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**‘We Have Hands the Same as Them’:
Struggles for Local Sovereignty and Livelihoods by
Internally Displaced Karen Villagers in Burma**

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“We have hands the same as them”

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**A research paper by
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Abstract	ii
Notes and Acknowledgements	ii
Notes on Terminology	iii
Abbreviations	iii
Note on Spelling	iii
Map of Burma	iv
Chapter 1	
Introduction	1
• The research context	2
• Methodology	4
Chapter 2	
Understanding Local Perceptions	6
• Identities: communal and individual	6
• Local conceptions of human rights and human security	7
• Villagers’ relationship to the land	8
• Contending conceptions of sovereignty	9
• Local conceptions of conflict	11
Chapter 3	
Karen Experiences of Displacement	13
• The roots of displacement	13
• The nature of displacement	15
• Village responses to displacement	16
- Survival strategies	16
- Aspects of resistance	21
Chapter 4	
Looking Outward: International Epistemology and Responses	24
• Imposing epistemology	24
• Real and potential responses	27
• Alternatives	30
• ‘Neutrality’ versus solidarity	31
Chapter 5	
Conclusions	32
References	35

Abstract

For the past thirty years hundreds of thousands of Karen villagers in Burma have been living a precarious existence, regularly moving between their villages and displacement in the forests or state-controlled relocation sites, struggling to retain access to their land and livelihoods against a military-run state determined to exert absolute control over their movements, their land, their cropping methods, their produce, and all other aspects of their lives. Outside attention on this situation tends to focus on the armed conflict between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the state military junta, and concludes that this is a simple case of ‘conflict-induced displacement’ which requires a peace agreement between combatants and ‘return’ of displaced villagers with help from the state. This paper challenges this analysis. It examines the nature and dynamics of Karen internal displacement through perspectives expressed by villagers themselves, and finds it to be an ongoing and fluid process of villagers evading state control while attempting to retain access to their land and livelihoods, rather than a spatial displacement from zones of armed conflict. The primary cause of displacement is not armed conflict, but state efforts to consolidate territorial sovereignty over civilians who are used to local-level sovereignty and ‘non-state’ identities. Villagers respond with survival strategies which in themselves constitute resistance to state control of their land, livelihoods, and lives. These ‘weapons of the weak’ used by Karen villagers have arguably weakened the state more than all the battles fought by the armed resistance, and the state has responded with brutal campaigns against their villages. The 2004 ceasefire between the state and Karen armed forces, which the state has used to further penetrate and militarise Karen areas, has only created further displacement and has made this conflict more open and urgent. The paper argues that the solution to Karen internal displacement is not the ‘return’, ‘reintegration’ and state-directed aid espoused by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and by some international actors, which would only represent victory for the state in this conflict; instead, it advocates recognising and supporting villagers’ efforts to resist state control and retain local sovereignty over their lands and livelihoods.

Notes and Acknowledgements

This paper is still a work in progress, and will hopefully be improved as the ideas it contains are tried out on the ground. This version draws extensively on my paper *Sovereignty, Survival and Resistance: Contending Perspectives on Karen Internal Displacement in Burma*, which was initially submitted in 2004 as part of postgraduate studies at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands, and was then revised for release as a Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) working paper. Though beginning from some of the ideas developed in that research, this paper updates the examples and context, and applies the ideas more concretely to the Karen displacement situation based on my experience throughout 2005 trying to implement these ideas in the work of KHRG. I would like to thank the KHRG staff and field researchers who provided inspiration and feedback in this work and who did much of the ground work upon which it is based, and particularly the villagers who have been willing throughout the years to tell their stories and express their feelings at great risk to themselves and their families. Most of all to Bel, who made this possible and provided support and inspiration all the way through.

Notes on Terminology

Burma/Myanmar: Burma never existed as an entity prior to its creation as an administrative province of British India in the 19th Century. Burmans historically used the adjective Myanmar to refer to things related to their country (meaning the Burman kingdoms of the heartland). In 1989 the military junta decreed a name change from Burma to ‘Myanmar Naing-Ngan’. Though accepted by the United Nations, this is seen by non-Burmans as part of the junta’s ethnic assimilation project, and the change has been rejected by the government elected in 1990 which was never allowed to take power. This paper will therefore use the name Burma.

Burman/Burmese: ‘Burman’ is used to refer to the dominant ethnic group in Burma, making up approximately half of the population. ‘Burmese’ is used as adjective for things related to the nation-state of Burma, such as Burmese citizens or the Burmese state. One exception is that ‘Burmese’ is the name given to the language of the Burmans.

Tatmadaw: The Burmese armed forces, the bulk of which is the Army (Tatmadaw Kyi).

Guiding Principles: The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, developed by a legal team led by Francis Deng, UN Secretary-General’s Representative on Internally Displaced Persons, and released in 1998.

Abbreviations

IDP	Internally displaced person
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council, the name of Burma’s military junta since 1997
SLORC	State Law & Order Restoration Council, the name of the military junta from 1988-97
KNU	Karen National Union
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army (armed wing of the KNU)
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, created in 1994 by a breakaway group from the KNLA. It has a ceasefire with the SPDC and still fights the KNLA.
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

Note on Spelling

This paper uses Canadian English spellings. In most aspects this resembles British spelling (as in ‘realise’, ‘centre’, ‘labour’), but it does not hyphenate in cases such as ‘cooperate’. Spelling in quoted passages remains as it appears in the original.



Chapter 1

Introduction

In mid-September 2005, just two weeks before the annual rice harvest, a column of over 300 Burmese Army soldiers headed up the Shwegyin River to force villagers in the Ler Wah area to move to state-controlled areas. Close to 1,000 people fled their villages upon receiving news of the approaching troops. On September 19th, the column shot dead a villager they sighted in the ricefields, then began shelling Kwih Lah, Ler Wah and other villages with mortars. The 35 Karen resistance soldiers based in the area fought a delaying action then withdrew, and the Army column occupied their camp and began destroying houses in surrounding villages, slashing the villagers' winnowing trays and puncturing their water-tins to make it impossible for them to continue living there. The villagers were used to this; since the Army first burned their villages in 1975, they have broken into smaller settlements hidden in the forest so they can remain close to their land, and since then the Army has come at least once or twice a year to smoke them out. This time, they headed up the hills to the east – the men to a nearby hillside where they could monitor the Army's movements, the families higher into the hills. They immediately organised to build basic shelters while teams of teenaged students were sent to retrieve rice from hidden storage barns. Schoolteachers set up blackboards in the forest and resumed school. Villagers appointed to liaise with resistance forces gathered intelligence and obtained some homemade landmines for use in defending their hiding places should the Army attempt to cross the river in pursuit. The Army never came, probably afraid of the resistance they might face, and withdrew on November 3rd without having captured a single villager. The villagers immediately returned to begin their harvest, now weeks overdue, while Karen resistance forces searched the area for landmines left by the departing Army. For these villagers this was the second time this happened in 2005, despite an ongoing ceasefire between the Burmese regime and Karen resistance forces. Less than two weeks later on November 16th, in the state-controlled areas just to the west where they were supposed to have been resettled, everyone in over 20 villages was ordered out by the Army for a week of forced labour maintaining a military access road.¹

For the past thirty years hundreds of thousands of Karen villagers in Burma have been living a precarious existence, regularly moving between their villages and displacement in the forests or state-controlled relocation sites, struggling to retain access to their land and livelihoods against a military-run state determined to exert absolute control over their movements, their land, their cropping methods, their produce, and all other aspects of their lives. Outside attention on this situation tends to focus either on the political conflict between the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) military junta and pro-democracy groups, or on the armed conflict between the junta and ethnicity-based resistance groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU). Rural villagers are assumed to be passive bystanders to this conflict who are either forced to support one side or the other, or stand by helplessly hoping to be 'left alone'; because they are assumed to be apolitical in the midst of armed conflict, their displacement is assumed to be 'conflict-induced'. Resolving the problem, so the argument goes, requires a peace agreement between combatants and 'return' of displaced villagers with help from the state. Since 2004, several UN agencies and international organisations have been negotiating to provide aid to state-controlled areas for the repatriation of Karen refugees and the resettlement of IDPs, and discussions are now underway on the possibility of providing aid to SPDC-controlled forced relocation sites.

¹ This account drawn from KHRG (2005b) and the author's discussions with villagers in the area concerned in November 2005.

Most of these negotiations and discussions have completely excluded displaced Karen villagers themselves, basing themselves instead on foreign frameworks like the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. This paper comes from the opposite direction, beginning from the stated perceptions and opinions of villagers themselves to look for possible ways to alleviate the crisis. These reveal that IDPs are not displaced by armed conflict, but as part of their struggle to retain control over their land, livelihoods and identities. Their flight into displacement is not an act of helplessness, but one of many tactics they deploy to remain beyond the reach of the state. Conventional methodologies of return or resettlement to state-controlled areas where they can be provided with aid would amount to handing control of their land and their communities to a predatory state which they have thus far been successfully resisting. When villagers express a desire for help, it is more often for material support for the survival strategies they use to live beyond state control, or protection against incursions by state military forces so they can continue their practice of local sovereignty. This paper discusses and contrasts several proposals for addressing the Karen internal displacement situation, and the effects these are likely to have on lives and livelihoods.

