



# NTS ALERT

*Political Insecurity as a result of various internal conflicts, poses grave threats to Human Security, primarily to women and children – the most vulnerable sectors of society. While the effects of internal conflicts in Asia have received massive international media coverage over the years, most of it has fallen on deaf ears of states. Sources of issues such as the pitiful circumstances surrounding refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), human rights abuses and child soldiers inevitably point to the state and its inability to eradicate poverty and empower its peoples. This edition of NTS Alert highlights some of these issues in selected conflict zones in Asia.*

## Women & Children in Conflict

### Human Security at Risk

The effects of political violence and conflicts are felt largely by civilians – causing immense suffering for many innocent lives. Poverty and increased inequality only serve to threaten the human security of populations caught in the conflict zones. Given their impoverished circumstances, they are often susceptible to abuse, both mental and physical, often by the armed aggressors.

### Rape and Physical Abuse

In **Burma**, for instance, women of ethnic minority groups have often been raped by officers from the Burmese Army. According to a *Refugee International* Report in 2003, cases of rape in Burma typically occur in conjunction with other human rights abuses, such as forced labor, forced relocation, torture and extrajudicial executions.



Widespread rape is committed with impunity, both by officers and lower ranking soldiers. Officers committed the majority of rapes documented in the 2003 report, in which the rank of the perpetrator was known. The culture of impunity contributes to the military atmosphere in which rape is permissible. It also leads to the conclusion that the system for protecting civilians is faulty, which in turn suggests that the rape is systematic. Due to the well-known impunity for rape, survivors and families are extremely reluctant to complain about it. In the rare cases where victims or their families actually do complain to military officials, army personnel often respond with violence.

Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have attempted to increase awareness regarding the awful predicament of the women. NGOs working with the Karen and Shan ethnic groups have been particularly

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more successful. The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) for instance published a report *License to Rape*, which inspired an unprecedented level of international interest and outrage. The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) also released a report in February 2007 entitled "State of Terror". The report documents about 4000 cases of abuse in 200 Karen villages and that some of the assaults were directed against families believed to be supporting rebels of the Karen National Union who have for decades been fighting for autonomy from the central government. According to Naw Blooming Night Zan, joint secretary-general of the KWO, "Ninety percent of all documented human rights violations in the report are forced relocations and forced laboring or portering, which have been committed in conjunction with rape, beating, mutilation, cultural murder, denial of rights to food, water and shelter and denial of the right to legal redress."

These threats to human security are also reflected in a mortality survey amongst Karen refugees in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. The survey was conducted by Francesco Checchi and colleagues from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University of London. The survey showed the severe effects of the conflict on ethnic minority civilians caught in the war zone. Some results of the survey are as follows:-

- ❑ About half of the deaths recorded (15 out of 31) were caused by violence and occurred inside Burma. Medical causes accounted for the remaining deaths.
- ❑ Nine were due to gunshot, five to explosion, and one to beating. Three of those killed were women and seven were children younger than 15 years.

The main reasons mentioned by families for leaving Burma were:-

- ❑ "War or insecurity" (attacks on their village or neighbouring villages, fear of persecution) (37%).
- ❑ "Forced labour" (34%)
- ❑ "Forced relocation" by troops to various displacement sites (22%).
- ❑ Families spontaneously reported that their house had been set on fire (15%)
- ❑ Eight villages had been burnt down (15%)

- ❑ 163 (67%) families stated that they had been interviewed for registration; however, only two (1%) could show a refugee card.

Not only do these findings highlight some of the wider physical and mental health issues inflicted on conflict

### **Conflict Zone: Burma**

Burma has experienced a long history of migration and conflict among various ethnic groups along fluid frontiers. During the British Colonial period, diverse peoples far from Rangoon were brought under nominal central administration but remained effectively self-ruled, with only a thin veneer of imperial oversight. During World War II, while many Burmese joined Japanese forces, many minority ethnic groups remained loyal to Britain. This reflected a genuine desire for independence on the part of both groups; Burmese struggling to be free of the British colonial yoke, and ethnic minorities wishing to escape Burmese domination.

The situation only worsened after independence, when constitutional rights for minority groups were not fully respected such as the Panglong Agreement of 1947 that outlined minority rights and specifically gave the Shan and Karenni peoples the option to secede from the union a decade after independence. Burma has since then been thrown into a series of brutal ethnic wars that have continued with varying intensity to this day. The Burmese junta is known internationally for carrying out systematic repression and human rights violations against the ethnic minority groups, many of which inhabit areas along the country's mountainous frontiers- such as the Karen, Shan, Karenni and Rohingya groups. The situation is further complicated by fights amongst ethnic groups and the Burmese junta over the control of drugs, in particular in the opium producing regions.

