

7. Rights of Minorities

7.1 Background

Armed opposition by seventeen ethnic groups has existed since Burma gained its independence from Britain in 1948. These groups have engaged in insurgency activities against the central Burmese government in order to gain greater autonomy or better—complete independence. When the military government reasserted power in September 1988 after suppressing the pro-democracy uprising, it pursued offensives against the military armed opposition groups. For decades now the policy of the military regime in Burma has been to undermine armed opposition groups by targeting the civilian populations who allegedly support them. The rural and areas where the majority are ethnic people are divided into SPDC-designated ‘white’, ‘brown’, and ‘black’ areas. ‘White’ indicates SPDC control with little or no incursion by opposition forces, ‘brown’ areas are SPDC-controlled but opposition forces can and do penetrate and operate there, and ‘black’ areas are either opposition-controlled or cannot be effectively controlled by the SPDC. Villages in ‘brown’ areas face heavy demands for forced labor and extortion by the military, particularly by columns which go to patrol the ‘black’ areas, and if there is any failure to meet these demands village elders can be arrested and executed or homes can be burned as though the village were ‘black’. In ‘black’ areas villagers are regularly tortured or killed on sight and villages are regularly forcibly relocated and burned.

Whenever the SPDC troops are attacked or otherwise suffer setbacks in the ‘black’ areas, they tend to retaliate in the easiest way possible: by going back to the ‘brown’ villages and demanding cash compensation, arresting elders, executing villagers, or burning houses. After suffering this for years on end, having no control over it and seeing no end in sight, the elders of many villages in the ‘brown’ areas made their own informal agreements with local SPDC commanders: they gave promises not to help the resistance forces in any way, to report on all movements and activities of the resistance forces and to fully and quickly comply with any and all orders of the SPDC, and in return they were given assurances that they would not be arrested, their villagers would not be tortured or executed, their village would not be forced to move and their homes would not be burned. Villages which have made such agreements are generally dubbed ‘*Nyein Chan Yay*’ (‘Peace’) villages by SPDC commanders.

The SLORC/SPDC adopted a policy of negotiating cease-fires with individual ethnic groups. Since 1989 about 15 such groups have reached cease-fire agreements with the SPDC. However, the Karen National Union (KNU) has continued to conduct armed operations in areas with significant Karen populations in the eastern and southern region of Burma, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KPP) has resumed fighting against the SPDC since the breakdown of a cease-fire negotiated in 1995. In central and southern Shan State, military forces continues to engage the Shan State Army (SSA), a remnant of Kung Sa’s narcotics-linked Mong Tai Army. Numerous other minor ethnically armed groups including the Chin national Front (CNF), the Naga National Council, the Rohingya Solidarity

Organization (RSO), and the Arakan National Organization (ANO) continue to oppose the SPDC with varying levels of armed opposition.

In areas where cease-fire agreements have been reached, human rights abuses continue to take place. In fact, in these “national reconciliation” areas human rights abuses have increased rather than abated. There has been no move on the part of the SPDC to engage in political discussions with opposition groups to reinforce the military cease-fire agreements. Under the terms of the cease-fire, some ethnic groups have been allowed to keep their arms and soldiers, however, SPDC had vastly increased the number of its soldiers in those areas.

Cease-fire groups are also unhappy with the implementation of SPDC’s so-called local development projects. SPDC officials have redirected development projects 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, cease-fire groups have attempted to prove that they are able to carry out their own development projects efficiently and humanely.

The continuing armed conflicts in the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Chin States have been accompanied by massive human rights violations. The SPDC army routinely seized civilians to work as porters, the majority of whom are members of 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 minorities, have been forced to work as unpaid laborers on new construction “development” projects in the past years. No one is spared, neither the sick nor the elderly, neither women nor children. For many, this work is utterly degrading, and causes cruel and inhumane suffering, which often results in death. Countless numbers of ethnic minorities have been removed from their homes to resettlement areas, where the conditions of the ‘resettlement’ are brutally enforced by the army. In areas where the SPDC suspects opposition, some or even all of the civilian populations 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, Shan State and Karen State.

