

# The Plight

## OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN BURMA

Woman and Child Rights Project (Southern Burma)

Issue No.1/2009, March 2009

### Report:

## Mon Women, the Military & Forced Labor in Mon State

### 1. Background

Burma's human rights situation remains "challenging" and there are few signs of improvement, a UN independent expert on human rights said as he wrapped up a six-day visit Thursday. But Tomas Ojea Quintana, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, said that there were "positive signs" from the ruling junta over his recommendations to the regime. "The human rights situation is still challenging. It is difficult for me to affirm that the human rights situation has improved," Quintana told reporters before flying out from Yangon. (*Myanmar rights situation still challenging*, UN, February 2009)

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Burma is well known for its use of forced labor. The ILO [*International Labor Organization*] took the unprecedented decision, fully supported by the UK, to invoke exceptional measures against Burma in November 2000 in response to its use of forced labor. In February 2007, the ILO reached a preliminary agreement with the Burmese government to investigate suspected cases of forced labor in the country. The agreement allows the ILO liaison officer in Rangoon to make a preliminary investigation of the alleged cases, and guarantees that the government will not retaliate against those making the complaint. Under this mechanism, 10 complaints have been processed



Woman clearing bushes at the Jatropha "physic nut" trees military development project in Mon State

## Message From

### Woman And Child Rights Project (Southern Part of Burma)

Woman and Child Right Project (WCRP) is an cooperative activity with Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) and it has main activity in collecting the information related to the human rights violations of women and children in southern part of Burma (Myanmar). It also aims to get world community's awareness for the protection of the rights of women and children.

The Burma's military regime, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 to guarantee the rights to women in Burma. Similarly the regime also ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991 to guarantee the rights to children in Burma. However, the regime has failed in their implementation of the conventional rights and the human rights violations against women and children systematically.

WCRP is dedicated to inform the world community what happens to general women and children in Burma and plans to educate them to know about their rights as the following objectives.

1. To monitor and protect the woman and child rights, by collecting information about their real situation by referencing the CEDAW and CRC, and distribute information to world community.
2. To strengthen women and children community, by providing on their rights accordingly to CEDAW and CRC ratified by regime and encourage them to participate in the struggle in the protection of their own rights.

successfully. The ILO's supplementary understanding with the Burmese government was extended to February 2009. (*British Foreign & Commonwealth Office document.....*)

**Under the terms of the agreement the ILO liaison officer can direct complaints by the victims of forced labor without any retaliatory action against them.** (*Top Official in Burma: Irrawaddy, February 2009*)

Although the ILO has a complaint mechanism related to forced labor, the population is unwilling to make a complaint out of fear of the ruling military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Moreover, many people are unaware that the complaint mechanism even exists.

In mid-1995, the main Mon political party, the New Mon State Party (NMSP), agreed to a ceasefire with the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council – predecessor to the SPDC) and subsequently Burmese Army troops took the opportunity to increase military deployment into Mon areas. Since 1998, the Burmese Army has deployed over 10 Light Infantry Battalions and an additional 10 Artillery Regiments in the southern part of Mon State particularly in Thanbyuzayut and Ye Townships. As well as troop deployment, this ongoing militarization of the region involves the launching of military offensives against armed Mon splinter groups and the establishment of a widespread military administration. In addition to militarization the regime has implemented a number of 'regional development projects', including large-scale endeavors such as dams and fuel pipelines, and smaller-scale infrastructure projects, which are often undertaken for the use and benefit of the military.

The impact of militarization and development projects on the local population has been severe. International organizations have continually accused the Burmese government of numerous human rights violations in Mon State. These include arbitrary detention, property confiscation, forced relocation, forced portering, sexual abuse and forced labor. This report will focus on the last of these categories – forced labor and in particular the use of women as coerced, unpaid workers for road maintenance, construction and the provision of food and resources for the military. During the NMSP's ceasefire talks in 1995, the ruling military junta promised to end the use of forced labor in Mon State, a promise that was never kept. This report will illustrate that broken promise.

## 2. Introduction

For this report WCRP interviewed women residents of Ye Township on their own and others' experiences of forced labor. Most of the interviews took place in Khaw-Zar Sub-township, in the southern part of Ye. For security reasons no names of the interviewees are provided. Infantry Battalion No.31 of the Burmese Army is based in this area where it continues operations against armed Mon splinter groups. Due to increased military operations, plus state infrastructure and development projects, the military routinely forces civilians to work as unpaid laborers. In addition to the primary research this report also includes material from other Mon organizations on forced labor issues in the southern part of Ye township, Mon State from 2008 to 2009.

