

# Simmering Under Ashes

Writing from Burma





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Writing from Burma

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## **Acknowledgements**

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ARTICLE 19 extends its thanks to all those writers, poets, artists, journalists and activists who contributed material to this collection, with particular thanks to the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma ([www.altsean.org](http://www.altsean.org)) which helped to source a lot of the content.

### **Pe Thein**

The late Pe Thein (1924-2009) was born in Bassein in the Irrawaddy Delta and was taught to draw cartoons by the pioneering cartoonist Ba Gyan whilst at Rangoon University. Pe Thein became an established artist in both cartoon journalism and comics and, despite being banned and restricted throughout his career, Pe Thein will continue to be regarded as a highly influential Burmese cartoonist.

### **Htein Lin**

Htein Lin was born in 1966 in the Irrawaddy Delta region and was arrested and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in 1998, during which he was forced to improvise to continue painting. Using the white cotton prison uniform as a canvas, he paid for paints to be smuggled into the jail. In the absence of brushes, he used his fingers, cigarette lighters, syringes, carved soap, and dinner plates to make his mark. He is currently working out of London.

# Simmering Under Ashes

## Writing from Burma

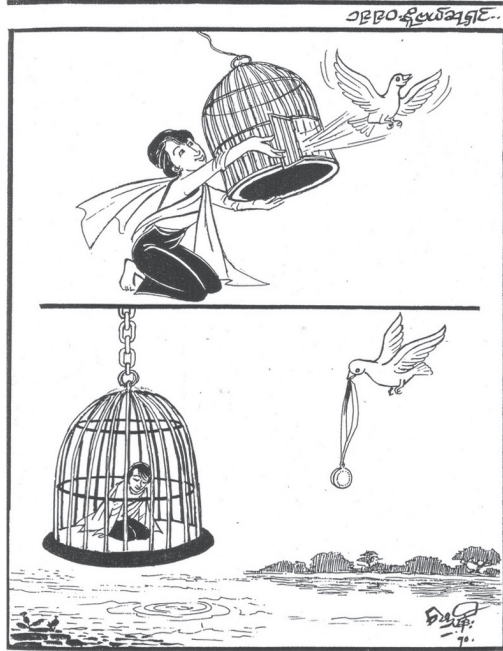
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Burma is ruled by one of the most brutal and corrupt regimes of our times, responsible for killings, forced labour, ethnic cleansing, imprisonment and torture. The media is harshly controlled and internet cafes are under surveillance. Artists are prevented from publishing or displaying their work. Hundreds of people, including journalists, artists and writers, are detained and imprisoned alongside Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's most prominent human rights defender, who has been under house arrest for most of the last 20 years.

Since the 1988 military coup, the regime has used the full panoply of repressive and censoring measures to enclose the country inside an almost impenetrable wall of silence, buttressed by fear and repression. Yet, the Burmese people still find ways to dissent, communicate and inform. Scratching poems on the floor of a prison cell, concocting ink from the brick powder of a prison wall, or organising clandestine performances of comedy, drama and poetry, they have defied their oppressors to speak of their experiences and their hopes and fears for their country.

*Simmering Under Ashes* is a collection of essays, poems, stories and articles written by Burmese journalists, writers and ordinary people. Published to commemorate both the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the pro-democracy protests of 8 August 1988, and the 20<sup>th</sup> year since Aung San Suu Kyi was first imprisoned, it celebrates the struggle for freedom in Burma. It also calls attention to the complicity or indifference of the international community. These contributions tell us of the catastrophic human cost and absolute cruelty of the regime. They also remind us that we are all diminished by the continued denial of freedom to the people of Burma.

*Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director, 8 August 2009*



*This publication is dedicated to Aung San Suu Kyi,  
honorary member of the ARTICLE 19 International  
Board.*

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“May all the men and women in the world be free!”

*This emblematic cartoon is remembered as being a revolutionary call for the 8th August 1988 protests. The artist Pe Thein claims not to have drawn it with the protests in mind, but his work was subsequently banned in Burma after 1988.*

# 1. Pro-Democracy Movement

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*“The future of my country lies in the hands of the younger generation”*

- Aung San Suu Kyi

The Burmese people who took to the streets of Rangoon during the country’s most widespread pro-democracy protests in 1988 and 2007 were united under the same image of “the fighting spirit of the peacock”. Originally, the image of a peacock represented the plight of the Burmese against British colonialism and foreign rule, but has, since the military regime came to power, signified the fight for freedom and democracy.

In August 1988, a widespread civil uprising calling for multi-party democracy momentarily gave the Burmese people a glimmer of hope. The resultant brutal suppression of the protests failed to stop the National League for Democracy, under Aung San Suu Kyi and it won a landslide victory in the 1990 elections. The military, however, rejected this election in a dramatic clampdown and Aung San Suu Kyi has been in detention almost ever since.

The military regime represses all forms of free expression in Burma and many democratic activists suffer torture, repeated imprisonment and widespread surveillance, hampering their efforts to create a free society. The writings in this section of *Simmering Under Ashes* reflect the Burmese people’s demands for democracy and freedom of expression.

## Adorable Mother's Admirable Journey

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*Written by Tin Moe*

Gee up "HE!" prompts the bulls to go forward with bell jingling,  
A few who could tarry in rest house hear it and tally beads.  
And so the British period passed.

Bombs booming and aeroplanes wheezing;  
Seek shelter in a religious dwelling  
The one ventures in up and down riverine trading  
While the freedom fight is commencing  
And so the World War II passed.

Loud noises acclaim with pride the national independence  
Flags flying, banners streaming in craziness  
Like a tidal wave it climbs  
And shake the earth with violence.  
There is however a sadness as if the sky fell  
And so the Aung San epoch passed.

The bell tolls, the whistle blows;  
The Victory Drum booms! A glow  
We are free, we are happy - but ephemeral.  
Blood everywhere; it's real.  
Old sheds razed to ground; hills blazed to crumble,  
Mothers with babies fled and trembled.  
Everybody was in haste everywhere  
These were tragedies with no finish  
And so the Independence episode passed.

So the ears come and go  
Sunset eventually leads to dawn  
So we toil along an endless journey.  
Here is a prompt that could be used

But it has been misplaced: the journey continues  
Heart was steeped in misery  
The one could not deny destiny  
But brave it with tranquillity.

With determination to forge ahead with intelligence:  
Near miracle it was when each plan was carried to a success.  
One would say that she blazes the trail  
Flags flying with daring and will - It's the way of our esteemed mother.

.....  
*This poem's subtitle is "Ludu Daw Amar's Birthday Greeting". Ludu Daw Amar, who lived from 1915 to 2008, was a highly regarded dissident Burmese writer and journalist based in Mandalay. Best known for her outspoken opposition to the military government and her work on traditional Burmese arts, theatre, dance and music, Daw Amar's birthday is celebrated annually by artists and writers in Burma in a rebellious gathering of free thinkers closely monitored by military intelligence.*

*A renowned poet and active supporter of the pro-democracy movement, Tin Moe was imprisoned in 1991 for four years. After his release he went into exile in the United States, travelling to literary events throughout the US, Europe, Japan and Southeast Asia. He died in 2007 in Los Angeles, California at the age of 73.*

## **My Thoughts on Hearing the United Nations Security Council's Decision to Discuss Burma**

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*Written by Feraya*

Burma has been in the dark for so long now,  
It has been like the eclipse of the sun  
During the full eclipse darkness descends,  
As the moon gradually obscures the disc of the sun  
Until finally the light is completely blocked out  
Then within a space of time the light returns  
And so it is that there are  
Points in time when there is darkness and  
Then the light shines forth like a new dawn.  
However, changes are happening,  
And clouds are clearing at long last  
We must be strong,  
Rock-like in our knowing  
We must not give up hope  
We must keep calm  
And keep each other calm  
And cultivate stillness within.  
Where there is darkness  
Your light will shine forth  
Do not get involved with darkness  
Be calm, be joyful  
And most of all  
Radiate love  
For all is happening as it should  
In the dance of the Universe.  
Do not despair,  
Do not give up hope,  
For soon there will come a time  
When we will all bathe in  
The great natural light of Freedom.

