



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Commentary

June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009 / KHRG #2009-C1

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### **Don't neglect rural Burma in calling for Suu Kyi's release**

*Following the arrest of the American John Yettaw on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, Burma's pro-democracy icon Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was charged with violating the terms of her house arrest, moved to Insein Prison and put on trial. The international community has responded to these events with a flurry of attention on Burma not seen since Cyclone Nargis last year. Heads of State, activists and newspaper editors have renewed calls for her immediate release. At the same time, Burma Army operations in Karen State and other rural ethnic areas along with their associated human rights abuses remain ongoing and widespread. Yet once again the situation of abuse in rural Burma has been marginalised in favour of the more high profile political drama in the country's urban settings. In calling, quite rightly, for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the international community must neither neglect the situation of abuse in rural Burma nor miss current opportunities to support those who face this abuse.*

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On May 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) authorities arrested a 53-year-old American named John Yettaw after he had apparently swum across Rangoon's Inya Lake to enter the residence of detained pro-democracy opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who remained under house arrest at the time. This peculiar event became the pretext for the SPDC to charge Suu Kyi with violating the terms of her house arrest, transfer her to a cell in Insein Prison and put her on trial. The international community has responded to these events with a flurry of attention on Burma not seen since Cyclone Nargis last year. This seems at least partly due to the oddity of events that led to the recent charges.

Current and former Heads of State like Barack Obama, Gordon Brown and Vaclav Havel, notable activists like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Yoko Ono as well as actors, athletes and newspaper editors around the globe have renewed calls for her immediate and unconditional release. Quite rightly, Suu Kyi should not have been under house arrest in the first place let alone put on trial for what many believe was the incursion of an uninvited foreigner. The incarceration of political dissidents to stifle opposition in Burma is surely an abuse in need of redress.

With that said however, precedent suggests that the SPDC is unlikely to respond sympathetically to ongoing calls for her release. The military leadership has shown every indication of working without falter towards its stated goal of 'discipline flourishing democracy' (under continued military rule) via the planned 2010 elections. Furthermore, even on the three prior occasions when Suu Kyi was released, little subsequently changed in the human rights situation for ordinary people and, of course, she has always been subsequently rearrested. All the while, daily repression and abuse continue on a far vaster scale in rural Burma, and particularly in the country's predominantly ethnic minority areas. Noting this disparity in international attention, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro stated in a May 27<sup>th</sup> 2009 op-ed for *The New York Times* that

*"while Suu Kyi has deservedly received a great deal of international attention over the past two decades, Myanmar's ethnic minorities – more than one-third of the*

*population – have suffered without international outcry. For Myanmar's process of national reconciliation to be successful, the plight of the minorities must also be addressed.”<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, frequent and widespread abuses against villagers in Burma's ethnic-minority areas continue. These include Burma Army attacks against civilians living in contested areas of mountainous northern Karen State. In these attacks, the army has applied a shoot-on-sight policy; destroyed villages, hiding sites, farm fields and food stores; and sought to forcibly relocate local villagers to military-controlled areas. In June 2008, Amnesty International said of these abuses, *“These violations amount to crimes against humanity, and the continuing offensive against the Karen civilians now barely registers on the international radar screen.”*<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the International Committee of the Red Cross said in June 2007 that *“The repeated abuses committed against men, women and children living along the Thai-Myanmar border violate many provisions of international humanitarian law.”*<sup>3</sup> These attacks have led to an acute food crisis and ongoing displacement as villagers flee violence and abuse.

In April of this year, KHRG released a briefing paper<sup>4</sup> outlining the devastating effects that ongoing military abuse has had on food security in Karen State. Likewise, the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) last month issued its own emergency appeal for rice aid for villagers in one of many vulnerable areas of northern Karen State. It stated that if food was not received, *“between 3,000 to 4,000 people are going to face starvation or have to leave for the border area in the near future.”* And current figures show that the population of displaced villagers from northern Karen State now residing at Ee Thoo Hta camp for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) on the Thai-Burma border has reached over 4,000 people.

