin were instrumental in helping them to recapture Burma by systematically harassing and creating havoc among the retreating Japanese.<sup>4</sup> In return for their loyalty they hoped for independence from the Burmans after the war, but it never came. By 1944, Aung San and the BIA had realised that the Japanese had no intention of granting real independence and that the tide of the war was turning, so they switched sides and also fought the retreating Japanese. After the war, Aung San approached the British for independence. The non-Burmans protested that they should be granted freedom from the Burmans, and the British convened the Frontier Areas Commission of Enquiry (FACE) to hear testimony, particularly from Karen regions, on their views. However, as more and more villagers testified of BIA atrocities, the British began to regret the experiment and after the Commission closed they wiped much of the testimony off the record. In the end, independence was granted under Aung San's plan, with a unitary government which would clearly be Burman-dominated.<sup>5</sup>

Realising that some kind of accommodation would have to be made with the non-Burmans, Aung San engineered the 1947 Panglong Agreement, whereby some representatives from the Shan, Chin and Kachin hills signed their willingness to cooperate with his government and not to seek secession for at least 10 years. No representatives of the Karen, Mon, or any other peoples were present. Even so, Panglong appeared to be a good starting point, but its spirit was wiped out a few months later when Aung San was assassinated by his Burman political rivals. When independence came in January 1948, U Nu became Burma's elected

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of this period see Morrison, Ian (1946) "Grandfather Longlegs", London: Faber & Faber

<sup>4</sup> See Field-Marshal (Viscount) William Joseph Slim, "Defeat into Victory", London: Cassell, (1956); London: Papermac (1986), 576p.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Klein, the son of missionaries to Burma and a missionary himself, has produced very detailed unpublished research on this period which exposes much of the reality about the Frontier Areas Commission of Enquiry and the tactics of Aung San and the British Government.

leader. He immediately faced a Communist rebellion which threatened to topple the government, and was largely saved by non-Burman units of the former colonial army. However, behind their backs he was raising his own Army, and he soon turned it against the Karen and other non-Burman units. At the same time the Karen and others began rising for some form of independence or federalism, first in large peaceful demonstrations, but when this didn't work they went into armed rebellion. In 1949, the newly independent government faced armed uprisings not only by the Communists, but the Karen and others as well.

### Civil War

Through the 1950s, U Nu's party managed to hold power and bring about some economic progress in the central Burman cities despite facing several armed opposition groups in the countryside. However, Gen. Ne Win, whom U Nu had made head of the Army, seized the government first in 1958-60, and then again in 1962, when he established a full military dictatorship and began stripping everyone in the country, Burman or otherwise, of their rights.

Through the 1950's and 1960's, more and more ethnic armed groups rose against the regime until by the late 1970's there were well over a dozen armed opposition groups controlling something like 20-30% of Burma's entire land mass. The Communists had become entrenched in large areas of Shan State, while ethnic-based armies controlled much of the hill territory near all of the country's land borders. Ne Win's response was to increasingly militarise the country and make his repression of all freedoms more and more systematic. He introduced the Burmese Way to Socialism, which essentially meant state control of everything, and he was the state. He largely cut off the country from international trade or contact, which only strengthened the hand of the armed opposition groups and drove the country into abject poverty. In the early 1970's he introduced the Four Cuts policy, aimed at cutting off all supplies of food, funds, recruits and intelligence to opposition groups; in practice, it meant undermining the opposition by systematically driving into destitution the civilian population supporting it. Forced relocations, forced labour and all forms of abuses against the civilian population became the order of the day.

