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Seeing Through the Smoke of Ceasefires

It is common to read in the international media that the detention of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the restrictions on her political party are Burma's main human rights abuses, while mass forced relocations, forced labour, rape, torture and killing in rural areas populated mainly by non-Burmans are qualified by descriptions like 'abuses committed in the context of counterinsurgency operations'. They are thereby demoted to a sort of second-tier human rights abuse, with an implicit suggestion that the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) would really like to avoid doing such things, but that they are unavoidable when rebels have to be dealt with – civilians get in the way, and some of them will always become 'collateral damage'.

Given that human rights are supposed to be for all, not just politicians or the rich, and that they are supposed to be indivisible and non-hierarchical, it is astounding how easily such language is not only accepted, but causes people to shrug their shoulders and conclude that only ending the war can end the abuses. If that is true, and if the human rights abuses against Karen villagers are actually just side effects of counterinsurgency operations, then a ceasefire should bring an end to them, or at least most of them. The Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) have now had an informal ceasefire agreement with the SPDC for almost 1½ years, since January 2004. By now, according to the generally accepted view of the human rights situation, villagers in most Karen districts should therefore be living largely free from oppression. So let us look at the changes in villagers' lives which have been brought by the ceasefire in several different regions where it is in effect.

Starting from the north, Toungoo District is a rugged mountainous region where for years the SPDC has divided villages into 'peace (*nyein chan yay*) villages', which are under their direct control, and 'hiding (*ywa bone*) villages', which are destroyed and ordered to move to SPDC-controlled villages. Immediately after agreeing to the ceasefire the SPDC sent troops through Toungoo District to southern Karenni (Kayah State) to attack Karenni resistance forces and forcibly relocate thousands of villagers; the Karen ceasefire protected their southern flank, and allowed them to use the Toungoo – Mawchi road for the first time without fear of ambush. No troops were withdrawn from Toungoo District; instead, the SPDC established two new Army bases and in December 2004 its eight battalions in the district suddenly stepped up operations, sending out columns to secure military access roads and villages and to flush internally displaced villagers out of the hills. Since then, villagers have been used intensively to porter supplies to outlying Army camps, to repair and improve military access roads to the remoter parts of the district, and to clear open 'killing zones' along roadsides so that displaced villagers and Karen resistance forces cannot cross. Villagers hiding in the hills have been shot on sight by SPDC patrols, their crops have been uprooted, and their shelters and food supplies destroyed. At the same time, more people in SPDC-controlled villages have fled into the hills to escape the forced labour, extortion and continued militarisation of the district. For more information, see the recent Report from the Field '*Peace, or Control? The SPDC's use of the Karen ceasefire to expand its control and repression of villagers in*

Toungoo District, Northern Karen State (KHRG #2005-F3, 22/3/2005), and the comprehensive report *Enduring Hunger and Repression: Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued Use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District* (KHRG #2004-01, September 2004), which is based on over 300 interviews with villagers in Toungoo District.

Directly south of Toungoo District lies Nyaunglebin District, divisible into largely SPDC-controlled plains in the west and hills in the east where the regime's control is far weaker. As part of the ceasefire, the SPDC agreed not to mount operations in the hills and to remain along the road from Kyauk Kyi eastward into neighbouring Papun District. This condition has been continuously violated since the rice harvest of November 2004, when SPDC columns set out to systematically destroy villages, crops and food supplies in eastern Shwegyin township and force villagers into the SPDC-controlled plains (see *Photo Set 2005A Section 1*). Such attacks have been repeated almost monthly since then, the latest occurring in May 2005 in the hills of Kyauk Kyi township. Most of the villagers have resisted the relocation orders by moving into the forests and evading the SPDC columns. Meanwhile, in the plains of western Mone township, systematic forced relocations have occurred and people in relocation sites and SPDC-controlled villages are being forced to upgrade roads and build new SPDC Army camps. For more details see *Nyaunglebin District: Food supplies destroyed, villagers forcibly displaced, and region-wide forced labour as SPDC forces seek control over civilians* (KHRG #2005-F4, 4/5/2005).

