

# Burma behind the scene

*Burma hit the headlines again last August and September when Burmese pro-democracy activists, monks and ordinary people peacefully challenged dictatorial rule and economic mismanagement by the ruling military regime. The generals responded with a brutal crackdown and at least 30 people were killed according to United Nations estimates. Since September, thousands of protesters, including monks, have been arrested and according to Amnesty International, the almost 2,000 political prisoners remain unreachable even by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).*

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Burma's problems are multidimensional and human rights abuses are common and widespread. Forced labour, for instance, continues to be among the most pervasive of human rights abuses in Burma. Despite numerous reports by human rights groups, as well as it being a leading cause of displacement and the movement of refugees into neighbouring countries, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC – the official name of the military regime) continues to deny the existence of this practice and attempts to present itself as cooperating with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to eradicate such abuses.<sup>1</sup>

## The dark side of development in Burma

The Tatmadaw (Burmese military) routinely forces civilians to work on state infrastructure projects, such as for example the building of roads, bridges, military bases or even towns. The military will typically demand labour from local villages, with the threat of fines if households are unable to supply the required amount of people. The SPDC troops' demand for labour is made easier by the existence of registration documents with details of the exact number of inhabitants, property and livestock within a village. Inhabitants have no choice but to apply for national identity cards and register their details or risk fines or arrest.<sup>2</sup> The military is furthermore increasingly relying on SPDC-appointed village chairpersons as intermediaries through whom to disseminate their demands. One particularly brutal example of forced labour is SPDC's use of villagers as human minesweepers. Civilians are forced to walk in

front of marching columns, so that they instead of the soldiers detonate eventual mines on the way.<sup>3</sup>

Projects vary in length and intensity, but they always mean that people are taken away from their land and livelihoods without any remuneration in return. The SPDC typically demands that forced labourers serve from early morning until evening and compliance with forced labour places civilians in dangerous situations, as they must travel away from their villages and communities, frequently under the supervision of low level officers and soldiers. Military personnel operate under blanket impunity, and know that they will not be held accountable for any mistreatment of civilians. Furthermore, low level officers and soldiers in charge of forced labour projects are under pressure to meet demands, quotas and timetables ordered by their superiors. Threats, harassment, beatings and even killings are not uncommon and women further risk rape and other sexual abuses.<sup>4</sup> Forced labour often means that villagers are unable to work on their own agricultural work for days or even weeks on end. Regular forced labour in Mon State (south-eastern Burma), for example, has been a primary factor leading to increasing food insecurity.<sup>5</sup>

## Prison labourers

Human rights organisations have reported the continuous use of forced prison labour in Burma and it is estimated that as many as 20 percent of prisoners sentenced to 'prison with hard labour'

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die as a consequence of the conditions of their detention. It has been reported that at least 91 labour camps operate in areas across the country and the thousands of prisoners in these camps are used to build highways, dams, irrigation canals, and to work on special agricultural projects. Prisoners are reportedly being forced to work 12 hours a day, without rest and the sick and weak are not exempted from work. Inmates that cannot afford bribes are condemned to the harshest labour.<sup>6</sup>

The living conditions and the general treatment of forced prison labourers are widely reported to be far worse than for civilian forced labourers. The work is more dangerous, they have to work even longer hours and health provisions are non-existent. The prisoners are viewed as expendable labour and there are countless reports of their torture, beatings and killings.<sup>7</sup> A constant supply of prison labour is assured by the continuing arbitrary arrests, as well as the imposition of lengthy sentences for minor misdemeanours. Those arrested often do not receive a legal process and are told that they will be released on payment of a bribe. Those who are unable to bribe the police or the judiciary are automatically sent to prison, whether there is evidence against them or not.<sup>8</sup>

### Forced conscription and child soldiers

Following the suppression in 1988 of the nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations, the ruling military council initiated a dramatic effort to modernize and expand the armed forces. To tighten its control over its population, the SPDC Army instituted a dramatic expansion of military personnel throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> Service in the armed forces is for many a dangerous and grueling experience and soldiers are often subjected to mistreatment by superior officers. According to the junta's military meeting minutes, there were about 9,000 desertions during 2006, whereas the army was only able to recruit 6,000. This trend continued in 2007 and the army is facing an acute shortage of trained soldiers. General Thein Sein, Burma's prime minister, has in response called for the army to recruit 7,000 soldiers per month, four times the actual monthly recruitment rate reported for mid-2005 and double the rate reported for mid-2006.<sup>10</sup> Regiments are expected to actively recruit in appointed areas and are often fined when they fail to meet quotas.<sup>11</sup>

Burma continues to have one of the highest numbers of child soldiers in the world.<sup>12</sup> The official age of enlistment in the army is 18 years and the SPCD army has denied allegations that it forcibly conscripts and recruits children. According to the chairman of the Committee for Prevention against Recruitment of Minors: "no forced recruitment is carried out and all the soldiers have joined the army of their own accord."<sup>13</sup> Thein Sein told the committee that minors themselves were to

blame for the problem because they lied about their true age or did not inform their parents that they had enlisted in the army. In a tacit admission that there remained underage soldiers in the armed forces, Thein Sein stated that soldiers with stunted growth were not sent to forward areas but were instead given light work duties at military bases, and that illiterate youth were sent to army schools to be educated.<sup>14</sup>

However, human rights groups charge the military regime with continuing to recruit large numbers of children into its army, sending boys as young as 12 to fight against ethnic minority rebels.<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimated that there may be more than 70,000 child soldiers in the SPDC Army. The children are often kidnapped on their way home from school, without their parents' knowledge. They are then brutalised and physically abused during their induction and basic training before being shipped off to fight in the country's ethnic states. "Child soldiers are sometimes forced to participate in human rights abuses, such as burning villages and using civilians for forced labour", said HRW. "Those who attempt to escape or desert are beaten, forcibly re-recruited or imprisoned."<sup>16</sup>

Non-state armed groups also recruit child soldiers, and some impose quotas on villages or households requiring them to supply a certain number of recruits, but the numbers are far smaller and some groups have taken steps to tackle child recruitment<sup>17</sup>.