Gradually the opposition to Ne Win's rule became almost universal. In the cities, major demonstrations broke out in 1974 but were put down by the military with many arrests and killings. In 1976, nine of the ethnic-based armies united to form the National Democratic Front (NDF)

alliance. However, Ne Win's rule continued until 1988, when a sudden demonetisation which had wiped out many people's savings triggered mass uprisings in Rangoon, Mandalay and most provincial towns. Hundreds of thousands of people hit the streets, led by university students and Buddhist monks, only to be raked with machine gun fire or charged with bayonets by combat troops. Anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 people were killed nationwide, and for the first time Burman pro-democracy activists fled to ethnic-held areas in the hills, where they formed their own pro-democracy organisations and allied themselves with the ethnic armies to form the Democratic Alliance of Burma and other alliances. In Rangoon, Ne Win stepped down but eventually hand-picked a junta, which assumed power in September 1988 and called itself the State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

### The SLORC and the SPDC

The SLORC inaugurated its rule by massacring more civilian demonstrators, then immediately began implementing more draconian measures than Ne Win had ever imposed. However, the regime was hungry for international funds and support, particularly the foreign aid which the international community had cut off in its horror at the massacres. In an attempt to appease both international and domestic criticism and to obtain financing, the SLORC began to make a show of opening markets and announced democratic elections for 1990, calculating that it could control the election results by keeping the opposition divided. Unfortunately for them, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San (who is an 'independence hero' to most ethnic Burmans), had returned from England to tend her sick mother in 1988 and had been dragged into the political whirlpool. She became the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD), a new opposition party, and the electoral opposition parties began rallying around her. To put a stop to this the SLORC put her under house arrest in 1989, but when the polls were held in May 1990, the NLD won 82% of the parliamentary seats, its allies 16%, and the SLORC's 'National Unity Party' only 2%. The junta immediately began taking steps to ignore the election, and never did honour the result. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was held under house arrest until 1995, and even now is so restricted in her movements that she remains under virtual house arrest. Elected Members of Parliament have been harassed, arrested, disqualified, or forced or coerced to resign. Some have died in prison, while others fled to areas held by the ethnic resistance groups and formed a parallel government.

In the ethnic-held areas, agreements were made between ethnic and pro-democracy groups wherein most of the ethnic armies dropped independence from their objectives, and in return the pro-democracy groups agreed to the concept of a federal system with some autonomy for the ethnic states. The SLORC changed the country's name to 'Myanmar Naing-Ngan', a name essentially meaning 'Burman Country' in the Burmese language, which the Burmans had used historically to refer to their kingdoms of the central plains; at the same time changing all other names to their Burmese language versions such as 'Rangoon' to 'Yangon'. This was seen by the ethnic nationalities as part of ethnic cleansing and by the Burmese pro-democracy groups as the act of an illegal regime, so all of these groups rejected the name change.

The SLORC stepped up its military offensives against the ethnic armed opposition and its repression of the civilian population. In 1989, the Burmese Communist Party imploded when the ethnic Wa soldiery rebelled against the mainly Chinese leadership, and then formed the United Wa State Army. The SLORC saw an opening and negotiated ceasefires with the Wa and several small groups within Shan State, promising SLORC Army support for drug trafficking operations in return for 'joining hands with the government'. Burma rapidly became the world's largest supplier of opium and heroin. The regime then used military offensives, large-scale forced relocation of civilians, the complicity of neighbouring countries, and finally buy-offs of the leadership to force other armed opposition groups into ceasefire deals, none of which addressed any of the political or human rights concerns of those groups. After each deal, the SLORC sent more military to effectively surround the ceasefire groups, making it impossible for them to consider a resumption of hostilities. Human rights abuses against the civilians, such as forced labour for the SLORC military, continued.

The SLORC presented these ceasefires internationally as evidence that it was creating 'peace', and claimed that it had secured ceasefires with 7 of 9 opposition groups; then 9 of 11; then 11 of 13; then 14 of 15; and at present, 17 of 18 opposition groups. The reality is that many of the groups in the list are SLORC creations, while at least 5 groups continue to fight the regime (the Karen National Union, the Shan State Army, the Karenni National Progressive Party [which the regime includes in its 'ceasefire' list], the Chin National Front, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, various Arakan Rohingya groups, etc.). The SLORC continued to offer business opportunities in return for international political support, and gained admission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, while still keeping China as its

