

"A GRAY AREA"

Special Report:
Accounts of Burmese Military
Human Rights Abuse in Tenasserim Area,
1983-1986

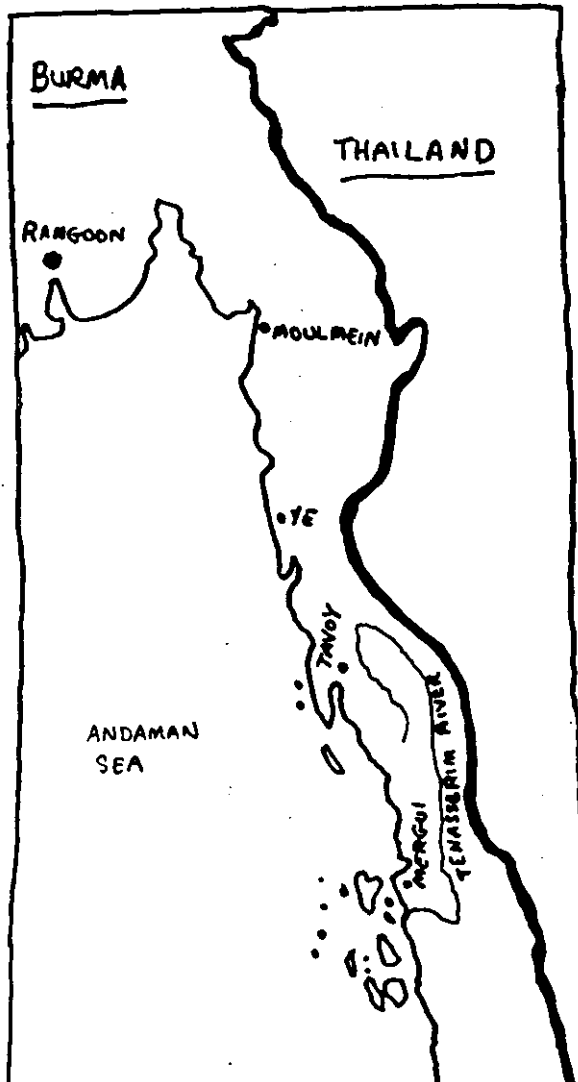
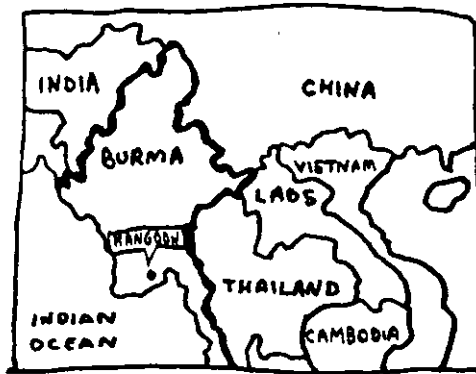
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INTRODUCTION

The events described in this report took place during 1983-1986, in the Tenasserim River area. In this area, ethnic minority forces, primarily of the Karen ethnic group, are engaged in warfare with the Burmese Army. This is one sector of a war that has been going on since Burma's Independence (1948). For nearly four decades, the Karen have been fighting for self-determination and the survival of their unique cultural identity. Numerous other ethnic minority groups are also at war with the Burmese government for similar causes. The ferocity of the Burmese efforts to suppress these rebel groups has led to fears that the Burmese intention is to destroy or drive out the ethnic minorities themselves. Many of the ethnic minorities perceive the Burmese as set on "exterminating" them.

For the Karen, it has been a long and tragic war. Many Karen with rebel sympathies were forced out of homes in the Delta region close to Rangoon, into the mountain ranges against the Thai border. Over 17,000 refugees from this area have fled into Thailand, where they lead a precarious existence in makeshift camps with very little relief aid. Many others are "displaced persons" fleeing the Burmese Army within Burma's borders. The Karen resistance groups maintain a de facto government under the Karen National Union, in the frontier area that they are able to control. They call this area the nation of Kawthoolei. The southernmost part of Burma is a narrow strip bordering Thailand in the east, and the Andaman Sea in the west. This area extends from the town of Ye, and includes the towns of Tavoy and Mergui. The Tenasserim River winds through this area until it reaches the Andaman Sea just south of Mergui.