The work of forced laborers includes construction and building maintenance, food production and resource supply for the army and their families, road repairs and village sentry duty. Laborers must provide their

own food and tools, as well as pay transportation costs if they live at a distance from their assigned job. They are usually unable to refuse orders to participate in forced labor

out of a well-founded fear of punishment by the military. However, if any civilian wishes to abstain they must hire a substitute laborer at their own expense to work in their place. On occasion this substitution process is also forced on civilians who are unsuitable for the work required: a burden which tends to fall most heavily on women.

Furthermore, the military frequently imposes movement restrictions on villagers due to suspicions of support for and contact with the armed rebel groups. These restrictions prevent villagers leaving their homes to work on their farms and plantations, which has a significant impact on their livelihoods as most of those in rural areas are farmers. This is particularly harsh at harvest time when the military refuse permission to take in a crop. When restrictions are lifted farmers are usually extremely busy making up for lost time and therefore are unavailable for forced labor. In Mon communities, most farmers are men and women tend to stay at home and take care of their families, leaving them more liable to be co-opted into forced labor when their husbands are unable to leave their farms. Therefore, women who live close to military bases tend to bear the burden of forced labor more than men.

### **3. Forced labor on road repairs**

#### **Case 1: WCRP interview with 32 year old woman from Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit village**

On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Infantry Battalion No. 31 forced residents of Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit village, Khaw-Zar Sub township, southern Ye Township, to work on road repairs as a high-ranking military officer was due to visit to the area three days later. The labor force included local women.

Laborers were required repair holes in the road with rocks which they had to collect and transport themselves. Villagers who owned ox carts provided the transport while others worked on collection and loading. They were divided into work sections and forced to labor for two days. They were also required to provide their own food and tools.

“We started early in the morning and worked until evening. We were permitted to go home for lunch. In the morning the work wasn’t so bad but it was very hot in the afternoon. These high ranking officers have been visiting a lot recently and so we are always forced to work,” said a local 32-year-old woman.

#### **Case 2: WCRP interview with a woman from Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit village**

On August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Battalion No. 31 commander, Colonel Ye Lwin Oo ordered the headman of Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit village to provide villagers for repairs on rain-damaged roads.

The village is home to 150 households and each household was required to supply one laborer. The workforce consisted of 125 women [age 18 to 65] and 25 men. The predominance of women was due to the absence of the men who were working on their plantations. During August the military were allowing farmers out of the village to work, leaving mainly women to face forced labor demands.

One of the women said, “We women needed to go because if our husbands had to do forced labor, they could not make a living and we wouldn’t be able to survive.

“We can’t refuse the military’s orders because if we refuse we will get beaten up,” she continued. “When some villagers were late for the work Colonel Ye Lwin Oo got angry and shot three times in the air. He shouted that they did not care about his orders and if he really hurt them they would know about it.

“While we were working we weren’t allowed a break. Sometimes the rocks were very heavy but we afraid to complain. We had to work from 7am until 12pm.

“When will we be free from the army? We can’t relax or eat well or make merit in the temple. This is because of our actions in the past. We have done bad things in the past and now we have to suffer.

#### **Case 3: IMNA, 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct 2008**

On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Infantry Battalion No. 31 ordered villagers in Ye Township to repair roads damaged by rain fall before a visit from high-ranking officers. Most of the conscripted villagers were women from Singu and Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit villages. The army threatened the women with a 4,000 Kyat fine if they were absent during work hours, from 7 am to 5 pm.

"We are afraid of the soldiers. That's why we went to repair the road and did not work on our plantations," said one of the women, 40, who added that the laborers even worked on a holy day.

The army has also banned people in Singu, Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit, Yin-Ye, Yin-Dein, Kabya and Pope Htaw [Shwe-Hin-Thar-Ywa-Thit] villages from working on their plantations, even during the day, citing rebel activity by the Monland Restoration Party.