The research context

The largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, Burma's population is estimated at 45 to 50 million (HRW, 2002:15). It is a country of great ethnic diversity, half the population being Burman and the other half divided between ten to fifteen major ethnic groups with many subgroups.² The Karen population is probably about 5 million,³ living mainly in a north-south band from eastern Pegu Division through Karen State, where they are the majority, and through Tenasserim Division to southernmost Burma; many also live in Irrawaddy Division and around Rangoon. In plains areas which they share with Burmans, many have adopted the Burmese language and other Burman practices, and practice Buddhism. In eastern Pegu Division, Karen State and Tenasserim Division there has been less influence: most speak Sgaw or Pwo Karen, retain distinct symbols of Karen culture, and practice Animism, Buddhist/Animist combinations, Christianity, or millenarianism (Keyes, 1977:54-56). This paper focuses on the latter regions, where most Karen internal displacement occurs.

Since 1962 Burma has been under military dictatorships which have rigidly repressed the Burman heartlands while fighting dozens of armed ethnicity-based resistance movements in the hills. The Karen National Union (KNU) and its army the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) are one of the larger movements and have been fighting for autonomy since 1949. The KNU/KNLA exerted *de facto* control over much of Karen State, eastern Pegu Division and Tenasserim Division until the mid-1990s, when Burmese offensives gradually pushed them toward the Thai border and a breakaway group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), began fighting against the KNLA. After 1995 the KNLA shrank by half to less than 5,000 troops (HRW, 2002:120-121) and reorganised into smaller guerrilla units, which now pursue a more hit-and-run form of armed resistance (ibid.:122-123).

To consolidate control over civilian populations in Burma's heartland and remoter areas, the current State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) junta has rapidly militarised since 1988 (Selth, 2002:33-35). The *Tatmadaw* (armed forces) has doubled to 350,000-450,000 strong, with an announced target to expand the Army to 500,000 (ibid.:79). Army bases have proliferated all over the country, in both conflict and non-conflict areas (Heppner, 2000:18;

² The Burman-dominated government claims 67% are Burmans, while non-Burman opposition groups claim only 40% are Burmans (see Smith, 1991:30; HRW, 2002:15).

³ State censuses have claimed "between 2 and 5 million, whereas Karen nationalists claim between 7 and 12 million." (Cheesman, 2002:203)

Fink, 2001:123). The Tatmadaw and civil authorities are responsible for forced labour (ILO, 1998:155), forced relocation (GIDPP, 2003:3; HRW, 2003:202), arbitrary detention, torture, killings and sexual abuse (HRW, 2003:203-204), looting and extortion (KHRG, 2001:142-146) and other abuses on a nationwide scale, all conducted with complete impunity. All of these have led to displacement in both Burman and non-Burman areas.

In Burma all land is officially owned by the state (Hudson-Rodd et.al., 2003:5-6) and it is common, particularly in remoter rural areas, for state and military authorities to confiscate land without compensation for infrastructure projects, construction of Army bases, farms to supply the Army, or business ventures (some of which are personal projects of military officers, while others are joint ventures between the state and private companies). In addition, the state confiscates crop quotas from farmers, usually amounting to 10-20% of the crop, for which it pays only a small fraction of market price; exemptions and reductions are not granted even if the crop fails or the farmer suffers other problems, and as a result many farmers have been forced to buy rice on the market to pay their quota. Those unable to do so have lost their land, gone into debt, and/or been imprisoned (Hudson-Rodd et.al., 2003:11). Following criticism by the World Bank and others (see ADB, 2001:5), the SPDC claimed that this system was being phased out in 2003, but testimonies from rural villagers suggest that it is still ongoing in some areas.⁴ To increase the quotas, the state frequently orders farmers to increase production through double- or triple-cropping programmes; the required irrigation and fertilisers are usually promised but never delivered (Hudson-Rodd et.al., 2003:12; KHRG, 1999:64), forcing the farmers to go further into debt to support the doubled or tripled quotas. As the Army expands and spreads throughout the countryside, it confiscates land to establish new bases and to produce food for itself. All of these practices are creating displacement.

Most of the armed resistance movements are ethnicity-based so the Tatmadaw sees the civilian population as part of the resistance. This led to the Four Cuts (*Pya Lay Pya*) programme, which aims to “cut the four main links (food, funds, intelligence and recruits) between insurgents, their families and local villagers” (Smith, 1991:259). In practice this means targeting civilians in conflict zones, wiping out villages and livelihoods and retaliating against civilians for attacks by resistance forces (KHRG, 2001:12). In rural Karen areas it began in 1975, forcing many families into a life on the move from that time onward (PWF, 2003b:9). Since 1995, forced relocation on a region-wide scale has become a core military tactic. Instead of strategically relocating a few villages, the entire region of resistance activity is targeted and every village not close to a motor road or SPDC base is ordered to move to relocation sites; Tatmadaw patrols then destroy any villages, food supplies and crops in the area and shoot civilians on sight (Heppner, 2000:16). Since 1996 these campaigns have destroyed approximately 1,500 villages in southern Shan State (SHRF, 1998:4), over 200 in Kayah State (KHRG, 1999b:55-57), over 700 in Karen State and Pegu Division (BBC, 2002:2), and over 100 more in Tenasserim Division (ibid.).

Relocation sites are placed adjacent to existing villages and Army camps, or along Army-controlled roads. Some are fenced and entry or exit is tightly controlled by troops; others are more open and may even appear as an open and unguarded village or as an add-on to an existing village. To leave the site, villagers must obtain a military pass; these often prohibit them from being away overnight, thereby preventing them from returning to their home fields. Even if they can reach their village or fields, these areas are now off-limits and they can be detained or shot for being found there even if they have a pass. Nothing is provided in

⁴ Author’s interviews with health workers from Karen regions, September 2005. Unpublished. See also HRDU (2005: Section 5.2).

relocation sites; villagers must bring their own building materials and food, there are no schools or health facilities, and they must do forced labour for nearby Army units. Lack of good water and food rapidly causes deaths. Eventually the Army has to relax movement restrictions so villagers can forage, and families take the opportunity to escape back to their home areas one by one. Many relocation sites disintegrate within a year, their occupants fleeing to a life in hiding in the hills or re-establishing their old villages (KHRG, 2001:80).

Displaced people follow different paths: some to relocation sites; some to larger villages or towns where they try to survive with the help of relatives; some to a mobile life around their village or in areas further from state control; some across the border to refugee camps or illegal labour. Many combine or alternate these strategies. When resistance groups controlled significant territories, these provided refuge to many IDPs. However, Karen resistance territory has shrunk to a tiny fraction of what it was, and even these areas are not firmly held. Karen resistance forces now offer little protection to villagers.

In January 2004, the KNU and SPDC agreed an informal ceasefire. However, instead of demilitarising Karen regions, the SPDC took advantage of the increased mobility this allowed to deploy more troops, step up work on military access roads into remoter areas, and establish Army camps in locations which had previously been too exposed to attack (KHRG, 2004a:1; TBBC, 2005:36). As a result, many villagers whose farmfields and villages were adjacent to roads or new Army camp sites were displaced further into the hills, fearing forced relocation and forced labour (KHRG, 2005a:6). Sporadic SPDC-KNLA and DKBA-KNLA fighting continued. The situation has worsened since SPDC Prime Minister Khin Nyunt (who negotiated the ceasefire) was purged in late 2004, followed by the return of the SPDC to a much more hardline political position. As a result, the amount of fighting between the two sides has increased in 2005, as has the amount of displacement due to Tatmadaw human rights abuses, and many Karen villagers expect the coming year to bring intensified militarisation and military activity (KHRG, 2005b). Longer-term ceasefires by other resistance armies have not stopped displacement either; in some areas they have even created displacement, as SPDC and local forces join in destructive ventures for profit or political control (Lanjouw et.al., 2000:233,234).

The above context has led to the normalisation of displacement throughout much of Burma. Estimates on the total number of IDPs range from 500,000 to 3 million, depending on the inclusiveness of the tally.⁵ Figures on rural Karen displacement are rare and problematic, but at least 30% of Karen hill villagers are probably displaced (Lanjouw et.al., 2000:231). When plains villages are added, the number of Karen IDPs is estimated between 300,000 and 600,000, about two-thirds of these in over 100 SPDC-controlled relocation sites and the remainder in hiding (UNHCR, 2004:1; BBC, 2002:6).

