

13. Abuse of Women

13.1. Background

Throughout history Burmese women have suffered discrimination. Society and tradition in Burma tend to denigrate the role of women. For example, although women constitute an estimated 40 per cent of the workplace, few women have ever been allowed to rise to top government positions. Gender discrimination also severely restricts women's right to express their legitimate interest in social and political affairs. Women -- particularly ethnic women -- are extremely vulnerable under the SLORC regime.

Although a signatory to the 1952 UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women, Burma has still not ratified the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, nor has it established any official agency to advance or protect the status of women. As a result, social, health, and educational problems which many women suffer daily are overlooked.

SLORC has repeatedly denied all reports of human rights abuses against women by citing the existence of equal rights and five key laws which, it argues, would prevent any such abuses from occurring: the *Suppression of Prostitution Act* (1949), the *Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act* (1954), the *Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association Law*, the *Nursing and Maternity Law*, and the Penal Code. Despite SLORC's denial of the existence of human rights abuses against women in Burma, there has been overwhelming evidence of a disturbing pattern of grave human rights abuses and humanitarian neglect throughout Burma since 1988, in which women have been particular victims.

13.2. Burmese Women in Politics

Burmese women who become politically active, by expressing their opinions for human rights or simply by aligning themselves with a particular political party, are systematically discriminated against and harassed. Moreover, those who directly confront SLORC's political system by demanding certain freedoms are arrested and brutally treated. The situation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the most prominent leader of democracy in Burma, illustrates the discrimination that political women must endure. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been physically attacked by the SLORC-sponsored group USDA. Slandering statements by SLORC are routine and her ability to move freely is severely restricted. These kinds of restrictions and harassment on

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are clear evidence of the violation of “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.”

This year, a number of well-known women political prisoners remain in detention, including Dr. Ma Thida and San San Nwe (Thaywaddy).

13.2.1. Incidents

- Dr. Ma Thida and ten other NLD members were arrested in July 1993 and held incommunicado before being brought to trial on October 15, 1993. They were charged with “endangering public tranquillity” under Section 5(j) of the *1950 Emergency Provisions Act*, “having contact with unlawful associations” under Section 17(1) of the *1908 Unlawful Associations Act*, and “distributing unlawful literature” under Sections 17 and 20 of the *1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act*. Dr. Ma Thida and her colleagues were found guilty and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Dr. Ma Thida had previously been a campaign assistant for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; at the time of her arrest she was working at the Muslim Free Hospital in Rangoon. The doctor is an accomplished writer; she has written many short stories and several novels, none of which have been published. Although she was given official permission to publish her latest novel, she has now been prohibited from doing so.

Dr. Ma Thida is currently being held in solitary confinement in Insein prison with no access to reading or writing materials. She has suffered from failing health since the beginning of her detention; her maladies include digestive problems, tuberculosis, and ovarian tumors which may require surgery. The medical treatment in Insein Prison is negligible; although she reportedly has recovered from tuberculosis, she is still not receiving appropriate medical care for her other ailments.

- Daw San San Nwe, a 51-year-old NLD member and well-known journalist, was arrested in Rangoon on August 4 or 5, 1994. A widow with four children, she was arrested with one of her daughters, Myat Mo Mo Tun and two other political leaders. According to the SLORC, the four were detained for passing information “critical of the government” to foreign journalists and diplomats in order to make foreign governments “misunderstand the SLORC government.” The four were also accused of sending information to the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma.

On October 6, 1994, Dan San San New was sentenced to seven years in prison under Section 59(e) of the *1950 Emergency Provisions Act* for spreading false information and three years in prison under Section 17(1) of the *Unlawful Associations Act* for membership or contact with illegal organizations. She had been previously arrested in July 1989 during one of SLORC's nationwide crackdown on the political opposition.

Daw San San New's writing has been banned in Burma since the beginning of the 1988 democracy movement. However, one of her banned short stories was featured in a book entitled, *Inked over, Ripped Out: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors* which was published by the PEN American Center in 1993.

13.3. 1996 Arrests of Female Activists

During 1996, dozens of women and female students were arrested, detained, and interrogated by SLORC authorities for their support of the NLD or for their participation in the student-led demonstrations in November and December 1996.