Conflict is not likely to cease as the Burmese junta continues to intensify its attacks on ethnic rebels. In the first half of April 2007 alone, the Shan State Army (SSA) reported fighting more than 10 skirmishes with Burmese troops. The SSA also claims that because it had not signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese junta, it has no choice but to be ever ready to go to battle with the Burmese junta.

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 The Burma Campaign UK, <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/>

victims, they also complement other studies of the effects of the war on civilians, such as the systematic use of rape as a terror tactic by the Burmese military and the consequent reproductive health crises, and injuries and deaths as a result of landmines, direct violence, infectious sexual diseases, and other diseases such as malaria, cholera, and AIDS.

In addition to this, such violence is further exacerbated by conflicts amongst the Burmese government and numerous ethnic rebel groups over the control of the lucrative drug trade. South-East Asia contains one of the world's epicenters of narcotics known as the Golden Triangle. These ethnic rebel groups, mostly based along Burma's northern and eastern borders, have hence used the drugs trade to fund their causes and are at the centre of production and trafficking. This brings into question, the motives of these ethnic rebels – whether the profits from narcotics actually support their cause in protecting their ethnic minority group, or whether the conflict associated with the drug trade only causes further threats to the peoples' human security. In fact, some cases of rape by the Burmese junta were reported to have been done to female

relatives of ethnic rebels, in retaliation to attacks by the latter.

### ***Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Asylum Seekers***

As a result of these high incidents of abuse and human rights violations, many civilians have been forced to flee from their homes. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a result of these conflicts in Burma is not fully known. According to the Burma Border Consortium, an NGO working along the borders of Thailand and Burma, the estimated number of Burmese IDPs in the Eastern region is 500,000. Between October 2005- October 2006 alone, 82,000 people were forced to leave their homes as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of armed conflict and human rights abuses. 3,077 villages in the surveyed area have been documented as forcibly displaced since 1996 - only 150 of them have been repopulated. The number of IDPs in other regions is not known due to the lack of access to these areas.

Thailand, which has accommodated many Burmese

### **Conflict Zone: Sri Lanka**

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is a long history of struggle between the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and the minority Hindu Tamils. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers, is a militant organization that has been waging a secessionist campaign against the Sri Lankan government since the 1970s in order to secure a separate state for the Tamil majority regions in the north and east of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). The LTTE is headed by its founder, Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The LTTE consider the Sinhalese who have been settled there by the government as unlawful trespassers on "their land." They have no compunction about going into villages at night and slitting the throats of men, women, and children. They have also killed many moderate Tamil leaders whom they label as "traitors." Furthermore, most people other than LTTE supporters agree that the LTTE has reneged on every agreement it ever signed when it saw it to be in its interest to do so. Nevertheless, most ordinary Tamils in the North appear to support the Tigers, not necessarily because they like them but because they like the Sri Lankan-or Indian-armies less. The Tigers are ruthless and authoritarian but they are not corrupt; they do not tolerate stealing, bribery, or rape, actions other armies are famous for. Furthermore, the LTTE maintains a high level of discipline, so much so that they would swallow cyanide capsules to avoid revealing anything when tortured in captivity.

In February 2002, Norway successfully brokered a formal ceasefire between the government and LTTE, ending active hostilities. Subsequent negotiations resulted in the government ending its ban on the LTTE, an end to the LTTE campaign for an independent Tamil state, and a power-sharing agreement that provides the Tamil rebels with regional autonomy. While negotiations officially stalled in April 2004, when the rebels withdrew from talks, and a comprehensive peace agreement remains elusive, the ceasefire has held and relative peace between the LTTE and government persists. Unfortunately, fighting and insecurity remains as internecine clashes between the LTTE and a rival faction, which split from the main Tiger leadership in March 2004, struggle for control of eastern Sri Lanka. The rival faction is led by Colonel Karuna.

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refugees over years, has attempted to limit the number of refugees. This included refusing to participate in refugee resettlement programs. Thailand's reluctance to do so was due to their fear that large-scale resettlement would encourage even greater numbers of Burmese refugees to come across the border. This, after all, what happened in the 1970s when America resettled many Vietnamese refugees who had come to Thailand to escape the Vietnam War.

