

## **POLITICAL SITUATION: MORE INFORMATIONS ABOUT THE SITUATION ALONG THE BURMESE-THAI BORDER**

On July 15, 2010, the UNHCR published the most recent refugee figures: there were 43.3 million displaced persons worldwide. This is the highest figure since the mid-Nineties. 15.2 million of them are refugees, nearly one million seek asylum in a foreign country and 27.1 million are internally displaced persons in their own country, with Burma showing the largest flood of refugees in south-east Asia.

### **INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS**

While official statistics are not available, the number of IDPs in Burma is estimated to be up to 2 million. The vast majority of this population belongs to ethnic minorities.

Human Rights Watch reported that in 2008 alone, 40,000 civilians were displaced in Karen State and Shan State. Because of a new Burmese offensive last summer, the number of Karen refugees crossing the border to Thailand was higher than for many years previous.

More often than refugees, the internally displaced tend to remain close to zones of conflict, caught in the cross-fire and at risk of being used as pawns, targets or human shields by the belligerents. Internally displaced persons do not have a specific international legal instrument that applies to them, as do refugees.

### **REFUGEES IN THAILAND**

According to TBBC, there were about 108,000 officially registered UNHCR refugees living in the nine camps along the Thai-Burmese border by October 2009.

Thailand hosts the biggest number of Burmese refugees. Thailand is not party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and has no refugee law. The Thai government deems that "persons fleeing fighting" may remain in Thailand, as long as they stay in the camps.

The freedom of movement is restricted as refugees and asylum seekers need written prior approval to enter or leave camps.

NGOs and CBOs (Community-based Organisations) play a key role to supply humanitarian aids such as food, water, sanitation, basic education and medical services to refugees in the camps.

In recent years, the international community has recognized that the internal situation in Burma makes it unlikely for voluntarily repatriation to take place in the near future, and that an alternative to the long term confinement in camps is beneficial to all parties. The Thai government and the UN has outlined a new approach to allow refugees more access to education and skills training.

Currently about 30,000 students are attending schools in refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. Education is free. However, teachers are mostly recruited from the refugee population and often not well qualified. About 200 young people in camps complete their secondary education every year. Some have the opportunity to join higher education supported by NGO-sponsored scholarships. A few students come out from camps and attend training such as human rights or media in Chiang Mai or Mae Sot. However, many young people have no chance to continue their studies, and some work as teachers or medics in camps.

## **POPULATION AND HISTORY OF BURMA**

The lack of a reliable census makes it impossible to more than roughly estimate the composition of Burma's ethnic mosaic or its total population. The Burman comprise about two-thirds of Burma's estimated 45-55 million people. More than 100 unique ethnic groups constitute the rest.

Historically, the 'ethnic question' has been at the heart of Burma's protracted political, social and humanitarian crises. Under British colonial rule (1826-1948), the different peoples of Burma were kept on largely different roads of political and economic development. Relations became dangerously inflamed during World War II, when many ethnic minority groups remained loyal to the British, while others opposed the colonial rule. As a result, there were disturbing outbreaks of inter-communal violence. In the hasty run-up to Burma's independence in 1948, many issues of ethnic, social and political rights, territorial divisions, and legacies of the war were never fully resolved. The principal demands of Burma's ethnic minorities are to gain genuine autonomy for their home areas and to achieve a significant voice in the affairs of the country as a whole. Few demand total independence as their ultimate goal.

## **KAREN**

The third-largest ethnic group after the Burman and the Shans, the Karen have also waged a long rebellion against the Burmese junta seeking either self-determination or even independence, depending on which insurgence group. Both Christian and Buddhist, the Karen have been plagued by internal strife between rival factions over the past couple of decades. A general ceasefire framework with the central government is in place but occasional flashpoints of fighting still occur. Karen villagers, who tend to live in the Irrawaddy Delta and in the border region between Burma and Thailand, have been victims of forced relocation and labour programs run by the Burmese military.

(There are also Karen in Thailand. For our film we chose the surroundings of a Thai Karen village in the forests outside Chiang Mai. The villagers were asked to play the extras in the scenes with the refugee camps. Many of them spoke only Karen, not Thai. So communication was a real challenge and only possible with several translations).

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

Despite the fact that Burma is signatory to several of the most important international human rights treaties, the most basic of globally recognized civil and political rights are not respected in today's Burma. Reports by international human rights organisations have repeatedly detailed a gruesome litany of human rights abuses in Burma. Ethnic minorities are especially vulnerable to abuses such as forced labour, forced relocation, arbitrary executions, torture, rape and detention without trial.

Ever since the military took over in 1962, it has sought to suppress ethnic minorities and to bring insurgent-dominated border areas under the military's control. The strategy has had military and ethnic dimensions: not only would minority communities be broken up and their ability to resist weakened, but it would also allow for the spread of state-sponsored Burmanisation, in which minority cultures, histories, and political aspirations would be eliminated in favour of a 'national' identity. The Burmese regime views all ethnic minorities as a potential security threat.

## **FORCED LABOUR**

Every day, the Burmese military forces hundreds of thousands of men, women, children and elderly people to work, usually without pay. Forced labour is common in construction, road maintenance, the railways, messenger work for troops and farming in fields confiscated by the army from farmers. Usually, the forced labourers have to provide their own tools and food.

