

Interviews in Satellite Villages

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Recently, a report, with photos was received from friends inside Burma. The report contains interviews with people who were recently relocated, under duress, to areas around Rangoon called "New Towns". Few such reports have been received, so DAWN wishes to give extra space in this issue to this reality of life in Burma today.

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First Interview

I recently arrived in the Shwe Pyi Tha new town, which is a new satellite village in the outskirts of Rangoon. Previously, the area was all paddy fields for rice production. The land was owned by the farmers themselves. When the military took over state power, the junta confiscated the paddy fields without paying any compensation to the farmers. Thus, the farmers now are landless, have no place to grow the rice for their survival. Even though the farmer's lands were confiscated, the farmers each had to pay 1500 kyats to the junta to build a new home in the new town. Ironically, they built their new homes on land they once owned, but lost to the military government. So, the farmers, not being able to farm any longer, have to search for work every day in order to survive.

Shwe Pyi Tha is divided by the Rangoon-Prome railway into the east area and the west area. In the east area, there are many large comfortable houses, and the area is well decorated in order to serve the high ranking army officers and civil servants. The people call the east area the "VIP ward".

In the west area, there are many huts made of bamboo with thatched roofs. The two areas are very contrasting although near together.

There are 9 wards in Shwe Pyi Tha, not counting the VIP ward. In the VIP ward, construction of the spacious houses has been going on for two years now.

The poor people were forced to shift to Shwe Pyi Tha from their old houses because the military junta told them that their old area was needed to build roads, new buildings (offices and living quarters for the armed forces officers), or to build the new market etc.,. Even though the poor people's houses were destroyed by the junta, the people received no compensation, and still had to pay at least 3000 kyats to 5000 kyats to get a small piece of land in the new town. These poor people have to work very hard every day to get even a small amount of money only for food. Now, they must begin their lives all over again. For example, the people build a small bamboo hut only 10 feet square which

costs at least 1000 kyats. Since they can earn enough each day only for mere survival, they must borrow the money with a high interest rate from the rich people. If the people can not borrow the money, they have to move to another place called Aye Mya Tha Ya which is on the Rangoon- Prome highway road, more than 150 miles from Rangoon. Even the people in Shwe Pyi Tha new town can not go to Rangoon area for their jobs because the transportation rate is very expensive. Their average daily income is only around 15 kyats. The round trip to Rangoon area costs 10 kyats. This expensive transportation rate is due to an increase in the price of petrol from 3.50 kyats to 15 kyats for a one gallon. Now, in Burma, all commodity prices are very high because of the expense of transportation.

One boy who is in the 4th standard in school, said that previously his family lived in Sin Min ward in Alon township. Now, the junta built the new Thi Ri Min Ga La market in their old place. One day the township SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) officials ordered the people to move from their old place to one of the new towns. The SLORC told the people to give the money for the new place and the people got one week to prepare to move to the new town. On the last day given for preparations, two army trucks and two fire trucks came to their old place to force the people out. The people did not destroy their house because they did not want to move from their old place. So, the army took the head of the house (most are the fathers of the families) and detained them for one week. Although, the people did not want to move from their old place, they were forced to move to the new town.

In this boy's family, are his parents, his two elder brothers, one younger sister and two younger brothers. The eldest brother is 20 years old (eighth standard in school). The second elder brother is 18 years old (seventh standard), he is 14 years old (fourth standard), his younger sister is 13 years old (third standard), and his two younger brothers are both 7 years old (first standard). Before the eviction, they were all in school. When they moved to the new town, their family had almost no money for survival. Thus, his two elder brothers had to leave school and find hard work to support their family. Each of the two brother's daily income is around 15 kyats. His father sells dry fish and salted fish. The young boy also works to support his family by repairing gas cigarette lighters in his spare time. His mother sells some small commodities in their house. Even though the whole family works so hard for their survival, their living standard is very low. Their daily family expenses are at least 64 kyats.

Most of the family in the new town are starving. The people are suffering from the high inflation rate.