13.3.1 On August 22, 1996, Burmese official media reported that "action had been taken" against 19 NLD members for distributing anti-government materials and "conniving" with outside forces to destabilize the country. Three women were among the 19 NLD supporters cited for these "crimes": Dr. Khin Mar Kyi, Daw Khin San Aye, and Dr. Khin Soe Win. Dr. Khin Mar Kyi, age 33, ran a private medical clinic in Monywa. She was arrested for allegedly having connections with illegal organizations; she was later sentenced to seven years in prison with hard labor. Currently she is in Htonbo labor camp. Daw Khin San Aye, age 35, is a shopkeeper. She was also arrested in Monywa and sentenced to seven years in prison with hard labor. She was sent to Mandalay prison. All three women were sentenced under Act 122/2 for high treason on the grounds that they had contacts with Burmese dissidents in India. The SLORC media later stated that the group of three had conspired to send NLD members for trainings in political defiance with exiled colleagues in India, had distributed leaflets attacking military-organized constitutional talks, and had made plans to open a secret office in Monywa. (*Source: SAIN*)

13.3.2. On February 11, 1997, eleven men and six women left Prome, Burma by train to attend the NLD Union Day in Rangoon. Soldiers and policemen boarded the train at Tharawaddy station and arrested fifteen of the NLD members (two of the women were not arrested). The prisoners were taken

to the quarters of the 35th Regiment. The women arrestees were Daw Myint Myint Khin, Daw Tin Hlaing, Daw Than Than Nu, and Daw Aye Mya San.¹ (*Source: SAIN*)

13.3.3. On December 3, 1996, Ma Thi Thi Aung, NLD youth member from Kamayut township, was sentenced to seven years in prison along with four other NLD members. The five were charged with having contacts with the student demonstrators in Rangoon. (*Source: SAIN*)

13.3.4. On December 7, 1996, seven student members of the NLD, including four women, were arrested for attending democracy demonstrations in Rangoon earlier in the month. The arrestees were: Ma Cho, Ma Kyi Kyi Win, Ma Khin Mar Yee, Ma Thida Myint Ma Cho, Thi Thi Aung, and Khin Mar Yee. The youth were sentenced to seven years imprisonment. Ma Kyi Kyi Win was later released. (*Source: SAIN*)

13.3.5. The following activists were also arrested for their alleged connections with the student demonstrations: Ma Yee Yee Htun, Ma Lay Lay Mon, Ma Thin Thin Aye, Ma Aung Gyi, Ma Myat Sabae Moe, Ma Sabae Phyu, Ma May Chaw Shein, and Ma Than Than Suu Win. Some individuals were released, but more detailed information is unavailable. (*Sources: SAIN*)

13.4. Women and Forced Labor

During the past few years, increasing numbers of women, including young girls and the elderly have been forced to work on SLORC's infrastructure projects and to act as porters in war zones. Such uncompensated, forced labor continues despite Burma's ratification in 1955 of Article 11 of ILO Convention No. 29 Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labor, ratified by Burma in 1955, which confines compulsory labor to "able-bodied" males between the ages of 18 and 45.

SLORC's has continued its widespread use of porters to carry military supplies, stand on sentry duty, build and maintain army camps, and act as human minesweepers. SLORC has no problem using women for such jobs. While SLORC battalions generally prefer male porters because they can carry heavier loads, some battalions deliberately demand or capture women porters in order to provide captive rape victims. SLORC soldiers generally select unmarried girls under the age of 18 for "porter duty." Women are considered more versatile and useful to these battalions.

1 The men arrested were Aung Myint, U Myo Thein, U Aung Myo Myint, U Shwe Thein, U Myint Than, U Paik Tin, U Myint Htwe, U Chit Tin, U Win Naing, U Aung Thein Win, and U Thein Zaw.

They can be employed as porters, human shields, property to be sold, and, of course, as sexual entertainment for the soldiers.

When these young girls are finally permitted to return home, they often discover they are pregnant. Many attempt to abort using primitive methods which sometimes causes their death. Despite the fact that the girls were violently raped and humiliated against their will, cultural norms require secrecy in the decision to abort; they fear that if the villagers learn that they have been raped, they will be unable to marry.