#### **Case 4: WCRP interview with 75 year old woman from Khaw-Zar Sub-Town**

On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Battalion No.31 ordered Khaw-Zar Sub-township headman, Nai Mya Aye to provide laborers to repair roads damaged by rainfall. He in turn ordered residents of Khaw-Zar, and Win-Ta mout and Kyauk-Htaung villages, to comply. The villagers were required to repair holes in the road with sand. Some of them were women, including an elderly lady of seventy five from Khaw-Zar town. During this time she was interviewed by WCRP.

"There are approximately a hundred villagers forced to work, including me. The soldiers don't care if there aren't any young people in a household. If we don't go they will punish us. So, we are always busy with forced labor and we don't have much time to do our own work.

"Now it's rainy season and the rain is so strong. It does not matter if we fill the holes with sand because the water will wash it away. But the soldiers know that we're afraid of them and they force us to do it.

"They could do it themselves but they do not. It's not just the army; the headman also wants their favor and treats us badly. So we keep quiet. They just like treating us badly. In the future, maybe they'll want us to clean up after them when they go to the bathroom!"

#### **Case 5: WCRP interview with 32 year old woman from Toe-Thet-Ywa-Thit village**

During November 21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008, the chairman of Khaw-Zar Sub-township Peace and Development Council Chairman, Kyaw Moe forced every household in town to provide a laborer to repair the road leading to Win-Ta mount and Kyone-Kanya villages and Battalion No.31's base.

The residents had to dig up soil and rocks and use the materials to repair holes and faults in the road. They were forced to work from 7am to 4pm on both days. One woman was compelled to send her school age daughter.

"When will this stop? We are always forced to do unpaid work and my daughter has to take days off school. I need to work at home and her father is a daily worker trying to earn money for our family. We don't have anyone else to send, only my daughter. We can't afford to hire anyone to take her place and she might have to discontinue her education."

#### **Case 6. WCRP interview with 40 year old woman from Yin-Dein-Wa village**

On February 17<sup>th</sup> 2009, Battalion No.31 ordered residents of Yin-Dein-Wa village, Khaw-Zar Sub-township to repair the road between their village and the next, Yin-Dein village.

Yin-Dein-Wa is home to 70 households and every household except those of the village headman and secretary had to provide labor. There were only 10 men available and the rest of the workforce consisted of women. They had to dig up soil to use in the repairs and load it into vehicles.

One of the laborers, a 40 year old woman, spoke to WCRP during the work as she took a short break.

"We are not sure how many days we have to do. It might finish today because they carry the soil by vehicle and it's quicker. If we had to carry it all the way by hand it might take about 10 days. The road between Yin-Dein and Yin-Dein-Wa is one and half miles long."

She added, "In summer we have to do forced labor one or two times a month but in rainy season we have to do it five or six times per month."

### **4. Forced labor to provide food and supplies for the military.**



## Case1: WCRP interview with 30 year old woman from Kyauk-Htaung village

On November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008, Captain Aung Pyint Phoe from Battalion No.31 ordered residents of five villages in Khaw-Zar Sub-township to harvest the army's rice crop. The villages were Win-Ta-Mout, Kyauk-Htaung, Mi-Htaw-Hlar-Kyi, Mi-Htaw-Hlar-Kalay and Ma-Gyi.

According to a 30 year old woman from Kyauk-Htaung village, "we started early in the morning and did not get home until after sunset. The fields were three miles away from our village. We had to work there once a week".

A WCRP field reporter was listening when female shopkeepers from Khaw-Zar main market discussed the situation during their lunch break. The women spoke about how they had to spend more time working for the army than on their own jobs. They said they had to work hard so the army could eat and even though they (the army) were capable of harvesting their own crop they still forced villagers to do it. They spoke of how they had to do everything: plant, maintain and harvest the crop. They also contrasted the amount of forced labor required from themselves in the town and that required from the rural population, saying that villages such as Kyout Thoun and Mi-Htaw-Hlar had to do more.

One of the shopkeepers said, "There's a soldier from Battalion No.31 called Zaw Moe Win. His wife, Ma Tin Tin Kyin was here shopping and she said that she didn't have to buy rice from the market because they had the rice that the villagers harvested a few days ago. It was far cheaper to buy from the military than to buy here, only 400 Kyat per pye (2 kilos). However, she didn't know how many baskets of it would be allocated to each soldier."



