



SWAN

Shan Women's Action Network Newsletter

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When will the cycle of violence end?



Villagers displaced by renewed conflict in northern Shan State

Last year saw civil war spread the entire length of Shan State. For over two decades, since 1989, there had been ceasefire agreements keeping a fragile peace in the north of the state, while conflict continued between the Burma Army and resistance forces in the south.

This all changed on March 13, 2011, when the regime broke its 22-year ceasefire agreement with the Shan State State Army-North (SSA-N), which had refused to become a pro-regime militia. The regime mobilized 3,500 troops to seize the SSA-North territories.

Within months, fighting had spread throughout northern Shan State. By August, widespread Burma Army atrocities against civilians, including forcing women to be human shields, shelling of temples, torture, killing and mutilation, had driven over 30,000 villagers to flee their homes.

The displaced either sought shelter in towns or went into hiding in the jungle, where they suffered from lack of food, shelter and medicine. Only a few managed to flee to the Thai border, joining the ongoing exodus of refugees fleeing conflict

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and abuses in southern Shan State.

Meanwhile, on June 9, 2011, the regime broke its 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), causing fighting and displacement not only in Kachin State, but also northern Shan State. In late September, the Burma Army launched a fierce offensive against the KIA's 4th Brigade in the northern Shan township of Kutkhai. Heavy shelling of populated areas caused over a thousand villagers to flee, mainly towards the Chinese border.

During these new offensives, there has been flagrant use of rape as a weapon of war by Burma Army troops. Within the space of only four days at the start of the offensive against SSA-N in March 2011, SWAN received reports of the gang-rape of six women, in three different villages, by troops from four different battalions. One of the women had just delivered a one-month old baby. Another was detained and raped for three nights by a group of eight soldiers. She died five days later of her injuries.

As the fighting escalated in July, so too did the sexual violence. On July 5, in a single village, there were four separate incidents of rape by Burma Army soldiers, including of a 12-year old schoolgirl and a woman who was nine months pregnant.

In Kachin State, within June and August, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) documented the rape of 37 women and girls by the Burma Army in eleven different townships, of whom thirteen were killed. In one case, troops gang-raped and then killed a 39-year-old woman and her 17-year-old daughter.

In late October, KWAT documented that four women were being held as sex slaves at a Burma Army base near the Kachin-China border. They were forced to cook and clean for troops during the day, and were gang-raped by them at night.

These incidents of sexual violence, committed with impunity by troops from numerous different battalions, provide overwhelming evidence of a continuing "Licence to Rape" by the Burma Army. Some of the newly displaced villagers have commented that they are witnessing the same atrocities by the Burma Army as they saw twenty years ago, before the ceasefires.

During the past few decades the Burma Army has relentlessly expanded its presence throughout Shan State, and is continuing to build new bases, confiscate land and reinforce troops. Until this militarization ends, women will face ongoing threats to their security and lives. ■

Message



from

SWAN

In recent months various armed groups in Shan State have been engaging in ceasefire negotiations with Burma's military-backed government.

We earnestly hope that this process will lead to a resolution of the political root causes of the conflict. However, in order for a genuine peace process to even begin, there must first be a nationwide ceasefire and cessation of fighting in all ethnic areas. There must also be an immediate end to new troop deployment, and to impunity for abuses by the Burma Army.

It must not be forgotten that the Burma Army has been relentlessly expanding its presence in Shan State. In the past year, a new regional command has been established, the fourth in Shan State, where more than a quarter of the Burma Army's estimated 600 infantry battalions are now stationed. Fresh troops have continue to be deployed, particularly to protect the new giant pipelines being built across northern Shan State and Burma to export oil and gas to China.

It is the presence of these troops, and their continuing impunity, that is threatening the security and lives of local communities, especially women. This is why we have yet to feel confidence in the current peace processes.

We therefore urge vigilance from all stakeholders, to observe the actual realities on the ground as negotiations continue. Those members of the international community already hailing the "end to civil war in Burma" have the luxury of ignoring the elephant in the room – the omnipresent Burma Army. We in the ethnic areas do not.

Standing up as female comedians in Burma

Just before the 2010 elections, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) joined with comic artists "Thee Nyi Noug" to produce a highly successful comedy performance satirizing the electoral process and discrimination against women under military rule. Performed to a packed audience in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and televised on the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), the show was groundbreaking. For the first time women took the lead as comedians, a role traditionally performed exclusively by men.