Even women with small infants are forced to report for portering duties. In some cases, a woman porter can be seen carrying a baby on her chest and a heavy load of mortar shells on her back. In other cases, soldiers order women to leave their infants behind in the village, where they must hope the other villagers will care for it. As part of portering duties, women with infants must also report for rotating shifts of usually three to seven days, building and maintaining army camps, cooking, cleaning, doing errands for soldiers, and standing sentry. Such duties are rotated among families. If a family can not provide an able-bodied adult at its turn, a child must report for duty. In conflict areas, able-bodied men are often afraid to report for duty because the soldiers often accuse the men of being rebels and then torture or execute them at will. In these cases, women or children are sent to replace the men.

SLORC soldiers use women and children to sweep roads for landmines each morning before they attempt to use the road. The soldiers hope that their use of women and children will dissuade nearby villagers from supporting any opposition groups. Often SLORC soldiers will force a large number of children to ride along the road in an army truck or a bullock cart and search for landmines.

SLORC's use of female forced labor on its infrastructure projects, including building railways, hydro-electric dams, and building and maintaining military supply roads, is also prevalent throughout Burma. The women and children, like the men, are forced to endure arduous work such as repairing collapsed sections of embankment and digging ditches. Often men stay at home to cultivate the fields while women report to the forced labor camps. One of the largest such projects is the Ye-Tavoy railway project. Women younger than 16 and older than 60 are forced to work on this project; some women are even in late stages of pregnancy. The working conditions at this camp, as with most of the other labor camps, are horrendous. Conditions are unsanitary, no medical care is provided, little food is available, and the makeshift shelters must be constructed by the workers themselves. The women with infants and young children are in a particularly precarious position as they must try to endure backbreaking work while also caring for their children. The unsanitary conditions and lack of adequate shelter make the children especially vulnerable to sickness and disease.

13.5. Incidents of Rape and Sexual Assault

More than half a century ago, rape in war was outlawed by the UN Geneva which states “Women shall be especially protected... against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.” Rape may be outlawed under the international rules governing conflicts, but Burmese women remain unprotected by the SLORC government; rape and sexual exploitation at the hands of SLORC soldiers is a common occurrence for Burmese women. Burmese and ethnic women have been raped by army soldiers in their homes and in their villages; sometimes their husbands and family are forced to watch. Women porters or women being temporarily held hostage have been raped by soldiers in the frontier areas and on military bases. Local women are raped during their forced labor duty on SLORC’s development projects or at their places of work. Women who flee to Thailand to escape their situation in Burma, are still not guaranteed safety. Some women are raped during the deportation process back to Burma or right after they are forced back to the country.

13.5.1. After its cease-fire agreement with SLORC in 1994, the “Kachin Independence Organization” (KIO) started selling logging tenders to China. Despite the cease-fire agreement, SLORC’s military columns often attack people working in the logging concession area and seize goods and money. At the end of 1995, SLORC’s LIB 437, located near Nalone village, Momauk township, led by Major Sein Pu raped two 22-year-old Chinese women working in the area. One woman died after being gang-raped by SLORC soldiers; the other woman managed to escape. The battalion also arrested 17 men, stole three logging trucks, 24 mules, jewelry, and one walkie-talkie. (*Source: ABSDF/North*).

13.5.2. On January 3, 1996, Lance-Corporal Khin Zaw and Corporal Soe Tin from LIB 313 and LIB 77, respectively, arrived at Htee Phado village. The Corporals spotted Naw Than Nwe, a 30-year-old woman and her sister Naw Ma Mu, 25 years old, working on their sugar cane plantation. Both young women were raped by the two men on the plantation. (*Source: KHRG*)

13.5.3. On February 18, 1996, Brigadier General Kyi Aung of Southern Command ordered his troops from IB 59, Column 2, to gather nearby villagers to a meeting. The troops gathered women, men, children, and the elderly; they ordered them to clear land mines between Naw Soh and Si Kheh Der villages. While the villagers were working, the soldiers raped a 23 year-old woman in front of them. (*Source: KHRG*)

