



# SWAN

## Shan Women's Action Network Newsletter

September 2006 # 7

### Working towards change

*One of SWAN's founding members, Khu (Teacher) Harn Noan, speaks of her life as a teacher, health worker and women's rights activist along the Shan-Thai border.*

#### How did you come to live on the border?

I was born and educated in southern Shan State, and then went to train as a teacher in Rangoon. After that I worked for ten years as a teacher at a government school in Burma. I was always conscious of the discrimination against ethnic people, and the lack of justice in society. This was why I chose to join the Shan movement on the Thai border in 1980.

#### What has been your main work along the border?

I worked for about 15 years as a teacher in a Shan school in a liberated area on the border. I also taught Shan literacy classes in the summer. During that time, I was also trained as a community health worker, and I would go out into the villages and give health education, particularly on maternal and child health care.

Then in 1996, the regime moved into our area and took over the school. The villagers had to move to the Thai side. We then arranged with the local authorities to set up the school again on the Thai side.

In 1999, I joined with about 40 other women to form SWAN. After that,



*Khu Harn Noan*

with some other SWAN members, we began running a health program at Lak Teng, on the northern Chiang Mai border. This included giving health outreach to internally displaced communities, as well as to the refugees newly displaced by fighting in 2002.

I also attended various women's rights and empowerment trainings organized by SWAN, and became a trainer among women's communities along the border.

#### What is your work now?

Since this year, I have been working

as an education coordinator at a school in Wan Piang Fa refugee camp on the eastern Shan State border. The school was set up in 2001. There are over 360 children at the school, including many orphans, who have fled armed conflict. Most of these children had never had a chance to go to school before.

#### What do you think is the main problem facing women in your community?

It is the lack of rule of law to protect women from the human rights abuses being committed by the regime's troops. And the root cause of this is the ongoing armed conflict and the lack of political settlement in Burma.

*Continued on page 2*

### INSIDE

- Dealing with crisis
- SPDC's new anti-trafficking law
- The regime's 2006 sexual offensive
- Controversial Salween dam plans continue

*Continued from page 1*

**Have you seen any changes in the status of women during your time on the border?**

Particularly in the last 6-7 years I have seen a lot of change. Women have been gaining more skills and self-confidence. They are now working in different organizations and have a lot more political awareness. They are speaking out about women's rights in many forums. They are actively working towards democratic change in Burma, and carrying out international advocacy work.



**What is your goal in life?**

I want to continue working with others to develop my community, and encourage people to be responsible citizens. I want to promote women's participation in the movement for democratic change in Burma. And I hope one day to see Burma become a genuine democratic country, and to be able to go back home to live with my relatives in Shan State.

**What motivates you in your work?**

I have a strong belief in my goal of working for my people and community. Self-confidence is very important. Apart from that, I have support from my children, and friends in SWAN and other organizations. I am also lucky to be staying in a liberated Shan area now, where I can work freely for my community.

**What are you most satisfied with in your life?**

I have a lot of satisfaction from having helped other people gain an education, and from having worked for the improvement of my community and society. One of the most important things is to be able to work with and be understanding of different people. This is an important quality of leadership. □

## *Message from SWAN*

SWAN welcomes the recent decision to put Burma on the UN Security Council agenda, especially Japan's vote in favour of this decision. We hope that this is a first step towards a resolution that will help bring about genuine peace and democracy in Burma. SWAN is also encouraged by the fact that ASEAN members are increasingly voicing dissatisfaction with the Burmese military regime's intransigence.

The regime has reacted to the UN Security Council decision by lashing out not only at the US, but also at Japan, which has been one of the major international aid donors to Burma. In the state-run media, the regime referred to war-time atrocities committed by the Japanese in Burma during World War II.

This is typical of the regime's tendency to smear anyone who goes against them, even close diplomatic allies such as Japan. It is no wonder that the regime regularly attacks SWAN and its members through their media, publications, and rallies of the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation. Most recently, they have been accusing us of being linked to "terrorist groups."