Women on their way to military forced labor in Khaw-Zar Township

## Case2: WCRP interview with 53 year old woman from Yin-Ye village

On March 11<sup>th</sup> 2009, Battalion IB No.31 forced residents of Yin-Ye village, Khaw-Zar Sub-township to provide firewood for use in their brick manufacturing concern in Khaw-Zar Sub-township. Villagers, including women, were organized into groups of ten and each group had to do a day's unpaid labor in which they were required to collect enough firewood to fuel one large brick pit. The wood was gathered approximately a mile away from the village and workers were also forced to use their own transport to deliver it to the military.

According to 53 year old local woman who witnessed the labor, "our village has 364 households but they didn't all have to go on the same day. All I know is that every day a group of ten villagers had to send one truck full of firewood."

She went on to speak about the various kinds of forced labor demanded of her village and the restrictions imposed on the residents.

"Sometimes we have to repair the road, sometimes we have to find firewood and sometimes the army stops us going to the forest where we have our plantation. Sometimes the army demands our motorbikes for their own use. We frequently have to work for them and have no time to relax. They can do the work themselves but they do not. The villagers have to do what the army demand and we just say nothing and keep quiet."

## 5. Forced labor on building maintenance

### Case1: WCRP interview with a woman from Khaw-Zar Sub-township

On August 21<sup>st</sup> 2008, Battalion No. 31 ordered a Khaw-Zar headman to organize eight laborers to repair a nursery school located beside the sub-township's main road. The work was to be completed before the imminent visit of a high-ranking military officer.

## NEWS

### **Illegal migrant driven to suicide by Thai boss's abuse of her sister**

WCRP:

An eighteen year old Burmese woman and her Thai boss's nine year old daughter died shortly after being hit by a pickup truck in what friends say was a deliberate act of suicide and revenge against her boss.

Mi Lar Oo, from Karen state, had been working illegally in Surat Thani Province, Thailand as domestic worker along with her older sister, twenty three year old Mi Mya. The sisters had left Burma to avoid Mi Mya's forced marriage. Then, in 2008, Mi Mya was raped by their boss, Mr. Suu Ree and became pregnant but the young women were too frightened of him to take any action.

Three months later, Mi Lar Oo went to the market one day and left her sister alone in the house. When she returned her sister was gone and Mr. Ree was cleaning their room. He had never done that before and she became afraid that he had killed her sister. She never saw her sister again and believed her to be dead.

Mi Lar Oo was too afraid to tell anyone about her sister's rape and possible murder. She could not leave as she was unable to speak Thai and had no friends in the area at the time. However, around two or three months before the fatal traffic accident she made some friends and told them everything. But they were also too afraid of Mr. Ree to speak out.

"Although we knew about it we didn't dare say anything because the boss threatened to kill us if we did and so we stayed silent," said the friends.

Soon afterwards, on March 9th, 2009 Mi Lar Oo left the house and took Mr. Ree's youngest daughter out with her, saying she was going shopping. Together with the child, she stepped out onto a busy road where both were hit by a pickup truck. Friends believe that this was deliberate suicide attempt and, by including her boss's daughter, also an act of revenge for her sister.

One friend who was close to her said, "Mi Lar Oo lied to the nine year old and said she was taking her to the market. Instead she went to the middle of a highway called Haywoo Road to commit suicide. They were both taken to hospital but died the next day. She wanted to get revenge on her boss, Mr. Suu Ree for what he did to her sister."

### **Eleven migrant workers at risk in a Kanchanaburi forest**

WCRP: April 1, 2009

On March 23, 2009, eleven Burmese illegal migrant workers entered Thailand, accompanied by an agent, at Three Pagoda Pass. The group, which included an eleven year old girl, eight women and two men, were subsequently at risk in a Kanchanaburi forest where they fled in order to avoid arrest by the Thai police.

According to Nai Aye, a relative of one of the workers, who heard about the incident from the agent, "there were forty Burmese illegal migrant workers in two vans accompanied by the local agent, Nai Htay, aged 40, from Three Pagoda Pass to Thailand. When they arrived at Kanchanaburi check point, the police didn't see the first van and they only stopped the second one for checking which included Nai Htay and eleven workers. The police didn't check carefully and allowed the van to go but after it left they became suspicious and two policemen followed the van by car.

"Nai Htay didn't allow the driver to stop the van and he wanted the driver to keep driving even when the police tried to stop them. So the two vehicles crashed into each other and two policemen were knocked unconscious on the spot. Nai Htay let the workers run away and they ran into the forest. There were only Nai Htay and the driver left there. Actually, the police didn't know he carried Burmese illegal migrant workers. So, when the two policemen regained consciousness, they arrested him and the driver and accused them of crashing into their car. The driver said that they didn't intend to crash but their brakes had failed. So, a Thai friend of the agent paid bail for them at the police station and got them out."