13.5.4. On April 18, 1996, SLORC Division Commander Pan Zan from IB 234 raped Ma Hla Sein, a 36-year-old married woman from Thapyay Nyunt

village, Nyaunglaybin district. (*Source: KHRG*)

13.5.5. On April 24, 1996, SLORC Division Commander Maung Maung Thein from IB 39 arrived at Maubin village, Nyaunglaybin district. The commander arrested Ma Pan Cho, daughter of U Tin Myint, allegedly to interrogate her. Maung Maung Thein took the young woman to Let Kaw Wah village and raped her at the home of U Pay Pay. The commander then took Ma Pan Cho to Ho Thay Phu village and raped her again, this time at the home of Saw Hla Win. The young woman was finally released on April 26, 1996. (*Source: KHRG*)

13.5.6. On May 5, 1996, SLORC Division Commander Pan Zan from IB 234 raped a young woman named Naw See Phaw from Thapyay Nyunt village in Nyaunglaybin district. On the same day, Pan Zan also raped a woman named Naw Mu Pho, a villager from Phalay Sa Lo in Nyaunglaybin district. (*Source: KHRG*)

13.5.7. On May 15, 1996, SLORC Division Commander Chit than Win and Lieutnant Commander Kyar Htun raped Ma Sein Myint, the 15-year-old daughter of U Win Maung from Ko Kya The village, Thaton district. The young girl was raped three times by the men. (*Source: KHRG*)

13.5.8. On December 21, 1996, 80 SLORC troops led by Major Kyaw Khaung, deputy commander of IB 64, were inspecting the vacant village of Hai Seng. They seized four women who had returned to the village to collect some of their belongings left behind when they were forced by SLORC soldiers to relocate. All four women were quite young: Narng Kya, age 17, daughter of Loong Aw and Pa Mu; Narng Thun, age 18, daughter of Loong Saw and Pa Ae; Narng Seng Awn, age 20, daughter of Loong Ta and Pa Aung; and Narng Yun, age 22, daughter of Loong Taw Ya and Pa Kham. Major Kyaw Khaung raped young Narng Kya. The other three young women were raped by the other officers and soldiers. (*Source: SHRF*)

13.5.9. On December 31, 1996, SLORC IB 64 Commander Khin Than Aye from Murng Nai, led 100 troops into the recently vacated village of Nawng Khem to ransack it. The soldiers came upon two young girls who had returned to the village in search of their cart oxen. The commanding officer, Khin Than Aye raped both women; the soldiers killed both oxen for food. They then released both Narng Mya, age 16, daughter of Loong Taw and Pa La and Narng Khawng, age 17, daughter of Zai Aw & Narng Ing. The SLORC troops eventually burned down all of the houses in the nearby four villages. (*Source: SHRF*)

- 13.5.10.** On January 11, 1997, 13 people, including ten women and three men who had recently been relocated by SLORC soldiers to a site near Kho Lam between Nam Zarng and Kun Hing, fled to a Thai border village in Fang district, Chiangmai province. According to the group, they fled their country because the soldiers constantly forced them to work without pay, leaving them virtually no time to work for themselves and their families. They were routinely forced to dig ditches, cut wood, build fences, fetch water and gather firewood for the soldiers. When the men were unavailable, the soldiers took women to work. The soldiers would separate the women, sending especially attractive women to work in remote spots where they could rape them. (*Source: SHRF*)
- 13.5.11.** One young woman, Nang Non, age 22, wept as she described the two times she was raped by soldiers. The first time, in late November 1996, she was forced to clear away roadside bushes east of Kho Lam. Sergeant Sein Win of IB 66, based at Nam Zarng, ordered Nang Non and three other women to work in a distant location, away from the other villagers. When Nang Non was alone, the Sergeant ordered her to work near a lush area of bushes. A few minutes later he dragged her behind the bushes and raped her at gunpoint; he told her he would shoot her if she made any noise. Nang Non's parents, Loong Su and Pa Zing, live in Kho Lam. (*Source: SHRF*)
- 13.5.12.** On January 18, 1997, SLORC IB 99 commander, Major Myint Thu from Nam Zarng, Shan State, ordered his second-in-command, Captain Than Than, to lead 60 troops to Wan Phui village. His orders were to have the village headman, Loong Yi Ya, relocate all the villagers to Kho Lam village within 5 days (both Wan Phui and Kho Lam are in Nam Zarng township). Upon his arrival in Wan Phui, Captain Than Than saw an 18 year-old woman named Narnng Ae. He ordered his soldiers to keep Narnng Ae's father, Loong Mu Ling, away from the house; the Captain then proceeded to rape Narnng Ae in her home for over an hour. (*Source: SHRF*)
- 13.5.13.** In early February 1997, reliable eye-witnesses reported that three girls from Azin village were raped and then killed by SLORC soldiers. The soldiers also killed one man. No other information on the incident is available. (*Source: KIC*)
- 13.5.14.** On February 17, 1997, SLORC troops from Division 55 forced 13 women from K'Hser Doh township, Mergui-Tavoy district to serve as porters. The women worked as porters from K'Neh Kaw, to Maw P'tru and to Leh Mu villages. The soldiers raped all of the women and then shot and killed them. On the same day, the same troops gang-raped a 25-year-old woman at her
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home, in the presence of her parents. (*Source: KIC*)