Meanwhile, further south in central Karen State, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) continues to pursue SPDC-backed attacks on KNLA positions in the lead-up to the 2010 elections. These attacks have led local villagers to flee to neighbouring Thailand. KHRG reported in May that over 200 villagers from north-eastern Dooplaya District had fled such attacks in late April 2009.<sup>5</sup> To support this offensive and the DKBA's planned transformation into a Border Security Force following next year's elections, the group has intensified forced recruitment in Pa'an District since last year. Most recently on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2009, DKBA authorities issued new quotas for army recruits. In response, 119 villagers fled to an IDP camp on the Pa'an District border with Thailand in order to avoid recruitment. With these newly displaced villagers, the population at this Pa'an-based IDP camp has reached over 1,200 people. And there remains a risk that DKBA forces will attack this site as well.

Elsewhere in Karen State, where SPDC and DKBA authorities hold firm control over the civilian population, villagers face persistent exploitative abuses and restrictions which soldiers and other local authorities regularly enforce. These include forced labour, arbitrary taxation, extortion, theft and looting as well as movement restrictions used to facilitate demands. These abuses are themselves root causes of poverty, food insecurity and the humanitarian crisis in the region. They are also not limited to ethnic-minority villagers.

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, “End Burma's System of Impunity,” *The New York Times*, May 27<sup>th</sup> 2009. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/28/opinion/28iht-edpineiro.html> on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Crimes against humanity in Eastern Myanmar*, Amnesty International, June 2008. Accessed at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA16/011/2008> on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Myanmar: ICRC denounces major and repeated violations of international humanitarian law,” International Committee of the Red Cross, June 2007. Accessed at [http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/myanmar-news-290607?OpenDocument&style=custo\\_print](http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/myanmar-news-290607?OpenDocument&style=custo_print) on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *Food Crisis: The cumulative impact of abuse in rural Burma*, KHRG, April 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts*, KHRG, May 2009.

The abuses cited here are not isolated cases. Villagers across Karen State have repeatedly described similar incidents in interviews with KHRG. Furthermore, villagers have regularly identified local-level human rights and humanitarian threats, like those described above, as more immediate concerns than the high-profile political events that play out in Rangoon and Naypyidaw. This is not to say that national-level political developments are irrelevant to the situation in rural Burma. Indeed, the two remain intimately connected. However, a narrow focus on high profile political actors risks marginalising the concerns of the country's overwhelmingly rural population and their role in shaping informal, local-level political processes. And a narrow focus on complex national-level issues risks missing opportunities to directly engage with villagers' more immediate concerns.

Along these lines, KHRG released its *Village Agency* report in November 2008, outlining immediate and concrete steps for direct external support to villagers across rural Burma, regardless of ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> These recommendations included incorporating locally-driven civilian protection measures into ongoing aid programmes being implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies operating in Burma. This means expanding, refining and strengthening the ways that aid groups can support villagers' efforts to resist abuse. In the same report, KHRG also called for increasing assistance by international governments, funding bodies and NGOs to indigenous organisations delivering aid 'cross-border' to local communities in Burma. As Rangoon-based aid agencies remain barred from working in many areas of the country, indigenous aid networks remain crucial to addressing the humanitarian crisis in these areas and to supporting villagers' efforts to resist abuse. Furthermore, SPDC restrictions limit the extent to which Rangoon-based aid groups can address human rights issues.

Conventional accounts of political life in Burma tend to neglect the concerns of rural villagers and the everyday efforts which they employ to resist abuse and address humanitarian and other issues; efforts which continually challenge and reshape informal, local-level political processes. Such accounts are at best incomplete and at worst harmful to the country's predominantly rural population whose voices they exclude. Thus to reiterate, while national-level governance reform remains crucial to addressing the country's humanitarian and human rights challenges in the long run, a narrow focus on high-profile political figures and national-level political dramas risks marginalising the more pressing concerns of villagers in rural Burma and missing more immediate opportunities for external support.

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<sup>6</sup> For the full list of recommendations and an expanded discussion of KHRG's *Village Agency* argument, see *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008.