Papun District is east of Nyaunglebin District, a region of forested hills divided by steep river valleys and dotted with small villages. Much of the district has been a freefire zone since 1997, when SPDC forces destroyed over 200 villages and forced tens of thousands of people into a life in hiding in the forests (see *Wholesale Destruction* [KHRG #98-01, February 1998]). Many are still there, while those living in SPDC-controlled villages have been in and out of forced relocation sites and are subjected to many forms of forced labour and extortion. Since the ceasefire, villagers in SPDC-controlled villages report that they are being called less often for forced labour as porters and road workers, largely because convicts are being brought in for these purposes. They are, however, being forced to do many other forms of forced labour such as supplying building materials for Army camps. Moreover, the SPDC is working to improve its road network to improve its access throughout the district; villagers complain that their fields are being bulldozed to make way for roads and Army camps, and their irrigation systems are being destroyed by being flattened or looted of their stones to provide foundations for roads. SPDC troops are also increasing their presence along the road which cuts across the district to Saw Hta, which lies on the Salween river at the Thai border, and incoming reports now suggest they are planning new Army camps along the Salween to secure the area for construction of a massive dam in cooperation with the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. For those living in the forests, this increased military presence is restricting their movements and making them feel less secure than ever. For more information see *Papun District: Forced Labour, Looting and Road Construction in SPDC-Controlled Areas* (KHRG #2005-F5, 20/5/2005).

Further southwest, Thaton District straddles the border of Karen and Mon States and is largely under SPDC control. In this district, 2004 saw the initiation of several major road projects involving the forced labour of thousands of villagers. The largest of these is the reconstruction and improvement of the old road from Kyaik Khaw (a.k.a. Thein Seik) to Lay Kay, for which each village in the area was forced to gather and deliver 30,000 cubic feet of broken rock (see *Photo Set 2005A Section 6.4*). New army camps are already being established along this road route, also using the forced labour of villagers. Villagers also continue to be called for forced labour as porters, supplying building materials to Army camps, and assisting in the logging and other money-making operations of Democratic Karen

Buddhist Army (DKBA) and SPDC officers. The SPDC is now exploiting its control over the district to confiscate thousands of acres of village land without payment to establish massive rubber plantations in a joint venture with a Rangoon company called Max Myanmar (see *Photo Set 2005A Section 7.3*). More information on the situation in Thaton District is reported in *Thaton District: Continued Consolidation of SPDC and DKBA Control through the use of Forced Labour, Extortion and Movement Restrictions* (KHRG #2005-F2, 21/2/2005).

East of Thaton District in central Karen State, Pa'an District is also strongly controlled by the SPDC and DKBA. Here villagers report that they are facing serious problems with their food and livelihood security, leading to food shortages and lack of money for health and other expenses. SPDC Army units seeking to produce their own food are ordering farmers to grow crops in dry season without providing any support for the required irrigation, and they are also encroaching on villagers' land and villages to establish Army camps and Army farmfields. Meanwhile, the DKBA in the area survives by imposing many forms of extortion on villagers, empowered by their weapons and shielded by SPDC protection. Forced labour for both SPDC and DKBA units continues unabated, including road projects in T'Nay Hsah township in the district's southeastern corner, with the aim of extending SPDC control into the last remote corners of the region. For information on all of these activities, see *Pa'an District: Food Security in Crisis for Civilians in Rural Areas* (KHRG #2005-B3, 30/3/2005) and *Forced Labour and the DKBA in T'Nay Hsah Township, Pa'an District* (KHRG #2005-B2, 21/2/2005).

Finally, Dooplaya District makes up the southern end of Karen State. The SPDC captured most of this region from the KNU in 1997, and since then villagers throughout most of its area have lived under a tightening web of SPDC military control facilitated by a network of new roads and relocation sites, and accompanied by land confiscation, village destruction and forced labour. Since the ceasefire this has not changed; villagers report that the only type of forced labour which has lessened is long-term portering, while forced labour continues unabated in all its other forms. Even the types of abuses one would expect to decrease under a ceasefire, like rocket attacks on New Year celebrations and arbitrary killings with impunity, have not stopped. Such abuses are maintaining a climate of fear throughout the district which is being exploited by the SPDC as a weapon of control. More information on this is provided in *Continued Militarisation, Killings and Fear in Dooplaya District* (KHRG #2005-F6, 2/6/2005), *Dooplaya District: Fighting and Human Rights Abuse Still Continue After Ceasefire* (KHRG #2005-F1, 18/2/2005), and *SPDC Violates the Ceasefire during Karen New Year Celebrations: The Attack on Kah Law Ghaw Village, Dooplaya District* (KHRG #2005-B1, 3/2/2005).

