

State of terror: women at risk

The Karen Women's Organisation

Two reports researched and written by the Karen Women's Organisation – *Shattering Silences in 2004* and *State of Terror in 2007*¹ – document the wide range of human rights abuses against Burmese women and girls.

The abuses were perpetrated across Karen State as part of the sustained campaign of terror by the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council). The reports focus in particular on the abuses experienced by women and girls and draw on over 4,000 documented cases of human rights abuses – in particular those of rape, sexual abuse and forced labour. Forced labour is itself often committed in conjunction with other human rights violations such as rape, beating, mutilation, torture, murder and denial of rights to food, water, shelter and legal redress. The cases documented cover a 25-year period from 1981 to 2006 but the human rights abuses continue today.

Rape

Rape has been used and continues to be used as a method of torture to intimidate and humiliate the civilian populations. Many of the rapes are perpetrated by senior military officers or done with their complicity. The perpetrators are aware that most of the civilian population will be too afraid to complain or that their complaints will not be taken seriously. As a consequence, the rape of women and girls across Karen State and in other states by SPDC soldiers and officers continues with impunity. Recorded cases of rape include the rape of children and of Buddhist nuns.

In a recent case a 25-year-old woman was gang-raped by soldiers. Three SPDC soldiers came to the village. They asked the village chief to give them one Karen woman. They threatened to kill the chief if he did not send for her. The soldiers took the woman to the nearest bush and two of them raped her.

Two young women describe their ordeal at the hands of a soldier. "The soldier ordered us to go with them and we did not even know where we were going. He said "Don't cry

or I will kill you." We walked to a valley and he said we should stop there. He ordered us to take off our clothes. At first, we dare no, then he made his voice strong and we took off our clothes. He lay down with his gun just beside him. He raped me first. He made my friend just lie down beside him. After he raped me, he raped my friend. After a while he raped us again." No action was ever taken against him.

In another district, a young woman was gang-raped by four soldiers in her home. After raping her, they killed her by shooting into her vagina. No action was taken.

Village chiefs are at constant risk of abuse and torture for failing to meet SPDC commands. Now, however, in the absence of men, it is often the senior women who take on this role. They of course face the additional risk of being raped or forced to engage in sex with SPDC soldiers as the price of protection for themselves, their families and communities.

Forced labour

Women and girls from across Karen State report having been forcibly recruited to help build roads and bridges, clear landmines and carry military supplies. They are at particular risk since men and boys flee the villages and hide in the jungle to avoid arrest, torture or killing. Those forcibly recruited include aged and frail women, pregnant and breast-feeding women, and schoolgirls as young as 11. Many women taken as porters are also raped.

"I had to go as a porter for one month. Every day we had to carry up the mountain and down again. I was sweating and couldn't breathe because I am very old and the soldiers prodded me with their guns because I am slow. I felt like my heart was breaking."

Recommendations

The KWO requests the assistance of the international community in the implementation of the following recommendations, calling on:

- the SPDC to stop all forms of sexual violence and all other forms of human rights abuses against women and girls, in particular in the ethnic areas of Burma
- the Royal Thai government to ensure survivors of rape and sexual violence fleeing to Thailand have access to adequate health and psychosocial support systems
- the international community to provide secure refuge and timely and appropriate service provision in countries of first asylum and upon resettlement to women and girls who are survivors of rape and sexual violence, and to ensure that refugee women and girls at extreme risk are provided with appropriate protection and support including case management, safe housing and, if appropriate, resettlement under UNHCR's women at risk programme

Formed in 1949 and with a membership of over 30,000 women, the Karen Women's Organisation (www.karenwomen.org) is a community-based organisation of Karen women working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border and with IDPs and women inside Burma. The KWO also encourages awareness of women's rights and promotes women's participation in community decision making and political processes.

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1. www.karenwomen.org