

The role of coercive measures in forced migration/internal displacement in Burma/Myanmar

By Andrew Bosson

Summary

Most forced migrants in Burma/Myanmar are displaced not by overt military action or large-scale infrastructure projects but through the cumulative impact of such coercive measures as forced labour, land confiscation, extortion and forced agricultural practices. These drive down the family's resource base, and thus its income, to the point where the household economy collapses and people cannot survive in their homes. The resulting displacement is not as dramatic as the expulsion of whole villages, well documented by various monitoring groups¹, since it typically involves the movement of individuals or single families – there is nothing remarkable about 3 or 4 people walking along a road. This pattern, which we call “gradual displacement”² may be recognised in regions of current conflict and in the cease-fire areas as well in as the rest of Burma -- the main focus of this article

An earlier and longer presentation of this analysis may be found in the May 2007 report prepared by the author for the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) under the title of [“Forced Migration/Internal Displacement in Burma with an emphasis on government-controlled areas”](#) -- also at [Burma-IDP report](#) . The methodology section of that report describes the difficulty of research inside Burma and details the indicative status of the results These were largely drawn from desk research and interviews in Thailand, India and Malaysia with 560 people who had been, before they crossed a border, internally displaced. The present article, while drawing on the earlier report, and referring to the survey, is also informed by further research and discussions in Thailand and India (late 2007-early 2008) with Burmese refugees.

Introduction

Most studies of internal displacement/forced migration in Burma/Myanmar concentrate on the rural areas of Eastern Burma which are occupied by the Burma Army or disputed by a number of non-Burman ethnic groups fighting for greater autonomy (but none demanding outright secession from the Union). While touching on these areas, this article mainly deals with other States and Divisions which are largely under SPDC control,

¹ See the reports of TBBC -- <http://www.tbtc.org> ; KHRG <http://www.khrg.org> ; FBR <http://www.freeburmarangers.org> ; SHRF <http://www.shanland.org> ; IDMC – <http://internal-displacement.org> et. al.

² I would like to thank Dr. Kyaw Nyunt for this term.

namely Irrawaddy, Magwe, Mandalay, West Pegu, Rangoon and Sagaing Divisions, and Kachin, Chin, Arakan and Northern and Eastern Shan State.

It looks at the coercive nature of the pressures which contribute to the collapse of the household economy and argues that their compulsory and irresistible nature brings this kind of population movement squarely into the field of forced migration, even though the immediate cause of leaving home can also be described in economic terms.

An estimate of the actual numbers of IDPs in Burma is beyond the scope of this article, though some individuals and organisations have stated that they think that the “livelihood migrants” probably constitute most of those displaced in Burma³.

Patterns of displacement in Burma/Myanmar

(1) Displacement/relocation produced by a single event.

This might be a natural disaster such as a flood or fire; it might be a military attack or a relocation/eviction order from the military or civil authorities for military, infrastructure or commercial purposes. Typically, these events affect whole villages or communities or sections of towns, and are relatively sudden. They occur in all States and Divisions, though relocations for direct military reasons are limited to conflict areas (indirect military reasons, which may occur nationwide, would include relocations to make way for military roads or installations).

(2) Displacement/relocation caused by a series of events

The events include coercive measures such as forced labour, land confiscation, arbitrary taxation, and compulsory, non-viable cropping in the case of farmers. These events generally act cumulatively over time, producing declining levels of human security which first affect the poorer families in a community. At this point, leaving home may appear to be the best or only option. In this context, people tend to leave as individuals or as family groups, though the whole community may gradually migrate over a period of years.

Forced labour, agricultural meddling by the authorities and the work required to fulfill their demand for building and other materials reduce the time farmers have to grow their crops. Confiscation of land and animals and the extortion of goods and cash reduce their physical resource base and household incomes are driven down to crisis point. According to the World Bank, “[t]he primary cause of poverty and poor human development outcomes in Myanmar is low household incomes.” The overall picture, therefore, is that for people in Burma, with its widespread poverty, rising inflation and declining real

³ See, for instance, Human Rights Watch [“They Came and Destroyed Our Village again”](#) and [Ending the Waiting Game: Strategies for Responding to Internally Displaced People in Burma](#) by Refugees International.

incomes, an already precarious situation is rendered critical by the coercive measures imposed by the authorities, and many people see migration as the only remaining option⁴.