The circumstances described above can hardly be described as isolated lapses by a few SPDC officers who are ignoring the ceasefire. They cover all of Karen State and parts of neighbouring states and involve many different SPDC authorities, battalions and infantry divisions. The orders for further militarisation of regions covered by the ceasefire, increased troop movements, and road construction projects to extend the military's reach have been given by Brigadier Generals and higher-level officers at the Regional Command level – which means they are part of central SPDC strategy. What we are seeing is not simply a ceasefire which is regularly being violated, but a ceasefire being used as a smokescreen to enhance military control over civilian populations. If the SPDC military's human rights abuses against Karen villagers were simply collateral effects of 'counterinsurgency operations', a ceasefire would have brought an end to most of them. But it has not, because the abuses were never primarily intended to undermine the armed resistance – they are targeted at the civilian villagers, because they are intended to bring the villagers under direct military control.

As a paranoid military regime, the SPDC deploys its military to bring all aspects of people's lives under direct control. Burma's conflict is not primarily between the SPDC and opposition armed groups, it is between the SPDC-controlled state wanting to control the entire population and every inch of sovereign territory, and anyone who resists that control. Most of those who resist are ordinary villagers and townspeople, only a small percentage of whom become part of the armed resistance. The population resists by evading orders, fleeing beyond the reach of SPDC forces, 'foot-dragging' by complying only partly with orders or doing shoddy forced labour, shaming or bribing SPDC officers and officials, sharing information or resources with resistance and human rights groups, or in some cases taking up arms. The armed conflict is thus only one extreme facet of a multi-faceted conflict rather than the central conflict itself. The SPDC recognises this and therefore expends most of its military energy trying to corral and control civilians, not seeking out and fighting the KNLA. The regime knows exactly where the KNLA is concentrated in each district, yet its troops stay largely away from these areas and focus instead on burning undefended villages. When a ceasefire is agreed it is only between those holding arms; it does not address any other facet of the conflict, it does not include the civilians who are the main actors in the conflict, and it therefore does not bring an end to the military's attacks on civilians. In fact, the ceasefire facilitates the Army's campaigns to corral and control the civilian population, because it no longer has to worry about coming under armed attack while carrying out these campaigns. This is what we are now seeing in Karen areas – the SPDC Army exercising its newfound freedom to move in order to step up its war against the freedom of villagers.

Once the conflict is understood from this perspective, it becomes clear that treating it as a battle between armed opponents with villagers as passive and apolitical bystanders is naïve – yet such naïveté continues to lead to gross misconceptions and grossly inappropriate responses. For example, one foreigner seeking to help the Karen people once proposed an organised exodus of all 'internally displaced' Karen villagers to a big camp in Thailand where they could be 'cared for' – completely ignoring that their 'internal displacement' is a condition of their struggle to retain their land while living beyond SPDC control. Equally naïve, the Rangoon and Bangkok offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) believe that a permanent ceasefire agreement is sufficient grounds for repatriation of all Karen refugees in Thailand to SPDC-controlled sites in Burma – in effect, forcing people to submit to the very forced relocation orders they fled in the first place. In such approaches, no one ever asks villagers what they want, because they are assumed to be passive and helpless victims with no ability to resist. Those who appear anything but passive and helpless, or express any opposition to state control over their land, are declared 'political' or 'KNU' and are thus at a stroke stripped of any right to consideration.

A more constructive approach has to start by seeing villagers as actors rather than bystanders in the context of conflict in which they live, engaged in a struggle to retain control over their own lives against a state that wants to strip this from them. They have always had to arrange their own survival from one day to the next with little or no outside help, and this will continue to be the case. They are much more capable than outside agencies of understanding and responding to their situation, so those who wish to help them should find out how they want to be helped first. It is hypocrisy to insist that people only deserve help if they submit to state control, or if they totally disengage themselves from their own context. If this ceasefire continues, and particularly if it becomes a formal agreement, villagers will need to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the armed and powerful groups which seek to control them, and they need material resources and political support to help them do this. Such assistance is certainly political, but all aid in a context like Burma is political and it is folly or hypocrisy to claim otherwise.