principal political and military backer. In late 1997, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Most of the armed groups fighting the SPDC have given up their control of territory in the face of mass military offensives, and now fight entirely using guerrilla tactics. In areas where there is still armed opposition, the SPDC is demanding the outright surrender of the opposition groups, backing this with military offensives and by implementing the Four Cuts policy more systematically than ever before, forcibly relocating hundreds of villages at a time, systematically torturing and executing any villagers suspected of having any links to the opposition, and forcing the civilian population to do labour and provide all the material needs of the Army. In rural areas where there is no conflict, the Army and administration demand regular forced labour on infrastructure and money-making schemes, extort money out of farmers until they have to flee their land, and force them to hand over large proportions of their crops to support the Army. In the cities and Burman areas, the regime keeps most of the universities closed, all freedom of expression and association is denied, unauthorised access to fax machines, foreign radio or the internet is punishable by long jail terms with hard labour, high school students have been sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for handing out pamphlets, and corruption and official extortion are rampant. The economy is destroyed, with a worthless currency, spiralling inflation, billions in foreign debt incurred by building up the military and almost no foreign exchange reserves. Politically the situation is at a stalemate, with the SPDC refusing to negotiate with the NLD, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or representatives of the ethnic nationalities; the regime appears to believe that if it can simply continue holding power, the international community will give in and give it the financial and political backing it needs in return for access to Burma's resources and extremely cheap labour.

### **The Present Day: Junta Policy in the Rural Areas**

The Karen people of today mainly inhabit southeastern Burma, consisting of Karen State (see map on page 29), where they form the majority, Tenasserim Division in Burma's far south, where they form the majority in the hills but not along the sea coast, the Irrawaddy Delta west of Rangoon, where they make up about half the population while Burmans make up the other half, and areas of eastern Pegu (Bago) Division and outlying parts of Rangoon.

Farming villages are the main social and economic unit throughout rural

southeastern Burma. Most of the villagers are subsistence farmers, growing rice and/or cash crops such as fruit, sugar cane or betelnut in several small fields handed down within families. On flat land, wet paddy cultivation is practised, but in many areas little or no flat land is available so families practice swidden agriculture, rotating each year to another of their hill fields on an 8 to 10 year cycle, cutting and clearing the trees which have grown since the field was last used and growing hillside rice in the rainy season. Villages in flat fertile areas can be as large as several hundred households, while in remote hill areas some villages have as few as 8 or 10 families.

Families operate on a subsistence level, growing enough rice and vegetables for their own use, raising some chickens, pigs and cattle, and fishing for their own consumption. Cash crops or extra rice or livestock are sold in surrounding villages or the nearest market town to obtain some money for other goods, but the local economy within the village operates largely on barter, loans and payments often being made in rice. This ancient system is very delicate because there is little or no safety net in hard times; if one family has troubles the village can pitch in to help them, but if an entire year's crop fails the village goes hungry for the following year. There is also no built-in capacity to deal with the scenario of several Army battalions moving into the area, restricting the movements of villagers and demanding food, labour, and building materials. However, under the rule of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) this is what the farming villages are being forced to deal with.

The SPDC itself is a classic case of a paranoid military junta; its leaders restrict even the most basic freedoms in the belief that any freedom whatsoever will be used to oppose their rule. They may be right, because unlike repressive regimes in many parts of the world, the SPDC represents no political faction or ideology other than pure militarism and has no constituency among the general populace. The result is a regime which focuses most of its energies on controlling the civilian population. This is especially true in the rural areas, many of them populated by the non-Burman ethnic nationalities which together make up approximately 50% of Burma's population. Ethnic-based armed resistance movements have been seeking autonomy by fighting the central regime for the past 50 years, and the SPDC and its predecessors have believed since the 1970's that the best way to destroy these groups is to destroy the ability of the civilians to support them.

This approach gave rise to the official Four Cuts policy, intended to deprive opposition groups of food, funds, recruits and intelligence. In practice, this is implemented by systematic intimidation and repression of the civilian population until they no longer dare support the opposition, and by making them so destitute that they are unable to provide any material support. In other words, undermine the opposition by directly attacking the civilians who support them, often referred to as 'draining the ocean so the fish cannot swim'.

