

# OPPRESSION IN BURMA

by Alison Tate

**A**ung San Suu Kyi is probably Burma's most famous and admired woman. As both the leader of the democracy movement and a strong advocate for human rights under Burma's military regime, she was awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize.

In recognition of the struggle and sacrifices of the millions of Burmese women, inside and outside Burma, June 19, Suu Kyi's birthday, has been designated as "Burma Women's Day."

For even as Suu Kyi attracts the international media's attention and has become the spokesperson for the protracted struggle of the 45 million Burmese people, the women of the nation are also involved in resisting brutal military rule and advancing human rights.

Refugee women interviewed in Thailand have given accounts that reflect the experiences of millions of those who are internally displaced within Burma.

## COUNTLESS REFUGEES

The long-time repression of human rights in Burma has impelled communities to flee to each of Burma's neighbors. There are now an estimated 200,000 people seeking refuge in Thailand; some 15,000 are in China's Yunnan province; an unconfirmed 10,000 are in India's civil war zone of the Northeastern States, and some 30,000 are officially in Bangladesh.

Most people believe that the actual number of refugees is probably much more. Thousands of people cross the borders each day



Looking forward to better days

to seek a place safe from intimidation, forced labor and forced relocation. Many thousands more remain displaced from their home villages and townships following military attacks or the constant cycle of oppression inflicted by the policies and practices of the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The consequences of the SLORC's policies have been the daily and long-term struggle of women against military aggression, poverty (stemming from an economy devoted to maintaining military control), abuse, looting, murder, imprisonment, torture, attacks on their person and character, as well as attacks on their families and colleagues in the pursuit of women's support and respect for human rights.

Inside Burma, women face economic hardship caused by poverty and a lack of development. Burma is considered one of

the world's 10 poorest countries. When the military took over in the early 1960s, Burma was known as the "rice bowl" of Asia. Many people who have fled Burma say they have nothing left now. When asked why they fled, these people often answer, "I have come to look for work". As they recount their experiences, one begins to understand the depths of suffering endured by the people from all areas, rural and urban, in Burma.

## FORCED LABOR

Often local SLORC military units enter the rural villages and demand that the villagers give them food—rice and other crops, livestock, even the land. Many people interviewed in Thailand have spoken of their farms being taken over by SLORC troops who forcibly make them work on a SLORC rice farm or corn or rubber plantation. They receive no pay and must provide their own

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food, water and medical supplies during "labor duty".

The SLORC has used forced labor as a part of its "economic development" program in all regions in Burma. It proudly declares to the world that despite being denied international financing by the World Bank and other agencies (in reaction to the regime's appalling human rights record), SLORC is developing infrastructure on its own. The truth is that, as refugees have stated, "their form of development, road building, constructing railways and building military bases and compounds, is done without the SLORC spending a *pya* [in Burmese currency - 'a cent']. The villagers are forced to do it all."

Men, women and children are regularly conscripted into forced labor, sometimes for 28 days each month, to work on military projects. One said: "We must work for them every day, so we cannot do our own work. We cannot plant, grow or harvest our own rice. We have no time."

This has meant that huge tracts of land in Burma are no longer farmed. No payment or compensation is ever offered in return. Still, rice farmers must pay a rice tax levied on the number of acres of land they till or own. When rural refugees from the ethnic states describe life in their villages, they talk of a total disruption to domestic life and often conclude that their biggest burden consists of "forced labor, high taxes and forced relocation."

### ALL YEAR ROUND

Karen, a 40-year-old Buddhist mother of five and a rice farmer, relates:

"There is a lot of work we must do for them. SLORC is building a road near our village. I had to carry and pack dirt on the road. It is very high, about seven feet above the paddy fields. Every rainy season, the rains wash it away. There is no bridge or tunnel. Every village in our area has to work to rebuild it again every dry season." She says that one

person from every household must work for five days by rotation. Workers are only released when their replacements arrive. After working for five days, they can rest for one or two days and then work again.

"We must also work on their farms and rubber plantations. We work all year round. We work for four to five days and then have two days off. SLORC brings Burmese-speaking [civilian] laborers to guard the road and control the villagers. Armed soldiers guard the sentries. In one month, my family must send somebody three times, for five days each time. Sometimes I go. Sometimes my husband goes. Sometimes we must send my [16-year-old] son. You must leave your work if you are called. We always have to work for the SLORC. I do not want to be oppressed by them anymore. We don't have anything left. That's why we decided to leave."

### MILITARY CONTROL

A Catholic, Karenni, 26, mother of three and a laborer, relates how difficult it is to survive under the threat of SLORC soldiers who control daily activities.

"There is plenty of wood in the forest, but the SLORC won't allow us to go in there to collect wood. There is a nighttime curfew. We have to be back from the farms by 4 p.m. Some people cannot farm anymore, because their farms are too far away. They cannot return in one day. We are afraid to go into the forest to collect vegetables or wood. We cannot collect leaves to thatch our houses. The troops shoot first. If they see you in the forest, they say you are supporting the rebels. My brother was killed like that."

The Burmese women decry the denial of health and education services, the impact on their families and communities of forced labor and forced relocation of rural and urban communities. Many women tell of the experience of military abuse, including rape, torture and execution.

### DIVISIVENESS

Economic and political control is related to the spread of HIV/AIDS and to the trafficking of women and girls from Burma to other countries. Women in the ethnic states speak of the threat to their cultural integrity as a result of the militarization of their country. In recent months the breakdown in trust has worsened in communities where violence has further divided the people.

In many communities where Muslims have reported the destruction of their mosques, local Buddhist villagers have been forced to participate in the demolition. In Karen Christian communities, Baptist pastors have reported being forced to enter Buddhist temples and offer respect to monks and to forcibly work on the construction of Buddhist temples. Buddhist monks and nuns have reported SLORC soldiers entering the temples wearing their army boots—a highly disrespectful act—and stealing village property, held in trust at the monastery, and religious artifacts.

Under the control structures of a militarized government, the economic and social survival of the family unit becomes a question. A Muslim woman, interviewed recently in Thailand, summarizes what many women from Burma want urgently. She pleads: "Please tell the Muslim countries of our suffering."

The women of Burma call on the people outside their country to recognize their plight. Their message is that "women's rights are human rights". Respect for the dignity of women in Burma and gender equality form part of their struggle for democracy. ♪

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