SWAN members Muay Noom Hom and Ying Hom, two of the lead comedians, talked about the experience.

Q: What was the main objective of the comedy show?

MNH: We wanted to highlight the ongoing human rights abuses by the military regime, the effects on people's lives, and how the elections were not going to bring real change.

Q: Why were you interested to take part in the show?

YH: Most people in Burma think that comedians should be men. I thought it was a great chance to show audiences that women could be good comedians too. I also liked the fact that it was a new way to raise women's voices.

Q: What was it like being a comedian?

MNH: It was really hard work. We had only two weeks to practice, and had to rehearse late into the night. We were part of the main four-woman stand-up comedy team. It was very tiring. I also knew that if I performed on stage, I might be arrested if I went back to Burma, so it was a big decision. I felt really nervous beforehand, but when I was on stage and the audience started laughing, it felt great. I'm really glad I've had a chance to become a comedian.

Q: What were the main challenges for you?

YH: We were all from different ethnic backgrounds, so we couldn't speak Burmese very well and were afraid that some words or idioms wouldn't be understood by the audience. We were also worried about our acting gestures and facial



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Lessons from Shan State's deadly earthquake

Over a year since the 6.8 scale earthquake struck eastern Shan State on March 24, impacting about 18,000 people in over 100 villages, the scars of the disaster are still visible. Some damaged buildings remain unrepaired.

Although international media reports suggested initially that the Burmese military authorities were responding “quickly and with unusual transparency” to the disaster, this verdict was premature. In reality, aid to the affected areas was tightly controlled, media access was restricted, and many outlying areas ended up receiving no assistance whatsoever.

The main areas affected were the village tracts of Taler and Mong Lane in Tachilek township, where collapsed buildings killed up to 300. The military authorities set up three “relief centres:” two in Taler and one in Mong Lane, where all donors were forced to deposit aid supplies.

Aid was quick to arrive from well-wishers in nearby Shan towns and Thailand, but donations had to be left at the military-guarded centres, where they were slow to be distributed and, according to many sources, pilfered by the authorities. Not long after the disaster, wives of Burma Army soldiers were seen selling canned fish and dried noodles at cheap prices outside the Taler and Tachilek markets in the early morning.

Some officials took advantage of the disaster to extort money from earthquake victims. One mother in Taler whose baby daughter died in

the earthquake was charged money by the police to take the body to Tachilek.

Foreign journalists attempting to cross the border from Thailand to cover the disaster were denied access.

International aid agencies issued a

Although urgently needed tarpaulins, blankets, food and water supplies were issued to communities in the main villages of Taler and Mong Lane, many affected villagers off the main road ended up receiving no official aid whatsoever.

Continuing strong aftershocks made most people afraid to stay in their



Above: traditional Shan house

Left: new house built by government in Taler.

detailed situation report within two weeks, but no mention was made of abuses by the authorities, and it was even claimed erroneously that the government was providing sufficient medical supplies. In fact, health staff working at emergency health centres complained to SWAN that there was a severe shortage of medicine, and they had received almost no medical supplies at all from the government.

houses, damaged or undamaged. People camped outside, finding that tarpaulins often provided insufficient protection to the heavy rains.

Poorer villagers, who lost not only their houses, but rice stocks, farming utensils, and animals, were forced to borrow money to buy tools and seeds to plant their rice fields.

Many hoping to receive support to rebuild their houses received a rude shock when the authorities announced that only owners of houses that had completely collapsed on the day of the quake were eligible for aid. Those whose houses were only partially damaged, or collapsed later due to aftershocks, would receive no assistance.

About 500 houses have been rebuilt by the authorities, but there have been many complaints about the style and quality of the buildings, which are all of a standard 5 x 7 meter size.

“The wooden planks are thin and poor quality. I’m afraid they won’t be able to stand strong winds, let alone another earthquake,” said a local resident.

The new houses, built like storage sheds, differ markedly from local buildings. Traditional Shan houses are built on tall stilts, so that paddy and livestock can be kept under-



neath. There is also usually an open cooking area and verandah.