Three days after the incident occurred Nai Htay told (Nai Aye not his really name) that he had contacted the eleven workers and that in two days he would go and pick them up and send them to Surat Thani district where they had relatives. So, for five days the eleven workers had to hide in the forest and faced serious problems without food or security. However, on March 28th, all of them were rescued by Nai Htay and taken to safety.

All of them had agreed to pay sixteen thousand baht each for transportation from their homes to the place where they would work in Thailand.

The eight laborers included three women aged 18, 23 and 50. They had to transport and split bamboo and use it to construct fences as well as clean the inside of the premises. The mother of one of the women spoke of her despair.

## Activities

### Mon Women's day Joint Statement

**12<sup>th</sup> Waxing Day of the 12<sup>th</sup> Month, 1370 Mon Lunar Year ( March 7,09)**

Mon women's day is celebrated every year on the birthday of a famous Mon Queen Banya Thou, also known as Mi Jao Bu, in order to empower Mon women to actively participate and take leadership roles in social, economic, and political processes. Queen Mi Jao Bu was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> Waxing day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, 755 Mon Lunar Year (March 23, 1394). Her Majesty Queen Mi Jao Bu was the only ruling queen in the history of Burma and was famous for her truthfulness and effective governance. Under her rule, the Hongsawato Mon kingdom was in peace and prosperity.

On this special occasion, we would like to take the opportunity to express our grave concern with regard to the situation of women and children in Burma, particularly in the areas of ethnic nationalities. The Burmese military regime continues the use of sexual violence against ethnic women and girls as a weapon of war against ethnic nationalities; thus the raping, torturing and murdering of ethnic women and girls is still widespread. In addition, ethnic women and girls have been cruelly targeted in the regime's systematic ethnic cleansing policies and Burmanizing tactics. Similar to prior Burmese governments, the current regime has applied "mixing blood and fusing culture" tactics to assimilate ethnic nationalities. In doing so, the regime's army encourages its troops to manipulate ethnic women and girls into marriages which often results in forced marriages.

Moreover, several thousands of ethnic women and children have become internally displaced persons and refugees as a result of human rights violations, illegal land confiscations, and the economic oppression committed by the Burmese army. Because of the deterioration of political, economic and social situations in their homeland many women and girls have fallen victim to human trafficking. We believe that such a humanitarian crisis can only be resolved by promoting the good governance, rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedom for the ethnic nationalities. Therefore,

We call for the Burmese military regime to:

- Immediately stop sexual violence against ethnic women and girls
- Immediately end all measures of ethnic cleansing in the Mon State and other ethnic areas
- Fully comply with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women and child rights
- Initiate a genuine tripartite dialogue for democratic reform and national reconciliation in Burma.

On this special day, we also urge all Mon women who live around the world to be united. No matter where we are and what organization we are affiliated with, we must bear our share of responsibility to protect and liberate Mon people and continue to work together for peace and justice for all.

The statement is jointly issued by:

Mon Women Organization (Thai-Burma Border)  
Mon Women Organization (Canada)  
Mon Women Organization (Sangkhlaburi)  
Mon Women's Association of America  
Mon Youth Progressive Organization  
Woman And Child Rights Project (Southern Burma)

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"It seems like I gave birth to my daughter just for her to do forced labor. She has to work for three or four days a week and I can't let her work at home. We can't leave here and we have to do what they want."

**Case2: WCRP interview with 52 year old woman from Shwe-Hin-Thar-Ywa-Thit village**

## Personal Account:

### Trafficked woman forced to have baby to pay debts.

#### WCRP

In March 2009, a woman called Mi May (not her real name) arrived at an anonymous safe house in Mahachai, Thailand. A former victim of trafficking, she had also been raped and forced to have a baby in order to pay debts to her Thai boss. Mi May is from Nyung Lay Pin village, Pago town, Mon State and is single. Her family are poor and did not have enough income to survive so Mi May and her 17 year old sister, Mi Moe (not her real name) were sent to Thailand as migrant workers. The family pawned their house to pay for the travelling costs.

The Woman and Child Rights Project met with Mi May and asked her how she became a victim of trafficking and how she was forced to have the baby.