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*Feraya was born in Shan State, Burma and now lives in exile in the United Kingdom. She is a visual artist and poet.*

## Freedom for Everyone!

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*Written by Nay Yu*

Lies for tortures  
Forever you will hear  
While our friends, brothers and sisters  
Became the victims of fear  
'The fear that corrupt power'  
The butchers to slice you in hunger  
The hunger for power  
That creates luxury in Myanmar  
And the measures all you can do for Burma  
Still need to meet for sure  
To secure the Burma's lives  
To be safe and free from fear alive.  
The Students have gone since 88?  
Here The Monks gone again in pain  
How many of martyrs are claimed?  
Though there are still in millions  
Should we pray or Fight for Freedom!  
Broken bricks or stones for Generals?  
No way, should we get to Fight for Freedom!  
Freedom for Everyone!

---

*Nay Yu is a prolific poet, writer and commentator on Burma, whose work features regularly in the Burma Digest ([www.burmadigest.info](http://www.burmadigest.info)).*

## A Porter's Poem

*Anonymous*

The lives of the porters are unlucky, no chance to survive  
We have to carry unfair heavy loads  
We have wounds on our shoulders and heads  
We have to climb mountains and are beaten like cattle  
We have to suffer from this powerlessness  
They tortured us cruelly  
All these problems are caused by the military government  
Escaping to survive  
Their power depends on their arms  
They killed many of the porters  
Many porters have sacrificed  
We, the escaped porters, have hearts filled with hatred...  
They beat and injured over one hundred of us porters  
Don't cry porters  
Together we will carry our loads until we reach the frontline  
Along the way we saw many dead porters  
Who died from landmines when they tried to escape  
When we think of them we feel pain in our hearts  
Porters run to escape and the soldiers try to shoot them  
When we escape we feel grief for the porters who cannot escape  
When we think of this we want to fight back to the military  
government  
Together we will struggle from now on!

---

*The Burmese military is known to force civilians and prisoners to be porters and to carry military supplies into conflict areas. These people are often harshly treated, physically abused and forced to carry heavy loads. Sometimes, they are used as human minesweepers, walking ahead of soldiers or using their bare hands to test minefields.*

## Burma's Ghosts Rise to Confront the Generals

Written by Pascal Koo-Thwe

"*They are killing the monks again,*" a Burmese friend of mine greeted me unceremoniously as soon as I arrived at her flat in south London. "*What can we do?*" It seemed she had been crying her eyes out - they were as red as the monks' robes.

She and her husband had recently returned from a short visit to Rangoon, just before the demonstrations started, and they didn't like what was happening there. "*Rangoon nowadays is full of beggars, soldiers, thugs and sad faces. Our country is in the hand of alien powers,*" they said sorrowfully. When reports of marches, shootings and crackdowns on protesters in the streets of Rangoon reached me via the internet and by phone, I knew that the ghosts of monks, students and civilians killed by the army during the past 40 years had risen again to haunt the generals. My hair stood on end as I relived the terrifying trauma of being on the receiving end of violence.

The faces of the protesting monks are exactly like those who were

killed in Mandalay during the 1988 uprising, in which I was one of the participants and a witness to the massacres.

Back then, truckloads of battle-hardened soldiers fighting on the front were shipped into the cities and told by their commanders that the monks and protesters were urban communists. The soldiers gunned them down indiscriminately without a trace of guilt. But this time, most soldiers know that they are not shooting at a bunch of "communist" monks but the sons of Buddha with holy anger. They know that they are committing the most heinous crime.

Buddhist monks in London and elsewhere held vigils at their monasteries, praying for a peaceful end to the crisis and the safety of their brethren in Burma. But their prayers went unanswered. The UN Security Council, the only organisation with the clout to affect the junta, decided not to intervene but merely to urge restraint. Violence has gone on unabated.

A telephone call from a friend in Burma informed me that more monks had been arrested and several people had disappeared. *“Ask the world how many Burmese people need to die before we can live like human beings,”* he said, before adding: *“They can’t kill all 50 million people, could they? I hope the world will stop giving us promises and do something before our country is destroyed utterly.”*

Meanwhile, the mournful sounds of the monks and their acolytes chanting sutras echoed around the monastery in Colindale, north London, denoting hope and despair at the same time.

Then I heard a monk mutter to his acolytes: *“If Burma is to be free only when the bones are piling up like the mountains, the bones of us monks will be at the bottom of the piles.”* His voice was as authoritative as a monk’s should be, and he said it with a tone that exuded reassurance but little comfort.

In Parliament Square, many Burmese expatriates, including those who hold Burmese passports and had never joined in any political activities in London, turned up to show solidarity with the marchers and to denounce the junta. The vigil highlights how urgently they feel for their beloved country, but their faces betray the fact that they still doubt whether the international community will take their concerns seriously. I rang a friend living in a Thai-Burmese border town to ask about the mood in the refugee camps. The refugees are watching developments with excitement, I was told: *“they hope to go home as soon as the crisis ends with a solution.”* But when I argued that things could only get worse, my friend replied that the refugees have nothing else to hope for but changes within the country in order to survive from day to day.

Burma or Myanmar has indeed gone to the dogs, and the mad ones at that.

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*Pascal Khoo-Thwe comes from Pekon and is a member of the Kayan ethnic minority group. A student activist and freedom fighter, Khoo-Thwe escaped to the United Kingdom where he studied English literature at Cambridge University. His autobiography, From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey, won the Kiriyaama Prize, an international literary award, in 2002.*

## Movement Simmers Under Ashes

*Mizzima Interview with Burmese comedian Zarganar, 2007*

*How is your health?*

I'm suffering from emphysema, which I got when I had to sleep on a concrete floor in prison.

*We heard that you were put in a military dog cell. What kind of place is this, and how long were you there?*

A military dog cell is a special cell for prisoners who commit crimes in prison: beating each other or committing murder in prison, drug use, sodomy, etc. These criminals are shackled and sent there for further punishment. They are put in isolation and solitary confinement. There are about 30 Alsatians guarding this type of cell, so it is called a military dog cell.

The measurement of the cell is about 8'x10'. You cannot see outside. There is no proper ventilation and sometimes it's too cold. I was made to sleep on a wooden board. I could not have a bath for the first two days. The food is terrible, as are the living conditions. There is no proper toilet. I had only a dining plate for both urination and excreta. I could use this plate only once for the whole day as it was filled after a single use. I had to spend seven or eight days there. I got pneumonia.

Then I was taken to No. 5 Special Ward. The living conditions were better there. I got an 8" high cot there and slept on it. There was also a 2'x6" bathroom in the room.

*Did you have roommates?*

No, I was alone in solitary confinement.

*Were you tortured?*

The living conditions were terrible. If they tortured me there, I would have died. We could see nothing; no stars, no moon.

*Did they interrogate you?*

The main interrogation lasted only one night on the first day. That first night, they interrogated me from 8pm to 6am as they thought I knew something. But they did not question me on a daily basis. They asked me some questions in the following days for a few hours only just to harass me. They kept waking me up. They called me when I went to bed. Sometimes they moved chairs and tables when I was asleep. I don't know why they did these things.

*What did they ask you?*

The questions are routine. "Who was with you?" "What did they do?" I answered them, I knew only myself, and I knew only what I did. There were no one from our film and art circle with me and no one came to me.

*Tell us how they arrested you.*

They came at about 12.20am. First they said they came to check the residents and guest registration (called "midnight check" in Burmese). It's really funny. Then I said to them, "Please don't waste my time. Have you come to arrest me?" I took clothes and some medicine with me.

I had been hiding in a place belonging to Ko Maung (Actor Kyaw Thu) and Ko Aung Way (poet) that evening. I could not think and had to return home before the curfew time of 9pm. The raid and search team consisted of eight people led by West District Police Major U Soe Thein, along with three inspectors, one sub-inspector, a station house officer from Sanchaung police, and two ward-level PDC members (Peace and Development Council, local level administration of the military junta). They brought no arrest and search warrant.

*Did they search your house?*

Yes, they searched my house thoroughly and messed up my room. But they didn't seize my computer - only my mobile phone, and said it would be returned later.

*Then what happened?*

First, they took me to the Insein prison annex. I spent the whole night there. The following morning, they took me to the Aungthapyay interrogation centre. I spent three or four days there. Then they took me to Insein prison's military dog cell.