Some dissatisfied Lahu villagers have ended up just using their new houses for storage and living in traditional bamboo houses next to them.

Aid to earthquake survivors has

now almost entirely dried up.

“Very few donors are coming now. They are probably fed up of being questioned by the authorities,” said one affected villager. “Some have also heard that donations were sold by local military families.” ■

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expressions, as none of us had ever acted before.

Q: What advice would you give to other women who want to be comedians?

MNH: You need to have confidence in yourself, and be prepared to sacrifice a lot of time. You also need language skills, which is why it would be great if we could also perform in our own language.

Q: What are the differences between Shan and Burmese comedy?

YH: Shans have a type of stage

show called “Jad Tai” which is a drama with singing and dancing. There are jokes, but it is not like the Burmese “a-nyein” stage shows where a row of stand-up comedians make jokes. Anyway, due to the lack of freedom of expression in Burma today, no one can publicly stage a comedy that openly criticizes the government.

Q: After this first show, you have performed in several other comedy productions by WLB, shown on DVB TV. What kind of feedback have you had?

MNH: There’ve been emails from women all over Burma. They really like the shows, and want more. It’s clear comedy is a great way to raise political awareness. A lot of people now recognize me. I’ve had compliments about my acting, but some suggested that I need to improve my pronunciation. It encourages me to try harder. I’m glad I’ve found a talent that’s useful. I used to think I didn’t have any particular skills which were helpful for my organization, but now I feel I can do a lot for the movement. ■

How ruby-mining made us poor



With Burma's military regime granting a growing number of mining concessions in mineral-rich Shan State, SWAN has become increasingly concerned about the social and environmental impacts of these mining projects, particularly on women. In this article, a young woman describes how the discovery of rubies in her hometown of Mong Hsu, central Shan State, impacted her life.

I have happy memories of my childhood in Mong Hsu. It was a small quiet town, with a close-knit community. We lived on the bank of the Nam Nga river, which flows through the town. My parents ran a small grocery shop, and had no shortage of customers. Most of the townsfolk were farmers who had rice fields and vegetable plantations in the valley around the town.

We drew water from the river for all our household needs – washing, bathing and cooking. My grandfather, who lived near our house, was a farmer. He relied on the river for irrigating his fields, and also had a water mill for pounding rice and crushing peanuts into oil.

All this changed in 1992, when rubies were discovered in the hills

south of the town. The news spread quickly and soon prospectors from all over the country began arriving in our area. The “Loi Seng” hillsides, formerly tea plantations cultivated by Lahu and Palaung farmers, were confiscated by the military authorities and sold as concessions to Burmese and Chinese companies, as well as ethnic ceasefire groups.

The main road through our town became choked with trucks carrying mining equipment, construction materials, food supplies and, above all, people to the mines. The “Loi Seng” hills, visible from the town, changed from green to white, as the hilltops were dynamited and cleared to make way for mile upon mile of mining settlements. By the mid 1990s there were about half a million workers on the mountains.

Almost all the mine workers were men. Only a few women were employed on the mines to sift stones, and cook for the miners. Otherwise, women worked in the service industries, in shops, restaurants, gambling dens, karaoke bars and massage parlours. Some sold underground lottery tickets. Many ended up doing sex work.

Conditions in the mines were tough, with a lot of digging done by hand. Cave-ins and accidents were common. Many miners took drugs, including opium, heroin and amphetamines, easily available from numerous dealers.

Although the main mining area was miles from our town, prospectors searched for rubies in every possible location. One company

began digging directly south of the town, right on the bank of the Nam Nga river. The excavation led to the complete blockage of one branch of the river (which divided in two through the town) and to the other branch becoming dirty and unusable.

Our lives became much harder. We could no longer use the river water for our daily needs. We tried to dig a well, but the water was still dirty. So we ended up having to fetch water in buckets many times a day from the well of a relative down the road. Sometimes even this well dried up, so we had to buy water from a water seller.

Even worse was when the water in the river began drying up. People said it was because the mines in the hills were using up the source waters. Suddenly farmers found they didn't have enough water to

irrigate their fields and gardens. My grandfather was not able to grow crops as before, and had to rent out his land to another farmer who could afford chemical fertilizers and a water-pump for irrigation.

