

Militarisation, armed conflict

Presented by Mary Labang

Good afternoon everyone.

Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world and throughout its existence as an independent state there has been **conflict** between central government and various indigenous groups seeking autonomy. Several groups have entered into ceasefire arrangements eg Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the groups have been granted de facto administrative authority over the areas under their control **but they have no influence on the political process.**

Promises were made by the regime in terms of investment in social services **but these have not been honoured.** And the deliberate policy of **Burmanisation** is experienced in the repression of indigenous cultures.

Burma has been ruled since 1962 by a series of military regimes, one of the longest running and most brutal military dictatorships in the world.

Although there is no external threat, the regime has continued to build up its army and to expand its military presence throughout the country, particularly in indigenous areas. Over the past decade, the regime has more than doubled the size of the army to nearly half a million soldiers, and set up more battalions. Today, there is a total of over 500 battalions in Burma. The regime spends under 1% of GDP on the health and education sectors combined, while spending over 40% of the national budget on its army. In Kachin State, between 1992 and 2006, the number of Burma Army battalions stationed there increased from 26 to 41 despite the cease fire agreement made in 1994 between the regime and Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

The regime's troops have been committing systematic and widespread human rights violations, including forced labor, forced relocation, torture, rape, various forms of sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, looting, forced portering and summary execution. They have been using rape as a strategy of war on women and girls particularly in the ethnic areas.

The regime is breaching their obligation, and using their troops to commit widespread acts of systematic sexual violence against women across all of Burma, especially those who live

in armed conflict areas such as the Karen, Karenni and Shan states. We, women of Burma have documented sexual violence cases since 2002. There is evidence documented of the regime's use of rape as a strategy of war in Burma by indigenous women of Burma in their reports: *Licence to Rape*, *Shattering Silences*, *System of Impunity*, *Catwalk to the Barracks*, and most recently "*State of Terror*" by the Karen Women's Organization, and "*Unsafe State*" by the Women's League of Chinland.

State of Terror documents 959 cases of violence against women committed by the regime's troops, mostly during the ongoing military offensives in Karen State. These cases include repeated gang rapes in 2006.

Unsafe State documents 38 cases of sexual violence, committed with impunity by the Burma Army throughout Chin state, mostly during the past five years. Almost half of the cases were gang rapes, and at least a third committed by officers.

In early February 2007, four Kachin school girls ages between 14 – 17 were gang raped by three army officers and four soldiers in Kachin State.

While these new reports have confirmed the continuing state-sanctioned sexual violence perpetrated by military soldiers against women and girls living in ethnic states, I would like to highlight the most recent and shocking case of a school girl in Kachin State.

On 27th July 2008, a 15 year old school girl, Hkawn Din, was on her way to the family paddy field to bring food for her brother. She was attacked and gang raped by Burmese soldiers. She was also brutally tortured and mutilated. After a three day search her naked and mutilated body was found 200 meters from the army checkpoint. Her skull had been crushed beyond recognition, her eyes were gouged out, her throat had been cut and she had been violated with knives.

17th July 2008, a Burmese officer came to her home and expressed his regret. "We are deeply sorry that our soldiers raped and murdered your daughter." He offered her parents a sack of milled rice, two Viss of sugar, four Viss of cooking oil, five cans of condensed mil and 500,000 kyats (424 US\$).

Her father expressed his anger at this offer and said I want the court to punish the guilty soldier rather than accepting 'customary law' and a small cash compensation by the Burmese Army. Until now, no punishment of the rapist has been confirmed, despite the fact that one soldier confessed to the rape.

All the reports show clearly to the international community that there is still license to rape in the conflict and indigenous areas. The evidence proves that there are hundreds of rape and gang rape cases committed by both high ranking and ordinary soldiers. However no formal court action has been taken against those perpetrators.

We urge the international community to actively support the efforts of the UN and other key stakeholders to achieve peace and justice, indigenous women's rights and democracy in Burma.