The Four Cuts have been official policy since the early 1970's, but the present State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military junta has made their implementation much more systematic than ever before. Using military offensives and large-scale forced relocations, the junta has managed to force many of the ethnic resistance groups into military ceasefires which do not address any political or human rights issues. However, several resistance groups continue to fight, particularly in Karen, Karenni (Kayah) and Shan States. In these areas, the junta's main tactic is now mass forced relocations of the civilian population. In the past forced relocation was used as a military tactic but only on a localised scale, a few villages at a time; however, in 1996 the junta began delineating regions where any form of resistance occurs, and forcing hundreds of villages at a time to move to Army-controlled sites. Between 1996 and the present, at least 1,500 villages in central Shan State have been ordered to move and destroyed, affecting at least 300,000 people; since 1997, 200 villages covering the entire map of Karenni (Kayah) State have been forced out and burned; since 1997, close to 200 villages in Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts of northern Karen State have been shelled and burned without warning, driving the population into hiding in the forest; between 1996 and 1997 over 100 villages in southern Tenasserim Division were forced out and destroyed, followed by a mass military offensive which is still destroying more villages now; and since December 1999 the SPDC has ordered that over 100 villages throughout Doolaya District of central Karen State hand over their entire rice harvest to the Army and then move to Army-controlled sites or face being shot on sight. In hill villages throughout Karen State, villagers are now being ordered to move into the 'centre' of their villages, meaning they cannot stay near their fields, and are only allowed to leave the village between dawn and dusk under threat of being shot if they are out after curfew. This disrupts the entire crop cycle, because villagers are used to staying in field huts far from the village for much of the growing season to do all of the intensive labour which is required. Many of them find that they can no longer produce their own food.

Many of the villages ordered to move do not even have any contact with opposition groups, but they fall within an area where the SPDC believes the opposition can operate. The villagers are usually given no more than a week to move, after which they are told their homes and belongings will be destroyed and they will be shot on sight if seen around their villages. After the relocation deadline the Army usually sends out patrols to destroy the villages, and particularly to hunt out and destroy any food supplies. The villagers are usually ordered to move out of the hills, to larger Army-controlled villages or sites along roads. They have to bring their own food and building supplies because nothing is given to them; in many cases they even have to hand over their rice to the Army and have it rationed back out to them day by day. Once in the relocation site, people have few or no opportunities to return to their fields and must survive by foraging for food or looking for local day labour. At the same time, the Army uses them as a convenient source of unpaid forced labour at local Army camps and along the roads, making it almost impossible for them to support themselves. After a few months, many people find they have little option but to starve or flee.

These days most people know what awaits them at the relocation sites, so when they are ordered to move they simply flee into hiding in the forests surrounding their farmfields. They then try to survive from hidden rice supplies around their villages, planting small patches of crops in several different places and fleeing from place to place whenever SPDC Army patrols come around. Tens of thousands of people are presently living this way in central Shan State, throughout Karenni (Kayah) State, in Toungoo, Papun and Nyaunglebin districts of northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Division, and Tenasserim Division of southern Burma. They have little food and many are starving, there is no access to medicines and many die of treatable diseases, their children have no access to education of any kind, and they live under the constant risk of being captured or shot by passing SPDC patrols who also seek out and destroy their food supplies and crops in the fields. Many of them have been living this way for two to three years already. Eventually, finding they can no longer survive this way, a steady stream of them try to make their way to the border with Thailand to become refugees.

This desperate lack of options is most clearly reflected by the statements of villagers included in the **'Death Squads and Displacement'** chapter below. In the remote hills of eastern Nyaunglebin District, villages have been shelled and burned without warning and villagers hiding in the forests are hunted on sight. In the western plains of the district, which are close to the Sittaung River and under SPDC control, the villages have

been forced into relocation sites where nothing is provided, and the SPDC has created new execution squads which have been systematically killing any villagers who have ever helped the opposition in the slightest way. As a result, villagers from the western plains flee into the hills, while villagers in the hills are themselves fleeing into the forests or toward Thailand - a trip that involves passing through northern Papun District, where even more villages have been systematically destroyed and the situation is equally as bad.