Methodology

This paper draws upon research and reporting by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), a local human rights documentation group I founded in 1992 with the assistance of Karen people. KHRG documents human rights in rural Burma through the testimonies of villagers, gathered primarily by field researchers who are Karen villagers themselves. It is politically independent, and though conducting research in areas where Karen and Burmese forces are active, it does not allow its work to be censored or influenced. This is not to claim that the organisation's perspective is neutral or apolitical; KHRG's researchers are all Karen villagers, IDPs or refugees staunchly opposed to human rights abuses by the State Peace and

⁵ See Lanjouw et.al. (2000:237), PWF (2003a:1), GIDPP (2003:1), TBBC (2005:24).

Development Council (SPDC) regime or by Karen resistance forces – a position I have also adopted.

My close engagement with Karen villagers made me aware that their perspectives and experiences are not reflected in the international definitions and frameworks bearing upon their situation. Hence, rather than following the more common ‘outside looking in’ approach – starting from international perspectives on IDPs and examining the situation of Karen villagers as a ‘case study’ – this paper adopts an ‘inside looking out’ approach. It begins from the perceptions of Karen villagers regarding identity, community, and conflict, their relationships with the land and the state, then explores their experience of displacement. The paper then looks outward, to discuss some of the responses to this situation proposed by international actors.

Local perceptions are many and varied, but those presented herein are based on prevalent sentiments expressed in several thousand interviews over the past thirteen years, supported where necessary by my own observations of the local situation. This raises questions of ethics because as an outsider I cannot claim to speak on behalf of Karen villagers, but I can attempt to derive from their testimonies a perspective closer to theirs. By placing the voices of villagers above those of international agencies, I may be able to bring the two worldviews closer together.

Chapter 2

Understanding Local Perceptions

Understanding Karen villagers' perceptions of displacement requires first understanding their perceptions of their own identities, their relationship to the state, and the political situation they live in. This chapter will first examine these, then look at how they influence people's perceptions of displacement and responses to it.

Identities: communal and individual

Discussions with rural Karen villagers reveal a clear distinction between "us" (Karen people) and "them" (others, particularly Burmans), reflected in statements such as:

"When we look at it, we are Karen, our hearts are Karen. As for them, they are not our nationality. They do things to us and it doesn't make us happy as Karen." (village headwoman; KHRG, 2001:167)

Writers have attributed such perspectives to the Karen being hill people living beyond the reach of the state, accustomed to outside threats and oppression. With no higher political structure than the village (Marshall, 1997:143), Karen regions have always been vulnerable to domination by more hierarchically structured valley societies like the Burman kingdoms. In the 1800s, the Sgaw, Pwo, Bwe, Pa'O and various 'Karenni' groups, with different languages, cultures, religions and lifestyles, and living in different regions, forged a more unified 'Karen' identity for survival (Hinton, 1979:92-93), a process encouraged by foreign missionaries (Cheesman, 2002:203). Central to this identity are a "sense of oppression at the hands of their neighbors" (Keyes, 1977:51) and self-characterisation as "oppressed, uneducated and virtuous" (Cheesman, 2002:204). They have defined themselves largely based on "structural opposition to other similar groups ... The Karen also have distinct myths and folklore that have a common theme - their inferior structural position vis-à-vis the lowland peoples, compensated for somewhat by belief in their moral superiority." (Fernando, 1982:130)

Burman and Thai authorities have reinforced this defensive Karen identity from outside, through direct oppression and labels like "hill tribe" (Keyes, 1979:8) which equate Karen identity with 'backwardness' and other socially undesirable characteristics. Under Burma's military regimes since 1962, "education and military activities are all geared to produce the integration, if not the assimilation, of the ethnic minorities into a society dominated by Burmans." (Keyes, 1977:57) The lack of hierarchical structures to target above the village level, however, has made the Karen a difficult political target. Moreover, the increasing brutality of militarised Burmese assimilation campaigns has generated a reaction, strengthening the Karen oppositional identity and leading many to actively resist the Burman-dominated state. As summarised by Cheesman (2002:199), "[s]tate discourses suggest accommodation, but are directed towards social control. Karen identity is born of primordial statements but is manifest in structural opposition to the state. Ultimately, while the state seeks to assimilate all, Karen nationalists aim towards the assimilation of their own and separation from others."

Individually, Karen IDPs are often considered simple subsistence farmers who know little beyond the bounds of their village and are therefore completely disoriented by displacement. This ignores the different and diverse identities they carry within the village community. Plains Karen villages with a strong cash economy have significant vertical stratification. This decreases in hill villages where subsistence farming and barter are the norm, but there is still

significant horizontal differentiation. Villagers see each other as having different skills and a different resource base depending on whether they farm hillside, irrigated rice, or cash crops; whether they own an elephant, cattle or a shop, or work as a landless day labourer. Other important lines of differentiation include gender, age, education, civil status and religion.

Differentiation also occurs based on political and military roles. Villages are guided by a council of elders led by a village head, all appointed by village consensus; but there may also be a village council appointed by SPDC authorities, another appointed as liaison to the KNU, and these roles may overlap. One such village head described the delicate game of dealing with the demands of several belligerents as “standing in a leaky boat ... being rocked from both sides” (Heppner, 2000:17). Militarily, people take on different positions vis-à-vis the opposing political sides in Burma, some of which derive from ideological commitments while others form part of survival strategies. Virtually every rural Karen household has immediate relatives in the KNLA, DKBA, or local SPDC ‘People’s Militia’. In Burma’s conflict people are considered culpable for the actions of relatives, so having a relative in one military or another becomes part of one’s identity.

Within what appears superficially to be a rural subsistence village or a small IDP community, each person’s identity is a complex composite drawn from all of the above factors. Some people carry multiple identities simultaneously, perhaps as KNU liaison and SPDC village secretary, and which of these they outwardly present changes whenever they enter or leave a state-controlled space, when the seasons of their livelihood change, or when their interlocutor switches from an SPDC officer to a human rights researcher. Village leaders often welcome human rights researchers or KNLA units to their village, then politely inform them that someone will be immediately sent to report their visit to SPDC authorities so that the village will avoid any punishment.⁶

Identities shape and are shaped by individual and communal perceptions of context (Sajor, 1999:28,29), such as the way people perceive sovereignty, conflict, their own displacement and human rights. Identity is a central point of contention in displacement situations, because states often label particular groups “enemy” or “other” as a justification for forced displacement (Cohen and Deng, 1998:6), while displaced people struggle to maintain identities and form their responses around them.

Local conceptions of human rights and human security

Most Karen villagers derive their conception of human rights not from international covenants, but from traditional societal values (such as village democracy, egalitarianism and norms of social interaction), observation and discussion with others, or historical accounts of oppression and resistance. Interviews by KHRG consistently reveal strong, well-developed and nuanced conceptions of rights and entitlements. Most internationally codified rights have their local parallels, but these are expressed in ways relevant to local contexts and local priorities.

For example, the theft of a cooking pot or a chicken by passing troops can be assigned greater significance than a beating, due to the importance of such items to survival. Children are often sent to fill SPDC forced labour quotas so adults can work the fields (KHRG, 2001:98), because family food security is seen as more important to the child than rights as internationally defined. Abuses are judged not just by their nature but also by the purpose,

⁶ From personal experience of the author on several occasions.

freedom to act, and mindset of the abuser; demands for food from well-fed officers are considered worse abuses than the same demands from starving foot-soldiers.

When villagers refer to and make claims upon human rights, it is their own conception of these rights. Repeated interaction with human rights researchers has now led many villagers to request education in international human rights standards,⁷ reflecting a growing awareness of international parallels.

Testimonies of Karen villagers illustrate that their conception of human security comprises physical security, access to land and food, and the ability to maintain and reproduce dignity, identity, and community (see KHRG, 2001:169). All of these require human rights. While the need for physical and food security is obvious, the focus on dignity, identity and community defies assumptions that IDPs in the forest or a relocation site would care only about physical sustenance. The struggle for higher-level needs is demonstrated by villagers' efforts to continue schooling their children while hiding in the forest. Hill villagers seldom see education as a utilitarian strategy because it creates few opportunities, as reflected in the Karen saying "Go to school, eat rice. Don't go to school, eat rice."⁸ Yet organising children for schooling is often one of the first activities of villagers in hiding:

"[W]e try to teach the children in the deep jungle as we can. ... The students are willing to learn, but they are afraid because of the problems made by the SPDC. They are very excited to become educated adults in the future. ... I love my people and I am interested to teach our children." (Elderly teacher; KHRG, 2001:75)

Similar attitudes and activities exist for maintaining religion and extended family relationships in forests and relocation sites. While these are not strictly essential for survival, they help villagers retain a sense of dignity and their communal identities, in response to the Tatmadaw's attempts to dehumanise them and undermine their communities.