SWAN's mandate is to promote the rights of women and children and to protect them from exploitation and violence. Since the formation of SWAN, we have responded to the practical needs of communities along the border whose lives have been devastated by decades of military aggression by the regime. In spite of many obstacles, we have set up schools, health centres, crisis support centres and trained women and girls to work for gender equality and justice. By what stretch of the imagination could these be called terrorist activities?

It is obvious that the main reason the regime is constantly attacking SWAN is because we have exposed their systematic use of sexual violence to terrorize local populations. It is thus highly ironic that an army of almost half a million soldiers which has been committing acts of terror against the entire country is now smearing a women's organisation with the "terrorist" label.

Indeed, as the saying goes, "those who protest the loudest have the most to hide." The more the regime rants, the more it is pointing the finger at itself. □

## Dealing with crisis

“Without this centre, I would have no place to go in Thailand as I have no family or relatives,” said a pregnant woman who had been beaten regularly by her husband since only 4 days after marrying him.

This is just one of the many cases that SWAN’s Women’s Crisis Support Centre has assisted since it was set up five years ago in northern Thailand. The centre has provided emergency support to women and children facing domestic violence, sexual abuse, trafficking, exploitation, or simply lack of access to health care.

Domestic violence is common among the Shan refugees working in Thailand. The low-paid itinerant nature of migrant work puts extra pressure on couples, who frequently split up and find new partners. Alcoholism also fuels violence.

One Shan refugee had come to Thailand and worked on a construction site. She married another Shan, but they separated and then she married a Thai man. Her Thai father-in-law treated her very cruelly, and ended up shooting her with a gun, and kicking her in the face when she begged him to stop shooting. She was seriously injured and was sent to hospital, where SWAN assisted her. She wanted to bring legal charges against her husband, but he threatened to kill her if she reported the case. He told the authorities it was her former Shan husband who had harmed her. Finally all she got was a small sum of money from her husband.

Another woman needed assistance because of domestic violence which she had suffered several years earlier in Shan State. She had been beaten savagely with a stick around the head by her former husband, when she complained about him taking another wife. She had later fled as a refugee to



*Housing of Shan refugees at a construction site in Chiang Mai*

Thailand with her two young daughters and began working in an orange plantation. However, the damage caused by the beating caused her to go gradually blind. She was only earning a daily wage of 70 baht, which was barely enough to feed herself and her 2 daughters, without buying any medicines for her eyes.

The inability to afford health services is a common problem among the Shan refugees surviving as migrant workers. Those who can afford a Thai work permit are entitled to cheap health care, but many stay in remote work sites and cannot afford transportation to hospitals. Those without work permits are afraid to travel without documentation, and are also reluctant to forfeit their daily wage by missing work.

This results in many refugees resorting to self-treatment, even in emergency cases. SWAN’s centre has had to assist women with broken arms or legs, or TB, who had not managed to access medical care.

One woman with seven children had

chosen to give birth at home in the orange plantation where she worked, because she didn’t want to miss any days of work by going to have check ups at a hospital. Her wage was only 70 baht a day, and her employer also cut off 5 baht a day to pay for her work permit, so she couldn’t afford to feed her family if she stopped working.

Many of the refugees are from rural areas of Shan State where there are no doctors, and prefer traditional methods of treatment, which are often ineffective or dangerous, such as having spirit-doctors perform ceremonies, or receiving “tonic” injections. They are reluctant to believe in the efficacy of pills, and often do not take a full course.

SWAN was asked to assist a 7-year-old refugee girl with severe health problems. She had suffered cerebral malaria, and was malnourished. Her parents had taken her to hospital but when the treatment did not seem to bear results, they had resorted to seeing a spirit-doctor. When she was

*Continued on page 6*

## SPDC's new anti-trafficking law: a further tool of oppression

In September 2005, SPDC proudly announced the enactment of their new Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law. In March of this year, it claimed that this law had “received favourable reviews regionally as well as internationally.”

