



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Commentary

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KHRG's 300th Report: Cause for Celebration?

On July 29th the Karen Human Rights Group released our 300th report. Though this is a milestone for the organisation, we see this as cause for reflection rather than celebration, on how the situation and our work have evolved in the 14 years since our formation in 1992.

On July 29th 2006 KHRG released our 300th report¹ since we began this work in 1992. This is a milestone, and one that very few human rights organisations in the world ever reach. However, it would be wrong to celebrate the release of a report like this one, which documents SPDC attacks on undefended civilian villages, widespread displacement, and continuing forced labour and other repression in SPDC-controlled areas – all very similar to the events and abuses we began by documenting in 1992. This is an occasion more for reflection than celebration, on how much longer this work will be required and on why the human rights situation only ever seems to get worse.

When we first began this work, no one imagined that we would still be doing it 14 years later. In 1992, despite the military offensives and abuses, the political mood was one of optimism because the 1990 elections were still fresh, alliances between ethnic resistance and newly formed Burman democracy groups were strengthening, and the days of the SLORC (as the SPDC was then known), with no particular constituency among the population, appeared to be numbered. Everyone was sure the regime would fall, it was only a question of when. In fact, there was so much focus on the political and military situation that very few people demonstrated any interest in the villagers, and that is why KHRG was formed. By transcribing the personal stories of villagers and projecting them to the outside world, we hoped that truth would bring about solidarity, response, and change. In those days no other groups were doing this kind of work. Attention on and international knowledge of Burma – particularly the ethnic situation and systematic human rights abuses – was virtually zero, and only a small handful of organisations were interested in delivering some small scale aid.

Since that time local organisations have proliferated, aid has increased and international attention and knowledge, though still rudimentary, is still incomparably greater than it was. Despite these changes, however, hope among the Karen population has progressively eroded. Internationally the SPDC has more supporters than detractors, partly among like-minded regimes worldwide but also among those hungry for resources and cheap labour to feed world markets. In our own work we have realised that truth is not enough, because truth is too easily twisted, trodden upon and turned upon its head by the powerful and influential in their own interest, including international organisations that should be on our side but are more interested in propagating their lifestyles and big budgets. Local people, they argue, are less able than their 'experts' to understand and interpret the local situation. Among the influential, we have learned, vested interest is a much more powerful motivator than truth; while among the rest of the population, informed primarily by shallow, skewed and

¹ See *Forced Labour, Extortion and Abuses in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-F7, July 29th 2006).

fickle mainstream media, people are much more willing to respond with solidarity when others are attacked by natural phenomena like tsunamis and earthquakes than when they are attacked by their fellow human beings.

We cannot celebrate the release of our 300th report in effect because the proper objective of any sincere human rights organisation must be to eliminate the need for its own existence. Though we feel we have been successful in drawing attention, solidarity and action to major issues like forced labour and the systematic destruction of village livelihoods, we cannot point to any significant improvement in the human rights situation of rural villagers since 1992. Instead many aspects of that situation have only progressively deteriorated, and as a result many people have progressively lost hope in a brighter future for themselves or their children. In these circumstances we can only see a continuing need for our work for the foreseeable future. The SPDC, with broad foreign support but still little or no domestic constituency, kept in power by an army of forced conscripts with very low morale, could fall apart as quickly as the Berlin Wall did once a few cracks appeared. But we do not see the collapse of the SPDC or the coming of 'democracy' in some form as the benchmark for bringing an end to our work. 'Democracy' will not magically eliminate the militarism, racism and will to power fuelling the abuses in Burma. It is only one of many steps – and not necessarily even the primary step – required. If some form of democratically-structured government were to take over from the SPDC next week, the need for our work would continue. If anything, the need would be even greater because we would have to overcome assumptions that things would immediately be 'better' – assumptions that persist despite having been proven false time and time again in transitions to democracy worldwide. It would be a difficult struggle, because no one outside the country would want to hear bad news anymore, while donors and other supporters would most likely shift their priorities from human rights to 'development' or simply shift their support to countries elsewhere. More than ever the voices of villagers will need to be heard, but will risk being drowned out by the cacophony of development and democracy 'experts'. We may be drowned out too, but we will try to present the villagers' own perspective on their situation, drawing not on international definitions and frameworks but on their own more holistic, interconnected way of viewing human rights and dignity.

So, unfortunately, the need for KHRG is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. We will continue to provide information to the outside world, but more importantly we will be expanding our work directly with Karen villagers. This work aims to rebuild villagers' confidence in themselves and their recognition of the many ways in which they are already resisting human rights abuses locally, not only surviving but retaining their sense of dignity and community. By encouraging them to discuss among themselves ways to strengthen these strategies, we try to foster hope and the spirit of struggle required to maintain it. We have come to realise that truth may not be enough to catalyse international action, but it is certainly enough to catalyse local action, and that especially if the political situation changes it will be the villagers who will have to stand up for their rights against forces both domestic and foreign who would exploit them. So don't light a candle for our 300th report, light one for the villagers instead.