Villagers' relationship to the land

As noted by Hudson-Rodd et.al. (2003:8), "Burma is an agrarian society and farming, more than simply an occupation, is a way of life." Karen hill villagers are entirely dependent on what they can produce from the land, and land-related rituals comprise a major part of their traditional animist beliefs (Marshall, 1997:75-81). Flat land is developed into irrigated paddy fields or plantations and farmed yearly; hillsides are farmed for rice on a rotational basis, with a family cycling through their various hillfields over an 8 to 10 year period. Rights to land are given and adjudicated by village elders who are appointed by consensus among the villagers. As a result, one study among Karen villagers in displacement-affected areas found that only 23% held any government land documents, while over 70% held land rights through customary ownership or assigned by village elders (TBBC, 2005:45). Villagers often express despair at the thought of how they would survive if separated from access to land, which makes them strongly resistant to the idea of moving to a relocation site or fleeing to Thailand. As expressed by a Karen human rights researcher, "they do not want to leave their area and their homes. They want to stay in their area. If they are going to die, they want to die in their area. If they are going to live, they want to live in their area." (KHRG, 2004c:105)

⁷ KHRG internal progress report, 12/10/2004.

⁸ From author's conversations with Karen villagers.

Going directly against local systems, since 1974 the constitution and repeated state decrees have given official ownership of all land to the state (Hudson-Rodd et.al., 2003:5-6). At present, according to the law,

“The State controls all land. Farmers have rights only to cultivation, which household members can inherit if permitted by the authorities of the Township and Village Land Committee and the Settlement and Land Records Department. The State can revoke landuse ownership rights if the farmers do not grow the crops specified by the authorities or use the land as specified. Land sales and transfers are illegal but tenancy and land sales and transfer of land to non-household family members do exist at the informal level.” (Hudson-Rodd and Nyunt, 2001:6)

Since 1988, the military junta has issued progressively more restrictive decrees stating that farmers must grow paddy as the dominant crop, and that fields must be forced to produce their maximum capacity; farmers who disobey have been arrested and/or deprived of rights to work the land (Hudson-Rodd et.al., 2003:7). The state maintains a monopoly on all exports, and forces farmers to hand over a portion of every crop at 20-25% of market price for export purposes; “[h]ouseholds unable to fill the quota face arrests, beatings and or confiscation of paddy land for re-distribution to other farmers.” (ibid.:8) This quota system was supposed to be phased out by the end of 2003 and this may have occurred in central parts of the country, but testimonies from farmers in remote Karen rural regions say the only change has been that the military has taken over from civil authorities in gathering the quota.⁹ In addition, farmers consistently complain of systematic looting of their crops and produce by both military and civil authorities, without compensation and with impunity. In the words of a village headman from northern Karen State, “We work for ourselves, but it is not for us, it all goes to them. We have to work for their food first, and then we must work for our food afterwards. ... If the villagers harvest 25 durians, the SPDC takes twelve durians. If we are going to eat a pig, we can only eat half and give them half. So, all of our things become their things.” (KHRG, 2004c:65) Another villager from the same area added, “They said that if the people could not give them [what they demanded], the villagers must leave the village. The people would not be able to work in their area or place [they would be forcibly relocated].” (ibid.:66)

This system pits the state in direct conflict with villagers over rights to farm the land. Making things worse, a common tactic now used by the Tatmadaw in its campaigns to force hill villagers to move to state-controlled spaces is to send armed columns out in the month prior to harvest to beat down, burn, or landmine the ricefields (KHRG, 2004c:98), or simply to occupy the area so the villagers flee and are kept away from their fields during the harvest period (KHRG, 2005b). Columns are also sent out just after hillfield clearing time to prematurely burn off the villagers’ fields so they cannot be planted (KHRG, 2005c:Section 7.1). In the perceptions of many villagers, this amounts to a declaration of war against them and against their survival.

Contending conceptions of sovereignty

It is often ignored that rigid territorial sovereignty was not the historical norm in most of the world. In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, Scott (1998:185) argues that kingdoms/states based their rule not on territory but on holding “a substantial, productive population within a reasonable radius of the court” for appropriation purposes. In Burma, these “state spaces” were a collection of “sedentary, wet-rice producers settled in valleys” (ibid.:186). The moment you entered the hills, where people “practiced shifting cultivation, were more widely

⁹ Author’s interviews with health workers from Karen regions, September 2005. Unpublished. See also HRDU (2005: Section 5.2).

scattered, and were therefore less promising subjects of appropriation”, you were in “nonstate spaces” (ibid.:187). “The role of statecraft in this context becomes that of maximizing the productive, settled population in such state spaces while at the same time drawing tribute from, or at least neutralizing, the nonstate spaces.” (ibid.:187) Though claiming sovereignty over remoter areas, the Burmese state had no capacity to enforce it (Leach, 1960:61). In the process of “neutralizing” the non-state spaces, people like the Karen were often plundered, oppressed, or forced to pay tribute by valley regimes, but were never assimilated or fully controlled; so “there survived in many areas strong regional and ethnic traditions of independence” (Smith, 1991:39).

The Four Cuts policy initially aimed to neutralise non-state spaces which could not be controlled. Before 1988, Tatmadaw forays into Karen territory were seasonal, withdrawing in rainy season. Since 1988, however, the regime has sought to consolidate the Burmese state by moving to a much more territorial form of control. The rapidly expanding Army began capturing *and holding* territory (ibid.:395) in order “to crush completely any elements of Burma’s population which did not come to terms with Rangoon” (Selth, 2002:35). Selth predicts that even resistance groups with ceasefire agreements will gradually be pressed to capitulate (ibid.:35). Though ethnic resistance movements do not seek to capture state power, they prevent the SPDC from exerting territorial sovereignty over remoter areas. The armed conflict has become a struggle to maintain non-state spaces against a state bent on territorial control.

The SPDC view of state-society relations is hierarchical and regimented; thus, “[t]he regime plays on a tradition of respect for elders to insist on unquestioning obedience from lower ranking soldiers *and civilians*” (Fink, 2001:121; emphasis added), and has declared the Tatmadaw as the “mother” and “father” of the nation (ibid.:122). Junta leaders view society as a hierarchy of obedience from the top military ranks to the lowest, and *below* that the top civilians to the lowest. As Karen villagers have remarked, “in rural areas even Privates lord over the civilians” (KHRG, 1996:3). Civilians are seen as “a free labour pool to be exploited by the military as needed” (Fink, 2001:123) and are punished militarily for any disobedience (HRW, 2002:89-90). Many examples exist of abuses being committed for no objective other than to ingrain this hierarchy: it can take the form of pointless forced labour moving stones back and forth (Fink, 2001:121), village leaders being summoned daily to military bases for no reason (KHRG, 2003:231), or rape as a means of dehumanisation (Belak, 2002:63). Forced relocation has thus altered from a means of neutralising non-state spaces to a means of controlling their populations and land - which explains its growth from a local military tactic to a policy of depopulating entire regions.

Many Karen villagers, however, still perceive themselves as occupying non-state spaces. In Karen society the village is the main social and political unit (Marshall, 1997:143) and is run somewhat democratically, with no higher-level hierarchy except the ‘village group’, several villages whose elders gather to discuss common issues. Karen villagers tend to see sovereignty as resting at the village level. They sometimes mention “our Karen country” (KHRG, 2001:168), but as a collective reference to Karen people and villages rather than any delineated territory. Sovereignty is thus the freedom of the village to live without interference, and when state or other forces attempt to usurp control over the village this sovereignty must be defended. As expressed by one displaced Karen man in the Papun hills,

“If they can’t control us, they will kill all of us. They order us to go and live with them. How can we live together with them there? We must stay here. Our ancestors stayed here. ... We can’t live like them. People who make peace with them must carry heavy loads as porters.” (KHRG, 1998:58-59)

Most villagers see the KNU not as a 'government' or substitute hierarchy, but as a force to drive the "Burmese" out of their area so they can "live in peace" (ibid.:169). If KNLA forces seem to be attracting the Tatmadaw into their area, village heads sometimes ask them to take their fighting elsewhere. In 1994, hill villagers in Pa'an and Papun districts felt the KNU was acting too like a 'government', placing heavy demands on them with no accountability; so their relatives in the KNLA mutinied and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). A DKBA soldier interviewed afterward stated the group's objectives as first getting rid of the KNU, then driving the Tatmadaw out of Karen State (KHRG, 1995:18) - thereby reinstating village sovereignty.

Their continuing belief in non-state spaces leads Karen villagers to use statements like "going down into Burma"; while "our leaders" (KHRG, 2001:165) refers to village heads or KNU leaders rather than state or Burman pro-democracy leaders. Though aware that they live within an internationally recognised 'Burma', Karen hill villagers do not consider themselves subjects of the Burmese state. The Tatmadaw is the only face of the state many of them have seen, so the two are considered one; *P'yaw* (Burmans) is used to refer to the state, its army, and its soldiers. The purpose of the *P'yaw* is "to wipe us out until we're gone, and then divide up our country" (Karen IDP; ibid.:168), i.e. as occupiers seeking to usurp local sovereignty. Karen villagers like this woman in Toungoo District commonly express exasperation that the Burmese state refuses to see that they will not be controlled: "If the *P'yaw* do not go back, how many people are going to die in the future? We wish that all of the *P'yaw* would go back to their places." (KHRG, 2004c:101) Karen armed resistance is seen not as an opportunistic grab at independence, but as self-defence against state attempts to recast sovereignty by invading traditionally non-state spaces. The struggle between the contending worldviews of villagers and the state manifests itself partly as armed conflict, and partly as the displacement of villagers evading assimilation and control.