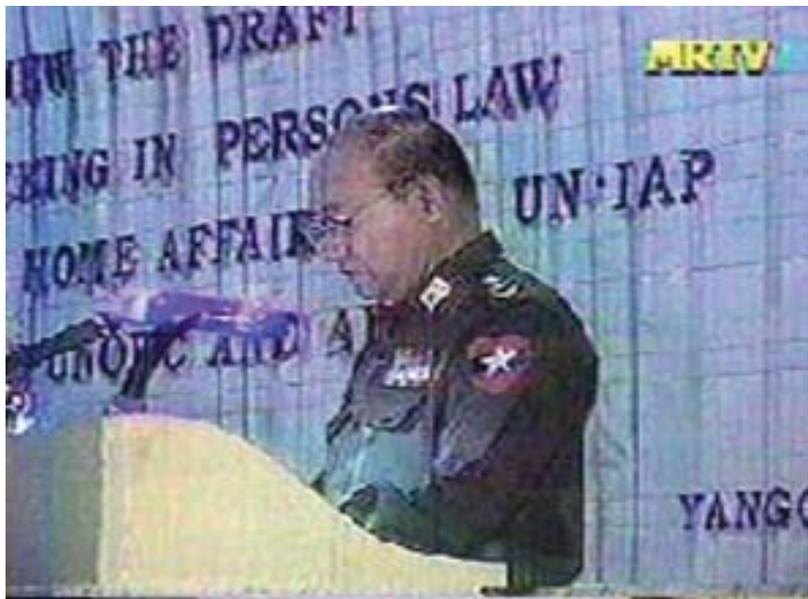
Chinese news agency Xinhua, not surprisingly, does indeed regularly quote the statistics of human trafficking cases exposed by the SPDC authorities. However, puzzlingly, UN personnel in Rangoon have also been describing the “success story” of how SPDC has been combating human trafficking in Burma.

For the communities SWAN is working with on the ground provide a completely contrasting picture of the impacts of the SPDC's anti-trafficking policies.

Straight after the SPDC's new law was announced, there were reports of local authorities barring people from travelling to Thailand; at the same time, households in many areas were ordered to re-register their family members (and were forced to buy a new house registration form) so that authorities could check that no family members were absent; this also involved the authorities demanding between 5000–7000 kyat (US\$5- 7) to issue people with new national identity cards. Moreover, the authorities reinforced restrictions on the registration of guests staying overnight, in order to monitor people's movement more closely.

According to local sources in Shan State, the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF), made up of wives of SPDC officers at various levels, have stepped up their extortion of money from women under 25 who want to travel from Kengtung to

Tachilek, on the Thai border. Since 1997, women under 25 in eastern Shan State have been forbidden to travel to the Thai border, but with travel permits from the MWAFF, they can pass through the checkpoints. In 2004, SWAN reported that these permits costs as high as 150,000 kyat (about \$150). Earlier this year, the cost of the permits had increased to 200,000 kyat (about \$200). These permits have to be signed by the Kengtung MWAFF chairwoman, wife of the SPDC Regional Military Commander.



*SPDC officer addressing UNIAP meeting to draft anti-trafficking law.*

Most disturbing is the fact that ordinary travellers have been arrested and falsely charged with trafficking. Under the new law, the prison sentence for trafficking of women and children is from 10 years to life imprisonment.

It is evident that the regime's authorities are using trafficking legislation as a further tool of oppression against the people of Burma. It is therefore extremely worrying that the process by which the SPDC has developed its new law has been actively supported by the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human

Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (UNIAP) together with UNODC and the ARCPPT (Asia Regional Cooperation to Prevent People Trafficking). In a country with no rule of law, how can this new legislation effectively benefit the people?

SWAN has repeatedly expressed concern about how the SPDC has been manipulating UN and other international agencies in Burma for its own benefit, in order to strengthen its grip on power. Now here again, SPDC has exploited the issue of

trafficking to gain international credibility and financial aid.