In the Tenasserim area, the towns, such as Mergui and Tavoy, and most of the coastline, are firmly in Burmese control. The border with Thailand is largely in K.N.U. control. The area in between is a contested zone, or, as the Burmese and Karen put it, a "gray area". Burmese military human rights abuse is widespread and constant in every ethnic minority war zone. The "gray areas" are the most vulnerable, as the civilians there are under suspicion as possible insurgent sympathizers. In an effort to cut off Karen support for the rebels, "strategic hamlets" are established, where villagers are brought to live in walled camps under Army supervision. Civilians in the "gray areas" are also held hostage, used as shields in battle, tortured, executed, and with great frequency they are captured for forced labor as porters and mine detectors by the Burmese Army. This report contains accounts of abuse of civilians trapped in the "gray area" of the Tenasserim.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three main courses of action to follow once one is aware of the ongoing human rights abuse situation in the Tenasserim area:

1. Keep informed about Burma and investigate the situation further. Investigatory missions may be refused entry by the Burmese government, but significant investigations can be conducted in border areas where refugees and traders from Burma enter neighboring countries. The Far Eastern Economic Review provides in-depth coverage of Burma's political, economic and human rights situation. Project Maje can provide background information and planning advice for investigatory missions.
2. The pattern of human rights abuse by the Burmese government and military must be condemned and protested by the international community. Every effort should be made to expose the fact that seemingly peaceful Burma has been waging a brutal war against its own minority groups. Pressure must be brought to bear on the Burmese government to safeguard the civilians in the war zone, rather than victimizing them. Military aid and anti-narcotics aid that can be used militarily (such as the 2,4-D herbicide spraying program) should be withheld. Development and relief aid must be extended to the frontier zone, and relief aid must be made available to refugees in Thailand. International relief organizations such as UNICEF, UNHCR and the International Red Cross must demand to enter the frontier war zone. Human rights organizations must demand to be allowed to enter Burma to monitor and substantiate accounts of human rights abuse.
3. Encourage a solution to the conflict in Burma. This war has gone on for three generations, killed thousands, displaced tens of thousands, and brought with it poverty, disease, and a crippled economy. Past attempts to negotiate a settlement have failed due to bad faith on the part of the Burmese government, and severe factionalism on the part of the opposition. In recent years there has been a marked consolidation of the opposition factions, placing them in a position where negotiation is practical, and to many, desirable. To ensure safety and good faith, negotiations should be held under international aegis, sponsored by the U.N. or an interested country such as China, Singapore, Malaysia, Great Britain, or Japan. A satisfactory solution may be found through a cease-fire, troop withdrawal, and a return to the autonomy granted the frontier areas in the Independence (1948) Constitution. With peace, all of Burma can develop and thrive, and the Burmese and other ethnic groups can learn to coexist -- as neighbors or as compatriots. In the long run, this is the only way to stop this Southeast Asian tragedy, to ensure that no more victims are enslaved or tortured, that no more children disappear, that no more villages are burned to the ground.

INTERVIEW WITH A KAREN WOMAN, TENASSERIM AREA OF KAWTHOOLEI,
APRIL 30, 1987

Q: How old are you?

A: Fifty two years old.

Q: In what village, what part of the countryside, did you grow up?

A: In Ni-Tha.

Q: How long ago did you come to this place?

A: Ten years ago.

Q: Before, did you see some soldiers from Burma?

A: When I was in Ni-Tha, I saw. Because they used to come there.

Q: And, one time, did the Burmese soldiers capture some people?

A: I came to live at Kawthowa, and went to Ni-Tha to go back to visit,
and I met them.

Q: When was that? How many years ago?

A: Four years ago.

Q: What happened when the Burmese soldiers came to the village?

A: At that time when the Burmese soldiers came, I was not at the village,
I was at the paddy field, my uncle's paddy field. And the Burmese came
not just at the village, but outside, and caught me there.

Q: What happened when they caught you in the field?

A: Arrested all the people. All they saw. And then they led us to
go into the jungle.

Q: Where did they take you then?

A: Up to the place where the fighting happened.

Q: And did they tell you anything, the Burmese?

A: They said not to speak or make noise. When fighting happened, we
had to be with them. We have to all the time stay with the soldiers.

Q: What happened when they took you to the place where the fighting was?

A: Fighting happened and then the Burmese Captain got wounded. Then
the Burmese withdrew.

Q: How many of the people from the village did the Burmese have with
them? A lot or only a few?

A: About ten, more than ten.

Q: And were they old or young? Women, children?