Local conceptions of conflict

Villagers who have suffered the state's Four Cuts policies often speak as parties to the conflict rather than bystanders. As one Karen IDP stated, "They accuse us of being their enemy so we also accuse them of being our enemy." (KHRG, 2001:167) Present SPDC military tactics target villagers more than resistance forces: "they even regard our belongings and everything else as their enemies. ... If they say that they are going to kill and oppress their real enemies, that should be enough." (ibid.:167) Villagers clearly recognise a conflict between themselves and the state, and that this is enacted as state oppression versus villagers' evasion and resistance.

Most people have relatives involved in the armed conflict, and IDPs in particular often rely on resistance units for information, protection, and medical assistance (ibid.:24). To expect non-partisanship, which outsiders use to delineate people deserving assistance, is naïve. Interviews with villagers usually reveal strong partisanship in various directions and taking various forms. State and non-state forces all see civilians as part of the conflict. "The SPDC knows that if they don't oppress the civilians like this, the civilians will always give encouragement to their enemy." (village headwoman; KHRG, 2001:166) Some take an active view:

"I am very angry with them when I think about it, but I have to be patient. When my son gets older and if they give me the opportunity I will beat them in return. They think I don't have hands but we have hands the same as them." (ibid.:166)

Some villagers in state-controlled villages express regret that they must do work for the state and are unable to help the resistance (ibid.:169). Others take other sides, or resent all sides to the conflict: “The enemy [SPDC] persecuted us. My mother and father were in contact with the *Nga Pway* [KNLA], because we had to feed them too. We have to be afraid of all of them and feed them all” (Karen IDP; KHRG, 1999c:32).

In chronic conflict situations like Burma, where “there is rarely a distinct ‘end’ to the emergency” (Schafer, 2002:4) and what is ‘normal’ gradually becomes redefined (ibid.:6), ideas on ‘conflict management’ can be helpful to analysis. Gilgan (2001:6) explains that these begin by viewing conflict as an ever-present social reality taking many forms, with armed violence being the most extreme; peace is “a process instead of an end state”. Conflict is thus inherent to state-society relations. Viewing armed conflict as one end of a spectrum of ongoing conflict in society rather than as an anomalous and isolated explosion of violence opens the door to a much better understanding of the Karen situation, because it allows us to see villagers not as passive bystanders, but as deeply embedded in their own context and at conflict with various actors seeking to usurp local land, sovereignty, and lives. This is crucial to understanding the nature of displacement, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Karen Experiences of Displacement

The roots of displacement

A common international convention is to categorise all displacement as either ‘conflict-induced’, ‘development-induced’, or ‘disaster-induced’, allowing for no other categorisations (GIDPP, 2003; Hynes, 2003:1; TBBC, 2005). Internal displacement in Karen areas is usually labelled “conflict-induced” (Hynes, 2003:10-18) simply because armed conflict is part of the context, yet Karen IDPs seldom mention armed conflict among the main reasons they fled their homes. Instead, the causes usually stated are human rights abuses committed unilaterally by military and civil authorities when the opposing side is not around, i.e. primarily in the *absence* of armed conflict. When armed clashes occur in or around a village, people usually escape into the bush overnight and return when the soldiers have departed. Even the few writers who acknowledge that much displacement is caused by abuses unrelated to armed conflict refuse to abandon the international categorisations. For example, Hynes (2003:9) names as a major cause “gaining control of the population through militarisation, i.e. conflict-induced displacement”, then backtracks by admitting that “increased militarisation is not always connected to conflict. It is militarisation and its effects on the civilian population that causes much of the displacement.” (ibid.:10) This would seem sufficient justification to scrap the “conflict-induced” categorisation in such cases, yet Hynes and many others refuse to do so. Others assume without providing any basis that displacement created by systematic extortion by civil authorities or forced labour as Army messengers, camp servants, or making thatch for officers to sell can be lumped under ‘development-induced displacement’ (see for example TBBC, 2005:20). The standard international pigeon-holes do not fit here, and looking at reality instead reveals that the immediate causes of longer-term Karen displacement in conflict and non-conflict areas tend to take two main forms: deliberate forced relocation orders, and combinations of human rights abuses unintentionally leading to displacement.

Since 1995 relocation orders have been the Tatmadaw’s main control tactic, ordering the people of entire regions to move to state-controlled spaces regardless of whether their village actually has contact with resistance forces:

“They were dividing all the villagers and the resistance. They plan to make the resistance disappear. ... they say the fish are in the pond, but there a few fish they can’t catch. So they drain the water to catch the fish.” (Karen villager; KHRG, 2000b:50)

Sometimes hundreds of villages at a time are involved, affecting tens of thousands of people in areas with only a few hundred resistance soldiers. Even with the Karen-SPDC conflict presently in an informal ceasefire, forced relocation of Karen villages continues (KHRG, 2005a:6; KHRG, 2005d:3-4; KHRG, 2004a:1), suggesting that forced relocation has become more a tool of civilian control than a weapon of war. In northern Karen districts, much of this ongoing displacement has occurred because SPDC forces have exploited the lack of armed conflict to send in additional forces, push roads into remoter areas, and build new Army camps. Villagers in the areas near these camps or whose fields are on hillsides near the roads say they have to abandon their fields and leave their villages to avoid being rounded up for forced labour or forced to move to sites along the road (KHRG, 2005a:5-6; see also KHRG, 2005c:Section 10.1). New roads, infrastructure projects, and commercial ventures facilitated by the ceasefire have all led to land confiscation without compensation and resulted in displacement. One project alone in a former conflict zone of Pa’an District

resulted in the uncompensated confiscation of over 5,000 acres of villagers' land in early 2005 for a massive rubber plantation which is a joint venture between the state and a private Rangoon-based company (NLM, 2005; KHRG, 2005c:Section 7.3). In November 2005 this Karen schoolteacher in Nyaunglebin District noted that people from SPDC-controlled plains areas were actually fleeing *into* conflict zones in the hills:

“Along the [*Shwegyin-Kyauk Kyi*] road down in the plains there used to be many villages, but the big villages have become small and the small villages have become forest. Many people have gone to the towns or come up here, because the SPDC demands so many taxes from them and forces them to do all kinds of labour.” (KHRG, 2005b:5)

Unintentionally-caused displacement occurs when people suffer “repeated, multiple, mutually reinforcing shocks” (Blaikie et.al., 1994:5) in the form of consecutive and simultaneous abuses (such as forced labour and extortion) which undermine their lives and livelihoods. The most vulnerable, usually those with the least economic or social security, are driven to flight first - hence statements by many people that their village still exists but has lost the poorest segment of its population (see KHRG, 1999a:38-39; 1999c:7). This statement from a village headman in Thaton District is not unusual: “In the past there were about 500 houses in the village. Now there are only 70 or 80 houses. It is because they [SPDC] are forcing the villagers [to work]. They couldn't suffer anymore, so they fled to stay in other villages. Now there are only 85 houses in the village.” (KHRG, 2006) As the abuses continue, focusing on fewer people as others flee, the less vulnerable become progressively more vulnerable and are gradually forced into flight themselves. Once all livestock and valuables have been sold to replace lost crops or pay bribes to evade forced labour, flight becomes the only feasible response to military demands:

“We had no food to eat. We had to search for food and work and we didn't have enough for our families. Moreover, they ordered us to porter and work for '*loh ah pay*' [forced labour] and they demanded food. We had to feed them. They ordered us to leave our work and go work for them. Because of this, we couldn't live under their organisation. We had to live in the jungle.” (internally displaced village head; KHRG, 2001:77)

The main abuses mentioned usually include forced labour at military camps and on profit-making projects of military officers, extortion for the profit of local officials, and similar abuses, caused not by the armed conflict nor by 'development' but by militarisation and the operation of military bases with complete impunity. Even in non-conflict areas, “villagers who have never seen fighting now find their villages flanked by three or four army camps. These camps function mainly to control village civilians, who must regularly provide the army with money, food, and unpaid labor on projects designed to improve infrastructure” (Heppner, 2000:18). This explains data gathered by the Burmese Border Consortium, which shows a higher average frequency of displacement for families in townships with relatively low levels of armed conflict (Bilin, Shwegyin, Kyauk Kyi and Thandaung), while Papun township, with much more intense armed conflict, has lower displacement frequencies (BBC, 2003:49-50). When armed conflict stops, as during the Karen ceasefire, SPDC military camps proliferate and encroach further into villagers' territory, thereby exacerbating the state-society struggle over sovereignty.

