

PRESS RELEASE, 29 OCTOBER 2009 RISING INSTABILITY IN EASTERN BURMA

Bangkok - During this sixtieth anniversary year of the Geneva Conventions, Israel's military assault on Gaza and Sri Lanka's refusal to distinguish between Tamil combatants and civilians have been high profile challenges to the relevance of international humanitarian law. Out of the media spotlight, the Burmese Army similarly persists in breaking the rules of war by indiscriminately attacking civilians and causing massive displacement. Indeed, aid agencies report that threats to human security in eastern Burma are increasing.

"After 25 years of responding to the consequences of conflict in eastern Burma, it is tragic to see the causes remain unaddressed and the situation is likely to further deteriorate during the next twelve months. A recent influx of refugees into Thailand and monitoring reports from internally displaced communities indicate that violence and abuse in eastern Burma are increasing", said Jack Dunford, Executive Director of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC).

TBBC is an alliance of twelve aid agencies from ten countries working to provide food, shelter, non-food items and capacity building support to Burmese refugees and displaced persons. The humanitarian agency has just released findings from field surveys about conflict and displacement conducted with over 3,100 households during the past 5 years in rural areas of eastern Burma.

The main threats to human security in eastern Burma are related to militarisation. Military patrols and landmines are the most significant and fastest growing threat to civilian safety and security, while forced labour and restrictions on movement are the most pervasive threats to livelihoods. Trend analysis suggests that the threats to both security and livelihoods have increased during the past five years.

Over 3,500 villages and hiding sites in eastern Burma have been destroyed or forcibly relocated since 1996, including 120 communities between August 2008 and July 2009. The scale of displaced villages is comparable to the situation in Darfur and has been recognised as the strongest single indicator of crimes against humanity in eastern Burma. At least 75,000 people were forced to leave their homes during this past year, and more than half a million people remain internally displaced.

The highest rates of recent displacement were reported in northern Karen areas and southern Shan State. Almost 60,000 Karen villagers are hiding in the mountains of Kyaukgyi, Thandaung and Papun Townships, and a third of these civilians fled from artillery attacks or the threat of Burmese Army patrols during the past year. Similarly, nearly 20,000 civilians from 30 Shan villages were forcibly relocated by the Burmese Army in retaliation for Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) operations in Laikha, Mong Kung and Keh Si Townships.

Thailand's National Security Council recently acknowledged it was preparing for another mass influx of refugees due to conflict in Burma's border areas leading up to the proposed elections in 2010. Conflict has already intensified in Karen State with over 4,000 Karen refugees fleeing into Thailand during June. The increased instability is related to demands that ethnic ceasefire groups transform into Border Guard Forces under Burmese Army command. Such pressure has already resulted in the resumption of hostilities in the Kokang region which caused 37,000 civilians to flee into China.

"The breakdown of 20 year old ceasefire agreements reflects how the Burmese junta's 'road map to democracy' offers no political settlement for the ethnic minority groups. Whether next year's elections provide a small window of opportunity or merely entrench military rule, there is an urgent need to address ethnic grievances in order to promote national reconciliation and solutions for displaced persons", said Mr Dunford.

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Enquiries (in Thailand) : Sally Thompson (+66) 022385027, or (+66) 0898508457

"Protracted Displacement and Militarisation in Eastern Burma" is available from www.tbbc.org/resources/resources.htm