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**"If they tortured me there, I would have died. We could see nothing: no stars, no moon."**

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*Did you sign any bond or give any pledge to them for your release?*

It's very strange. They didn't tell me I would be released; they just said I would be transferred to a prison in another town. I said nothing to them. I thought if they transferred me to another prison, it would be a visit to another place at their expense. When we reached the main gate they told me I would be released. They took me back to my home in a car escorted by five police majors. They said nothing to me.

*Have you been watched since your release?*

Yes. There are three types of surveillance: the USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Association, a social welfare movement formed and supported by the military junta), Swanahshin and police. The police mean police plus ward-level PDC members. They keep watching me from some teashops and snack shops in front of my house. The ward-level PDC members told me what they would do so in advance. I don't care about them. Let them stay and watch. I go out as usual.

*We heard that the authorities banned 19 writers and artists from writing and performing for offering alms to protesting monks at Shwedagon. Who are they?*

They include writer Sayama Than Myint Aung, poet Aung Way, writer Zaw Thet Htwe, Mar-j, Oo Swe, Sein Nee (chief editor of "Padauk Pwint Thit"), Tin Thit (editor of "Padauk Pwint Thit" magazine), Daw Ahmar, Dagon Taryar, cartoonist Awpikye, comedian Ko Po Phyu, editor Ko Win Nyein, actor Ko Kyaw Thu and me. The films and videos of Ko Kyaw Thu which were shot before his arrest were rejected after a censor board screening.

*How does the ban affect these writers and artists?*

I have been banned for nearly two years now. It affects our livelihood. How can we survive without work? We know nothing about other trades. We can't learn how to fire a gun at this age. The ban brings a lot of trouble to writers and artists. As for the people, they have to suffer too; they cannot read the works of these writers and cannot see the films of these artists.

*Most of the leading students and monks have been arrested. Do you think the movement has ceased?*

As far as I know, we cannot say the movement has ceased. It is simmering under the ashes. It's just temporary, it cannot be stopped, and the movement is simmering in the hearts and souls of the people.

*How does the shock and injury of the people contribute to the movement?*

It has two sides, both positive and negative for the people and the country. I think it is good. My children who are in their early 20s can't believe the atrocities committed in the 1988 uprising when I tell them about it. They think we are exaggerating and lying. Now they have seen what happened with their own eyes. Now they realise we are not lying - only telling them the truth and facts.

.....  
**"As far as I know, we cannot say the movement has  
ceased. It is simmering under the ashes."**  
.....

The SPDC (Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council) has appointed a Relation Minister and opened communication channels with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi after UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari's visit to Burma [2007]. Also, there are mass rallies and marches in support of the government, and the curfew and ban on public gatherings of five people or more have been lifted.

*Can things return to normal?*

Not yet. The recent protests are still in everybody's heart. They cannot

disappear easily. People are still talking about them. The government-backed marches are just a show as they were in the past. And now the authorities are up to the same tricks, which have no effect and are known by everybody.

For example, U Aung Thaung of the Ministry of Industry called film director Mee Pwar to accompany him to the mass rallies being held in his native home of Myingyan district. He wanted to say his native place didn't take part and join in the recent protests.

The state-run TV and newspapers are not for our people, they are for the soldiers. No one is interested in their propaganda. One hundred percent of the people don't believe in it.

*If the recent protests are still simmering, can the movement revive again?*

We do not only have the option of taking to the streets and marching. We have other means. The movement will re-emerge in different forms. If SPDC gives us what we want, there will be no more protests. But if they give us what we do not want, it will reignite the movement. No one can forget what they saw and what they encountered in the recent protests. It may not re-emerge in the same form as in the recent protests, sacrificing a lot of lives and damaging a lot of livelihoods. It will appear in a different form. It is premature for me to say what will be the form of the struggle. But the chance of re-emerging of the protest and movement is sure.

.....

*Zarganar ("Tweezers") is the stage name of Maung Thura, born in 1961 in Rangoon to well-known writers and intellectuals, Kyi Oo and Nan Nyunt Swe. Zarganar is Burma's most famous comic and satirist, renowned for his witty word play. He is also a brave opponent of the regime and is currently serving a 35-year prison sentence (reduced from 60 years) in Myitkyina Prison in Kachin State, in the far north of Burma. In 2006, he was banned indefinitely from performing and was arrested in June 2008 for speaking to the foreign media about the plight of people affected by Cyclone Nargis. This interview is reprinted with the kind permission of Mizzima News, an agency specialising in news from and about Burma ([www.mizzima.com](http://www.mizzima.com)).*



Untitled

*The artist Pe Thein referring to the widescale system of censorship and redaction of the press in Burma.*

## 2. Refugees and Exiles

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*“We live in fear with tears and sadness.”*

**- an unnamed refugee from the Chin minority  
living in exile on the island of Guam**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that approximately a quarter of a million Burmese people currently live as registered refugees outside Burma, with just over 22,000 people in the process of seeking asylum at any one time. Many of these people have fled repression, physical abuse, forced labour and censorship.

Nearly 800,000 people also live as internally displaced persons and stateless persons within Burma, although UN agencies believe that these figures are under-reported. A number of factors contribute to this phenomenon, including the after-effects of the devastating Cyclone Nargis which struck Burma in May 2008. An estimated half million ordinary people have also been displaced by ongoing fighting between the Burmese military and ethnically-based armed opposition groups that live primarily in the borderlands of the country. The ethnic minority groups in Burma that are most at risk of repression from the regime include Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Chinese, Mon, Indian, Rohingya, Chin, Panthay and Karenni.

This section of *Simmering Under Ashes* reflects the feelings and perspectives of some of those people who have lost their homes, their communities and their country.

## Thailand: Unburdened Feelings of Bitter Experience

---

*Written by Ei Ei*

The beginning of Ka-sone (April-May), 1994 was a month of terrible heat. It was too hot in the daytime, but it was about to be cool and pleasant at night. However, the rain came down so suddenly at an angle and annoyed constantly till the cold night blanket could squeeze out water. People did not notice what could have happened at the same time. If our humans were cautious enough and could foresee the future, they could probably escape from the danger that can fall on them.

On that day of terrible rain, our family faced an unexpected situation. Things just turned from light into dark. We were all captured by the Thai police because we were illegal migrant workers. We were put into a small room at the Chonburi police lockup. We were detained for over 3 months, not such a long time compared to others. However, the experiences we got during our few months in jail are still marked clearly in my mind, like a scar that will never vanish in life.

At that time, my siblings and I were only children. I know now that according to the rights of the child, forcibly putting children into jail without reason was against international laws. But we did not understand at that time. My father and mother felt so sorry for us. While we were in jail, their minds were overwhelmed with grief and sympathy for us. I knew they were thinking, "Our children are getting into trouble because of us".

I will never forget the experience of the first day of jail. All the children under 18 years old did not have meals. The children under 18 were not yet listed as prisoners in the warden's list, though clearly we were in the jail. So, the wardens did not feed the unlisted children. Therefore, we ordered food from outside. But, some parents who could not afford to buy food outside, fed their meals to their children and went hungry themselves. That is why, over time, mothers and fathers were suffering health problems and contributed to why some passed away in jail and why their children became orphans.

Among these parents, one prominent memory for me is about a woman with two children. Her eldest son was eight and the youngest was only 10 months old. She did not eat her meals, instead giving them to her eldest son.

.....  
**“When they were still unsatisfied torturing the males, they came into the female-lockup and forced the young and beautiful girls to go with them.”**  
.....

As she was not fully recovered enough from delivering her baby, starvation spoiled her health and threatened her life. At the time she was sent to the hospital, and her children were left in the jail with others. Her husband was not allowed to visit her. Though it took one month long, she did not come back from the hospital and her two children were lost not knowing where she went. While it was the very first experience like this for our family, it was like a good movie for the other inmates in jail.

Our family was very big, my mother, father and 7 children and we did not have enough money. So,

we all lived without enough food. My mother worried about us and she starved herself to feed us. Her quota was not enough for all seven of us. We told our mother to eat her meal regularly and we ate “Ma Ma” (Thai instant noodle) daily instead. Though it did not taste like rice, we could fill our stomach for a while.