The main coercive measures imposed by the civil and military authorities are:

Forced labour

Forced labour is reported in all parts of Burma, though less in urban areas. This practice, especially forced portering and other especially brutal forms of forced labour, amounting to torture, can be a direct cause of displacement. It also reduces the time people have to do their own work and thus pushes down family incomes. Those with the resources can pay someone to carry out their forced labour duties, but eventually these resources may be exhausted and the person/family has the choice of doing the work or leaving. The most thorough and authoritative account of forced labour in Burma, the 1998 report of the ILO Commission of Inquiry, states that:

“Families who were no longer able to support themselves often moved to an area where they thought the demands for forced labour would be less; if this was not possible, they would often leave Myanmar as refugees. Information provided to the Commission indicated that forced labour was a major reason behind people leaving Myanmar and becoming refugees.” and that: The impossibility of making a living because of the amount of forced labour exacted is a frequent reason for fleeing the country.”⁵

A 1999 World Bank report⁶ states that “... *economic development projects, armed conflict and extensive use of forced labor [emphasis added] have all contributed to rural displacement.*” In the survey conducted for the May report, forced labour was given by 59.9% of respondents as a reason for leaving home.

Land confiscation

Where a household is entirely or largely dependent on the land, land confiscation can be a direct cause of displacement, as well as a factor contributing, along with other pressures, to the reduction of the family resource base, pushing down incomes and reducing human security to a level that frequently leads to displacement. In the survey conducted for the IDMC report, land confiscation was reported in the rural areas of all states and divisions. Of the 560 respondents to the survey conducted for this report, 39.1% gave land confiscation as a reason for leaving home.

Robbery, extortion, arbitrary taxation

The practice of extortion and arbitrary taxation is reported from all parts of Burma. It involves demands for goods and cash, normally on the pretext of fees and taxes, e.g. for ceremonies or development projects, devised by the military and civil authorities.

⁴ For an update on the annexes of the May 2007 report, see:

http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs4/IDP_updates_2007-12.pdf

⁵ <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/reim/gb/docs/gb273/myanmar.htm>

⁶ *Myanmar: An Economic and Social Assessment*, World Bank, 1999, page v

Extortion and arbitrary taxation directly reduce the family income, frequently leading to food scarcity either as a single cause or in combination with other coercive measures. Extortion/heavy and arbitrary taxation is given by 60% of the Survey respondents as a reason for leaving home.

Compulsory (and frequently ruinous) cropping and marketing policies

One of the key policy objectives of SLORC/SPDC is urban stability. A means to this end is to ensure that the army and the cities, especially Rangoon, have adequate and affordable supplies of rice, lack of which can lead to urban unrest (there were rice shortages in Rangoon immediately preceding the resumption of direct power by the military in September 1988). In line with this objective, the military and civil authorities impose compulsory cropping and marketing practices on farmers throughout the country. These included a paddy procurement system whereby farmers were obliged to sell a portion of their rice crop to the state at below market prices, often leading to heavy debt and deeper poverty. In 2003 the system was abolished, though there are reports that some army units, especially in rice-deficit areas, continue the practice. Currently, one of the most onerous forms of Government interference in farming is the compulsory growing of Summer rice, frequently at the wrong time of the year, in the wrong soil and weather conditions and without adequate fertilizer or irrigation. The current nationwide scheme to grow Jetropha (physic or castor oil plant) plants for bio-diesel is another drain on the farmers' resource base. While engaged in such compulsory cultivation, a family cannot do its own work, thus lowering its income. Ruinous agricultural cropping and marketing policies were given by 18.6% of the survey respondents as a reason for leaving home.

Punishment for non-compliance with orders

To discover whether the coercive measures were actually coercive, the survey asked what would happen if people did not obey the demands for forced labour etc. In most cases, respondents said they would be punished.

Geographic Summaries

Arakan State

A major root cause of displacement in Arakan is the increased presence, and thereby pressure on the people, of the Burma army, with its demands for (uncompensated) labour, land and other resources. Land confiscation in particular has been a burden on the people. Another, mainly affecting northern Arakan, is the construction of "model villages" which has recently involved the eviction of the (Muslim) Rohingyas, the appropriation of their land, the destruction of their houses and their replacement by (Buddhist) Rakhines and Burmans, not all of whom are voluntary settlers.

Chin State

A major root cause of forced migration in Chin State is militarization, which gives rise to high levels of forced labour, land confiscation and extortion. Another reason frequently given for leaving home is the coercive agricultural policies which require people to cultivate tea and Jetropha (physic/castor oil) plants, either on their own land or on army plan-

tations. There are a number of reports of evictions and relocations thought to be motivated by religious intolerance – confiscation of land of Chin Christians for use by Buddhists, including the expansion of monasteries.