### International development and its discontents

The establishment of internationally sponsored projects such as hydroelectric dam sites, gas and oil

**Burma continues to have one of the highest numbers of child soldiers in the world.**

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pipelines and the construction of new roads, ports and railroads have become concomitant with an increase in SPDC military presence around these areas which then result in an increase of human rights abuses, particularly forced labour and portering. International joint ventures and the significant human rights abuses that follow have been extensively reported and include the use of troops and landmines to secure large development projects. Currently, there are a number of international joint ventures taking place in Burma and one of them is a large hydroelectric dam construction on the Irrawaddy River.

The SPDC has allowed Chinese companies to build this dam and transmit the energy back to China. This dam is one in a series that the SPDC government has planned involving the export of power to neighbouring countries. The Dam, whose launching ceremony was held last year, will generate an estimated 3,600 MW of electricity and the power will be worth an estimated USD 500 million per year. The Irrawaddy Myitsone dam is the first in a series of seven large Chinese dams to be built along this waterway.<sup>18</sup>

Locals strongly oppose the construction of the hydroelectric power plant at Myitsone, because it is an invaluable natural heritage of Kachin State and it is feared that the project will cause flooding and an increase in human rights abuses.<sup>19</sup> An estimated 47 villages will be inundated and approximately 100,000 people will be displaced. Roads that link major towns in the remote state will be drowned and the floods will have a major impact on the existing problems of unemployment, HIV/Aids and drug abuse.<sup>20</sup> The dam will have as well a negative impact on fisheries, river bank cultivation and flood plain farming.

The healthcare system that is ranked one of the worst in the world will be further burdened by an increase in malaria and the release of toxic methyl mercury from the dam's reservoir.<sup>21</sup> Northern Burma is earthquake prone and the Irrawaddy Myitsone site is less than 100 km from the major Sagaing fault line. Dam breakage or unnatural flood surges would be disastrous for the capital of Kachin State, Myitikiyna, which lies 40 km downstream.

## A look ahead

Burma's human rights abuses are multidimensional and widespread. During last years 'Saffron revolution', the Burmese and many all over the world hoped that change would be imminent. The SPDC junta has survived, and continues to abuse its people behind closed doors. The revolution has been put down, but this does not mean that its spirit has died. It is only a matter of time until the Burmese will rebel again.

More of her articles can be read on:  
<http://1000forgottenstories.wordpress.com/>

<sup>1</sup> "Shouldering the burden of militarisation: SPDC, DKBA and KPF order documents and forced labour since September 2006", KHRG #2007-02 August 2007

<sup>2</sup> "Setting up the System of Repression: The Progressive Regimentation of Civilian Life in Doooplaya District", KHRG, 7 September 2006; "Oppression by Proxy in Thaton District", KHRG, 21 December 2006

<sup>3</sup> "Report from the Field", May 30<sup>th</sup> 2007, KHRG #2007-F4

<sup>4</sup> "Shouldering the burden of militarisation: SPDC, DKBA and KPF order documents and forced labour since September 2006", KHRG #2007-02 August 2007

<sup>5</sup> "Report from the Field", July 9 2007, KHRG #2007-F5

<sup>6</sup> "Graveyards, Not Labour Camps", Irrawaddy, August 2007

<sup>7</sup> "Many Police Controlled Prisoners Die from Forced Labour in SPDC army", DVB, 22 June 2006.

<sup>8</sup> "Shoot on Sight: The Ongoing SPDC Offensive Against Villagers in Northern Karen State", Burma Issues, December 2006.

<sup>9</sup> "SPDC army Has More Battalions, Less Men", SHAN, 27 March 2007

<sup>10</sup> "Sold to be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma", Human Rights Watch Volume 19, No. 15(C), October 2007

<sup>11</sup> "UN Envoy Upbeat Over Child Soldiers in Burma", Bangkok Post, Tuesday 10 July 2007

<sup>12</sup> BURMA: A worsening crisis of internal displacement: A profile of the internal displacement situation, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 28 March, 2007

<sup>13</sup> "Burma Junta Says Western Allegations of Child Soldiers Are Untrue", AP, 2 February 2007

<sup>14</sup> Burma Country Report on Human Rights Practices-2006, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labour, US. Department of State, 6 March 2007

<sup>15</sup> "Burma Junta Says Western Allegations of Child Soldiers Are Untrue", AP, 2 February 2007

<sup>16</sup> "Burma Still Recruiting Children in Its Army", KNG, 31 October 2007

<sup>17</sup> "HRW Condemns Use of Child Soldiers", DVB, 1 November 2007

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "Junta Ignore Pleas to Stop Myitsone Hydropower Project", KNG, 14 June 2007

<sup>20</sup> "Damming the Irrawaddy", KDNG

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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