Two months later, our family and other prisoners including other Burmese citizens were moved to Kanchanaburi jail, in western Thailand. The jail was controlled by some cruel Burmese citizens who were placed as head-prisoners by Thai police. They did not care about anyone because they thought that “the power is in our hand”. They treated everyone badly even their own citizens. All the inmates had to obey the head-prisoners’ orders more than the policemen.

When those wardens had nothing to do, they went to the male-lockup and tortured the inmates. When they were still unsatisfied torturing the males, they came into the female-lockup and forced the young and beautiful girls to go with them.

After taking the girls out of the

room, they forced them to massage them, raped them, and kept them as a new 'wife'. Some women were also trafficked from the jail. They did these atrocities not only to the single women but also to those who were married, women with children, young girls including both under 11 and over 11 years old like me were destroyed by the head-prisoners. On the day we were freed from jail, I felt worried about the fortunes and future of the rest of the remaining inmates.

I felt sorry that our Burmese citizens were facing a lot of difficulties and there was no one to help, even each other, as some fellow citizens acted selfishly like living by "Jungle Rules". If we have the chance to work peacefully, stably and freely, children like us would not endure this kind of bitter experience. This was my first experience and I hope that will be the last time for me.

May all Burmese citizens be free from the dictatorship very soon.

.....  
*Ei Ei, who was born in 1983, works for the Tavoyan Women's Union, an independent civil society organisation working for women's rights and gender equality within a just and peaceful society. "Unburdened Feelings of Bitter Experience" was produced as part of the Women's Voices for Hope series of publications by the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, a network of organisations and individuals based in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, supporting the movement for human rights and democracy in Burma ([www.altsean.org](http://www.altsean.org)).*

## Please Help Us

*Written by Zoya Phan*

2006

When I was just 14 years old the soldiers came to my village. Mortar bombs exploded and soldiers opened fire. There was no warning. We fled for our lives, but many people were killed. My family ran, carrying what we could on our backs, leaving our home and everything behind. I still remember the smell of the black smoke as our village was destroyed. As we hid in the jungle, homeless and afraid, a British trade delegation dined in Rangoon, making business deals with the regime that had just slaughtered my people.

My country is ruled by one of the world's most brutal military dictatorships. It is 11 years since the attack on my village but nothing has changed. Earlier this year the regime launched a new military offensive against civilians of the Karen and Karenni ethnics in Eastern part of Burma. Shooting children, mutilating and beheading people, forcing 20,000 people from their homes. And still the British government has done nothing to

stop companies investing in Burma. How many more generations will have to suffer while the world looks the other way?

I know sanctions are controversial. In many countries trade and investment can have a positive impact, bringing jobs and prosperity, and opening up countries to new ideas. In Burma the opposite happened, the regime used trade and investment to double the size of the army, and reduced spending on health and education. That is why Burmese people are asking for targeted economic sanctions, to cut the economic lifeline keeping this regime afloat.

As a democracy activist from Burma, I am confused by the response of the international community. How can any government's foreign policy not make human rights a priority? What is more important than the basic right of all of us to live in peace, without fear? How can governments stand by while in

Burma innocent children are shot, while girls as young as five years old are raped by soldiers, while over a thousand political prisoners face torture and cruelty every day. While Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, her life in danger.

Why has it taken 16 years for the United Nations Security Council to even discuss Burma? There is not even a UN arms embargo against my country.

Promoting human rights and democracy is not imperialist. It is not a cultural issue. It is everyone's business. I believe it should be a priority for every country. The opportunity to speak to you today has given me hope. I hope that your party will help my people in their struggle for human rights, democracy and freedom in Burma.

Hope that this signifies a bigger change, and that in future governments will put human rights at the core of their foreign policy. There are millions of people like me around the world - not just from Burma - who have been forced from their homes by brutal regimes. We just want to go home. I just want to

go home. But I can't without your help. Please help us go home.

## 2007

Now, once again, people are being shot on the streets of Rangoon, just as they are being shot every day in the part of Burma I come from, the jungles of Karen state. I am angry, because governments have known what has been going on for so long, and have done almost nothing to help us.

The messages the Burma Campaign UK is getting from Rangoon break my heart. One person told us: *"All night long I could hear people screaming and crying out for help. Soldiers were beating everyone they found. We are living in hell. Please help us."* Every one we speak to asks for help from the international community.

The world warned the regime not to use violence, and said there would be consequences if they did. The regime used violence, where are the consequences? Only the USA has imposed new sanctions. Once again the regime gets the message that it can literally get away with murder.

We must keep the pressure on China but we can't just pass the buck as if it is just their responsibility. I believe, every government can do something that will make a difference. We can stop doing business with this regime when we know they spend the money they make on the guns and bullets killing people on the streets. We can stop selling them guns. I asked last year, I ask again and I will ask again and again until we have freedom in Burma. Why isn't there a United Nations arms embargo against the regime?

These shackles were smuggled out of a prison in Burma. This is what those monks who have been arrested will be forced to wear while

they face torture including electric shocks and the iron rod, where a rod is rubbed up and down on your shins until the skin and flesh is worn away and the rod is grinding on bone.

No matter what the regime does to us, we won't stop demanding our freedom, our basic human rights and democracy. They might have suppressed protests in the short term, but we will not give in. We will win our freedom. But without more support from the international community, my people will have to pay for their freedom with their lives and blood. So many are being killed, so many being tortured. I ask again as I asked last year, please help us.

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*Zoya Phan lives in exile in London. She is a member of the Karen ethnic group and was 14 when she and her family were forced out of their village by Burmese soldiers, during the military government's ethnic cleansing campaign. Phan escaped to neighbouring Thailand, eventually making her way to the United Kingdom where she now works with Burma Campaign UK ([www.burmacampaign.org.uk](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk)). She has also published an autobiography entitled "Little Daughter". These two speeches were made at the British Conservative Party conferences in 2006 and 2007.*

## Flightless

*Written by Karenni Lady*

When I talk about life in a cage, some people will think of birds and some people will think of prison. My story is about both. I have my motherland and my people. But I have not stayed in my country. I feel so sorrowful. I want to stay and do what I want to do in my country. I think that nobody wants to be a refugee. But we can't do anything, because of our country's situation.

I arrived in a refugee camp when I was five years old. At that time I didn't know anything. I don't know, what is a refugee? When I got older and realised what it means, it was such horror, such painful knowledge for me.

I want others to know what I know now.

I have lived in a refugee camp for over seventeen years. There are many people there. We have had to move the camp often because of fighting between the SPDC and rebels. We can't do anything in the camp. We just wait for the UN to give us food and other NGOs to support us with

things like education and healthcare. We cannot go out. Everything is controlled. We don't have enough education. If the UN stopped giving us food, what could we do? We can't do anything. We can't support ourselves. We would all fight with each other. We have to depend for everything on the UN and NGOs, so we feel small in ourselves. It makes you feel small. It is very strict in the camps. And the numbers of people increase year by year.

The UN and NGOs give us food, shelter and clothing, but that's all really. It's all for our bodies; there is nothing for our souls, our spirits.

Sometimes third countries come to take some people into their nations. We must apply to the UN for that. Some girls threaten suicide in their applications. If you don't take us we will die, they say. Most youth at the camp don't know any other life; they are numb. They don't know how to change our lives. There are so many of them.

Some people probably think it's easy, an easy life. You get handed everything, and don't have to work, you are supported, and don't have to worry about supporting yourself. But we cannot stay in our country. We had to seek asylum in another country. If that country refuses us, what can we do? Nothing, I had a woman teacher from the Philippines who thought we must all be safe and happy in the camp! She thought it looked comfortable and easy. She said we were lucky. I wanted to argue with her but in our culture we never disagree with teachers.

.....  
**"All people who read this,  
I'm proud you listen to me.  
Don't forget me.  
Enjoy your freedom.  
Don't be careless with it."**  
.....

If I go out in the camp, I feel like a bird living in a cage. I dream that I can escape and fly everywhere; I'm so happy then. But in reality I'm not a bird. I am a human. Only the cage is real. I don't have anyplace to stay except the camp. Sometimes I lost my mind thinking about that. I didn't know anything about outside the camp. Sometimes I can't believe

myself, my life. I always ask myself, why did I have to become a refugee? I know there are others like me. Do they feel the same as I do? I want to know.

