

Forced relocation in Burma's former capital

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The population of Yangon has experienced coercive resettlement on a truly massive scale under military rule.

During the period 1958-60, the caretaker government of General Ne Win made Burma's armed forces – rather than elected representatives – responsible for governing Yangon (Rangoon), Burma's largest city and the country's capital until the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) moved its seat of power to Naypyidaw in 2005. The government established three new townships near Yangon to which 167,000 people, one sixth of the city's population of one million, were involuntarily relocated.¹ The government claimed that resettlement was necessary because the tens of thousands of people fleeing insurgency in the countryside who had become squatters in the city posed a threat both to public health and to law and order. Deeply resentful of having lost their former homes, the residents of the new townships put up strong resistance against the Ne Win regime during 1988's Democracy Summer.

In response to the demonstrations in the summer of 1988, the State

Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, renamed the SPDC in 1997) seized power. Within a year it had established ten new satellite towns with a population of almost half a million, most of whom had been forcibly resettled. Many were squatters but others were owners of substantial housing who were being punished by the SLORC for actively supporting the 1988 demonstrations. Not only did they lose their old homes but they were forced to pay for plots of land and materials to build new houses in the outlying areas, which generally lacked electricity, water and other amenities. There were few employment opportunities in the satellite towns, obliging the relocated people to make long and costly commutes into central Yangon to work in the informal economy.²

Today, resettled people live crowded together in simple houses made of thatch and bamboo, the poorest of Yangon's poor. They were hardest hit by the August 2007 increase in fuel prices that sparked nationwide

anti-government demonstrations the following month, since the cost of food and public transportation skyrocketed. With its 'huts to apartments' scheme, the SPDC claims to have placed many squatters in new multi-storey housing on the site of or near their former dwellings. However, forced relocation in Yangon, Mandalay and other cities in central Burma continues today; victims of fires, for example, are not allowed to rebuild their old neighbourhoods and residential areas are cleared to make way for new roads, apartments and shopping centres. This is an environment where the land rights of ordinary citizens, whatever their ethnicity, remain unrecognised.

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1. Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), *Burma: Displacement and Dispossession, Forced Migration and Land Rights*. November 2007, pp95-98.

2. 'Interviews in Satellite Villages', *Dawn News Bulletin*, vol. 2, no 14 (July 1990), pp3-9.