Our stand on the trafficking issue in Burma is that the regime itself is the root cause of the critical political and economic problems that are the main push factors driving women out of the country and into a situation where they are vulnerable to trafficking.

At the same time, SWAN believes that empowerment of women and children is crucial to preventing them from being trafficked. Empowerment includes access to education and information, which makes them

# The regime's 2006 sexual offensive in Central Shan State

In the first half of 2006, world attention was drawn to the plight of thousands of newly displaced villagers fleeing the fiercest offensive in a decade by the military regime in Karen areas of eastern Burma. Few people were aware that at the same time the regime's troops were conducting another kind of offensive, of systematic sexual violence, against women in Central Shan State.

Details of this sexual offensive first reached the outside world on April 10, when BBC radio broadcast an interview with a community worker from the central Shan township of Murng Kerng, who described how several units of SPDC soldiers had been marauding through hill villages since the start of the year raping women at each village.

Further details emerged in May, when the Shan Herald Agency for News revealed the units as belonging to infantry battalions 514, 515, 518 and 64. On orders to flush out the Shan resistance in Murng Kerng, the troops had gone from village to village demanding that headmen provide

between 5-7 "comfort women" for their soldiers. One mute woman seized in this way had been beaten to death and her body left outside her village.

SWAN subsequently interviewed several sources from Murng Kerng, who confirmed the earlier reports, providing further details of rape cases by SPDC troops in their areas.

"One unit of about ten soldiers from LIB 515 went from village to village around where I live - altogether about 10 Palaung villages. At each village they ordered the headmen to provide women as "guides" for their troops and then gang-raped them along the way. If the headmen couldn't provide any women, they were fined 200,000 kyat," explained one source.

Another source described how the same unit had visited a Palaung village and demanded comfort women. When the father of one of the women protested, he was beaten to death.

When appeals in March by village elders to local military authorities failed to end the rampage of this

particular unit, the elders approached a senior military commander in the town of Loilem. The unit's commanding officer and some of his men were then reported to have been apprehended. However, other units that have perpetrated sexual violence continue to operate in the area.

The area of Murng Kerng has been one of the most hotly contested areas between the SPDC and Shan resistance forces during 2006. Regardless of occasional token punishment of military rapists, it is evident that the Burma Army is continuing to endorse any tactics, including sexual violence, to subdue the local population.

An SPDC colonel visiting the area in March of this year is reported to have told soldiers at the command post of infantry battalion 243: "Do anything you like, whether it be stealing, robbing, raping or dealing in drugs. The only thing is to be careful it doesn't come out on one of the foreign radios." In other words, the regime is still clearly giving licence to its soldiers to commit rape. □

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## *Continued from Page 4*

confident enough to resist unscrupulous persons.

The regime has constantly abused the state's funds and spent billions of dollars on its military infrastructure, while neglecting the health and education sectors. Its misrule has pushed out millions of people from the country. It is therefore absurd to us that the regime is being permitted to boast about its success in combating trafficking at international seminars. Why are the real trafficking push factors never mentioned at these seminars, which are attended and supported by international agencies?

Worse than that, in several trafficking seminars, the regime has even taken the opportunity to refute "fabrications" that they had committed any kind of systematic human rights abuses against women. This was clearly a reference to our own report, "Licence to Rape," documenting the systematic use of sexual violence by the regime against women in Shan State.

For SWAN, the root causes of the increase in trafficking of women and children in Burma, namely the policies of the military regime, must be addressed or the problem will

continue to worsen.

Therefore, donor countries giving support to various UN agencies and NGOs working with the regime should be aware that the "anti-trafficking" activities that SPDC is implementing are only superficial, as they do not address the political root causes of the problem. More importantly, they should realize that SPDC is exploiting the trafficking issue to boost its image in the world arena and to attract international support in order to maintain military rule in Burma. □

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referred to SWAN, she was barely conscious and her legs were thin and weak.