The most dreaded form of forced labour is that of portering for the army. The porters have to carry heavy loads of munitions and merchandise for long distances in the hills, often through combat zones. Starved and beaten, the porters have to walk ahead of the soldiers in landmine-infested areas, and are often used as human shields during exchanges of fire.

It has taken years for the military junta to admit that forced labour exists in Burma, and it now says that it has issued orders to put an end to it, but that it cannot ensure that the soldiers in the lower ranks follow these orders. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has detailed the junta's use of massive and widespread forced labour. In October 2000, after repeatedly failing to receive convincing assurance that the junta is acting to end forced labour, the ILO took the unprecedented action of urging all its members, including governments, labour unions and employers, to review their ties to the regime.

## **MAE-TAO-KLINIK**

A very important Burmese institution is the NGO funded Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) in Mae Sot. The clinic's director, Dr Cynthia Maung, fled in 1988 over the border into Thailand to escape a savage crackdown. Although she has now lived in exile in Thailand for years, Maung has no official papers and is effectively stateless. Over the years, the clinic has grown from a small house to a multi-specialty centre providing free healthcare for refugees, Burmese migrant workers and

others crossing the border from Burma into Thailand. People of all ethnicities and religions are welcome at the Clinic.

Though exact numbers are difficult to estimate because of the fluidity of its patient population, the Clinic serves a target population of around 150,000 in the Thai-Burmese border area. Its staff provide comprehensive inpatient and outpatient services including trauma care, blood transfusion, reproductive health, paediatric services, eye care, and prosthetics for landmine survivors.

The clinic also hosts interns from local ethnic groups for periods of three months to one year. Interns are trained to become a new group of health workers and technicians who will go out to provide healthcare in the border area. In addition, mobile clinics within Burma, that provide health services to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), are supported.

The Mae Tao Clinic's reach extends far beyond its base in Mae Sot: Community service programmes include a home for unaccompanied children at Umphium Mae refugee camp. The Clinic also supports schools and boarding houses that serve the families of local migrant workers and staff. In addition, it sponsors women's organisations, health education initiatives and community awareness events at refugee camps

## **LANDMINES**

Burma has the highest number of landmine victims in Asia, apart from Afghanistan. Both the government and armed groups of ethnic minorities continue to make regular and extensive use of landmines. Burma is also one of the few countries that still produce anti-personnel mines. It has not signed the mine ban treaty and forms part of the eighteen countries that did not support a UN resolution in December 2008 which requested a global anti-personnel mine ban treaty.

The "Landmine Monitor Report 2009" recorded for the period of 1999 to 2008 2,325 incidents in Burma (175 deaths, 2002 injured, 148 cases not verifiable). The number of unregistered incidents is likely to be much higher. It is estimated that roughly 1,500 humans a year fall victim to landmines.

Civilians fall victim to landmines in two ways: they are either used as live mine detectors by being forced to walk ahead of army units through mine-infested areas or they are forced to remove the mines without having any relevant knowledge or removal tools at their disposal. They always run the risk of stepping on a mine somewhere. Over 14 percent of all landmine victims stepped on a landmine within a diameter of half a mile from their village.

The government uses mines voluntarily in the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, with the goal to cut off food and equipment supply as well as escape routes. Even after clearing a village and relocating the inhabitants, the army still uses mines to make sure that the villagers from returning. The military also use landmines along the borders to prevent people from leaving the country.

## **MALARIA**

Malaria is a vector-borne infectious disease that is transmitted by infected mosquitoes carrying the malaria parasites in their saliva. These parasites enter the host's bloodstream when bitten by an infected mosquito and then migrate to the liver where they multiply before returning into the bloodstream to invade the red blood cells. The parasites continue to multiply inside the red cells until they burst releasing large numbers of free parasites into the blood plasma causing the characteristic fever associated with the disease. This phase of the disease occurs in cycles of approximately 48 hours.

Nearly half of all malaria infections in the whole of Asia occur in Burma, where it remains a major cause of death and illness. The vast majority of cases occur in children under 5 years old; but pregnant women, refugees and internally displaced people are also especially vulnerable.

## **BURMA AND THE WORLD**

Although the international community agrees on the need for political reforms in Burma, it remains divided over the appropriate means to approach the issue.

Western countries, including the USA, the European Union and the Scandinavian countries have been promoting the isolation of the regime with future co-operation contingent upon political liberalisation, while most Asian countries support economic and other forms of engagement with the military rulers. China plays a particularly important role as the regime's main supporter

The Burma military leadership has repeatedly disconcerted the international community at large. The military, having already provoked an international outcry when it brutally cracked down on demonstration during the September 2007 Saffron Revolution, added insult to injury by having denied foreign aid personnel access to Burma after cyclone Nargis hit the Irrawaddy Delta in May 2008.

At the United Nations, the situation in Burma is being raised annually by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Since 1991, successive UNGA resolutions have called for the transfer of power to elected representatives, the restoration of democracy and respect for human rights. Concern about the lack of political and civil rights has predominated, but in April 2000, the UNHCR resolution also called for the restoration of social and economic rights. Since 1992, a Special Rapporteur has been reporting to the UN on the situation of human rights and the progress towards democracy in Burma.