The schools in the new town are a very sad situation. Some schools are still being built. The teachers especially face a very difficult time in traveling to and from the schools. SLORC issues coupon tickets to use for their transportation. The teachers, as well as the government workers, can use the coupons for travelling during office hours. The teachers transportation costs are at least 4 kyats for the round trip to the new town. Their salary is 650 kyats per month. But they pay 189 kyats only for travelling to the school. Thus, the government staff are also suffering from high inflation.

The hospital is being still built in the new town. There is only one clinic to care for the people. There are only a few medicines in the clinic and there is a serious lack of medicine for accident cases. The doctor only comes infrequently to the clinic. There are four kinds of buses for transportation to the new town. Yet the people have difficulty getting rides as there are only a few vehicles available. Most of the people most work in the Rangoon area. So the people must spend a large portion of the money for transportation to go to the Rangoon area. In the evening, during the rush hour, the people pay at least 5 kyats for the bus from Rangoon area to the new town area.

In the VIP ward, the main road divides the area into the high ranking civil servants area and the armed forces staff area. Large houses are being built in both sections of the VIP ward. Although the high ranking officers build the houses here, they sell them at a very high price rather than live in them. These high ranking officers get bricks and cement at the official rate which is very low. At the same time, they use the state-owned cars for the transportation to carry the building supplies. The army officers even use the army trucks for transportation to build their houses.

In the new town, we can clearly see the junta's tactics of manipulating the people. The junta gives many special facilities to the officers to oppress the people. Although the people understand the junta's brutal tactics, they do not dare to speak out against the junta during this period of rule under the military.

Second interview

We arrived in Nyaung Pin village which is about 10 miles from Mague city in Mague division. One old man said that he was arrested in 1989. According to our conversation with him, the military junta loaned him money to grow his sesame seed crop. During this time, all the farmers are poor and lack money to invest for farming because they are also suffering from high inflation rates. Although the farmers borrowed the money from the junta, the farmers had to pay back the same value in sesame seeds plus interest to the junta who exports the sesame seeds abroad. These exports help the junta earn much needed foreign exchange to buy the ammunition which they use to oppress the people in Burma. The junta sets the sesame seed price at 34 kilo for 220 kyats for the farmers. If the farmers can not pay back the debt in sesame seeds, they must pay money which is 240 kyats for 34 kilo plus penalty. For example, if the farmer has one acre of land planted to sesame seeds, he is forced to pay the quota of sesame seed which the junta needs. When the farmer is seriously sick, faces a disaster or some other destruction, he can not cultivate his field so he can not pay back the debts to the junta.

This farmer said that he, his two friends from his village and 26 other farmers from other villages in the area were arrested because of their inability to pay back the debts to the junta. According to Burmese traditional custom, the farmers are responsible to support their families for everything. Now, their families face starvation. Thus, this farmer had to sell the cows (the essential animals for the farmers in Burma), bullock carts

and their house to get the money needed to pay back the money so that the junta would release the farmers from detention. Although the farmers have been released from detention now, they are in a very difficult situation.

In Kwan Gyan Gone Township of Rangoon Division, after the junta took over state power, they forced the villagers to make the fence around the villager's land. One blind man in the village was very poor and could not make the fence. For that reason, the army men kicked him out of the village. When the army men came to the village, they also destroyed the Za Yart (small house to rest for the travellers) without any reason.

In this village, the villagers are not satisfied with the military junta's actions. They are very simple and do not understand politics. But they know about the brutality the military daily carries out to oppress the farmers in the village. Other villagers in the middle area of Burma are also suffering from the brutal oppression of the junta. But they do not dare to fight against the junta.

Third Interview

After the military took over state power, the military junta confiscated the rice fields owned by the resident farmers to use for building the new town. They did not pay the farmers any compensation. This area is about 25 miles from Min Hla city in Pegu division. The junta named this new town Aye Mya Tha Yar (peaceful and nice place). Even though the land of the farmers was confiscated, the farmers were forced by the junta to build the roads on their own land for the new town. If the farmers could not work to build the new town as volunteers, they had to pay 15 kyats for each day. If the very poor people could not pay the money to get land in the other new town, they were forced to move to this Aye Mya Tha Ya new town by the junta. The other new areas are Hlaing Tha Ya (good smelling place), Shwe Pyi Tha (wealthy place) and Dagon Myo Thit (the name of an ancient city). The junta planned to move the poor people from the Rangoon area. But the poor people were working in Rangoon area. The junta did this because these people were actively involved in the country-wide demonstrations in 1988. After the military took the state power, the junta got the opportunity to take revenge against the poor people by evicting them from their old homes.