Sometimes, even when I'm with my family, I feel lonely. Our family is split up. My father is in the Karenni Army so he's usually at the frontline. My mother, sister and I live in a big home, but it feels empty. I stay in my room a lot. I am inside so many walls: the walls of my room, the walls of the house, then camp walls, then mountains, then the SPDC. Wherever we look we see mountains, in every direction. Some people think that sounds beautiful, but to me they are the bars of a cage. I want to fly over them and away. But if you escape and fly, maybe others will shoot at you.

Nowadays I study at the EarthRights School in Thailand. It is a secure place, so my body is still sort of in a cage. But now my mind is more free. Coming here was my first time out of the camp in seventeen years. This wall here is not so bad. I can leave once a week or so. I can say what I want to say, do what I want to do, can share my feelings,

and feel proud that people listen to me. All people who read this, I'm proud you listen to me. Don't forget me. Enjoy your freedom. Don't be careless with it.

After I graduate, I will have to go back to the camp, to the cage. I am scared to go back to that place and be trapped again. I want to fly over Burma and see what is happening everywhere and collect information. In the camp I cannot see anything. I'm scared my mind will close again. I cannot hold or see my future in a camp. I want to be a person who is free to do what I wish for myself and my community. If we campaign, fight for rights, teach others what we've learned, the Thai authorities will stop us. I may be a refugee but I am human, and I know I have human rights, but I cannot grasp them. It feels like a deep cut in my heart. Will there be more years there? How many years will there be?

I want to relive my childhood in my motherland, playing with friends. I can't go home. I don't want to be in the camp. Where can I build my nest, can you tell me that? I don't want my generation, and the next generation, my children, to grow up where I had to grow up.

.....  
**"I may be a refugee  
but I am human,  
and I know I have  
human rights,  
but I cannot grasp them."**  
.....

There is another woman from the same camp at the EarthRights School but I didn't know her there. There are many sections of the camp, and she and I live far apart. It's too big to have met each other. So many people, all in the same situation. Not only me, but all of my people, my flock, my flightless people. We must solve it together somehow.

.....  
*Karenni Lady lives exiled from Burma in neighbouring Thailand. The Karenni are an ethnic group living on the Thai-Burmese border. This piece was supplied by the EarthRights School of Burma, a group which documents human rights and environmental abuses, especially in repressive regimes ([www.earthrights.org](http://www.earthrights.org)).*

### 3. Women

.....

***“If you shout I’ll choke you ... If you fight or cry or shout, I’ll kill you.”***

**- unnamed prison guard heard inside the infamous Insein Prison,  
located near Rangoon.**

The situation for women in Burma is dire. The military regime routinely uses forced labour, rape, mutilation and torture against women. Denial of food, water and shelter, especially to those from vulnerable ethnic minority groups, is another common means used to harass women and children. There are thousands of women who have taken up the struggle for democracy and human rights, as well as for gender equality. But the costs are high. A traditionally patriarchal culture, combined with harsh economic realities that favour men over women, mean that women experience discrimination on many fronts.

This section of *Simmering Under Ashes* reflects the stories of Burmese women and sheds a light on their often unbearable and painful struggle to realise their fundamental human rights.

## Speaking Out, Making a Difference

Written by Cheery Zahau

It was a cold winter in 2003 when I was at the Central Chin Women Organization (CCWO) in Aizawl, India to help translate Chin language into English. My leaders and colleagues had left me with the huge responsibility of looking after the office.

The deportation of Burmese refugees by the local Mizo people, which had begun on 17th July 2003 had started to calm down. After months of terror, hiding and fear of deportation and homelessness we were now feeling a little more at ease, a little safer than during the worst of the deportation period. Fortunately, our landlord now felt safe enough to allow us to rent another room without fear of reprisal, so some of the girls and I could take shelter. However I didn't know where my family and friends had hidden themselves.

The stories I translated on that cold winter's day changed me. It was the first time I met with survivors of rape by the brutal Burmese soldiers. Though I always believed that the

Burmese soldiers would not spare the women, that they would in fact target women to oppress and punish our people, it was still very hard for me to talk with the rape survivors. I could feel their fear, see it in their faces, the pain or hatred in their eyes. Their hands shook with anger. Their voices blurred with helplessness at the end of the conversation.

I was shocked. As I listened to their stories I was not sure if I was breathing then I realized that I was weeping alongside them. After listening to their stories they gave me a duty, saying in Chin: *"It's not just us. More women will suffer if you don't talk."* I cannot forget that moment. Likewise, my colleagues who had heard the stories of women who had been victimized sexually and physically by the Burmese troops were also determined to speak out.

In 2006 we started documenting incidents of sexual violence by the military regime against Chin women as much as we could. We

knew the stories we heard outside Burma, from the few brave women determined to recount their traumatic experiences, were just the 'tip of the iceberg', so we decided to go inside.

.....  
**"I could feel their fear,  
 see it in their faces,  
 the pain or hatred  
 in their eyes."**  
 .....

My colleagues risked their lives to get more detailed information and documentation about the ongoing rapes and sexual violence. Outside Burma I waited anxiously. I spent hours and hours worrying about the lives of my colleagues who were travelling in Chin State because the Burmese army troops are everywhere in Chin State. They can arrest anyone without a reason. My colleagues who went inside with a purpose, with a mission to interview survivors and expose the truth faced the most dangerous conditions and severe consequences if the military authorities found out.

I myself travelled to several villages to meet with community leaders, to meet with women who had

been severely hurt by the troops. I remember their words clearly.

One time a rape survivor said to me: *"Telling my story to you will give me another nightmare because it is so painful beyond what words can express."* On another occasion, a woman, said, with anger in her voice: *"telling my story to you will not ease my pain."*

I was frozen because I could feel their anger and their pain.

The attitudes of some of the male leaders, who still cling to the outdated notion that rape brings shame to the community, mocked me and the works that women were doing. While they felt more at ease avoiding what was happening to the Chin women I had to challenge them: *"will you talk about rape only after all the women in your village have been raped by the soldiers?"*

One time a woman said to me: *"I am not young and attractive but the soldiers still raped me. They raped me because I am an ethnic woman and they knew I could not do anything against them."*

I become more determined to protect the helpless women in whatever way I can, with the tools that I have. I do not have guns like the Burmese army soldiers have, to protect the women. I do not have the physical strength to save these women from the soldiers. But I do have a voice! All I can do is to tell their stories to the world, hoping that these atrocities will be stopped.

I have talked publicly about the rape of women in Burma on several occasions. Before I delivered the presentation, I wept for nights and days. Often I told myself: “*don’t tell these stories anymore*” because the pain takes place inside of me.

At times I get depressed after talking about the rape incidents and I ask myself the reason, which I do not need to know. All I know is, I will keep talking about this until rape is stopped, until violence against women does not take place anymore, until the women have laws that will protect them, until the women have political freedom to take part in our political solution. I believe that when the women are given political freedom, when we have rule of law and the protection of the law, when women are safe from any form of violence, our country will be peaceful and prosperous.

.....  
*Cheery Zahau is from the Chin ethnic group and is exiled in India. She campaigns for the Women’s League of Chinland ([www.chinwomen.org](http://www.chinwomen.org)), an umbrella organisation of women’s groups that are exiled from Chin State in the western part of Burma. In “Unsafe State” published in 2007, the WLC documented sexual violence against Chin women by the Burmese military regime.*

*“Speaking Out, Making a Difference” was produced as part of the Women’s Voices for Hope series of publications by the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, a network of organisations and individuals based in ASEAN member states supporting the movement for human rights and democracy in Burma ([www.altsean.org](http://www.altsean.org)).*

## Shan Women and Children are Still Being Raped

*Written by Shan Women's Action Network*

Shan Women's Action Network reports that the Burmese Military Regime is still giving license to its soldiers to commit rape to women and children of Shan State.