In the case of *Sri Lanka*, the option of crossing international borders to seek refuge is not as easy as Thailand given its geographical location. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) 2004 statistics indicated that internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka made up 89% of the recorded population in the conflict-ridden areas – significantly more than the recorded number of refugees and asylum seekers combined. In addition to this, only 21% of these IDPs have been able to seek refuge in refugee camps. This therefore implies that the remaining 79% who reside in urban areas do not have UN protection and continue to face threats to their security.

In *Nepal*, women who have tried to flee from conflict zones have often fallen prey to human traffickers along the Bihar-Nepal border. Nepalese voluntary organizations have noted increasing accounts of women falling into the trap of traffickers who lure them away by promising them well paid jobs and even marriages. The high levels of illiteracy and abject poverty in the villages further leave the girls vulnerable to traffickers.

In the *Philippines*, the United Nations World Food Programme estimated that 120,000 people remain displaced in the country's southern island of Mindanao due to armed conflict. This total number included people displaced during the 2000 and 2003 wars and who had not been able to return home due to security problems or have not been rehabilitated.

Between January and December 2006, an estimated 98,000 people were displaced by armed conflict, mainly on Mindanao. 178,000 people were estimated to have been displaced the previous year (2005). The number of returnees during 2005 and 2006 is

### **Conflict Zone: Philippines**

Armed Conflict in the Philippines is complicated by the nature of the groups involved. There are at least three major armed groups that have espoused a political agenda – *Moro National Liberation Movement (MNLF)*, *Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)* and the *New People's Army (NPA)*.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is a Muslim separatist rebel group based in Southern Philippines. The area where the MILF is active mainly in the southern portion of Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, Palawan Basilan and the neighbouring islands. There are approximately 4.5 million Muslims in the Philippines and the majority live within this area. The MILF was formed in the late 1970s, split from the Moro National Liberation Front, advocating a more moderate and conciliatory approach toward the government. In January 1996, the MNLF signed an agreement relinquishing its goal of independence for Muslim regions and accepting the government's offer of autonomy. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the next largest faction, refused to accept the accord and initiated a brief offensive that ended in a truce later that month.

The NPA is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. It was formed in 1969 and has since then waged a guerrilla campaign in the Filipino countryside with the aim of overthrowing the government through protracted guerrilla warfare. Although primarily a rural-based guerrilla group, the NPA has an active urban infrastructure to carry out militant acts by using city-based assassination squads called sparrow units. The NPA derives most of its funding from contributions of supporters and so-called revolutionary taxes extorted from local businesses. Violence still wages on as the rebels pulled out of peace talks with the Philippine government in August 2004. This was in protest to their inclusion in the United States and the European Union lists of terrorist groups.

#### **Sources**

4 NPA Rebels Killed in Southern Philippines, *People's Daily China*, 5 May 2006

Edward M.Kuder, "The Moros in the Philippines", *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No.2 (Feb. 1995) pg 119-126

unknown, although most displacement tends to be only temporarily. According to the Philippines' Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and news reports, it is estimated that a total of 1,922,435 people have been displaced by armed conflict in the six years (2000-2006). Nearly 80% of all displacements during that time took place in 2000 and 2003, when armed conflict was most intense.

However, in many instances, protection from harm in refugee camps is close to none (see section on 'Refugee Camps: Not so Safe Havens'). As such, human security threats to refugees are no different to those living outside of the camps.

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### Conflict Zone: Nepal

The Nepalese Civil War (labelled People's War by the Maoists), was a conflict between monarchist government forces and Maoist rebels in Nepal since 1996. The war was started by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN or Maoists) on February 13, 1996 with the aim of establishing the "People's Republic of Nepal." Maoism has also become a significant political ideology in Nepal, where until recently, the Maoist insurgency has been fighting against the Royal Nepalese Army and other supporters of the monarchy. The CPN has declared the armed struggle over and joined the interim government, leading to elections for a national constituent assembly.

The CPN steadily gained greater leverage after the massacre of the royal family by Crown Prince Dipendra, who later killed himself in 2001. Moreover, the Nepalese government has attempted to address the political violence by ensuring greater political participation from, not only the CPN, but various sectors of Nepalese society. The CPN has made some recent progress in the political realm. In June 2006, the CPN signed a 12 point agreement with the Seven Party Alliance in order to further the Democracy Movement (also known as Loktantra Andolan). A three month ceasefire was then declared. However, the process of 'forced donations' is alleged to be continuing. In January 2007, the CPN won a quarter of the seats in a new parliament, in which – five Ministers and 1 junior minister positions were taken up by Maoists. The Maoists were placed in charge of the ministries of information, local development, planning and works, forestry, and women and children. Despite these political advances, spats of armed conflicts still occur and a sense of instability still lingers.