7.2 Banning ethnic languages in school

Though ethnic groups have their own primary languages, Burmese language is the sole language of instruction in all state schools. Even in ethnic areas, primary and second state schools do not offer any instruction in the local ethnic minority language, even as a second language.

After a cease-fire agreement between the New Mon State Party and the SPDC, the SPDC promised that if the students in Mon State wished to study Mon literature, they could attend special Mon literature studies outside school time in government schools. Many Mon students joined the Mon literature classes and they were strongly supported by the Mon community. However in 1997, the Mon State LORC issued an official statement that it

would no longer allow the use of government schools to teach Mon literature. They later instructed the concerned Township authorities to prohibit the teaching of Mon literature. After the leaders of the NMSP complained about this case, SPDC issued that the Mon community must build their school if the students really wanted to study the subject. Therefore, the Mon community leaders built many Mon schools in Mon State with their own funds and manual labor. Then, in 1998, the Mon State PDC authorities instructed the local authorities to close down all Mon national schools in the whole of Mon State. These schools had been built and were running as self-supporting entities of the local Mon community in the State. The authorities claimed the teaching Mon literature is illegal and the running of Mon national schools in the villages is against existing laws. However, many schools remained open or re-opened.

7.3 Mon Schools ordered to Close down in 1999

On October 16, 1999, SPDC authorities in Mon State ordered a Mon national school to close down. The school had been providing education to Mon children in a building in a Mon monastery compound of Kwan-tar village, Mudon Township, Mon State. The order actually came from Military Intelligent No. 5 and the village PDC chairman, Nai Sein Aung, and Secretary, Nai Thar Aung, had to take responsibility to close the school down. The next day, on October 17, the village headmen called a meeting with all students' parents and explained that the "higher authorities" had ordered them to close down the school because it was an illegal institution and the teaching of the Mon language was also illegal. The parents were threatened that if they sent their children to a Mon school in the future that both they and their children would be arrested. The parents were then forced to sign a letter promising to keep their children out of the school. After the school was closed, about 100 children lost access to education. Village militia troops waited around the Mon school to prevent the operation of the school until the end of October.

On October 28, the Mudon Township PDC authorities closed down another school. The Township Secretary, U Myint Soe, went to Set-thawe village in southern part of Mudon town and ordered, through the village headmen, to close down the local Mon school immediately. The next day, the village chairman asked the school headmistress to meet him. He asked her to close down the school immediately, and warned her that if she refused to close down the school, she would be arrested and detained according to the laws as she was leading illegal activities. (*Source: HURFOM*)

7.4 Banning Shan script in Shan State

In early March 1999, SPDC's Northeastern Regional Military Command Commander, Maj-Gen. Tin Aung Myint Oo, instructed all the regiments and battalions under his command to destroy all the signboards bearing villages' names in Shan script in their respective areas of control. These signboards had been put up by the Shan cease-fire groups and village communities alongside the Burmese signboards. According to the SPDC, the Shan language is not allowed to be used even in Shan State, and only signboards that bear the Burmese script are to be used. In September 1999 SPDC command in eastern Shan State banned the sale of the traditional locally made rice wine. The army brew now has the monopoly. In

addition to Shan alcohol, the Shan language is banned in schools, on signboards and video tapes dubbed in Shan are banned. (*Source: SHAN*)

7.5 Shan Refugees Lose Citizenship

New household registrations by the SPDC in the town of Pang Long are causing concern that Shan refugees from the area are being deliberately deprived of their citizenship. Since May 22, 1999, the SPDC authorities in Pang Long have been ordering headmen of town quarters and villages around the town to compile new house registration lists. Anyone not physically present in the household is not allowed to be registered. Since the forced relocation of over 10,000 Shan villagers to Pang Long in early 1998, a large number of these Shans have fled to Thailand. With the new registrations, those seeking refuge in Thailand are now being deprived of their original identity and may not be allowed to return if they wanted to. (*Source: SHRF*)