The real reasons for most displacement thus lie in unprovoked human rights abuses, which increase with state militarisation throughout the countryside. Seeking the root causes of this militarisation leads us back to state efforts to consolidate control over territory and population. Moreover, once a formal ceasefire is in place nonstate armed groups also try to exert their own sovereignty in their own area, creating additional displacement. This is why

displacement continues to occur despite ceasefire agreements, and why in some longstanding ceasefire areas displacement has even increased (Lanjouw et.al., 2000:233,234; HRDU, 2005:Section 13.2). The SPDC's land policies were shown earlier to be in direct conflict with villagers' attachment to their land; moreover, land is central to the villagers' way of life, their beliefs and their sense of identity. Most cases of displacement occur not when villagers 'flee fighting', as is assumed by those who use the 'conflict-induced' label for Karen displacement, but in the process of the struggle between villagers and various armed actors over sovereignty, land, and identities. This certainly constitutes a conflict, particularly when seen as part of the spectrum of state-society conflict mentioned earlier, but it is not the armed conflict meant by those who label Karen displacement as 'conflict-induced'.

The nature of displacement

For individuals, families and villages, displacement takes several forms. Some people move into (or further into) state spaces: to relocation sites, or to larger villages or towns where they have relatives. Others flee into (or further into) non-state spaces: to remoter areas or neighbouring countries. In most cases the spatial displacement is not far. Movement to a state space can mean to a roadside in the valley two kilometres from their hill village, while those evading the state often flee to their farmfield hut or up a stream so they can retain access to their village and fields. A key consideration is retaining access to their productive land, because farming families see no other way to survive. People therefore seek to minimise the distance they flee, even if this means remaining within reach of state forces and having to move regularly to evade them. This results in a localised and very fluid form of displacement.

“They can't call us to go [to a relocation site] because we dare not stay there. If we go to stay there, they force us to be their slaves. ... So we were staying around our village, and if they came, we fled. Sometimes they came up to shoot us, but they failed. We fled and escaped from them, and we stayed in the jungle.” (Karen refugee; KHRG, 2001:77)

Some people have been 'displaced' for twenty years without moving more than an hour's walk from their original village, which they reinhabit temporarily when Tatmadaw units are not around. The anecdote from Nyaunglebin District which begins this paper provides an example: the villagers have been staying in semi-temporary settlements since the early 1980s, flee temporarily to the nearby hills whenever SPDC columns come to assert control over the area, but watch the column closely so they can return to their fields the moment the soldiers depart. Even people in relocation sites usually do not stay forever:

“They forced the villagers to move to the relocation site many times. They forced them to relocate one time in 1991. Then they forced them again in 1997 ... They went for a month and then they were allowed to go back and stay in their own villages. In 1998 they were forced to stay until now. The soldiers haven't allowed them to come back. ... Recently, they made many relocations in the Leit Tho area, but it didn't work. The villagers went to stay for a while, but then they ran back and disappeared” (KHRG researcher; KHRG, 2000a:18).

The two main reasons people give for not going to relocation sites and for fleeing relocation sites are that they are cut off from access to their land and that they are used for forced labour and extortion by the state (KHRG, 2001:77). Repeated efforts by the state to bring them under control, however, force them to remain on the move between the village, hiding sites, and relocation sites. Research by the Burmese Border Consortium found that “the average internally displaced household had to move 3 times in the previous year.” (BBC, 2003:47) Displacement is not a one-time move but an ongoing process of living on the move, which begins to form part of lives and identities.

“We have been fleeing since we were young and in the wombs of our mothers. In our father’s time, they fled until they died. Now in our time, we are going to flee until we die.” (Karen IDP; KHRG, 2001:167)

This is not to say that repeated and chronic displacement is accepted, but that to the villagers it takes on more of a social, cultural and economic dimension than a spatial or temporal dimension; it is the disruption of ways of living, the loss of contact with cultural and other symbols, and the threatened loss of identity which people fear. Karen refugee Tha Lay has expressed it well:

“[I]t is not just material things. Each time you move you lose something, your ability to give your children an education, your ability to provide your family with food, your ability to create a youth group or practice your religion, your ability to create opposing systems to an oppressive regime. Constant movement also breaks down the family structure. Children are separated from their parents, granny is eventually left behind, the extended family becomes the nuclear family which in time becomes the individual. ... Movement basically erodes the simple social fabrics of everyday life. ... Some of the more negative aspects ... are the erosion of structures that constant movement causes, the erosion of ideas of familiarity; having familiar things around you is a common way that human beings cope with trying situations” (Tha Lay, 2003:7-8)

The spatial aspect of displacement is thus less important to most Karen IDPs than the separation from land and community, loss of livelihood and the threatened loss of identity. This is in line with Ibrahim’s (1995:35) description of displacement as “a social process that transforms existence”. He identifies a socio-economic component, whereby “otherwise self-sufficient people” become impoverished and vulnerable (ibid.:38), and a socio-cultural component, defined as “a process through which a community ... is denied access to objects and symbols that are central to the maintenance and propagation of its socio-cultural identity, value systems, and practices.” (ibid.:43) Socio-cultural displacement can occur even without spatial displacement, which is why even people staying in their villages often express the feeling that they are in a continuous process of displacement which has been going on for twenty years or more.

Village responses to displacement

Survival strategies

Displacement creates vulnerability, in that once a family is displaced, “trigger events” (Blaikie et.al., 1994:23,26) like illness, the loss of a relative, crop destruction or an encounter with soldiers can have much more serious effects than prior to displacement, bringing about arrest, death, or flight. However, every vulnerability tends to have a corresponding capacity (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989:11), and people respond to vulnerabilities by engaging their corresponding capacities to create survival strategies. Anderson and Woodrow (1989:13-15) suggest that vulnerabilities and capacities can be divided into three interacting and overlapping types: physical/material, social/organisational, and motivational/attitudinal. These same categories can be used for the corresponding survival strategies that people develop.

Recognition of social/organisational and motivational/attitudinal strategies indicates that survival strategies aim for more than mere physical sustenance. Blaikie et.al. (1994:63) discuss this starting from Maslow’s (1970) “hierarchy of human needs”, which posits that

needs exist on different levels, and people only focus on needs at a particular level when needs at lower levels are already satisfied. In crisis, people “retreat to the defence of needs that are lower in the hierarchy” (Blaikie et.al., 1994:63), for example breaking up the family for individual survival, or sacrificing things considered essential to dignity. This is often true, but to assume that people lose all need for dignity is a mistake; instead, even in disaster they retain a “complex set of priorities” (ibid.:63). Coping strategies “seek not just survival, but also the maintenance of other human needs such as the receiving of respect, dignity, and the maintenance of family, household, and community cohesion” (ibid.:69). Economistic-utitarian approaches assume people seek these as “assets” for personal gain (see Korf, 2004:277). But Karen villagers hiding in the forest continue practicing religion and schooling children to retain a sense of dignity and continuity, not as an investment in their material future. Survival strategies attempt “to preserve needs as high up the hierarchy as possible in the face of threat”, so in disasters, “emergent organization is much more common than social chaos, and ... altruism and stoicism are more common than selfishness and panic” (Blaikie et.al., 1994:63-64). This view of survival as incorporating much more than physical sustenance is crucial to an understanding of the survival strategies employed by displaced Karen villagers.

The table below gives some examples of survival strategies used by displaced Karen villagers to respond to particular vulnerabilities, divided into physical/material, social/organisational, and motivational/attitudinal. The information is drawn from my participant observation with Karen IDPs and interviews gathered by the Karen Human Rights Group, except where otherwise referenced.

Vulnerabilities	Survival Strategy Responses
PHYSICAL/MATERIAL	
Death and Injury	
Shooting on sight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of quick-escape routes from hiding places • Avoiding pathways used by the Tatmadaw • Posting lookouts and tracking Tatmadaw movements • Monitoring movement of Tatmadaw columns through exchange of information with resistance forces • IDP groups camp near resistance units for protection • Armed protection by resistance forces during flight
Tatmadaw attacks on villages to drive out civilians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bunkers underneath houses • Lookouts posted near villages
Arrest, detention and portering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In non-state spaces, cooperation to monitor SPDC movements • In state spaces, religious and village leaders act as intermediaries to secure release • In state spaces, bribes to avoid arrest or forced labour • Misreporting family status to avoid demands for porters
Sexual abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention through gathering of women in groups for work, sleeping and other activity • Support of local women for those who have been raped, usually including exposing the rape if the victim is married, or concealing it if unmarried
Homelessness	
Relocation orders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bribing officers to postpone relocation • Carrying building materials & food to relocation sites • Flight to farmfield huts or hiding places
Destruction of houses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving to farmfield huts • Rebuilding houses
Destruction of shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flight and rebuilding • Landmines to delay columns while villagers escape
Lack of housing in relocation sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing on assistance and shelter of local people • Foraging for materials and rebuilding
Hunger	
Destruction of food stocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiding rice in hidden rice barns • Food sharing with those who have none • Gathering and preparing forest foods • Clearing and planting hidden fields • Switch to cash crops which can be grown in the forest or harvested from existing trees • Stretching rice supplies through use of rice soup • Consuming preserved fruits hidden in rice barns, with the salty water used as source of salt (PWF, 2003b:10)
Attacks on rice fields	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement to remoter areas and clearing of new plots • Switch to forest foods and cash crops • Planting, weeding and harvesting in groups with lookouts or KNLA guards • Planting, weeding and harvesting by night
Looting or killing livestock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Switch to small and mobile livestock (buffaloes and cattle abandoned in favour of chicken and pigs) • If in hiding, muzzling livestock to prevent noise (AHRC, 1999:15)
Blockades on food entering the hills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplies covertly brought by villagers in 'peace villages' or traded in temporary 'jungle markets' • Covert trips to towns and Thailand • Arranging supplies through supply lines of resistance forces