A: Women like me, four women. We have to go in front, the four women.
The soldiers told us to go in the front. Before they reached the
fighting place, the soldiers made the four women go in front. The
Burmese soldiers were behind us. Because they said if we didn't

Q: Did the Burmese soldiers tell you it was because there were mines there, or did they just say...?

A: They didn't say anything, they just say "You go first. If you don't go or if you make a sound, we shoot you."

Q: And were all the people with you also Karen people?

A: Just like this. The Burmese soldiers, that one troop who caught us -- there's another Burmese troop who caught so many children and women and they met together. So we were together again.

Q: When you were walking with the soldiers, did you have to carry something also?

A: Not us, because they tied us. Behind our backs. To go in front so that the Karen soldiers, if they saw us, they wouldn't shoot us because we are Karen.

Q: What happened when you walked in the place where they had mines in the ground?

A: We didn't step on any mines, but we reached the place where the Karen and the Burmese shoot each other.

Q: Did any of the Burmese die, or did any of the villagers die?

A: One villager died at that time. I don't know the exact number that got wounded. But many people got wounded, the Burmese soldiers.

Q: How long was the shooting happening? A long time or a short time?

A: We started going to that place at 4:00 and we reached the fighting place at 5:00 and they shot until 6:00 and it became dark and they couldn't see.

Q: What time of year was it? What season?

A: The time after harvesting. Harvest time is November, December. Cold weather starts. It was January.

Q: What happened when it got dark?

A: After it got dark, at that time the Captain got wounded, and then they have to withdraw. Before they withdraw, they untied us.

Q: Did they leave you in the same place?

A: And then they told us to go with them, back with them.

Q: Did they give you anything to eat or did they let you find something to eat or drink?

A: They made what we call sa-thoo in Karen, rice flour, just like a Burmese pancake. The Burmese soldiers had it for a long time, and gave us one pancake for four persons. The whole day we have only that to eat. And it was already rotten.

Q: And during the day did they give you some water, or let you have some water?

A: For drinking water they give -- with a plastic container, the cover, the cap -- two caps for one day, the whole day.

Q: How did the soldiers treat you? How did they speak to you, or did they do anything to you while they had you there?

A: They didn't say anything. They told us to get down on the ground and they tied us up. They said "Go straight", they just said "Don't look around or we will shoot you."

Q: Then when the Burmese soldiers went back, what happened to you?

A: They told us to go with them up to a place called Than Ton Long, that's a Burmese name: "Three Mountains". A Burmese village.

Q: Did you go with them then?

A: We had to go, yes.

Q: How far was it to go to that place? How long did it take?

A: Starting from the time the Burmese soldiers caught us and then sent us back after the fight and sent us back to Than Ton Long, it's four days.

Q: When you got to the "Three Mountains" place, what happened to you?

A: They kept us at Than Ton Long, "Three Mountains", for fifteen days. They didn't let us go. And then I dared not stay, because I knew some Burmese there who knew I had been with the Kawthoolei people. So I was frightened of the Burmese, so I tried to run away. Escape from that place.

Q: During the days when you had to stay there, how did the Burmese treat the people? How did they speak to you, what did they do, if they gave you an order, how did they treat you?

A: About me, what I have said is all. About other people, I will tell what I saw: the first group of the Burmese soldiers captured us -- first troop -- and then the second troop came with the children and there's a very small baby, a year old. A Burmese soldier -- the baby cried, she wanted to have milk from her mother, the girl, she cried -- and a Burmese soldier squeezed her face. And then it became, the jaw became -- the bone broke. Broke the jaw. And in the evening it becomes very swollen. And one person asked the Captain to kill the baby. Because the baby makes noise.

Q: Did they?

A: One of the Burmese soldiers asked his Captain that he will kill this girl and they want to eat the baby, they said. I don't know if they really would or not, but maybe they frighten us that they will eat the flesh.

Q: They said that in front of the villagers?

A: They said that in front of us, so we cry, we all cry. Afraid that the Burmese soldiers will eat us.

Q: Was the baby's mother there then?