13.5.15. On February 18, 1997, the same SLORC troops from Division 55 gang-raped a 50-year-old woman who eventually managed to escape from them. She arrived back at K'neh Kaw village the following day. (*Source: KIC*)

13.5.16. In February 1997, SLORC troops entered Phaung Daw village in Ka Set Do township and arrested male villagers to work as porters. Before they left on their military operation, the SLORC troops looted each house in the village, stealing whatever they could carry; they also killed domestic animals. One woman was gang-raped; her husband and father were forced to watch with their hands tied behind their backs. The soldiers continued to gang-rape the woman until she became unconscious; she later died. After being forced to watch the gang-rape of their loved one, the two men were beaten to death by the soldiers. (*Source: ABSDF*)

13.5.17. In February 1997, Refugees report that at least ten young women from Ka Nel Khaw village were arrested and brought to a military outpost in Ta Mae Hta. Nine of the women were gang-raped at the outpost; one woman, Naw Phaw Khwar, managed to escape. (*Source: ABSDF*)

13.5.18. In February, 1997, two women, from Phosimu village, between the ages of 28 and 38, who prefer to remain nameless, were repeatedly raped by SLORC soldiers. According to the two, they were forced to do odd jobs for the soldiers during the day. At night, they were forced to have sexual relations with between five and 15 soldiers per night. (*Source: NCUB*)

13.5.19. On March 20, 1997, Sergeant Tway Nge and a private from the SLORC's LIB 208, under the command of Major Htay Aung, raped Naw Paw Lweh, a 15 year-old girl from Pu-yay village. The men raped at her home. They threatened her aunt with death if she leaked any information about the sexual crime. (*Source: KIC*)

13.5.20. On March 23, 1997, the Company 1 commander from LIB 205, Captain Thein Aung and his entire company gang-raped Naw Aye Yin, a 35 year-old woman and her sister Ma Thein Za, 17 years old. The women were from Gar-lay-kee village, Kya Ein Seik Kyi township; after they were repeatedly raped, the soldiers shot them to death. Their naked bodies were left at the edge of a nearby forest. (*Source: KIC*)

13.5.21. On March 28, 1997, SLORC Major Saw Win and 100 soldiers from IB 246 arrived at Wan Phui, Kho lam circle, Nam Zarng township. The

soldiers saw twenty people moving their belongings to Kho Lam village. Major Saw Win and his soldiers accused the men of being Shan United Revolution Army (SURA) soldiers; they accused the women of being married to SURA soldiers. After Major Saw Win and his soldiers raped the six women, they beat and killed them, along with the 14 men.² (*Source: SHRF*)

