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Supporting IDP resistance strategies

Whether in hiding or living under military control, displaced villagers of Karen State and other areas of rural Burma have shown themselves to be innovative and courageous in responding to and resisting military abuse. They urgently need increased assistance but it is they who should determine the direction of any such intervention. This article, co-authored by two KHRG staff members, appears in issue number 30 of the journal Forced Migration Review (FMR), issued in April 2008 and is available on both the KHRG and FMR websites.

A common external misrepresentation of the conflict and displacement in eastern Burma is one which narrowly depicts a civil war between the SPDC army and armed opposition groups like the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), with civilians as unintended victims and displacement a side-effect of the armed conflict. A closer examination of the situation, however, which listens to what civilians themselves are saying, shows that this is not the case. Rather, the SPDC army has overwhelmingly focused its military campaigns against civilian communities and in many cases has actively avoided KNLA patrols.

Military units of the SPDC active in Karen State depend for their day-to-day operations on labour, money, food and other supplies extracted from the local civilian population through various forms of forced labour and extortion. In non-military controlled areas, especially the more mountainous regions of northern Karen State, the SPDC army has had difficulty enforcing such demands and has therefore sought to forcibly transfer the disparate rural communities into contained relocation sites where they can be more easily exploited. This strategy has undermined villagers' livelihoods by preventing them from travelling to work or trade and by requiring that they submit their money and resources to military personnel and take time away from their own occupations in order to meet SPDC demands for labour. These inter-related abuses have combined over time to exacerbate poverty, increase malnutrition and worsen the region's humanitarian crisis.

Aware of conditions of life under military control, many villagers have therefore chosen instead to go into hiding. By evading demands and restrictions, villagers not only claim their right to be free from such abuse but also weaken the operations of local army units and thus frustrate the spread of militarisation over Karen State. The SPDC, in turn, has deemed those villagers in hiding to be enemies of the state, targeting them as such in military campaigns, shooting them on sight and burning down their homes, fields and food stores.

IDPs as political actors

Most displaced villagers in Karen State could, in principle, go to live under SPDC rule. The fact that so many civilians remain displaced in hiding sites is indicative of villagers' aspirations to live free from oppressive military control and their success in resisting the SPDC army's efforts to enforce this control. Fleeing into the forest is thus not an act of fear and helplessness but a courageous way of resisting SPDC rule. Those unable to flee resist

in different ways, employing daily acts of subtle subversion and non-compliance in order to mitigate or wholly avoid the demands and restrictions put upon them.

Along with the act of flight itself, villagers in hiding have developed additional response strategies. For example, those remaining in their villages but expecting to have to flee hide rice stores at secret locations in the forest and build concealed shelters to which they can escape should SPDC troops suddenly arrive. Using advanced warning systems to relay messages between communities, villagers can learn of the impending arrival of troops and thereby gather belongings and head into the forest prior to the actual arrival of soldiers. Upon reaching relatively secure hiding sites, displaced communities are quick to re-establish schools to educate their children and provide some measure of structure despite the disruptions of a life on the run. Villagers share rice with others who have been unable to bring along sufficient reserves. If they expect to remain for a longer period at one hiding site, villagers often establish small hillside paddy plots or cultivate cardamom, betel nut and other crops which, being relatively small and durable, are practical trade goods for displaced communities.

Using traditional knowledge of their environment, villagers have been able to concoct natural remedies for a variety of ailments out of locally available ingredients. As the SPDC enforces heavy restrictions on travel and trade, the establishment of temporary and covert 'jungle markets' allows displaced villagers in hiding to trade with those living under military control. Displaced villagers also actively seek out local aid groups providing cross-border medical, educational and nutritional support. Civilian lookouts monitoring the military presence at their abandoned villages inform others if and when army patrols move on, allowing for a possible return to reclaim their homes and land or at least to fetch items left behind.

In the context of the SPDC's efforts to control and exploit the civilian population and villagers' efforts to resist this control, the pursuit of subsistence, healthcare, education and other social programmes outside of military control becomes a highly political act. As such, aid to displaced communities likewise becomes a political act. Where aid programmes support IDP efforts to survive in hiding, they directly challenge the regime's efforts at civilian control and the SPDC views such aid with hostility. Acknowledging the right of displaced people to resist military abuse is a necessary aspect of trying to support their various needs. External intervention which seeks the return, resettlement and reintegration of displaced communities to SPDC-controlled villages and relocation sites and provides aid through SPDC channels would strengthen the SPDC and weaken the villagers. In contrast, aid delivered directly to civilian communities outside military-controlled channels strengthens the position of the villagers in relation to the military.

Village agency

While international awareness of the human rights situation in rural Burma has increased in recent years, it has tended to favour a simplistic view of villagers as helpless 'victims' who lack the knowledge and means to address their own needs. Thousands of interviews with local people conducted by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), however, make it clear that villagers in rural Burma have strong views about what needs to be done to improve their situation and how these aims can be practicably realised. In response to what villagers were telling us, KHRG introduced its 'Village Agency' project in 2005. This project has two components: firstly, to document - along with the abuses which rural people face - their stories about the efforts they make to resist this abuse and, secondly, to help villagers identify and strengthen their resistance strategies.

In our Village Agency workshops, with the help of KHRG field researchers as facilitators, villagers discuss their perceptions of human rights and local events, are introduced to basic

international human rights norms and explore how these relate to their own situation. They are encouraged to recognise and discuss what they are already doing to respond to and resist human rights abuses and, finally, to discuss ways to strengthen, extend and implement local strategies. The objective is not to 'teach' villagers about human rights but to get them thinking more consciously about human rights, to help them recognise the ways they are already claiming their rights and to catalyse discussion on ways to strengthen their strategies. The hope is that these workshops will kick-start a process where villagers will regularly discuss and share approaches amongst themselves, trying out new ones as appropriate.

The more villagers strengthen their own strategies to claim their rights, the more they will be seen as actors participating in the processes and decisions which affect them. In turn, local and international actors will be encouraged to work in ways that strengthen villagers' own strategies, rather than imposing strategies upon them.

This article can also be accessed online at *Forced Migration Review* Issue 30, April 2008 (<http://www.fmreview.org/burma.htm>). For hard copies of this issue send an email to fmr@qeh.ox.ac.uk. Please include full postal address and an indication of how many copies are needed and in which languages (English, Burmese, French, Arabic or Spanish).