Vulnerabilities	Survival Strategy Responses
PHYSICAL/MATERIAL (continued)	
Food-stripping by soldiers in relocation sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concealment of food • Escaping the site to forage • Temporary returns to farmfields • Finding paid labour • Using influence of religious leaders, particularly monks, and village leaders, particularly elderly women, on Army officers, to obtain concessions
Disease	
Destruction of clinics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplies covertly brought by villagers from state spaces • Covert trips to towns and Thailand • Purchasing from medicine traders coming through the hills • Use of natural medicines
Access to markets and clinics blocked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplies covertly brought by villagers in 'peace villages' • Covert trips to towns and Thailand • Taking the sick to KNLA medics or NGO 'backpack' medics • Making and use of forest medicines
Blockades on medicines into the hills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above
Loss of resources	
Asset-stripping by soldiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversion of liquid assets to jewellery • Concealment of liquid assets • In state spaces, collaboration with the state by cooperating with demands on community level, or on individual level by joining militia or becoming an informer
Loss of access to markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on barter
SOCIAL/ORGANISATIONAL	
Breakdown of Family	
Family separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support network of fellow villagers and relatives in nearby villages
Loss of a family member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support by extended family
Loss of Educational Opportunity	
Destruction of schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of jungle schools • Boarding children with relatives where there are schools • Sending young children to refugee camps or monasteries for education • Establishment of schools by villagers in relocation sites, with use of village teachers
No education in relocation sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covert home education • Arranging escape of children to places where they can attend school
Breakdown of Religion	
Destruction of monasteries and churches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation of worship and rituals in hiding sites • Establishment of religious centres in relocation sites, or covert worship if not allowed
Loss of religious leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement by lay religious elders, or in their absence by volunteer villagers

Vulnerabilities	Survival Strategy Responses
SOCIAL/ORGANISATIONAL (continued)	
Breakdown of Community	
Separation of village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closer cooperation of families and of small groups in hiding or in relocation sites
Loss of village leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement by village elders, lay religious elders, schoolteacher or volunteer villagers with organisational skills • In state spaces, rotation of village head responsibilities on regular basis • Selection of elderly women as village heads, because they can exert 'maternal' authority over military officers and are less likely to be tortured
Political/Military	
Breakdown of local organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement by smaller organisational structures focused on facilitating survival
Loss of contact with political/military opposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Villagers rotate as sentries and observing Tatmadaw movements • Information sharing with other villagers on the move
MOTIVATIONAL/ATTITUDINAL	
Hopelessness	
Loss of self-confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost all work and community protection done communally, by the family or the community • Reliance on village leaders to provide direction
Frustration, anger and desperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength from religious belief • Stoicism • Cooperation in various ways with resistance forces, providing a sense of taking action against oppression
Fear and suspicion	
Debilitating fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of solitude; always remaining in a group • Stoicism and fatalism • Strength through religious belief
Suspicion of informers among other villagers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caution and low-key statements and behaviour when in state spaces • Exchange of information to reveal informers • Multiple identities which can be used to present a submissive face
Loss of religion	
State attempts to undermine religious belief through destroying religious institutions in non-state spaces and denying access to them in relocation sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued worship at family level or led by volunteer religious leaders • Drawing on religious beliefs which place the oppressed above their oppressors • Strengthening religious belief as a reaction to repression • Appealing to the religious beliefs of Army officers
Loss of cultural identity	
Loss of material cultural symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attaching greater value to portable or reconstructable cultural symbols (e.g. clothing and forest altars, as opposed to bronze drums)
Loss of literacy in own language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covert teaching and home teaching by the literate • See above strategies responding to 'destruction of schools'
Breakdown of cultural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensified efforts by elders and others to pass on cultural knowledge and pride

Many of these strategies are built around Karen traditions that predate the current displacement situation by centuries. For example, storing rice in small storage barns outside the village is a longstanding Karen tradition (Marshall, 1997:82) which has been adapted to hiding food stores. The onus to share food with those whose crops are lost is rooted in moral precepts which elders traditionally passed on through verbal parables (ibid.:144-145). Similar parables advocate stoicism when abused (ibid.:147), communal work in the fields, and communal care for the sick (ibid.:144). Most of these survival strategies are discussed by villagers themselves as being about retaining dignity, continuity, and community, rather than mere physical survival or utilitarianism.

Individuals and groups tend to adopt strategies based on their specific capacities and vulnerabilities, and their different strategies interact with each other in various ways. For example, families with sufficient rice or money lend some to others; villagers stand lookout while others harvest or forage; villagers with KNLA connections use these to seek protection or medical help. Early warning systems are established to pass news between villages on troop movements or abuses; village scouts are sent out for security; and some villagers even obtain landmines or other weapons to secure their villages and hiding places from intrusion (TBBC, 2005:53-56; KHRG, 2005b). Interviews with displaced villagers indicate that they are keenly aware of the dependency they have on the group, and that the group has on them. Though often taking it for granted, villagers' awareness of their own local expertise is reflected by statements that they wouldn't know how to live in a refugee camp, or about the ineptitude of Burmese troops in the forest.

“We don't want to go to that side [Thailand]. ... We love our country and we would like to stay in our country. Even if we can't eat good food or are faced with a food problem we are going to endure it. We just eat *dta p'ghaw po* [watery rice porridge with jungle vegetables].” (internally displaced village head; KHRG, 2001:78)

As one village headman stated, “if there are rights for the villagers everything will go well and they will not be poor like this.” (KHRG, 2001:169) The villagers' survival strategies constitute a claim on those rights, but in recent years the balance between villagers' survival strategies and Tatmadaw oppression has steadily eroded due to the increasing ferocity of Four Cuts campaigns and the weakening ability of KNLA forces to provide protection. If villagers are to continue surviving close to their land, they are likely to need survival strategies which provide stronger resistance against human rights abuses.

Aspects of resistance

When the military project to consolidate territorial sovereignty comes in contact with local identities and perceptions, what occurs is not submission or acquiescence but diverse patterns of displacement and resistance. Consider the following statement by an internally displaced Karen man:

“The SPDC still plans to come and make problems at this place. But we think that we will try and stay here until the end of this year. If they come and shoot us often it will not be easy to stay here anymore. If there is no plan for us then we have to find a new place again. But I will never go and surrender to them. I do not dare. They try to hurt us and we are already hurting.” (KHRG, 2001:78)

This is not a voice of aggressive resistance, but it still indicates awareness of rights and a stand against oppression. Karen villagers clearly see the abuses that lead to their displacement, and those which follow it, as gross intrusions on their perceptions of human rights and human security and on the sovereign rights of their village communities. Their

resistance to this intrusion takes many forms: flight into the forest to evade state control and restrictions; hiding rice to avoid confiscation; avoidance of forced labour and concealment of assets when in relocation sites; appointment of elderly women as village heads to exert 'maternal' pressure on military officers; foot-dragging in complying with relocation or other orders; lying to or attempting to bribe officers; assisting deserters to escape instead of turning them in; passing information to resistance forces or human rights groups. Some villagers go further, obtaining walkie-talkies, landmines or guns from the KNLA to give them warning of approaching troops and defend their home area or hiding place against incursions (KHRG, 2005b; TBBC, 2005:54-56). Even acts of apparent compliance can conceal noncompliance: doing forced labour in a substandard way, or moving to a relocation site but hiding food supplies outside. Village leaders tell visiting researchers about SPDC human rights abuses, then (to avoid potential SPDC retaliation) report the visit and the interview to local SPDC military authorities, telling the SPDC officer that they had no choice but to tell the researchers about abuses or they would have faced KNLA retribution; in this way they evade retribution by either side, while also subtly notifying the SPDC officers that their every abuse is being recorded and transmitted to the outside world. In some cases this has made officers more cautious about the demands they subsequently make of villagers.¹⁰ Villagers tell of many such small victories, which occur even though on the surface the officer appears all-powerful and the villagers defenceless.

