

Under attack: a way of life

David Eubank

Much of what is happening in the conflict zones of eastern Burma is difficult to capture with photos, video and reports. It is a slow and insidious strangulation of the population rather than an all-out effort to crush them.

Burma's rulers have divided the country into three zones: white – those areas under their total control; brown – contested areas; and black – areas over which they have no control. Black areas are designated 'free-fire' zones where the Burma army can kill anyone it comes across. The area described in this article is a black zone.

In the Karen and Karenni States of eastern Burma, the Burma army regularly launches sweeping operations, involving up to four battalions, in villages and areas where resistance is active and where IDPs are suspected to be hiding. The soldiers will often mortar and machine-gun the village first and then enter the village to harass civilians,

loot homes, beat, rape and torture indiscriminately, and sometimes burn homes or entire villages. Landmines are then laid in the village and on the routes that villagers use in and out of the village. If a villager is seen, he or she is shot on sight.

During these sweeps, resistance fighters will try to protect the population. Skirmishes may only last a few minutes but they can buy time for people to escape into the jungle with some belongings before the soldiers arrive. On being attacked, villagers will flee into the jungle, to

prepared hiding places if possible. They flee with only what they can carry – their infant children, some utensils, a blanket or two for the entire family, some plastic sheeting and a few days' supply of rice. Once the troops return to their camps, the villagers try to return to or near their fields and villages. During the current offensive, which began in February 2006, there have been many Burma army units attacking on different fronts. As one resistance leader said, "The last few months, the Burma army has attacked so much that many of the hiding places were overrun. Many people were scattered in the jungle. Now it is a little better as the Burma army is busy building up their new camps. But when they are finished with the new camps they will come again. This is a very bad offensive for us all and we do not know how we will manage it. But we must try and we will not leave our homes."

Villagers are also forced to clear landmines and act as human shields around bulldozers to help the army improve road networks. Forced labour is common, with many villagers forced to act as porters, subject to harsh treatment and not infrequent execution.

We had gathered together from ten surrounding villages for a prayer meeting when the Burma army forces appeared and captured some of us. We were tied up, beaten and punched. Then we were given electric shocks to our body. My friend Saw Gwe was killed. I managed to escape. The Burma army accused us of being in the resistance but we are not. We are farmers. We now cannot stay here and so we will go to a refugee camp.

*Saw Nu Nu, a Karenni man
who is now an IDP*

Why do the Burmese soldiers come to burn our villages? We do not go to burn theirs. Why do they want to come and bother us? We only want to have our farms, do our work and live in peace. Our life in the mountains is already very hard. Why do they want to make it harder?

Karenni pastor



Some of those whose villages were attacked return to the same site, rebuilding their houses. Many others remain on the run, go into hiding or attempt to flee the country altogether. Some set up camp in less accessible places where they struggle to eke out an existence.

The village of Maw Tu Der in northwestern Karen State, for example, was burned down by the Burma army in 2004. The villagers have been in hiding in the jungle since then. They have built rough shelters hidden in the trees near trails that have deliberately been kept small and difficult to travel on. They have some kind of security due to the difficulty of access and the help of the local resistance forces (mostly providing early warning of troop movements) but food production has plummeted and there is little cash to purchase clothes, blankets, cooking utensils and farm implements.

Their health has suffered dramatically because they have too little to eat, are more exposed and share inadequate water sources. There is no clinic nearby and Burma army patrols make regular access by medical teams difficult. The Free Burma Rangers, Karen Human Rights Group¹ and the Back Pack Health Worker Team² have extensively documented this direct correlation between Burma army oppression and the ill-health of the population.³ It is only through the efforts of the resistance groups – who provide information, communication, transportation, logistical and security support – that any humanitarian relief can reach those under attack.

During the current offensive, over 370 villagers have been killed in the northern three districts of Karen State and over 30,000 have been displaced, many of whom are now in hiding. Over 60 new Burma army camps and three new roads have been built. The slow but unrelenting attacks and the building of new camps and roads seem to be driven by a plan to dominate, chase out or crush any Karen people in these areas. This is the largest offensive against the Karen people since 1997. The scale of displacement and destruction is large and each death an irreplaceable loss.

The disruption of food production, burning of homes and the shoot-on-sight orders of the Burma army have made staying in their homeland untenable for thousands more. Of the more than 30,000 displaced, over 7,000 people have already left their homes for the Thai border. The people here need food, medicine, shelter and help to rebuild their homes, schools and lives. They also need immediate protection and the freedom to return to their homes.

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1. www.khrg.org/

2. www.geocities.com/maesohtml/bphwt/

3. See article by Heather Rae 'Internal displacement in eastern Burma', FMR 28 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR28/25.pdf and the Back Pack Health Worker Team's 2006 report on 'Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma' at www.geocities.com/maesohtml/bphwt

Villagers forced to carry loads for the Burma army, June 2007.