The Changing Faces of Forced Labour

Since 2000 the SPDC claims to have completely banned the use of forced labour in Burma and set out criminal penalties for those who demand it. This has had very little impact on the actual use of forced labour by SPDC military and civilian authorities, because it is not enforced. The official order documents reproduced in *SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2003-A* (KHRG #2003-01, August 2003) and *Forced Labour Orders Since the Ban: A Compendium of SPDC Order Documents Demanding Forced Labour since November 2000* (KHRG #2002-01, February 2002) provide extensive evidence of this. Over the past few years the SPDC has, however, taken some steps to try to cover its tracks and reduce the international pressure against its use of forced labour – but in characteristic SPDC fashion, these steps have not sought to reduce the practice so much as to hide the evidence. One tactic has been to reduce the number of written orders specifically demanding forced labour. Instead, officers send out written orders summoning village leaders to ‘meetings’, then dictate their forced labour orders orally. While reducing the paper trail proving forced labour, this method actually increases the overall amount of forced labour because it forces village elders to waste a great deal of their time running back and forth to Army camps to receive instructions. Another tactic has been to use the term *loh ah pay* to refer to all forms of forced labour. The term, which literally means voluntary labour for the community or to earn Buddhist merit, was previously used by the SPDC only to refer to short-term *ad hoc* forced labour, but now it is often used to refer to longer-term forced labour such as road work and even to portering. Though semantic, this deception has been used to trick many villagers into going for forced labour they would otherwise have evaded, and has therefore angered many people.

A third tactic has been to use prison convicts for much of the forced labour in many regions, particularly the more brutal forms of forced labour such as long-term portering and heavy road work. To make these convicts readily available to field Army units a system of transit camps called *Won Saung* (literally ‘Carrying Service’) have been established in places close to areas of intensive military operations. Convicts from prisons throughout Burma are sent to *Won Saung* camps where they are readily available for immediate use by Army units in the region. Political prisoners and those with a long time remaining in their sentences are not used for fear that they may escape, so many of those involved are serving sentences for petty crimes like fistfighting or selling tickets for illegal lotteries. The Army’s demand for convict labourers has become so high that some people claim they have been grabbed from the street, sent to prison and directly on to the *Won Saung* without crime, charge or trial. Despite their petty or nonexistent crimes, convict labourers are treated particularly brutally, regularly beaten, fed very little, and in many cases kept well beyond the end of their sentences, sometimes until they either escape or die (see *Photo Set 2005A Section 6.2*). It is worth noting here that this still constitutes forced labour as internationally defined unless the labour was assigned as part of the sentence, which is rarely the case; moreover, the treatment of Burma’s convict labourers grossly violates the Geneva Conventions and other international human rights law. In some areas the SPDC military is also now using its own soldiers, particularly child conscripts, to do some of the road labour formerly required of villagers (see *Photo Set 2005A Section 12*).

One area where the increased use of convict labour has been particularly noticeable is Papun District in northern Karen State. SPDC patrols hunting out internally displaced villagers in the hills now rely mainly on columns of convict porters. Villagers living near SPDC Army camps in all three townships of the district have recently reported to KHRG researchers that they now have to do less forced labour as porters and rebuilding roads, having been replaced for much of this work by convicts and SPDC soldiers, particularly child soldiers (see *Papun District: Forced Labour, Looting and Road Construction in SPDC-Controlled Areas*

[KHRG #2005-F5, 20/5/2005]). In a sense this represents a partial victory for the villagers in their battle against SPDC control. Through their skill at evading capture when columns patrol their villages, people in the remote hills have forced the SPDC to look elsewhere for forced labourers. Then as other labourers are brought in, even people living in fully SPDC-controlled villages benefit from a reduction in forced labour – perhaps because the SPDC officers know they cannot prevent them fleeing into the hills to join their relatives if forced labour demands become too heavy. Of course, the abuse of convicts and child soldiers which has partly replaced the abuse of villagers cannot be condoned by any means, and the villagers under SPDC control are still forced to do many other kinds of labour; yet the example this provides of villagers successfully standing up against SPDC abuse is important.