My parents were no longer able to earn a living from their shop, and I was taken out of school. Many farmers were falling into poverty and unable to buy goods as before. The few farmers able to get good crops sold their produce up in the mining areas where they could get a better price. This caused a scarcity of market goods in the town, raising prices and fuelling poverty.

At the same time there was an increase of drug addiction and crime in Mong Hsu, due to the easy availability of drugs in the mining area. My parents became very worried that my brothers would start taking drugs. So finally they

decided to migrate to Thailand with the whole family.

Many of the original inhabitants of Mong Hsu have come to find work in Thailand like us. Even though the mines have become less productive in the past few years, the damage has been done to the local environment and community. Drug use is still rampant, and most parents send their children away to study or work elsewhere so they don't become addicted. The Burma Army camp in the town has also expanded, causing more people to lose their land.

When I tell people I am from Mong Hsu, they always joke that I must be rich because I come from a famous ruby mining area. In fact, ruby mining made us poor. When I see people wearing rubies, I don't think they are beautiful, I just think of all the people who have suffered to dig up those stones. ■

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also rarely provided. As a result, diarrhea is common.

Workers spray pesticides on the tobacco plants three times a day, causing a strong chemical smell to pervade the fields and the drying huts. Some workers develop respiratory problems, and many also develop skin rashes from the daily task of picking and handling the pesticide-covered tobacco leaves. The generally poor quality of food given to the workers also means lowered resistance to illness.

After picking the leaves, workers must thread them onto pieces of string using large needles and hang them up to dry in plastic covered huts. After several days, the dried leaves are tied up in bundles and put in sacks. The threading

and packing requires long hours of sitting, causing cramping and numbness in the legs.

Workers who fall ill usually seek treatment in private clinics. If they are lucky, their "laoban" (employer) covers their medical costs. If not, they must pay themselves. Reluctance to pay costs has led some workers to avoid treatment, leading to chronic health problems and in some cases even death.

The isolated working conditions in the fields mean that women are vulnerable to various kinds of exploitation and abuse. There have been reports of sexual harassment by male employers, trafficking of women to be brides of Chinese men, and failure to pay agreed upon wages.

There currently exists no system to provide work permits to foreign migrant workers in this area meaning there is no official regulation of their working conditions and wages, and no legal recourse in cases of exploitation.

Most of the tobacco grown in this area of Yunnan is sold to a large Chinese company called Sheng Liu Yen in the nearby prefecture of Baoshan. It is then exported to various countries, including Germany, Japan and the USA -- presumably for substantial profits. It is a shame indeed that these profits are being made at the expense of the health and safety of young women from Shan State. ■

Exploited in China's tobacco fields

Thousands of young migrant women from Shan State are suffering harsh working conditions in tobacco farms in Yunnan

Since 2005 Chinese authorities have been promoting tobacco as a dry season crop in western Yunnan along the border with Burma. Rice farmers have been encouraged with subsidies to grow tobacco during the seven month period from October to April. In some areas, farmers have been given quotas according to their household size, with each household member expected to grow 1/5 of an acre of tobacco.

As tobacco cultivation requires intensive labour, Chinese farmers have been recruiting migrant labourers from Burma to carry out the work. Most are young women, who are seen as more dexterous at picking and drying the tobacco leaves.

Workers are usually recruited by agents, who travel to rural areas of Shan State where increasing militarization and poverty make young women eager for any opportunity to find work to support their families. Promised wages of 20 yuan (approx US\$ 3) a day, with free

food and accommodation, and no Chinese language ability required, women willingly accompany the agents, not only paying their own way, but even paying the agent 20 yuan. The agent also earns 50 yuan from the employer for every worker she brings.

Most employers do not bother to purchase legal stay permits for their workers, who therefore do not dare venture from their living quarters in the tobacco fields. Workers stay together in small groups of three or four in field huts. They are expected to work daily from 7.30 am to 8 pm, with a 2-hour lunch break. Once the tobacco starts to be harvested, they often work until 10 or 11 pm packing up the dried tobacco leaves. They have no days off, except at Chinese New Year, and are usually not given any overtime pay for working late into the night.

The living conditions in the fields are extremely unsanitary. Workers must use the irrigation channels alongside fields for bathing, cooking and drinking. The water is not only dirty but also heavily polluted with runoff from chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Proper latrines are



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