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## **Refugee Camps: Not-So-Safe Havens**

In times of conflict and instability, refugee camps would be the natural safe haven to reach. However, in some instances, many refugees are not assured of the UN-mandated protection they are meant to receive in the camps.

A reason for this is the apathetic attitude of the host government that is accommodating these refugees. As a result, the lack of effort on the government's part impedes any progress to ensure proper protection and care for the refugees. This was evident in Bangladesh, where fieldwork conducted by Refugees International an NGO, revealed the immense violations of human security experienced by Rohingya refugees from Burma. Bangladeshi authorities were reported to have prevented international agencies from carrying out improvements in camp facilities fearing that a humane camp environment would attract more Rohingya to their country. Shelters had not been repaired for years (due to damage done by termites) and the lack of ventilation and stifling heat in the shelters have contributed to a number of skin diseases.

Poor living conditions and policy restrictions have also threatened refugees' health and economic security. Due to the fact that the Bangladeshi government prohibits refugees from engaging in income generating activities, many refugees sell part of their food rations, which they receive from the United Nations' World Food Program to the local Bangladeshi community living near the camps. By doing so, they are able to purchase themselves with other food items such as spices, vegetables and meat. The rations are also sold to meet non-food needs such as clothing and medical expenses, which have not been provided enough for by the refugee camp. In addition to this, refugees are often at a disadvantage during the ration trade and are vulnerable to exploitation by locals who have a monopoly on purchasing rations at low prices.

Even with a population that receives full rations, the level of malnutrition, is however, very high. A recent mortality and nutrition survey showed that acute malnutrition was prevalent in 16.8% of children between the ages of 6 to 59 months – with 2.8% of them considered as severe cases. Chronic malnutrition was present in 51.9% of the children. The situation is further exacerbated by the poor water and sanitation facilities available to the refugees.

## **Profiting from Refugees**

According to the Washington-based activist group, the US Campaign for Burma (USCB), Thai authorities have routinely denied ethnic refugees, such as the Padaung, the right to resettle to third countries despite having already been accepted for resettlement by Canada, New Zealand and Finland. Many of the Padaung have sought refuge in the Mae Hong Song province in northern Thailand. Thailand's reason for this has been that the Padaung are not legally classified as refugees.

Despite this, USCB claims that some Thai authorities may see the Padaung as a popular tourist attraction and thus exploit them for profits, both locally and nationally. Up to 500 tourists a day are said to spend between 250-500 Thai baht (US \$7.72-15.45) for the opportunity to see these "long-neck" women. USCB also noted that tourism in these villages could reach into the millions of dollars, including the money spent at local hotels, restaurants, bus companies and tourist agencies. Even so, the Padaung women only earn about 1,500 baht (\$35) a month – a salary that has been administered by Thais.

### **Source**

Thailand Denies Padaung Resettlement Rights: Activist Group, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 April 2007

These poor health conditions also have adverse effects on women, in particular with regards to maternal health. This is evident in the fact that the average size of a Rohingya family in the camps is estimated at 6.8 and about 650 children are born in the camps each year. This is because early marriage is common among the refugees and there is little spacing between children. The adverse impact on women's health and nutrition is therefore significant, with anemia among pregnant women at 59.8%. Moreover, as with all other camp situations, Rohingya women are at risk of sexual and gender based violence.

The rising population in the camps has also resulted in an immense gap in the education. Due to government policy, education does not extend beyond the fifth standard and there are severe shortages of qualified teachers and books. As a result, the literacy rate in camps is a low 12%. Moreover, there are virtually no recreational or skill training activities for the camp

residents. Bangladesh's decision to deny children formal basic education is not only creating a lost generation but also depriving the Rohingya of the chance to gain skills that would help anchor them upon return to Burma. It is possible that many Rohingyas who go back without education and skills will be fleeing again to Bangladesh before long.

**Source**

The Rohingya: Discrimination in Burma and Denial of Rights in Bangladesh, *Refugees International Bulletin*, 21 July 2006

*In the Next  
NTS-Alert...*



*A Focus on  
Child Soldiers*

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