Villagers in areas like Papun District must rely on methods like the above to reduce forced labour, because it is unlikely that they will be able to bring cases against SPDC officials under the anti-forced labour laws any time soon. Though there have now been at least seven such cases brought in other parts of Burma since 2004, some of them resulting in convictions, any attempt to bring such a case in military-controlled Karen State would probably result in the arrest and torture of the plaintiff by the Army. Moreover, all of the cases thus far have been against civilian officials, not Army officers or soldiers; yet it is the Army which is responsible for most forced labour nationwide. The SPDC is unlikely to allow any case to be brought against an Army officer under the present circumstances, for fear that the moment the Army's impunity begins to erode the Army's loyalty may begin to crack. Even so, the villagers who have brought cases against SPDC civil authorities thus far have demonstrated incredible courage and have made history by putting the first dents in the SPDC's armour of impunity, and the progress of further cases deserves close attention. In combination with international pressure against forced labour led by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which now appears to be on the international agenda again after a lapse of two or three years, these events could finally bring about some change in the face of forced labour – the human rights abuse which probably has the most widely felt effects in Burma.

Whose Suffering Counts?

In recent months we have seen the results of a Thai government decree that everyone recognised as 'Persons of Concern' (POCs) by UNHCR must move into one of three Karen refugee camps – Tham Hin, Ban Don Yang, or Noh Po – or face possible arrest and deportation, and the loss of any access to third-country resettlement procedures. This population of a few thousand people is primarily made up of Burmese (and mainly ethnic Burman) dissidents, most of whom had fled Burma's cities since 1988 and have been living in Bangkok and other towns of Thailand, many of them working with political or humanitarian organisations. Thai authorities have for years attempted to corral and silence these people, but this latest effort has been enforced much more firmly and is cause for serious concern. At the same time, however, there is another facet to this story which deserves attention. Even before they were sent to the camps, and with increasing volume thereafter, POCs and activists began decrying the camps as 'concentration camps' where people's lives are 'under threat' for lack of good food and water, electricity and cellphones (see for example "*Exiles Decry Camp Conditions*", The Nation [Bangkok], April 25th 2005). Articles and reports have proliferated on what a serious human rights abuse it is to hold Burmese dissidents in such overcrowded, disease-ridden places so dangerously close to the Burmese border. The POCs have formed multiple committees within the camps, and the latest reports are that a group of those in Ban Don Yang began a hunger strike when European diplomats were about to visit the camp, demanding to be moved back to Bangkok ("*Burmese Refugees in Thailand Stage Hunger Strike*", Democratic Voice of Burma, June 1st 2005).

One could be forgiven for forgetting that there were tens of thousands of Karen refugees living in these camps long before the POCs arrived, because they are seldom mentioned – nor is the hospitality they showed many of the POCs whose houses were not ready on their arrival at the camps. Though increasing Thai government restrictions on the camps over recent years had led to overcrowding, insufficient clean water and other problems well before the POCs arrived, these reports almost never went beyond the community of refugee committees and concerned humanitarian organisations. Only a handful of the POCs now interned in the camps ever expressed any concern about conditions there in the past. And even now, the calls for urgent action are most often written as though it is only the Persons of Concern who are there, and only the Persons of Concern who deserve to be provided with better food, water and electricity.

This phenomenon is nothing new. It forms part of what could be called the double standards of Burmese activism, which treats matters of the urban, the educated, and the Burman-led democracy struggle as central, and those of the rural, the agrarian, and the ethnically non-Burman as peripheral. The latter, this implies, should wait for the former to lead the way, and throw their unconditional support behind it. This logic has led to the tendency, to an extent virtually unprecedented in international politics, to telescope everything that is happening in Burma down to one issue and one person: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and freedom and power for her National League for Democracy (NLD) party. Reading international media on Burma one could almost forget there is anyone else living there except the junta and the NLD – just as one could easily forget that there are tens of thousands of Karen refugees in the camps where the POCs are now interned. These double standards not only skew discourse and understanding internationally, they also act as an obstacle to political and human rights progress. For example, amid all the outcry on Burma's upcoming chairmanship of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), there are strong suggestions that Burma's appropriateness for the role will be judged simply on whether they release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. This makes things very easy for the SPDC because as anyone can remember, they can and do release her whenever it suits their convenience, then detain her once again after the desired international concessions have been obtained. When it occurs, her release so entirely monopolises international attention that the SPDC can exploit it to launch major offensives against Karen and other civilians – as occurred in 2002, when hundreds of Karen civilians were killed and thousands more forcibly relocated in Dooplaya under cover of Aung San Suu Kyi's temporary release, without any international media coverage or diplomatic response (see *KHRG Commentary #2002-C1*, September 2002). Basing benchmarks on broader political and human rights issues which affect the entire population – like forced labour and militarisation – would be a far more constructive way to demand progress.

