

## 7. Rights of Minorities

### 7.1. Background

Since Burma became independent from the United Kingdom in 1948, members of ethnic minority groups have engaged in insurgency activities against the central Burman Government in an effort to gain greater autonomy or complete independence. When the military reasserted power in September 1988 after suppressing the pro-democracy movement, they pursued heightened offensives against ethnic minority armed opposition groups. SLORC/SPDC has allowed its forces to commit widespread human rights violations against civilians during counter-insurgency operations against the country's armed opposition groups. Rather than attempting to negotiate a comprehensive settlement, the SLORC/SPDC has tried to pick off the groups one by one. Since 1989, the SLORC/SPDC has agreed to a cease-fire with 16 of the armed ethnic minority groups. However, cease-fires have sometimes been short-lived. In March 1995, a cease-fire agreement between the Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP) and the SLORC broke down after three months. In January 1996, the SLORC signed a cease-fire agreement with the Muang Tai Army (MTA) led by Khun Sa in Shan State. Nevertheless other Shan opposition groups have continued their armed struggle against the SLORC/SPDC.

The Karen National Union (KNU) remains the last major group not to have agreed to a cease-fire. At the end of January 1997, cease-fire talks between the SLORC and the KNU broke down for the fourth time. In early 1997, SLORC troops launched a large offensive against remaining KNU positions. In the meantime, the SLORC/SPDC army freely kills, maims, and terrorizes ethnic minority populations that happen to be in its path.

While the SLORC/SPDC constantly boasts of its successful cease-fire agreements, the dissatisfaction among ethnic groups is increasing especially with the recent restrictions being placed on Shan national groups. When these groups negotiated with the SLORC/SPDC, they were told that they would be allowed to continue wearing their military uniforms and keep their weapons. However, SLORC/SPDC has now decreed that group members participating in the cease fire may not wear military garb or retain their weapons.

Cease-fire groups are also unhappy with the implementation of SLORC/SPDC's so-called local development projects. SLORC/SPDC officials have redirected development project funds into their own pockets. As a result, the groups have had to finance the construction of schools and hospital facilities as well as provide the necessary infrastructure themselves. By doing this, the cease-fire groups have attempted to prove that they are able to carry out their own development projects efficiently and humanely. While SLORC/SPDC resorts to forced labor practices whenever they implement such projects, the cease-fire groups pay their laborers fair wages. (*Source: ABSDF*)

The Kayan New Land Party (KNLP) accuses SLORC of breaking their case-fire agreement by forcing KNLP soldiers to lay down their arms. KNLP Commander-in-Chief Major General Than Palan made the accusation in a speech given on June 4, 1997 during a celebration of the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the KNLP that took place in Phel Khon township, Shan State. Major General Than Palan said SLORC Battalion No.336 used force when they ordered KNLP soldiers to lay down their arms. He added that when KNLP members travel from place to place they are searched by SLORC/SPDC troops, including KNLP leaders. Than Palan said that these kinds of acts by the SLORC/SPDC army violate the cease-fire agreement.

The KNLP signed a cease-fire agreement with the SLORC in July 1994, which allowed for the KNLP to retain their weapons. The KNLP, formed on June 4, 1964, has urged the SLORC/SPDC to begin a tripartite dialogue with ethnic forces and NLD party leader-elect, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Many observers have made note of the connection between the SLORC/SPDC's increased pressure on the KNLP and the organization's call for a tripartite dialogue. (*Source: ABSDF*)

The continuing armed conflicts in the Karen, Karenni, and Shan States have been accompanied by massive human rights violations. The SLORC/SPDC army routinely seizes civilians to work as porters, the majority of whom are members of Burma's ethnic minorities. These civilians are arbitrarily detained, tortured and ill-treated. They are severely punished especially when they are unable to perform all that is required of them. Further abuses of porters include being repeatedly beaten with bamboo sticks or rifle butts, being deprived of food, water, rest and medical treatment, and being killed.

Hundreds of thousands of others, including many ethnic Burmese, have been forced to work as unpaid laborers on new construction "development" projects in the past five years. No one is spared. Not the sick or the elderly. Not women or children. For many, this work is utterly degrading, causes cruel and inhuman suffering, and often results in death.

Countless other members of ethnic minorities have been removed from their homes to resettlement areas, where the conditions of their “resettlement” are brutally enforced by the army. In areas where the SLORC/SPDC suspects opposition, some or even all of the civilian population is forced at gunpoint to move into relocation camps where they are told that they cannot return home until the opposition groups among them surrender. If villagers do not obey, they are summarily executed. Their homes, crops and livestock are also destroyed. Such “scorched earth” campaigns have been conducted in Karenni State, Central Shan State, and the Papun District of Karen State.

In 1997, the SLORC/SPDC carried out widespread repression of ethnic minority civilians. Thousands of Rohingyas Muslims from the Arakan State headed for Bangladesh, fleeing Burma to escape degrading poverty, the indignity of forced relocation, and the horrors of forced labor. In Shan State, a forced relocation program early in 1997 caused tens of thousands of ethnic minorities to flee into Thailand. In February, SLORC launched a large offensive against the Karen National Union (KNU), the last major armed ethnic minority group refusing to agree to the terms of the cease-fire. As a result some 20,000 civilians fled to Thailand to avoid fighting and being subjected to further human rights violations.

## **7.2. Prohibition of Mon National Day**

The SLORC/SPDC has harassed ethnic groups, even those that have reached a cease-fire agreement with the SLORC/SPDC. On February 21, 1997, the eve of the Golden Jubilee Mon National Day, SLORC intelligence and local authorities ordered towns in Mon State to cancel their already prepared celebrations. The No.5 Military Intelligence Unit based in Moulmein, Mon State, was responsible for issuing this order to the local authorities concerned. The Central Organizing Committee of Golden Jubilee Mon National Day was informed by the intelligence officers that the celebration was barred indefinitely. The authorities added that it was unnecessary to celebrate Mon National Day anyway because SLORC already celebrated Mon State Day on March 19, every year, for the Mon people.

The entire Mon populace was angered and vehemently disapproved of the SLORC policy against the celebration of Mon National Day. The Mon people had prepared for this day, this special occasion to celebrate the Golden Jubilee, nearly three months. The authorities also cancelled celebrations in Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, Ye, and Paung, other towns in Mon State. (*Source: HRFOM*)

For additional information on the ethnic minorities situation in Burma see also the

following chapters: Chapter 1, Extra-judicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions; Chapter 5, Forced Relocation and Internally Displaced Persons; Chapter 6, Deprivation of Livelihood; Chapter 11, Freedom of Movement; and Chapter 13, Abuse of Women.