Irrawaddy Division

We do not have sufficient data to arrive at a well-grounded overview for Irrawaddy Division, though indications are that forced labour and extortion are especially heavy.

Kachin State

The root cause of forced migration in Kachin State is the increased presence of the Burma army, which is engaged in administrative and commercial as well as military activities. These have involved widespread confiscation of land and other property, and forced labour is reported in the extraction of logs as well as work on roads and bridges.

Magwe Division

Relocation for infrastructure projects, added to coercive agricultural policies, land confiscation for institutional, commercial and private use, along with widespread forced labour and extortion are the major factors leading to displacement in Magwe Division.

Mandalay Division

The most dramatic relocations in Mandalay Division over the past three years involved the move of the capital to Pyinmana. Land confiscation has also occurred in other parts of the Division, and the coercive imposition of uninformed farming policies have also contributed to the pressures that lead people to leave home.

Pegu Division (West)

Forced relocation, land confiscation and control over land and farmers' activities form the main focus of the reports available. Forced labour and extortion by civil and military authorities have also been reported.

Rangoon Division

Displacement of people from the rural areas surrounding Rangoon has largely been to provide space for those displaced from Rangoon, for the development of industrial zones, for military camps and factories, for road-building and for private or military commercial gain. Evictions from the city in the period following the resumption of direct power by the military in 1988 were part of the plan to make Rangoon more subject to military control, and for commercial gain. In the lead-up to the Visit Myanmar Year of 1996, evictions were part of the process to "beautify" the city

Sagaing Division

Major causes of displacement in Sagaing Division are relocations, land confiscation and forced labour for infrastructure projects such as roads, and dams, extortion and interference by the local authorities in agriculture.

Eastern and Northern Shan State

Along with the forced displacement of the Wa from 1999, the increased presence of the Burma army has been the root cause of displacement in northern and eastern Shan State. The army's policy of "self-reliance" has led to evictions and widespread land confiscation, forced labour, extortion and other abuses which exacerbate an already fragile economy and drives down levels of human security.

Displacement in the Eastern border areas

Though these areas are not the main focus of this article, it is important to note that the "gradual displacement" caused by a combination of coercive measures is also regarded as a major cause of displacement by monitoring organisations working in those areas:

"Internal displacement in eastern Burma... is more commonly associated with the coerced movements of smaller groups rather than entire villages. This relates to impoverishment and forced migration caused by the confiscation of land, asset stripping, forced procurement policies, agricultural production quotas, forced labour, arbitrary taxation, extortion and restrictions on access to fields and markets. The compulsory and unavoidable nature of these factors is distinct from the voluntary profit-oriented, "pull-factors" more commonly associated with economic migration". TBBC IDP Survey, Nov. 2007 p 3.

"Expanded State control has intensified demands to cultivate castor oil and physic nut plantations to produce bio-diesel as a fuel substitute. Associated human rights abuses, such as land confiscation, extortion, and forced cultivation have become more systematic, with the junta establishing sub-township supervisory committees. ...The imposition of forced labour for castor oil plantations has been cited as the main reason for flight by new arrivals to the Thailand border in 2007..." Shan Human Rights Foundation, Monthly Report, August 2007.

"Taken together, and keeping in mind that such conditions exist in state-controlled regions across Burma, this family-by-family displacement probably accounts for far more of Burma's internally displaced people than does the large scale forced displacement of entire villages..." K. Heppner, Director of Karen Human Rights Group, 2006. Cited in "Forced Migration/Internal Displacement in Burma..." *qv*.

Conclusion

Most relevant reports and surveys I have been able to access state essentially that people from all parts of Burma leave home either in obedience to a direct relocation order from the military or civil authorities or as a result of a process whereby coercive measures imposed by the authorities play a major role in forcing down household incomes to the point where the family cannot survive. At this point, leaving home may seem to be the only option. These factors, which include direct forced relocation, forced labour, extortion and land confiscation, operate in, are affected by and exacerbate a situation of widespread poverty, rising inflation and declining real incomes. In other words, people leave home due to a *combination of coercive and economic factors*. One has to consider

the whole process leading to displacement rather than a single, immediate cause. Where coercive measures, as described in this article, are involved, the resulting population movement falls under the *Guiding Principles* even if the situation that actually triggers movement, frequently food insecurity, may also be described in economic terms.