Another recent manifestation of the double standards of Burmese activism is the reaction to the Shan State 'declaration of independence' issued by some Shan exiles. The immediacy and virulence of the response to this declaration was worthy of note – not from the SPDC, from whom it is predictable, but from the NLD and Burmese 'pro-democracy' activists worldwide. One would think that an appropriate response to such a declaration might be to open discussions with those who made it, find out what they seek to achieve with it, and look for some common ground. Instead, Burma's 'pro-democracy' forces were astoundingly quick to come out in support of the SPDC, denouncing the declaration and denying any possibility of discussion on the issue. The NLD in Rangoon issued a statement declaring "The NLD will not accept any activities and plans not in accordance with the party's policy, including forming a parallel government" ("*NLD Opposes Shan State Independence*", Irrawaddy, April 19th 2005), which is somewhat ironic given that the NLD itself has formed two 'parallel governments', the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) and the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The NLD, according to

the Irrawaddy magazine, “aims to build a genuine union of Burma without the secession of any of its component states” (ibid.) – though how can a union can be “genuine” if the NLD decides its form and refuses to discuss the details with anyone else? Following the NLD’s lead, the Burma activist media immediately swung into gear to press other Shan actors to denounce the secessionists and distance themselves from the declaration, rather than to investigate its roots.