After staying at SWAN's centre, with better nutrition and with physiotherapy she improved dramatically and was able to walk as before. She is now able to study at school again.

Sexual violence is another danger facing women and girls, from the moment they leave their homes to seek refuge in Thailand. Many refugees travel by truck to the Thai border. Despite paying large sums of money for the journey, the drivers sometimes force them to pay extra along the way, and when they have no money, they force young women and girls to sleep with them as payment.

Once in Thailand, women are very vulnerable to sexual violence from their employers. One woman assisted by SWAN had been raped by the owner of the shop where she worked. He had raped many of his former employees.

Some had had abortions, and some had run away. The woman we assisted had become pregnant, and given birth to a son, but the employer had not taken responsibility for this. She had also worked for two years for him without payment. SWAN contacted some Thai NGOs who are currently assisting her to get compensation for the lack of payment from a Thai Labour Court.

While the centre assists about ten cases a month, there are many more cases among the refugee community that SWAN has been unable to assist. One common problem is that women, particularly those that have suffered some form of violence, are often ashamed to seek outside assistance, fearing censure from their community.

Unfortunately, with hundreds of thousands of Shan refugees already in Thailand, and hundreds more arriving each month, it is certain that the number of women and children needing assistance is only going to increase. □

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## Controversial Salween dam plans continue

Despite renewed international condemnation of human rights abuses in eastern Burma during 2006, the Burmese military regime, in conjunction with Thailand and China, is proceeding with plans to build a series of 4 hydropower dams on the Salween River in Shan and Karen States.

A recent agreement signed in Beijing in June 2006 between the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand and China's state-owned Sinohydro, indicate that the Hatgyi Dam in Karen State will be the first dam to be built. Ongoing military operations by the regime in this area displacing thousands of Karen civilians since early 2006 are also likely intended to clear the area before the construction of the dam.

However, on April 3 2006, a Memorandum of Agreement was also signed in Rangoon between the regime and the Thai MDX group of companies to build a 7,100 megawatt dam at Tasang in Shan State. Local Shan villagers report that preparatory infrastructure at the Tasang dam site is already more advanced than at Hatgyi. In 2005, MDX built a 150 KW hydropower turbine on a tributary of the Salween River in order to provide electricity to supply three buildings for workers, a clinic and an office which have been built south of the dam site in readiness for construction of the dam.

Furthermore, as part of a local public relations campaign, since early 2006 the MDX has been providing malaria testing and dental services to villagers south of the dam



*The Salween River in Shan State*

site, in areas of Mong Ton Township through which power transmission lines from the dam will pass to Thailand. However, the communities living in the potential flood zone have not yet been given any special services, and have not even been informed about the dam construction.

The Tasang dam site is located in one of the main conflict areas of Shan State. About 280 communities, totaling 60,000 people, have already been forcibly relocated since 1996 from village tracts adjoining the dam site and its potential flood zone. Many of these villagers have fled to Thailand, but several thousand villagers still live in scattered communities along the river and its tributaries. The regime has been steadily increasing its military presence in the area, to provide security for the dam-site and other strategic infrastructure. There are now 30

## Experiencing Christmas good-will in Denmark

*In November 2005, SWAN Education coordinator Moan Kaein joined the Danish Burma Committee as an intern, to help them launch their Christmas Calendar project, supported by the Danish Foreign Ministry, to raise funds for SWAN's education program.*

I was very happy to have the chance to take part in the Christmas Calendar Project in Denmark. First of all, I was able to watch the showing on Danish TV of the docu-drama "The real life of Shan children," which had been filmed earlier in 2005 among Shan refugee communities working in orange orchards in northern Thailand. The three episodes: "Sai Shwe and Sai La Maung want to go to school," "Sai Law gets new sandals" and "Amee Nar and the white board," were shown on consecutive Saturday evenings. Viewers all over Denmark learned of the plight of Shan refugees, and were encouraged to buy Christmas calendars to support SWAN's education program.