In March 2006, an SPDC colonel who visited Murng Kerng, Central Shan State was reported to have told soldiers at the command post of infantry battalion 243: *"Do anything you like, whether it be stealing, robbing, raping or dealing in drugs. The only thing is to be careful it doesn't come out on one of the foreign radios."*

Whilst world attention has been on the Karen's plight since the first half of 2006, few people are aware that at the same time the regime's troops are conducting very similar offensives of systematic violence against women and children in Central Shan State. Details of this sexual offensive first reached the outside world on April 10 when BBC interviewed a community worker from the central Shan township of Murng Kerng who reported that several units of SPDC soldiers had been marauding

through hill villages since the start of the year raping women at each village.

Shan Herald Agency for News reported in May that on orders to flush out the Shan resistance in Murng Kerng SPDC soldiers belonging to infantry battalions 514, 515, 518 and 64 went from village to village demanding that headmen to provide them with 5 to 7 "comfort women". One mute woman was seized in this way by the soldiers, beaten to death and her body left outside her village.

Shan Women's Action Network subsequently interviewed several sources from Murng Kerng, who confirmed the earlier reports, providing further details of rape cases by SPDC troops in their areas. *'One unit of about ten soldiers from LIB 515 went from village to village around where I live - altogether about 10 Palaung villages. At each village they ordered the headman to provide women as "guides" for the troops and then gang-raped them along the way. If the headmen*

*refused they were fined 200,000 kyat.*' Another source described how the same unit had visited a Palaung village and demanded comfort women. When the father of one of the women protested, he was beaten to death.

Since 2002 until today, at least 254 women and girls in Shan State have been raped by SPDC troops from 42 battalions. This year between January and April alone, at least 29 women in six Palaung villages in Shan State reported sexual violence, including gang-rape, sexual slavery and torture to death, committed by SPDC officers and soldiers. Women and girls were seized by patrolling troops and kept for sexual abuse for up to five nights. In one village, women were gang-raped in front of their husbands, who had been tied up.

The Palaung Women's Organization reported that:

- On 9 October 2006 at 2.00 pm six soldiers of Burma's military regime gang raped three Palaung women outside Wan Pan village, Ho Pong village tract, Loi Lemdistrict in

Southern Shan State. The three women were Daw Nan Man, aged 52, Ma Aye Sein, aged 32, and Ma Aye Kyaing, aged 14. All three women were rice cultivators. The soldiers, from Battalion 9 stationed at Murng Naung base, located at Wan Pan village, were Thet Pine, Thet Lwin Oo, Myo Thein, La Min Htwe, Kyaw Soe and Win Ko.

.....  
**"Do anything you like,  
whether it be stealing,  
robbing, raping or  
dealing in drugs.  
The only thing is  
to be careful it doesn't  
come out on one of the  
foreign radios."**  
.....

- Daw Nan Man and Ma Aye Kyaing escaped from the soldiers after incurring serious injuries. However, the soldiers left Ma Aye Sein, whose injuries were too severe to move, lying in the bush where the gang rape had taken place. Ma Aye Sein's skull had been cracked open, there were 4 stab wounds under her left breast and three ribs were broken. Ma Aye Sein died on 13 October at Lwe Lin Hospital from her

injuries, which were complicated by delays in getting her to hospital. Wan Pan villagers went and reported the gang rapes to the commanders of Battalion No 9. To date, none of the six rapists have been prosecuted.

SPDC soldiers and troops are still frequently raping Shan and other ethnic women in conflict areas with impunity. Rape is still being used as a tool to demoralise and destroy ethnic communities, and serves as a continuation of civil warfare off the battlefield.

Moreover, because of the steadily increasing military battalions in the conflict areas of Shan State, local villagers are in greater risk of violence perpetrated by the soldiers, including sexual violence.

In the meantime, whilst rape and brutalisation by the SPDC against women and children of Shan State is still going on, the Burmese Military Regime has even taken the opportunity to deny and refute “fabrications” that their soldiers had committed any kind of systematic human rights abuses against women.

.....  
*Founded in March 1999, the Shan Women’s Action Network ([www.shanwomen.org](http://www.shanwomen.org)) brings together a network of volunteer activists in Burma and Thailand to work for gender equality and justice for Shan women.*

*The Shan people are an ethnic group living primarily in the Shan state along Burma’s borders with Thailand, Lao and China. Forcefully conscripted into the Burmese army and used as forced labourers, some Shan groups have been engaged in intermittent conflict with the Burmese military, and many live as refugees in Thailand.*

## Gender Violence in Burma

*Written by Cheery Zahau*

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to begin by thanking the US-UN Office, Ambassador Rees and Ambassador Brister for organizing this important event at the United Nations, during the 51st Session of Commission on the Status of Women. I also would like to thank all of you for being here with us today.

My name is Cheery Zahau, a Chin woman from Burma. Burma is a Southeast Asian country that shares borders with China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. Burma has a population of over 50 million people comprising 8 major ethnic nationalities: Burman, Shan, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Chin, Kachin and Arakan. I was born and I grew up in a Chin village. I left for India in 1999 because I did not feel safe as an ethnic woman in my own state.

Before 1988 there were two army battalions in Chin State. However, the regime has now increased that number to 13 battalions spread across 33 military outposts in Chin

State. This increase in troop levels demonstrates the dramatic militarization of Burma, particularly in the ethnic states, over the last 20 years.

Burma's ethnic groups demand equality, autonomy and self-determination. But these demands are denied by the regime and met with systematic human rights violations, which include forced labour, forced relocation, religious persecution, arbitrary arrest and detention, destruction of thousands of ethnic villages, the driving out of hundreds of thousands of ethnic civilians to neighbouring countries, and forcing an estimated one million peoples to be internally displaced persons.

Worse yet is that Burmese military soldiers are raping the ethnic women and girls with impunity. Ethnic women and girls from Shan, Kachin, Chin, Karen, Mon, Karenni and Arakan States have long suffered from state-sanctioned sexual crimes perpetrated by the Burmese military. Rape incidents in

ethnic areas are higher because it is a part of the regime's strategy to punish the armed resistant groups or to the suppression of various ethnic peoples as a tool for ethnic cleansing. Although rape has been used by the regime to control the population for decades it took years and courage of many women to document these crimes. Pioneered by the Shan Women's Action Network report "License to Rape" in 2002, a number of reports documenting the use of rape as a weapon of war in Burma have since been published by the Karen Women's Organization, the Women's League of Burma; and the Human Rights Foundation of Monland. The total number of rape victims documented in these reports totals 1,859 girls and women.

As a result of these reports, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma has repeatedly raised concerns about the widespread and systematic use of sexual violence by the regime's troops. However, the SPDC has continued to deny this, and the sexual violence continues. I would like to particularly highlight the situation in Chin State. Over the

course of six months in 2006, my organization, the Women's League of Chinland documented 38 cases of sexual violence in Chin State committed by the Burmese military troops.

Please bear in mind that it is extremely difficult to collect this information in Chin State because of the geographical isolation and the tight control of the area by the Burmese military. At the same time, the women dare not speak out because of their fear of the army and the social stigma of rape from their community.

We believe that the rape cases we have been able to document represent only the tip of the iceberg. Of these 38 cases, 5 of them were girls under 18 and the youngest was 12 years old. The circumstances of the rapes clearly show that women and girls are under constant threat of sexual violence during their daily lives.

Women and girls were raped in their homes, while working at farms, collecting firewood, walking back from church, travelling to market and to schools. They are also

raped while doing forced labour and working as forced porters for the Burmese army.

Often the rapes have been carried out with extreme brutality and in some cases resulting in the death of the victim. In one case, a woman was stripped naked and hung on a cross, in a deliberate act of mockery against her Christian religion. This indicates that sexual violence is being deliberately used as a weapon to torture and terrorize local ethnic populations into submission.

Almost half of the rapes were gang-rapes, showing that there is a collective understanding among the troops that they can rape with impunity. And about third of the rapes were committed by officers, sometimes in their own army camps. Again, this is a clear example to the troops that rape is acceptable under their command. None of these rapists are prosecuted. In some cases, people reporting the cases were even threatened. In only a few cases was some punishment meted out to the soldiers, but all the victims or families got in return was a small amount of money, or the knowledge that the rapists were

transferred to another army post. This clearly shows that the regime has no rules of law to protect women. The soldiers can act with impunity, knowing that they are above the law. Because of the lack of redress for these crimes, it is clear that Burma's state policy is to wilfully ignore and indeed condone rape by soldiers against women.