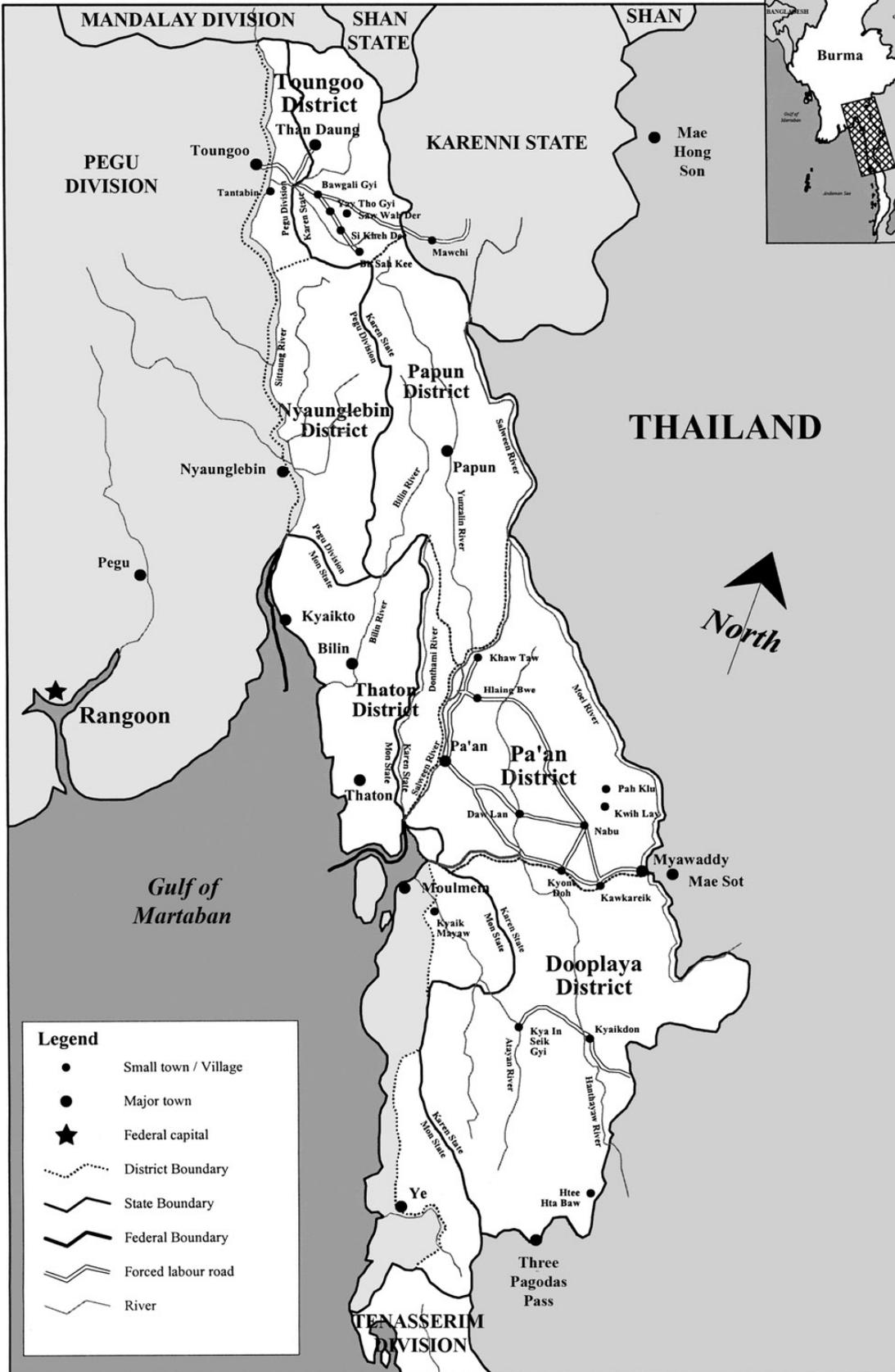
What is of particular interest here is not the credibility or otherwise of the Shan declaration itself, but the close-minded and xenophobic reaction to it. In activist circles, people who criticise the NLD even slightly are usually vilified, but criticising Shan political groups is seen as progressive and fashionable. Perhaps a more productive route lies somewhere in between – involving open, informed and constructive discussion and criticism of all parties and ideas, including those presently considered sacred. It seems, though, that the concept of a unitary, centralised Burma remains as sacrosanct in ‘pro-democracy’ circles as the concept of democracy itself, and is not open for democratic debate. Among Burmese activists democracy is treated as dogma – so instead of opening spaces for discussion, which is what democracy should be all about, it tends to close them down. It would be interesting to ask NLD leaders and other pro-democracy actors face to face which they would choose if given only two options: a military-controlled pseudo-democracy with partial power for the NLD, or a fully democratic federal Burma in which central Burmese authorities would have to hand over certain powers, such as control of natural resources and education, to states, and the Burmans would have to give up political hegemony. Don’t be surprised if they choose the former – though it is more likely that, as they have done for years, they will simply evade the question.

What KHRG is doing

In order to provide more timely and accessible reporting, in early 2005 KHRG replaced our ‘Information Updates’ with two new categories of reports: **Reports from the Field**, which draw on summaries and interviews provided by our field researchers to concisely document the overall situation in particular regions, and **News Bulletins**, which are released when specific incidents and trends need to be quickly reported. Since February we have released six Reports from the Field, four News Bulletins and *Photo Set 2005A*, our largest photo set to date with over 900 images from our field researchers documenting many aspects of the human rights situation in Karen areas. More field reports and full comprehensive reports are on the way. Over the coming year, we hope to produce full thematic reports as well, on issues such as women’s rights and education.

As the discussion in the first part of this Commentary suggested, the human rights situation under the informal ceasefire demonstrates the need for greater awareness of the role of Karen villagers in resisting SPDC oppression and abuses in their own way. KHRG reports have always brought these out through interviews with villagers, but we are now increasing our efforts in our field research and in our report writing to bring more focus on this aspect of the situation – to show not only the suffering but also the strength, capacity and spirit of the villagers. We hope that this helps toward making villagers’ voices difficult to ignore in political processes, and also that it provides readers of our reports with food for thought.

Districts of Karen State



Legend

- Small town / Village
- Major town
- ★ Federal capital
- District Boundary
- State Boundary
- Federal Boundary
- Forced labour road
- River

Scale: 1 cm to 22 km
1 in. to 35 miles

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group