13.5.22. On April 1, 1997, SLORC Major Maung Kyaw Tun from LIB 424 based in Kunhing township, raped Nang Than, a 16-year-old girl and daughter of Sai Su Nan Tar and Nan Aye Kham. The Major arrived at the girl's house in Wan Beang Khan, Wan Lao circle, Kunhing township and gave her father 50 kyats to go buy a hen; the Major told Nang Than's mother to get some vegetables. While her parent's were away, he told the young girl that he needed to inspect her home for illegal belongings. He ordered his men to guard the house for him. He took her inside the house and raped her. After the Major had finished raping the girl, she ran to the village headman and reported the rape. The headman and other villagers confronted the Major who proceeded to accuse Nang Than of lying; he beat the girl until she fell unconscious. When her parents returned from their assigned errands, Major Maung Kyaw demanded 10,000 kyats from them since their daughter had falsely accused him. (*Source: SHRF*)

13.5.23. On April 2, 1997, SLORC troops from IB 45, led by Major Aung Lwin, newly stationed at Murngsart village, patrolled the area of Waeng Nur village tract. They came upon the headmen, community leaders, and other villagers without incident. On April 6, 1997, the Major and some of his soldiers returned to the Waeng Nur village, this time dressed in civilian clothes. Major Aung Lwin went directly to the house of an 18 year-old Shan girl named Nang Zarm, who he had seen on while he was patrolling a few days earlier. The Major sent Nang Zarm's parents to get something to eat. He had his men guard the downstairs portion of the house while he raped Nang Zarm upstairs. Upon the return of her parents, young Nang Zarm cried and told them that the Major had raped her. As expected, Major Aung Lwin denied the accusation and aggressively slapped Nang Zarm. Nang Zarm's parents sought help from the village headmen, but the Major had already told him that he had been falsely accused. Nang Zarm's parents were told that nothing more could be done. (*Source: SHRF*)

2 The villagers killed by the IB 246 soldiers are as follows: Loong Sai Long, age 40; Loong Yawd Kham, age 45; Loong Par Hla, age 47; Loong Thi, age 42; Sai Hla Kyi, age 32; Sai Tee Ya, age 30; Sai Kham, age 29; Sai Nu, age 28; Sai Myo, age 22; Sai Leang, age 20; Sai Ar Lee Ya, age 29; Sai Vi Sing Tar, age 22; Sai Vi Mar Lar, age 19; Nang Pong, age 18; Nang Aye, age 19; Nang Pool, age 24; Nang Kham Arm, age 23; Nang Parn, age 20; and Nang Soi, age 30.

13.5.24. On April 2, 1997, the following four women were raped by SLORC troops: Nang Hla, age 16; Nang Sai, age 18; Nang Bok, age 22; and Nang Tun, age 25. All the women are originally from Nong Khan village, Ho Yarn circle, Kunhing township. On April 2, the women had returned to their village to collect some of their belongings after being forced to relocate to another village by SLORC troops. Major Myint Lwin and 26 of his troops from LIB 424 also happened to arrive in the village on the same day. Major Myint Lwin raped the four women and then told the 26 soldiers with him to rape the women. After the repeated rapes, the women fled back to Kunhing township. Major Myint Lwin and his soldiers proceeded to burn down 35 houses in the village. Most of the villagers who were forced to move from Nong Khan village were unable to find work and have subsequently fled to Thailand. (*Source: SHRF*)

13.5.25. In the Kaeng Kham village tract, Kunhing township, the village men often work nights at the local logging company. A platoon of SLORC troops from LIB 519, led by Sergeant Hla Phyu, are stationed at Kaeng Kham village. At night, while the men are away, Sergeant Hla Phyu and his men repeatedly rape the women, going from house to house. Every adult women in the small village has been raped. (*Source: SHRF*)

13.6. The Situation of Refugee Women

Ethnic minority groups in Burma are often caught up in the SLORC's counterinsurgency efforts against armed ethnic groups who have been seeking autonomy since the end of British rule in 1949. The ethnic people suffer from SLORC's abuses, especially during forced relocation of villages, forced portering, and seizure of land and property. During these military operations, SLORC soldiers commit atrocities such as rape, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, torture, beatings, and forced portering. As a result of these human rights violations (combined with severe economic difficulties, caused in part by SLORC's arbitrary tax policies), hundreds of thousands of ethnic people have sought refuge in bordering countries.