.....  
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.....

Rape survivors face many challenges after being raped. They are often severely traumatized and some become mentally disturbed. For instance, a woman from Tedim Township in Chin State was raped and tortured by the two soldiers in November 2003 on her way to go to market. She was deeply upset about her life and she became mentally imbalanced. In some cases, the rape survivors carry unwanted pregnancies and subsequently face stigma in their own communities.

Rape is one of the factors forcing Chin women to flee as refugees to India and other countries. However, as India does not recognize Chin refugees, they are subject to forcible repatriation at any time.

We are convinced that only genuine political change to democracy, restoration of the rule of law, establishment of a civilian government, and a withdrawal of Burma Army troops from ethnic areas will bring an end to the systematic sexual violence in Burma. We therefore urge the United Nations Security Council to pass a binding resolution on Burma that will help bring about these changes.

At the same time, we would like to urge Burma's regional neighbours, particularly India, to reconsider their economic and military.

We also would like to request the governments of China and Russia to reconsider their positions and support the UN Security Council's intervention in Burma. By opposing the UNSC resolution on Burma in January 2007, China and Russia gave the wrong signal to the Burmese military regime to continue killing its own people and to rape more women and girls. We need UNSC intervention in Burma immediately.

.....  
*This speech was delivered by Cheery Zahau of the Women's League of Chinland to a panel discussion at the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations in 2007. Cheery Zahau is from the Chin ethnic group and lives in India where she works for the Women's League of Chinland ([www.chinwomen.org](http://www.chinwomen.org)), an umbrella organisation of women's groups that are exiled from Chin State in Burma.*



**"Railway"**  
.....

*The artist Pe Thein commenting on the extreme poverty of forced labourers in Burma.*

## 4. Environment

.....

*“By destroying our forests, our trees, our wild animals, and our rivers, the Burmese dictatorship and its partners in crime also destroy who we are. Even though they have the money, guns, and power, we have truth and justice on our side to defend human rights and the environment.”*

**- Ka Hsaw Wa, Burmese human rights activist  
and co-founder of EarthRights International**

Burma is one of the world’s richest countries in natural resources and biodiversity. However, this leaves the country vulnerable to exploitative forces and many powerful actors, from the British colonists to the current military regime, have suppressed the Burmese people in order to extract gems, gas, oil and wood over many generations. Neighbouring countries, including China, India, Korea and Thailand, also have interests in hydropower, oil, natural gas and mining projects in Burma, many of which are shrouded in secrecy.

Unrestricted deforestation and aggressive mining cause both environmental and social problems, and international human rights groups have called for boycotts of Burmese gems which generate revenue for the military regime. Indiscriminate mining for jade and rubies destroys delicate eco-systems in the north of the country. In Karen State, the Karen National Union has been accused of selling valuable timber in exchange for arms.

Local people receive few economic benefits from trade in natural resources and, instead, are being increasingly forced off their agricultural lands and out of their homes. Ordinary people are also the most vulnerable to floods, landslides and natural disasters, which are an outcome of climate change and environmental degradation. The writings contained in this chapter reflect the lack of control over their local environment that many communities experience.

## Children Playing by Valley

*Anonymous*

One day, early in the morning, I was feeling very cool and happy. I saw the sun rising up between two mountains, and I heard the voices of a lot of birds “tweet”. I heard the voices of children, playing happily. This village was lovely and its villagers honourable. Their livelihoods were very simple: farming, hunting, and fishing. This village was surrounded by lots of mountains and a stream flowed slowly behind it. They depended on this stream for their survival. They really cared about this stream and their mountainous area. It was far from any city, from the Kachin capital of Myitkina. All the villagers were Kachin people.

One evening, a lot of people came into this village. But they were not local people. Their faces and their language were very different. They were from China. The villagers offered them warm hospitality. That’s their culture. The villagers didn’t know what the Chinese people would do in their village. They just saw them as guests, because of being honourable.

Actually, the villagers could not have guessed this, but the visitors were enemies of this village, because they came for gold mining, and for logging. They were many kinds of company members. They were holding permits from the Burma Government. But the villagers didn’t know about all that. They’d never imagined such things. They had little education and didn’t know much about the world outside the village. The government of Burma never cared about education for such rural people. They were happy in darkness.

These Chinese companies started to destroy their environment with open pit mining and logging. First, they cut down the big trees. In doing this they accidentally broke off a lot of small trees too. The villagers had loved and protected their forest since long, long ago. They believed the forest was their soul, the stream was their blood. But these companies did not care about their lives. They looked just at their profit.

When they dug mines, they absorbed water from the stream. Later they threw their tailings into the stream. In fact, they used a lot of mercury in this mining. They were digging a lot of areas. The forests disappeared bit by bit. The villagers' environment and their livelihoods were gone, their stream contaminated. They couldn't afford to get clean water, so they continued to use this stream. Later, they faced many kinds of health problems. Some people died. Women suffered miscarriages, and children got skin diseases. Their animals also got diseases, and some died. So they couldn't continue to farm because their livestock perished - another livelihood problem caused by logging and mining.

After these times, the villagers became corrupt. Before, they were really honourable. But today they are not in the same situation as previously. They need food for survival. No one else can or will

support them. Their livelihoods have vanished. They face health problems. Some women and some girls had their lives broken, because they faced food problems. They had no jobs. Moreover, some of their family and relations died. They were unprotected. So some became prostitutes. So, who has sympathy for them? Who can give support for their lives?

After three or four years, these Chinese companies moved on. There was no more mining or logging to do. But they left behind many impacts from mining and logging for the villagers to deal with. All the birds and wildlife cannot live in their forest. Their forest has become a desert. Their stream has become a poison. Before this happened, I heard a lot of the voices of birds. But now I never hear a "tweet". Before this happened, I heard the voices of children playing. But now I only hear voicelessness.

.....  
*Mining in Burma is highly exploitative and characterised by poor safety practices and little consideration for either the human or environmental consequences of mineral extraction. There is often conflict between competing interest groups. Local villagers may be forced to give up their lands or are forcibly co-opted into providing labour or food to miners. Many lose their livelihoods due to environmental destruction.*

## Three Seasons

*Written by Naw Naw Poe*

I am inspired sometimes by other cultures, and I love the internet for connecting me with them. The Yiaaku people of Kenya have a beautiful blessing or prayer that is full of environmental symbolism:

May the land of your father and mother embrace you.  
May you grow as huge as a loimugo tree.  
May you smell as sweet as the Songoyo tree.  
Be as straight as the Itarokwa tree.  
Be as studious as Ol Dony Keri mountain.  
And as cool as the forests of Muk Godo.

This inspired me to write my own poem, which is also a blessing to you, based on the three seasons of Burma:

May the winter bring you joy  
New hope and new life.  
It's time the old leaves fall down  
And the new leaves come.  
Reminds us to leave off the bad things  
Start with the new good things.

May the raining wash your pain  
Throw the sorrow, live for tomorrow.  
It's time the rain  
makes the plants green.  
Reminds me to keep going on my long journey  
Not to give up but to rise up with happiness.

May the summer give you peace  
Keep an honesty for the goodness.  
It's time the sun

Pours more heat on the Earth.  
Reminds us to protect and maintain  
Not to destroy that we cannot make.

Let the Earth be happy  
Because of you and me.  
That is our  
Responsibility.

## Treasures Turned to Sorrows

*Extract from an Interview with a Karen Farmer*

We all suffer, but in different ways around the Shwegyin River.

Some people suffer from mining, some from damming, some from taxes and some from other oppression.

It is very hard to live in this difficult situation. What we once considered our treasure has now become our sorrow. All the places and fields along the Shwegyin River used to be owned by the Karen people. Many of these places are old village sites. When the next generation is asked where their parents lived, they won't be able to say anything because the land will have been destroyed and there won't be anything left to show them.

.....  
*The Karen are an ethnic group that come from Burma and Thailand. In Burma, there are around three million Karen who live mostly in the hilly eastern border region and in the Irrawaddy Delta. A separatist struggle has been underway since 1949, mostly led by the Karen National Union, in response to which the government has employed acts of widespread repression and ethnic cleansing.*

## Renewing Roots

*Written by Nai*

I am a Mon man, and I was born in a beautiful Mon Village in Karen State. It should have been a peaceful place, but it would get caught in the middle of fighting between the KNU and the SPDC.