“First, we worked in the garment industry in Mae Sot for months and we were not satisfied with our salary and didn’t think we could send back any money to our family. For that reason, we wanted to move to Bangkok to get a better job and earn more money. So we met with an agent, Ko Tout, who had been working in Mae Sot for many years, and he said that in Bangkok there were many good jobs and if we both wanted to go he would send us and we had to pay 6000 Baht for transport fees.

“We agreed to pay the money and followed him to Bangkok. But he didn’t let me and my sister go together. He sent me to the house of a Thai boss and he took 20,000 Baht from him without me knowing. So I had to work to pay all the debts.

“While I was there they always locked the house and didn’t allow me outside. I didn’t go outside the whole time. Also, I couldn’t speak Thai. There were only the boss and his wife living there. The wife couldn’t have a baby. After I had worked there for five months, I asked her when my debt would be paid and she said that if I wanted to pay it all off I could have a baby for them. I didn’t agree with this but the woman got her husband to rape me. I got pregnant and when I was due to have my baby they wouldn’t take me to hospital but took me to a small clinic instead so the birth would be

more of a secret. I delivered twin baby boys on February 19<sup>th</sup> and the boss and his wife only allowed my babies to stay with me for ten days. After that, they were taken from me and I wasn’t allowed to see them anymore.

“When I heard my babies crying I couldn’t close my mind and I wanted to see them. I didn’t get a chance to breast feed and my breasts were very painful but the boss wouldn’t allow it.”

Mi May’s voice became tearful as she recounted this painful episode.

“Two months after I gave birth the wife forced me to leave the house. I was crying to the boss and pleading that I didn’t mind about the low salary. It would be okay if I got a chance to stay with my babies. The wife didn’t care what I said and about 2pm in the afternoon she phoned a taxi driver to pick me up. Before I left she checked to make sure I hadn’t taken anything from her home. She talked with the taxi driver and I didn’t understand what they were talking about. After he drove for about two hours he stopped and tried to rape me but I took something from the car to hit him with and then I ran away, leaving my shoes behind. While I was walking another taxi driver saw me and he was very sympathetic and sent me to a market.

“I was very hungry and thirsty and had nowhere to go. I just kept walking without hope. Then I saw a monastery and went in to ask for some food. There were one or two Mon people there working on construction and I asked them to let me stay there for a while. Two days later I became very weak and had to see a doctor. The doctor asked me what had happened and then he phoned a safe house in Mahachai *which looks after victims of trafficking*. Now I am in safe place. But I haven’t heard anything from my sister since we left Mae Sot and whether she is facing any problems.”

Mi May does not know the location of the house where she was held in Bangkok and the case will be difficult to investigate, according to a source working for a Labor Rights organization who prefers to remain anonymous.

From March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, Battalion No.31 commander, Lt. Colonel Myo Swe and his wife, Nhwe Nhwe Win forced residents of Shwe-Hin-Thar-Ywa-Thit village, in the southern part of Ye Township, to provide six days’ unpaid labor to repair a pagoda.



## Feature

### A woman's life, displaced on the border



**HURFOM: March 3, 2009**

Grass leaves cover the small hut and the floor is laid with bamboo. The poles are only the thickness of a thin man's wrist. The hut has three rooms and it was built as many months ago. In the bedroom there is one blanket and two pillows; in the kitchen there are two pots and four dishes. A woman named Mi Kyae is sleeping on the floor as two children play on the ground near her. Their situation is not so different from the situation of many displaced people and refugees on the Thai-Burma border.

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) has had a ceasefire with Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government for around 13 years, but the villagers still suffer from war. Conflict is still happening in southern Mon State and Tanessarim Division because Mon and Karen rebels are active in the area. The SPDC calls the region a "black area," and treats it as a free fire zone.

SPDC soldiers and rebels are still fighting in the area. And villagers are still suffering. A hundred thousand villagers have left their homes and moved to places they hope will be safer. But the displaced people face many problems in their new homes; problems related to food, health care, education, land rights, employment and travel. In this situation, women and children suffer more than men because men are usually the main breadwinners who have to work and

consequently they can get more food and more and better health care.