After the poor were moved to the new town, they faced the jobless problem. Now they face many difficulties for their survival. The people in this new town have a very low standard of living. Now, 90% of the people are facing the jobless problem and starvation in the new town. Their daily food is only rice soup. With food so very difficult for the poor people to get, how can they even think about education for their children?

One man said that there are six people in his family. Now, they have no jobs for their survival. His mother is 70 years old. He looks for any hard work day by day. When they have no money to buy food for the family, they have to sell even their mosquito nets, blankets and clothing. Sometimes they go without eating for some meals because of their financial crisis. Even sometimes when somebody in the family is sick, they go to the clinic and there is no medicine or doctor there. Constantly the water floods under the houses, so mosquitoes are numerous.

There are only tricycles for transportation for the people.

One young man (16 years old) said that he is a tricycle driver. There are 7 people in his family. His father was a carpenter and his mother was a hard laborer in a construction site. He attended school until the 8th standard. When their family moved to the new town, they became faced with no jobs and with starvation. So, his elder brother joined the army to support his family. Now, his parents are jobless in the new town. The SLORC sells 1.4 kilo of rice to his family for a week. When there is a lack of rice, even the SLORC can not sell the rice to the people.

Burma is a rice-cultivation country. Rice is the main export of Burma. Yet, the people are starving. The rice exports is for only the military expenses. Now, the junta is using about US\$1,500,000 for each day in the civil war.

Fourth Interview

When the military took over state power, the junta confiscated the rice fields in order to build the new town area called Hlaing Tha Ya which is on the other side of the Hlaing river in Rangoon.

Even though the rice fields were confiscated, the farmers did not get any compensation from the junta. The junta violated the 1963 law which was written to protect the farmers' rights (this law was drawn up by the revolutionary government led by former Gen. Ne Win). According to the law No.3/2, act No.1, the government can confiscate land only if:

(a) the farmers took a loan from the government and can not repay it; (b) the settlement of an inheritance can not be done peacefully; (c) law and state order have been violated.

The life of the farmers is only planting and harvesting paddy for survival. When they are landless, their survival becomes almost impossible. Since the BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party) ruling period, the farmers have had to pay a very high tax in the form of paddy. Because the military and the BSPP are virtually the same thing, this high paddy tax simply goes to support the military. The government corporation sets a very low price for the farmer's paddy, and this makes the tax very high for the farmers. If the farmers want to purchase back their own land to build a house on after their rice fields were confiscated (without any compensation), they have to pay 1500 kyats (about US\$250) for a plot 40 feet by 20 feet.

The people from many different areas were forced to move to this new town. The junta gave many reasons to the people why they had to move, such as they were living in an eviction area needed to build a new road, market etc.. Although the people's old places were confiscated by the junta, the people had to paid 1500 kyats to get the new place in the new town. While the people were moving to the new town, they ran into many

troubles. For example, the Hlaing river can be used only during the high tide when boats large enough to carry trucks to the other side of river can float. So, the people had to wait for long hours for high tide in order to move their possessions. They had nothing to eat during this time.

There are more than 5000 people living in this new town.

Now, 50% of the houses still have no walls in the new town. Forty per cent of the people are jobless and facing starvation. One dweller said that in his old place, he could do any job and his daily income was from 15 kyats to 20 kyats. Now, in the new town, although he also looks for any kind of hard work, he can not get the job for his survival. Currently, he is jobless and facing starvation. There is only one clinic in which two nurses attend to the health needs of the people with only a few medicines. The hospital is still being built in the new town. Some serious patients died because the transportation is very difficult to go to the hospital on the Rangoon side. One medical doctor said that he knew of a patient who died for lack of 5 kyats (US\$.60).

There is only one high school and 50 very small schools for basic education. One basic school teacher said that there are three teachers for the 50 students in his school. One high school student said that there are insufficient desks in his school.

There is no cemetery in the town. The people can not take the body to the Rangoon side because of the difficult transportation. So, the people made a cemetery in one rice field.