One day that happened when I was at school, when I was maybe eight years old. We had seen this situation many times already, although we were only young children. So we hid under the school building as usual. Bullets were flying. When it was safe to move we ran to the monastery next door, and it's lucky we did that, because the SPDC burned our school to the ground. The next day, we couldn't go to school, of course. My family moved to a different village. At that time, the local environment was really beautiful. There were huge old trees, there was clean water, clean air, good natural agriculture with no pesticides or manmade fertilizers. Eventually I had to move to the city to attend school. So my life changed a lot. People in the city had a lot of contempt for countryside people like me. They looked down on me.

The village education I had received was inferior to what my new classmates had. It was really difficult to catch up. Finally I did pass high school, and I wanted to go to university. But higher education in Burma is very corrupt. If you want to study the best subjects, the ones that lead to a good job, you must bribe the staff and the people at the education ministry handsomely. I wanted to study engineering. But couldn't afford to pay my way into university, so I had to study it at a lower level, in an institute.

After that I returned to the village of my childhood. The environment had been destroyed, by the government system, and by the powerlessness and the lack of education of the villagers. The noble trees had been replaced by rubber plantations. We lost the traditional medicines we'd been able to get from the forest. The groundwater was gone, the topsoil eroded. In the rainy season, the village would flood and homes be destroyed. It broke my heart. It made me an environmentalist.

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*The Mon people are an ethnic group living along the Thai-Burmese border in the Irrawaddy Delta in Burma. Facing long-term repression from the state, the Mon are engaged in a struggle to maintain their language and cultural identity, along with political autonomy. Today, many Mon people from Burma live as refugees in Thailand or are scattered across the globe.*

## Her Kindness

*Written by Khon Nasa*

Hello!! The Earth...  
Because of us  
You have to run  
24 hours in a day  
12 months in a year.  
It is your kindness.

Hello!! The Earth...  
Because of us  
You have to give the air.  
You have to give the blood.  
You have to give the skin.  
You have to change night to day.  
It is your kindness.

Ho! The Earth...  
Now...  
We are virus.  
We are taking your bones.  
We are cutting your hair.  
We are eating your skin.  
We are swimming in your blood.  
It is her kindness...

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*Khon Nasa is a Burmese environmental specialist.*

## Dams on Salween Threaten Indigenous Groups

*Written by Marwaan Macan-Markar*

Being a village headman means little if you live in a community nestling in the hills close to Thailand's northern border with Burma. More so, if officials have plans to use your village for a large 'development' project.

That is the lesson Nu Chamnayakiriprai continues to learn as he ponders the future of his family and of over 50 others who live in the Me Koh village, in the Mae Hong Son province. The questions that the 49-year-old seeks answers to include where his community will be forced to relocate and what economic prospects await them.

On Wednesday, during a visit to Bangkok, Nu confessed that these troubling questions have been with him for four years, when he had learnt, indirectly, that his village and the surrounding areas would go under water soon after one of a series of dams is built on the Salween river, which flows through Burma.

*"We still do not know where we will be moved. The officials who came to*

*survey our village and the nearby area did not ask for our views or discuss the plans,"* says Nu, whose village has thrived on an economy of rice and vegetable farming for nearly 100 years. *"That is why we are against the dams being built on the Salween."*

The predicament faced by the villagers of Me Koh is one shared by other communities, too, both on the Thai side and the Burmese side of the international border. Activists estimate that over 80,000 people will be forced out of their homes due to large tracts of land expected to go under water.

Many of those likely to be affected live close to Burma's eastern border, which is home to ethnic communities such as the Karen, Shan and Karenni. Even the international border is destined for change, since a part of the Salween serves as a geographic divide between the two countries.

The cloak of secrecy that has been thrown over the construction plans - which involve state-owned power

entities in Burma, China and Thailand - was brought to light Wednesday by local environmentalists and NGOs. *“The entire decision-making process for the planning and implementation of the Salween hydropower development projects has been shrouded in secrecy,”* a coalition of NGOs stated in a letter of protest that was handed to Thailand’s minister of energy.

*“There has been a total absence of public participation among the dam-affected communities in Burma (and) the over fifty Karen-Thai villages living along the Salween river in Thailand’s Mae Hong Son province,”* the letter adds. *“The following laws and regulations are currently being violated in the planning process for the Salween dams: complete disclosure of project information to the public; a hearing to receive input from affected people; and the official public hearing of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment report.”*

The petition submitted to officials in Bangkok was part of a global campaign held Wednesday to oppose the five dams being built on the Salween. Activists in cities as far a field as Tokyo, Washington DC,

Sydney, New Delhi, Berlin and Paris held protests outside Thai embassies and consulates to highlight the human and environmental cost of the planned dams.

The 2,800 km Salween is the longest untouched body of water flowing through South-east Asia. This free-flowing river starts in the mountains of Tibet, courses through China’s southern Yunnan province, enters Burma, touches the Thai-Burma border, and then flows out into the Andaman Sea.

**“We still do not know where we will be moved. The officials who came to survey our village and the nearby area did not ask for our views or discuss the plans”**

The reservoirs to be created with the hydropower projects are expected to engulf up to 2,000 sq km of land rich in biodiversity, including rare and endangered plants and animals. Also threatened with extinction are the indigenous cultures in the area, some of which belong to small tribes, such as the Yintalai, who have “approximately

*1,000 people remaining in the world,”* states a background note produced by activists.

The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the state-run power utility, is taking a lead role in driving the plans to build the five dams, such as the Hat Gyi dam in Burma’s Karen State, and the Tasang dam in Burma’s Shan State. Construction of the Hat Gyi is to commence later this year.

EGAT is also under fire for ignoring the fact of Burma being run by an oppressive military dictatorship. After all, the areas selected for the dams along the Salween lie in the heart of a region that has been torn apart by years of conflict.

Burmese troops have been accused of committing a spate of human rights violations as they try to wrest control of territory from ethnic rebel groups, like the Karen and Shan. Abuses reported have ranged

from burning and looting, forced relocation, extrajudicial killings, and rape. Both sides of the conflict have been accused of excessive use of landmines in the Salween river basin.

NGOs are equally troubled that the Burmese military will benefit from money pouring in at a time when the South-east Asian nation is under international sanctions led by the U.S. government. The investment for the Hat Gyi dam alone is estimated to be one billion U.S. dollars.

*“Thailand’s image will be tainted if these dams are built, because of the major role played by EGAT,”* Sai Sai, coordinator of Salween Watch, an NGO based in the northern Thai city of Chang Mai, told IPS. *“Thai investment is damaging the environment, forcing villagers out of their homes and making the Burmese military government richer.”*

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*Marwaan Macan-Markar is the Bangkok correspondent for Inter Press Service, reporting on human rights, development, environment and politics.*

# About ARTICLE 19

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Established in 1987, ARTICLE 19 fights for all hostages of censorship, defends dissenting voices that have been muzzled, and campaigns against laws and practices that silence. We take our name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”*

ARTICLE 19 monitors, researches, publishes, lobbies, campaigns, sets standards and litigates on behalf of freedom of expression wherever it is threatened.

We provide expertise on international human rights standards and on legislation that protects the right to speak and the right to know; campaign to safeguard media pluralism, independence and diversity of views; promote the right to know of poorer communities and advocate for the implementation of freedom of information legislation to ensure transparency and strengthen citizens’ participation. We champion freedom of expression, including freedom of information, as a fundamental human right that is also central to the protection of other rights.

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*The people of Burma live under one of the world's most repressive regimes.*

*In spite of ruthless censorship and repression, the Burmese people continue to dissent, communicate and inform. Scratching poems on the floor of a prison cell, concocting ink from the brick powder of a prison wall, or organising clandestine performances of comedy, drama and poetry, these brave people defy their oppressors to speak of their experiences, and their hopes and fears for their country.*

*Simmering Under Ashes is a collection of essays, poems, stories and articles written by Burmese journalists, writers, poets and playwrights. It celebrates the struggle for freedom in Burma against the regime's repression and international complicity, ineffectiveness or indifference.*

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**ARTICLE 19**  
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