On November 19, the Danish Burma Committee organized a Burma Action Day. Ten teams were sent out to different towns in Denmark to distribute fliers advertising the calendars, which were on sale in post offices and banks all over the country. Together with another friend from Burma and a Danish volunteer, I traveled to a town called Hillerod. We set up a board in a shopping street and spent several hours giving out fliers to passers-by and explaining about the situation in Burma. At first, I felt nervous stopping strangers in the street, but many people took the fliers and asked questions about Burma.

It was snowing, and even with a thick coat and hat I was absolutely freezing. I felt like a piece of pork in a refrigerator. I had been given gloves, but I couldn't handle the fliers using them, so I had to keep taking them off.

As part of the campaign, I also had to visit schools in different parts of Denmark to give talks about Burma



*Moan Kaein (far right, back row) at a school in Denmark*

and the situation of the Shan refugee children. Each school had received books about the Shan, and cut-out paper dolls showing the clothing of different ethnic groups in Shan State. Even though the children were very young, they were very interested in how children in other continents lived and how they felt. They really wanted to help, and even organized to collect money among themselves to give donations for the Shan children.

It was all a great experience for me, and my confidence and English speaking skills improved a lot during this time. I had been really nervous about getting lost while traveling in a big city like Copenhagen, but the system of public transportation was so good that it was very easy to travel.

One other important experience for me was the chance to observe a local election in Copenhagen. I was able to visit the Soborg polling station in Gladsaxe to see people casting their votes in ballot boxes, and then the counting of the votes. It was a taste of democracy in action, which I hope one day to be able to experience in my own country. □

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### *Continued from page 6*

battalions in the area, putting local villagers at greater risk of violence, including sexual violence.

Almost half of the 173 incidents of rape documented in our 2002 report "Licence to Rape" took place in the areas of forced relocation along the Salween River and the potential flood area. Sexual violence is continuing in these areas. In May 2006, an 18-year-old girl from Kunhing was gang-raped by the regime's troops while tending buffalo.

The US\$6 billion Tasang dam will submerge a total area of about 870 square kilometers. Electricity from the dam will be transmitted to Thailand and feed into the Mekong Power Grid of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) which is supported financially and technically by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

*For further information on campaigns against the Salween dams, see [salweenwatch.org](http://salweenwatch.org)*

## News Briefs

***Support SWAN's education program for refugee children from Shan State by buying paper dolls***



SWAN's book of paper cut-out dolls for children, showing the costumes of the different ethnic groups in Shan State, produced in collaboration with DANIDA (Danish International Development Agency) & the Danish Burma Committee (DBC), can be purchased by contacting SWAN at:

***paperdolls@shanwomen.org***



### ***Licence to Rape published in Hindi***

The Hindi translation of the report Licence to Rape was published in August 2006 in collaboration with The Other Media, based in New Delhi. The report was launched at the Seventh National Women's Conference in India in early September. □

### ***SWAN delivers key-note speech at launch of Cambodian Parliamentary Caucus on Burma***

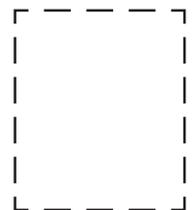
On August 25, 2006, SWAN advocate Charm Tong gave the key-note address at the launch of the Cambodian Parliamentary Caucus on Burma in Phnom Penh. The caucus was formed by twenty-six Cambodian parliamentarians to support the movement for human rights and democracy in Burma. In her speech, Charm Tong described the human rights situation in Burma and resulting displacement, and reiterated calls for Burma to be put on the UN Security Council agenda. □

### ***SWAN joins high-level Roundtable on Burma***

Hseng Nong, co-founder of SWAN, joined a Roundtable Dialogue on Burma hosted by First Lady Laura Bush in New York on September 19, 2006. The dialogue was aimed to "help gain support for a US-sponsored UN Security Resolution to call out Burma for political and human rights violations." Hseng Nong highlighted the SPDC's systematic use of sexual violence against women in Burma. □



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