More than 80 percent of ethnic refugees are women and children. Unfortunately these vulnerable refugees often face further persecution in supposed safe-haven neighboring countries. In Thailand particularly, refugee women often suffer abuses which are in violation of international standards established by the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, Thailand is not a party to the UN Convention; in fact, no one entering Thailand illegally from Burma is permitted to apply for asylum. As a result, there is no permanent international presence within the refugee camps, leaving the refugees, especially women, vulnerable to sexual abuse by the

Thai Border Patrol Police, who pressure them to return to Burma.

In addition to mistreatment at the hands of the Thai border police, many refugee camps inside Thailand remain under threat of attack by SLORC and its alliance forces. In 1996, Karen refugee camps along the Thai border were attacked and razed several times by the SLORC and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, a breakaway faction of the KNU. On January 3, 1997, over forty heavily-armed SLORC troops attacked the refugees in Cher Le camp near Mae Hong Song province in northern Thailand. The camp was shelled for 20 minutes, during which time the SLORC troops used 60 mm, 40 mm, and RPG anti-tank launchers. Soldiers from SLORC's LIB 84 brazenly walked into the camp and slaughtered defenseless refugees. Ei Pyone, a 19-year-old Shan refugee girl, and Ai Pun, a 30-year-old father of two, were killed in the attack. Ten other villagers, including a 13-year-old boy and two-year-old girls were seriously wounded during the shelling.

13.7. Burmese Women and HIV

While the number of HIV-infected individuals continue to rise in Burma, the general public remains woefully uninformed about its risks, with women suffering greatly from the lack of public education. Prostitution and the risk of HIV is widespread, yet the SLORC-controlled media does not supply adequate public health information to the populace in any systematic way. SLORC's widespread restrictions on the media, freedom of expression, and the right to community participation are some of the main obstacles that Burmese must overcome to acquire information on even the most basic health care questions. Moreover, traditional mores in this conservative Buddhist country conspire with SLORC's repressive nature to prevent prostitution and the sex trade -- the primary reason for the spread of HIV/AIDS -- from being publicly acknowledged.

Obviously, stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases is closely linked with ending the spread of prostitution and the allure of the sex-trade. However, even if women were well-informed of the effects of HIV, there remain compelling reasons for them to enter the sex trade or a career of prostitution. Economic upheaval and ethnic warfare in Burma create a powerful incentive for women, even young girls, to earn money to support their families.

The large number of Burmese women working in prostitution in Thailand and Burma continues to rise. Health officials estimate that women constitute at least one-third of all cases of HIV-infection in Burma (over 175,000 individuals).³ Other reasons for

³ *From the Southeast Asian Information Network's report, citing survey data collection since 1992.*

the high incidence of HIV among Burmese women are the country's poor medical facilities, including unhygienic injections and the frequent need for blood transfusions after childbirth due to anemia or poor prenatal care.

Under the *1949 Prostitution Suppression Act*, four training schools, with capacity for up to 600 former sex workers, were established in Rangoon, Mandalay, Mergui, and Kengtung under the Department of Social Welfare. Women attending these schools were chosen for some of the first HIV-testing programs in Burma. In 1994, UNICEF interviewed 78 residents in one training school; 70 percent had sexually-transmitted diseases and eight percent were HIV-positive. Not surprisingly, 98 percent had no knowledge of AIDS or how it could be prevented, according to the UNICEF report.

While the number of active commercial sex workers has increased dramatically in response to social and economic upheavals since 1988, it is nearly impossible to estimate accurately the number of young women involved. Some young girls are forced to enter prostitution to support their families, while others have taken it up while trying to eke out a living on the streets. However, much of the sex-trade is covert and therefore difficult to analyze; girls as young as 12, under the control of pimps, frequently move among different houses to work or are brought directly to a "client's" home at night.

In an effort to escape the dire economic and social situation in Burma, many young women flee to Thailand for jobs. Many women have been exploited and forced into the sex trade. However, those women who temporarily escape the sex trade and find a legitimate job are often lured into it by the prospect of making big money. Today rough estimates of the number of Burmese girls and women working in prostitution in Thailand is approximately 40,000.

