



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Media release – response to UN statement on KHRG report

(Bangkok, April 26th 2007) – On Wednesday April 25th 2007, the United Nations Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar released a statement in response to KHRG's recently released report *Development by Decree: The politics of poverty and control in Karen State*. KHRG welcomes the UN's response and appreciates the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator's acknowledgement that it agrees with the report's findings on the problems confronting the delivery of humanitarian aid in Burma. KHRG is encouraged about the possibility for greater openness and discussion regarding the methods used by aid agencies in the implementation of their programmes.

However, a number of points in the UN's media statement need clarification. While the statement says that "*the authors of the report were not able to review or discuss with UN agencies, or even with the UN Humanitarian Coordinator, some of the assertions in the report concerning UN agencies,*" this is misleading. KHRG did communicate with various UN agencies regarding some of the issues raised in the report including the Office of the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations. Unicef was also contacted but failed to respond. While the voices of these agencies are often heard publicly, the overriding purpose of this report was rather to bring out the voices of villagers in Burma regarding SPDC models of development; voices which are very seldom heard.

The UN press statement further says that, "*Many of the points made are either incorrect or dated.*" KHRG stands by the voices of the villagers and the findings of the report as presented and affirms that these are not dated. Nevertheless, if the UN is willing to identify specific issues which it believes are incorrect or dated and to supply more accurate and detailed information, KHRG would be happy to look into these issues and respond with relevant information from the local villagers targeted by development projects.

Finally, the UN statement says that "*the UN response to alleviation of the suffering in Myanmar is defined by a strict adherence to basic humanitarian principles.*" Given the restrictive environment in which international aid agencies operate, it is questionable how effectively these principles, which require input from local peoples regarding their needs and concerns, can actually be adhered to. A recently released report by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) entitled *Assistance Programs Constrained in Burma* has outlined many of these restrictions.¹ The report particularly identifies SPDC restrictions on the movement of international staff within Burma and on their freedom to "*gather data needed to understand the scope and nature of Burma's problems,*" and further cites officials in UN and other international agencies who say that "*the Burmese regime has impeded their ability to conduct their own surveys and freely share the data they gather.*"²

¹ "Assistance Programs Constrained in Burma," United States Government Accountability Office, April 2007. Accessed at www.gao.gov/new.items/d07457.pdf on April 26th 2007.

² Ibid.

The SPDC not only imposes severe travel restrictions on all international aid and development agencies, they furthermore require that a regime counterpart accompany agency staff on visits to projects sites. The presence of the regime counterpart inhibits local peoples from freely discussing their situation and sharing information, particularly regarding human rights abuses. Effective adherence to humanitarian principles requires that local populations are free to express their concerns and criticism regarding the implementation the relevant aid programmes, and not be silenced where their views conflict with the political ideology of the State. In Burma, restrictions imposed by the SPDC obstruct such expressions and thus the ability of international agencies to conduct impact assessments. The UNDP itself has acknowledged this deficiency in its *Report of the Independent Assessment Mission of the Human Development Initiative Myanmar*, where it states that “plans for a system for monitoring of results still is in its infancy and no structured impact information is currently available.”³ Meanwhile, the principle of neutrality, which requires aid to be provided based on need rather than political considerations, is violated by UN agencies’ inability to deliver aid cross-border from neighbouring countries or from central Burma to anyone living in areas not under firm SPDC control.

The ability of international agencies to adopt transparency and accountability to local peoples and to conduct human rights impact assessments is being further restricted as the junta seeks to oblige these agencies to work together with members of the SPDC-controlled Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which has been implicated in coercive projects and violent attacks on pro-democracy activists nationwide, including the Depayin massacre of 2003. KHRG is therefore concerned that on April 5th 2007, the United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Ms Margareta Wahiström along with other Rangoon-based UN officials met with the Secretary-General of the USDA, Major General U Htay Oo, and reportedly accepted gifts from him.⁴ Two weeks later on April 18th, the USDA orchestrated a mass beating of human rights activists at Oakpon village in Hinthada Township, 100 kilometers northwest of Rangoon.⁵ U Htay Oo is not only the USDA Secretary-General, but also SPDC Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation, through which the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) is implementing its Oil Crop Cultivation Programme.

KHRG would like to reiterate that it recognises the severity of the humanitarian crisis in Burma, local peoples’ need for humanitarian assistance and their right to access such assistance. KHRG also recognises that UN agencies, international NGOs and foreign governments seeking to implement aid programmes in Burma face severe challenges to their mandates due to increasingly restrictive SPDC policies. Nevertheless, local peoples have expressed concerns about the development programmes implemented under the conditions imposed by the SPDC and international aid and development agencies are duty-bound to account for these voices. Devising an effective means of conducting human rights impact assessments for such programmes is thus of primary importance. KHRG therefore appreciates that the United Nations Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator is willing to engage with these issues and hopes that the outcome of our recently released report will be a broadening of the discussion on aid and development to include local voices speaking about the human rights situation which they confront.

³ *Report of the Independent Assessment Mission of the Human Development Initiative Myanmar*, UNDP, July 2006. Accessed online at www.undp.org/execbrd/word/Myanmar%20-%20HDI%20Assessment%202006%20Final.doc on April 26th 2007.

⁴ “USDA Secretary-General meets UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs,” *New Light of Myanmar*, April 5th 2007. Accessed online at: www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/index.html on April 26th 2007.

⁵ “Violent Attacks on Rights Activists: Government Militias Beat and Harass Opponents,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 24th 2007. Accessed at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/04/24/burma15754.htm> on April 26th 2007.