A: That girl, that baby, is my niece. That baby's mother ~~was~~ went to Tavoy and left that baby, with some condensed milk, with the baby's grandpa. They lived together in the house. And the Burmese caught them. The time the Burmese captured them was four days, that baby had no milk to drink. They have porridge they gave her, just a little bit. So she was unconscious when they got back to Than Ton Long and he met with her mother. They met at Than Ton Long, and her mother took her back to Tavoy. And the doctor at Tavoy said "If you came one hour later, your baby would die." The soldiers had led us back to Than Ton Long, and we had to stay there fifteen days. Within fifteen days, we didn't hear about my uncle -- the baby's grandpa. So the villagers looked for that man. They didn't see him. So they had to let the dogs go into the forest and they found the dead body.

Q: Did he die on the way when he was walking with the soldiers?

A: They have two groups, the Burmese soldiers -- the first group with us. The second group killed my uncle, the baby's grandpa.

Q: How did they die? Who killed them? How many people?

A: One person at that time. When they withdrew, they killed the old man. (at Than Ton Long): I saw some villagers who knew me and sent me back (helped escape). They (Burmese soldiers) got angry at me, and they said "The two" -- because I was caught with my daughter -- "the mother and the daughter, they went back!" And then they went many places to look for us, even to Tavoy. "Maybe they ran to Tavoy". They searched for us but they didn't find us. And they said to the villagers that if we got caught they will kill us.

Q: And after this happened, how did you feel about those soldiers? What did you think about those soldiers?

A: I dare not to go back anymore to the place, the front, we call "the gray area". I stay here all the time now.

Name Saw True Love
 Address Mong Hsat / Tavoy District which dominated by K.N.U Government Government.
 Date of birth 13.6.55 Place of birth Burma (Rangoon)
 Ethnic group Karen Sex Male
 Profession Army (Karen National Liberation Army)
 Military rank or government position, if any Military Rank - Sgt, NO(10)BN, K.N.L.A
 Member of which organization opposed to Burmese Government, if any Karen National Union

DO YOU KNOW OF ANY TIMES DURING THE PAST THREE YEARS (1983-1986) WHEN THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT OR MILITARY FORCES HAVE COMMITTED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ABUSES? IF SO, PLEASE SPECIFY WHEN AND WHERE IT HAPPENED, AND WHO WAS INVOLVED. (Question #2, on imprisonment, was left blank & therefore is omitted from this copy)

1. Military Abuses:

- a) using civilians for forced labor
 The Burmese troops seized the villages and let them carried the ammunitions and gave them only small amount of food. When ever they attack our troops, they let the villagers before them for their protection. They killed who could not carried the loads along the operation. They used the men, women and children as a human mine sweepers.
- b) Taking civilian hostages, or purposely endangering lives of civilians
 They consume the energy of the civilians, by looting of their domestic animals, destroying the houses, villages and plantations belong to them, raped the women with bestial outrages.
- c) committing criminal acts against civilians (non-combatants)
 The Burmese troops are committing criminal acts against the civilians by accusing them that they are involoving with the Revolutions or supporting the Revolution. The villages who were suspect by them, are interrogated by the Burmese soldiers and who used the brutal ways in their interrogation.

3. Civil Rights:

- a) Denying rights or benefits (such as education, health care, representation, trade) because of ethnic group or religion

- b) Suppressing religious practices, cultural expression, language
 1. There is no opportunity to study Karen language. That is the main point to disappear Karen Nation in Burma
 2. The Karen flag can use only in Karen New year Ceremony.
 3. It is prohibited to use in National affairs.

- 5.4.85 The Burmese Troops killed two villagers at "Tee Ser kwee" village. 9
- 5.85 Two villagers from "Kini" village, killed by the Burmese Troops.
- 5.5.85 NO (101) BN "3" COY commander "Khin Hla" killed a village Head "Jaw Bee Lay".
- 7.6/86 The Burmese Troops fired the Sugout bout at "Ta ket" village, killed a woman named "Naw Bway Paw".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The interview was conducted in the Tenasserim area of Kawthoolei, by Project Maje's Director, Edith T. Mirante. Questions were asked in English and the questions and answers were interpreted into/from the Karen language by Esther Linn Maing of the K.N.U. The interview was taped and transcribed by the Project Director.

The questionnaire was part of a research survey conducted in July-September 1986, by Project Maje. A report of the findings of that survey on human rights abuse, titled "I Am Still Alive", is available from Project Maje. As Saw True Love's data was collected too late for inclusion in that report, it is combined with the interview from the same Tenasserim area for this special report.

The Project Director, Edith T. Mirante, is solely responsible for this report's contents. For more information on the Burma frontier war and human rights issues, please contact Project Maje.