Burmese women are often lacking in Thai language skills and are most often in a precarious position of having entered the country illegally. As a result, they are usually forced to work at the cheapest and most dangerous end of the sex market, where rates of up to 90 percent HIV-infection rates have been recorded. Advertised to clients as pure and AIDS-free, many Burmese women work at brothels in which they become trapped in a form of debt bondage. In 1994, Human Rights Watch Asia published a report on the trafficking of Burmese girls and women into Thailand, which described regular beatings and over 15 deaths at these brothels.

(Also see under "Personal Accounts," interviews 2, 5, 6, 7, 17, 27, 28, 31, 32, 34, 36, 37, 39, 41, 61, 65, 66, 70, 73, and 76)



Photo (40)

Woman laborer seen at the forced labor worksite in Mon State. Women and children are not spared from the forced labor projects across the country. (Photo by MIS)

Photo (42)

Women are frequently the victims of violence. Ei Pyin, a refugee, was brutally killed during an attack to a Karenni refugee camp in January 1997.

A mother and her children in a detention center in Thailand. Due to the economic hardship and political repression in Burma, thousands of Burmese illegal migrants including this family work in Thailand illegally.

Photo (44)

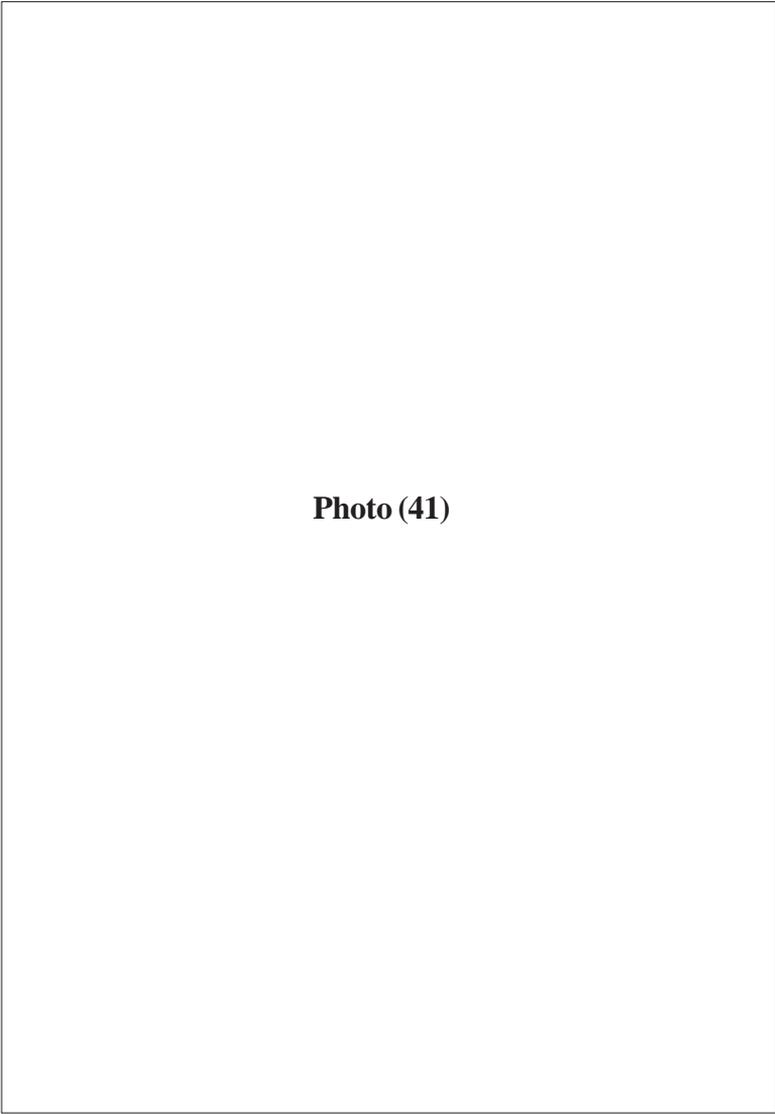


Photo (41)

(Photo by ABSDF)

Bu Meh, a Karenni girl was gang-raped by the SLORC troops after she was caught fleeing into Thailand. Her village was among those forcibly relocated in Karenni State.