Mi Kyae's family and other families escaped from their village last October. When they left, each family had to pay 5,000 Kyat to village authorities and had to lie about visiting another village. When her group left the village they had to walk for three days and two nights. They walked from Ye to Halockhani, which is a Mon resettlement camp for returned refugees. The group crossed many camps but they could not live in these camps because no one knew them and they had no one to depend on.

Mi Kyae's family is just one of the families which have been displaced from Tanessarim Division. Her family was displaced from Cha Pon village and now they are based in a village in We Jar Tha village, Sangklaburi District, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand. Mi Kyae's family has four members: Mi Kyae, her two children and her husband. They hoped to get a better life in the border area.

Mi Kyae's group stayed in We Jar Tha village for a month before some went back. Some returned because they had property in their home village, others wanted to go back because they knew they would face a difficult life in We Jar Tha. Only Mi Kyae's family did not return.

Since her family arrived in this area three months ago, they have faced many kinds of problems. They struggled to find food and health care, land for building a house and employment. When they first arrived in We Jar Tha they had no place to live, but fortunately the Mon Relief Development Committee (MRDC) helped them find a place to stay. Mi Kyae has had to find a job on her own.

In We Jar Tha village, only Mi Kyae's husband can work and Mi Kyae cannot work because her husband's employer will not allow women to work on his farm. Her husband can work only one or two weeks per month and he can only earn 130 baht per day. He is paid unfairly low wages because he is an illegal worker in Thailand. Legal foreign workers can earn 170 to 180 Baht per day and Thais can earn 200 Baht per day.

Mi Kyae has no idea how to get more income and she also does not dare to go outside because she is afraid that the Thai police will arrest

A local 52-year-old woman said, "The pagoda was established by our grandparents. It's located on a hillside approximately a mile away from the village.

"We have fifty households here and about forty were required to provide a laborer. The workers, including twenty women, had to carry water, clear the grounds and carry bricks from trucks to the construction site. The bricks had come from the army's brick pits in Khaw-Zar. The laborers included some of their soldiers too."

## Feature Continued

her and put her in jail. She has no job and she only works in the house preparing food and looking after her children.

“Now that the prices of rice and cooking materials are so expensive and my income is so low I have no idea how to continue in life. Sometimes I have not enough food for my family and I need to give my husband more food than us because he has to work. My two children also have to get enough food. I always eat less.”

While Mi Kyae talked about her situation a motorbike came and the driver shouted to her, “Do you want some fish? If you have no money you can give me tall-grass.” In January and February, many people sell tall grasses for broom making. Mi Kyae stood up from her place and went to the motorbike and her children also ran along side her in their bare feet and dirty clothes. She picked up one small bag of fish and then came back to her place and sat down again. The wind was blowing strongly and there was a strong smell of pig shit. When I looked at the two children I asked her how old they were. She replied that the eldest was five years old and the younger was four. The children did not look their age because they were little and thin and small.

She looked at her children and worried about their education. “My daughters are at the age for school,” she said. “But I cannot let them to go to school. I have no idea how can I send my daughters to school because I have no money.”

Mi Kyae talked about her home village in Burma. “In my village we had to do forced labor for the army every day and my husband could not work for our family. We did not have enough food to eat and our plantation was confiscated. Women were raped while their husbands were away carrying soldiers’ things [as conscripted porters].”

In her village the rebel groups also demanded money and food from the villagers. Villagers have to give to each side, soldiers rebel and SPDC alike. If the soldiers heard that villagers gave food and money to the rebel groups they would execute or torture suspected villagers. These things are common in the black areas, My Kyae said.

The numbers of soldiers is increasing and villagers have had to take more and more responsibility for SPDC and rebel soldiers.

Villagers have to work more because they have to pay illegal taxes to both sides. These conflicts affect the villagers so over a hundred thousand have had to leave home because of such suffering.

“Lives in the southern part of Ye Township are like grass – while the buffalo are fighting the grass is always destroyed,” Mi Kyae said with tears in her eyes.

“In the Southern Part of Ye Township there are the most human rights abuses in all Mon State,” agreed Nai Aue Mon from the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM). HURFOM works to extensively document reports about Human Rights abuses in Mon areas like Mon State and Tenasserim Division.

Many of the people displaced by conflict and human rights abuses do not live in the refugee camps or resettlement sites. Some of them live in other places around the border area and receive no help from the MRDC, which provides support to residents of resettlement sites. The MRDC can only focus on the people who live in the official sites, even though all displaced people are in need. The MRDC is only able to help people who live on the Burmese side of the border, not those who live on the Thai side. Mi Kyae’s family lives on the Thai side so she has not had much help from the MRDC since she arrived in We Jar Tha.