Forced relocation is not the only thing ripping the villages apart. Even in villages which have not been forced to move it has become almost impossible to survive. Village leaders living in conflict areas have described their lives as ‘standing in a leaky boat which is being rocked from both sides’. They are forced to support opposition armies, such as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), or the Shan State Army (SSA), with food, porters and recruits, and then they are severely punished for this by the SPDC Army. While most of the villagers support the aims of the opposition, they find it difficult to provide material support and they often ask local guerrilla commanders not to attack the SPDC in their area, because whenever SPDC columns are ambushed they respond by torturing the elders and burning homes in the nearest villages, accusing them of not providing sufficient intelligence. The dilemma facing village elders in this situation exists in all of the regions covered in the later sections of this book, but is perhaps most clear in the voices of villagers from Thaton District included in the section **“Caught in the Middle”**, because the SPDC is largely in control there. A typical SPDC written order sent by Infantry Battalion #26 to a Karen village in a similar area of Toungoo district in 1999 reads, *“do not give paddy, rice or ‘set kyay ngwe’ [protection money] to the enemy. [We] will burn and relocate the villages who give these. [We] will decree them to be hard core.”*<sup>6</sup> However, villages have no choice but to provide these things, and they constantly face retaliations by SPDC commanders for it. At the same time, it must be said that the opposition armies do not engage in the brutal abuses of the SPDC Army, and when the worst abuses are occurring the villagers often flee to the opposition troops for some form of protection.

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<sup>6</sup> See **“SPDC and DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2000-A”**, Karen Human Rights Group, February 2000, Order #3, available on the KHRG web site ([www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org))

Landmines have become an added threat to villagers, particularly over the past 3 to 4 years. In Karen State, landmines are now being laid heavily by at least 3 groups: the SPDC, the KNLA, and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (a Karen splinter group allied to the SPDC). None of the mines are mapped, and though the KNLA tells the villagers which pathways are mined the information often doesn't get to everyone. Most of the casualties are villagers, particularly because of the SPDC practice of using villagers to march in front of their columns as human minesweepers and human shields against ambush. This form of abuse is on the rise in central Karen State, and many SPDC columns are specifically choosing to use women and children for it. According to research done by Non-Violence International for the September 2000 Landmine Monitor (the publication of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines), the estimated number of landmine casualties in Karen State rose in 1999 to well over 1,000, more than the reported landmine casualties for all of Cambodia during the same time period. With landmine use increasing every month, Burma is beginning to be seen as Asia's new landmine hotspot. On the ground, this is reflected in the testimony of villagers, many of whom say that the main thing making them flee their villages was fear of being taken by the SPDC to clear mines. Pa'an District of central Karen State is now one of the most heavily mined areas in all of Burma, and this is reflected in the feelings of villagers from the area recorded below in the chapter "**Beyond All Endurance**"; a few years ago, villagers interviewed from this area knew little or nothing of landmines, but now the issue permeates their consciousness and their fears.

Even this is only another factor in a whole range of suffering which combines to make life in villages impossible. In conflict areas, villagers face daily or weekly demands from all of the SPDC Army camps and mobile patrols in their area. At any given time, a village has to provide an average of one person per household for a whole range of forced labour: forced porters, guides and human minesweepers for military columns, messengers and sentries for Army camps, building and maintaining Army camp fences, trenches, booby-traps, and barracks, cutting and hauling firewood, cooking and carrying water to soldiers, building and rebuilding military supply roads, clearing scrub along roadsides to minimise the possibility of ambush, standing sentry along military supply roads, growing crops for the Army on confiscated land, and engaging in profit-making activities for the officers such as brick-baking, rubber planting or digging fishponds. Every Army unit demands most of these things from the surrounding villages, and every village is surrounded by three, four or five Army units. The forced labour is