
Human Rights in Rural Burma

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In November 1997 the State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta ruling Burma changed its name to the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC). However, there was no change in the four key leaders of the junta, and judging by the testimonies of villagers throughout Burma and the continuation of all of the regime's military operations, there has been no change in policy; in fact, the forced relocations and related abuses occurring in many rural parts of the country have only intensified, making it appear that the SPDC regime is even more ruthless and repressive than the SLORC ever was. Like many dictatorships, the SLORC/ SPDC is an extremely paranoid regime, believing that it must control every inch of territory and the daily lives of every citizen in Burma; that if it relaxes its repression for one moment, the people will rise and destroy it. This mentality explains the junta's refusal to negotiate or compromise with its opponents, even in situations where there would be nothing to lose by doing so. SPDC leaders regularly state that "only the Army can hold the country together", and they feel that to do this the Army must control absolutely everything which happens in the country.

In order to gain this control, the military continues to expand at a rate far beyond the means of the junta or the country. In many regions, particularly the central and urban areas, the military has already established near-complete control, but in remoter areas, such as the non-Burman ethnic areas towards all the borders, it has only partial or no control, and in some of these regions there is still armed resistance. The policy of the SPDC, and before it the SLORC, in the case of any form of armed resistance is to "drain the ocean so the fish cannot swim"; in other words, undermine the oppo-

sition by attacking the civilian population until they can no longer support any opposition. This is the fundamental idea of the Four Cuts policy (cutting supplies of food, funds, recruits and intelligence to the resistance) which Ne Win initiated in the 1970's. The current SPDC plan for consolidating control over areas where there is resistance appears to consist of the following steps: 1) mount a military offensive against the area; 2) forcibly relocate all villagers to sites under direct Army control and destroy those villages; 3) use the relocated villagers and others as forced labour, portering and building military access roads into their home areas; 4) move more Army units in and use the villagers as

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forced labour to build bases along the access roads; 5) allow the villagers back to their villages, where they are now under complete military control and can be used as a rotating source of extortion money and forced labour, further consolidating control through "development" projects, forced labour farming for the Army, etc.. If resistance attacks still persist at this last stage, retaliation is carried out against villages by executing village elders, burning houses and other means.

Throughout Burma we can see examples where this process is at various stages; in eastern Tenasserim Division the SPDC is still on a military offensive, while in parts of Chin State they are conducting initial forced relocations, and in central Shan State they are combining the two. In parts of central Karen State which they have now occupied for 1-3 years, they are constructing access roads and new Army bases with forced labour. In areas which the junta has controlled for longer periods and those where there has never been active resistance, the process is well into its last stage of sys-