“One day my child was sick but I did not dare to go to the hospital. People in We Jar Tha said to me that if I went to the hospital the police would arrest me and put me in jail. I had to send my daughter to the outside health worker and it was very expensive. The health worker just gave my daughter one injection and ten tablets of medicine and I had to give her 500 baht.”

Mi Kyae’s family hoped to get a better life in the border area but they face many difficulties. They want to go back to their home village and live their lives in peace. They know that they will probably never go back again, but they hope that one day if Burma becomes democratic then they could go back and live there happily. Thousands upon thousands of families like Mi Kyae’s hope to go back to their hometowns, but nobody knows how long the conflict and human rights abuses will continue.

In one day, one week, one month, one year, one life or one generation we will go back to our home.

## 6. Forced labor for sentry duty

### Case 1. WCRP interview with 55 year old woman from Yin-Ye village

## Invitation for Feedback to Our Publication "The Plight" of Women and Children in Southern Burma

Dear Readers,

With objectives to monitor the situation of women and children in southern part of Burma and to empower them with the rights described in CEDAW and CRC, which are both ratified by the current military regime in Burma, our "Woman and Child Rights Project (Southern Burma)" came into existence since 2000.

Under this project, "The Plight" Newsletter is produced quarterly and this newsletter especially describe the general situation of women and children in Burma and how their human rights are violated by the ruling regime and its army.

In a plan to evaluate our publication, we wish to get the FEEDBACK of our readers. Hence, you can kindly send your feedback. If you know anyone who would like to receive the newsletter or if you wish to send your feedback, please feel free to contact the following mailing and e-mail address.

Woman and Child Rights Project  
P. O. Box 2237, General Post Office  
Bangkok, Thailand 10501  
E-mail: [wcrpcontact@yahoo.com](mailto:wcrpcontact@yahoo.com)  
Website: [www.rehmonnya.org](http://www.rehmonnya.org)

With regards,  
Project Coordinator  
Woman and Child Rights Project - Southern Burma

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Battalion No. 31 ordered Nai Kyaw Hein, the headman of Yin-Ye village, Khaw-Zar Sub-township, to force residents to work as unpaid village sentries. There are three entrances to Yin-Ye and households were divided into three groups, each taking responsibility for an entrance. Four sentries were required per entrance and most households had to provide someone for sentry duty at least one night a week. However, the headman would not allow women to do the work even if their husbands were absent and so some women were obliged to hire substitute workers at their own expense.

One 55 year-old woman said, "my husband was not here but the headman still wanted me to send someone. So I decided to go but he wouldn't allow me to do it and I had to pay 2000 Kyat per night to hire a man. However, friends or relatives of the headman didn't have to do the sentry duty or provide a substitute worker.

"I need to pay once a week and it's not only that I have to pay for. I have to pay different kinds of fees. I don't know what they're for; I just give the military what they want."

## 7. Conclusion

As the above few cases illustrate, it is clear that forced labor is continuing in the Ye Township area of Mon State. The effects on women include loss of livelihood, financial difficulties, loss of education, physical hardship and the psychological impact of constant fear and apprehension. Demands for forced labor often come without warning and the presence of the military creates a climate of imminent threat. Few are exempt from their demands, regardless of age, gender or ability. As mentioned in the introduction, women in Mon State are disproportionately affected by this abuse of their human rights.

The regime should take into account Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which applies to all, including women. The article declares: *no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.*





**Female  
trafficking  
victim**

(Read personal  
account on  
Page 8)

## Acronyms

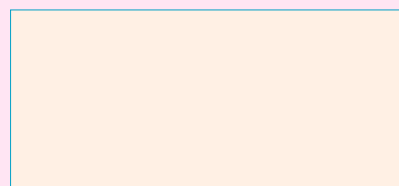
- IB** - Infantry Battalion
- ILO** - International Labor Organization
- NMSP** - New Mon State Party
- SLORC** - State Law and Order Restoration Council
- SPDC** - State Peace and Development Council
- UDHR** - Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- UK** - United Kingdom
- UN** - United Nation
- WCRP** - Woman and Child Rights Project



**Mon Women's Day in  
Sangkhlaburi**

( Read activities  
on Page 7 )

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