Gilgan (2001:2) argues that in situations like this it is important to look beyond armed conflict and consider the strategic position and role of non-combatants. She follows Foucault's observation that power relations by definition imply the possibility of resistance, "and therefore where there is domination, violent or otherwise, some form of resistance must also be present. The manifestation of resistance will be dependent on the particular dynamics of the conflict and thus may be public, well organised and carried out on a large scale, or small and clandestine." (ibid.:5) This dominance-resistance dialectic appears throughout the spectrum of conflict, whether armed conflict or state repression of villagers. In this case, the villagers' resistance takes the form of what Scott (1985:29) has called "weapons of the weak". Scott argues that peasant non-compliance does not need to be organised or have the prime objective of undermining the system to be considered resistance; though the immediate intention may be self-help, the need for that self-help is the central point of struggle between oppressed and oppressor (ibid.:296). Thus villagers can be fleeing mainly in order to survive until tomorrow, but their flight still constitutes a form of resistance which undermines the power of the state. Such resistance can achieve more than open confrontation "precisely because it aims at self-help and withdrawal rather than institutional confrontation" (ibid.:32). In particularly repressive environments, it may be the only resistance possible; "institutions of repression", if effective, "may all but preclude any forms of resistance other than the individual, the informal, and the clandestine." (ibid.:299)

Villagers who flee into hiding often see this as a reflection of their weakness, yet the flight of villagers is the leading factor undermining the SPDC's control in many regions. If villagers never fled, they could be relocated or controlled because their stationary villages would be vulnerable to any form of military intimidation or threat, thus making it easy for the state to take over their land and enforce its authority. By fleeing, however, they frustrate these objectives. In November 2005 meetings between human rights researchers and Karen villagers in Papun district, the villagers initially spoke of fleeing in fear and helplessness, but in the course of the discussion they agreed that by fleeing whenever SPDC troops were

¹⁰ Taken from incident reports of Karen Human Rights Group field researchers, June through November 2005.

nearby they had retained control of their land, avoided forced labour and other abuses, and kept the SPDC from establishing camps in their area.¹¹

The very existence of IDPs within Burma's borders is evidence of the failure of SPDC efforts to consolidate control, and their strategies for continued survival therefore constitute resistance even if their prime motivation is connection to their land. Sharples (2003:2) sees the survival of Karen IDPs as "a sign of resilience and hope." She attaches "paramount importance" to "the simple fact that they have refused to be forced across international borders. While many are forced to flee and become refugees, IDPs often make the choice to stay. Their resilience sees them regrouping, rebuilding and surviving in an environment conducive to an aggressor determined to destroy them." Within Burma, IDPs could submit to state control or join SPDC militias, but most choose not to:

"If we have to go to another place we won't go. ... We will stay in the country and die in the country. It is our own country. We will fight by ourselves. We will do it by ourselves. If the other countries pity us, help us. If the other countries don't pity us, we will fight until everything is ruined and it is finished. [When] Nobody can eat. It will be finished at that time." (Karen IDP; KHRG, 2001:76)

The villager who expressed this is not a combatant, yet he fully recognises his part in a "fight" against state oppression. His statement reveals how closely Karen self-perceived identity is linked to resistance against assimilation. The maintenance and reproduction of Karen identity and community, shown earlier to be central to local perceptions of human security, are therefore in constant conflict with the SPDC's efforts to consolidate sovereignty. When villagers say they simply want to be 'left alone', this does not reflect apolitical passivity but a desire to retain local sovereignty – which is why such sentiments are treated by the SPDC as subversive. To the SPDC's hierarchical view of society, all civilians are a potential threat to order. In consolidating and maintaining control, the SPDC faces a broad spectrum of resistance, ranging from noncompliance by civilians and its own soldiers, to political dissidence, to armed resistance. Armed resistance forms only a small part of this spectrum, and its forces have been weakened or marginalised; the main conflict is played out as a domination-resistance dialectic (Gilgan, 2001:5) between the state and the population, and very few civilians are not embedded in it. Human rights abuses, forced displacement, and villagers' response strategies all become political in this context; the flight of a family into the forest is just as politically relevant as the arrest of a dissident or a military assault.

This raises the question whether the villagers' resistance to state assimilation would be more effective if they were more conscious of their actions as resistance. Lieten and Nieuwenhuys (1989:9) see "survival strategies as an element in a process of emancipation" because they are often accompanied by increasing solidarity and cooperation; yet they differentiate between the "survival model" and the "emancipation model" of survival strategies (ibid.:11), and argue that it is important to move from the former to the latter to achieve significant change (ibid.:17). The Karen villagers' resistance has already achieved a great deal, but they are suffering severely. The question of whether they can or should move to a more self-aware resistance aimed at emancipation will be among those addressed in the next chapter.

¹¹ Taken from Karen Human Rights Group village meetings in November 2005 at which the author was present.

Chapter 4

Looking Outward: International Epistemology and Responses

Imposing epistemology

There is a major debate centred upon the “fundamental clashes between the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, and developmental approaches of engagement, conditionality and solidarity.” (Schafer, 2002:5) This debate is often mirrored in the clash between definitions and frameworks brought by international actors for categorising and acting on people and situations, and local perceptions that do not fit those definitions or bend to those frameworks. Chapter 3 noted that for Karen villagers, displacement is a fluid and ongoing process that is less spatial than sociocultural, and which often occurs as a survival strategy in their struggle to resist control by the state and retain local sovereignty over their identities, land and livelihoods. Contrast this with the UN’s Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (henceforth ‘Guiding Principles’), which define internally displaced people (IDPs) as:

“persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.” (UNOCHA, 1998:2-3)

This definition is built upon an assumption of unbroken territorial sovereignty; IDPs are distinguished from refugees by their failure to cross a border of some “internationally recognized” state. Displacement itself is framed as a spatial phenomenon determined by geographic separation from ‘home’. Based on this conception, the Guiding Principles seek to resolve internal displacement through “return, resettlement and reintegration” (UNOCHA, 1998:10). Internal displacement is seen as a spatially bound phenomenon to be resolved through return home or resettlement elsewhere, with the state holding the “primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian assistance” (ibid.:3). Any possibility of non-state spaces or local sovereignty is implicitly discarded.

International norms ignore local agency when they apply the IDP label, which connotes people who have lost all agency through being disconnected from the resources and social networks of home. The IDP identity acts as a “principal label” (Wood, 1985:11) which overrides and ignores villagers’ multiple identities and capacities and homogenises their diverse experiences of displacement. In effect, it turns self-supporting people into ‘victims’ in need of outside protection and assistance. The Guiding Principles refer to national authorities and foreign actors “providing” protection and assistance, while IDPs have the “right to request and to receive” these services (Principle 3; UNOCHA, 1998:3). Rights to life, dignity, liberty, education, are to be achieved by authorities “protecting” IDPs against abuse and “providing” services (ibid.:4-9). Only two of the thirty Principles¹² suggest that IDPs have agency to act. In the remainder, they are victims receiving protection and services without mention of their right to control those services; a charity-based rather than rights-based perspective.

¹² Principles 14 and 15.

The inclination to view IDPs as potential charity recipients rather than people with rights and agency is bolstered by some of the human rights reporting on the situation, which tends toward descriptions like “In the jungles and mountains traumatised, weak, psychologically numb people were attempting to survive in conditions where their homes, food, implements and animals had been destroyed. They lived in constant fear of attack.” (Horton, 2005:14) Such descriptions make it easy for international organisations to ignore the voice and agency of displaced people when responding to situations. If IDPs manage to organise or acquire a voice strong enough to overcome these descriptions, they risk being labelled as ‘political’ or ‘rebels’ instead. In Colombia, Fagen et.al. (2003:26) document how IDPs became “embittered” after being “kept outside, marginalized, and under control”, having to queue for hours to receive relief supplies through metal bars. Rather than remedy the situation by working through local IDP organisations,

“Relief workers have complained that the IDPs and their leaders demonstrate resentment, ingratitude, stubbornness, and are demanding and aggressive. Some of the relief workers point to such attitudes as diminishing the legitimacy of the IDP claims to be victims; i.e. ‘true’ IDPs would be humble and grateful. The IDP leadership is typically blamed for inculcating bad manners among the group overall” (ibid.:26)

Similarly, Duffield notes that when displaced Dinka in the Sudan were labelled as IDPs,

“At a stroke, all sense of history and cultural difference was lost. Displaced Southerners ceased to be members of distinct ethnic groups coming from different regions and ecosystems, following diverse survival strategies and integrated in various ways into the systems of Northern patronage and power” (Duffield, 2002:93)

Instead, their identity became a mere function of what material resources they lacked as IDPs, and interventions looked only at replacing these resources or spatially returning them home; according to Duffield, this is why outside interventions further weakened their position (ibid.:99-100).

Once principally labelled an IDP a person’s spatial displacement becomes the problem to be resolved, even if it is only a symptom of causes like human rights abuses, lack of access to land, or struggles over local sovereignty. Reattaching the displaced person to a fixed location becomes the objective. Seen as a universal solution to displacement, return/resettlement/reintegration becomes equivalent to “emplacement” (Malkki, 1995:515), fixing people to locations where they can be considered subjects of a sovereign state – then further reinforcing this by channelling aid through the mechanisms of that state or conditional upon state approval. This creates a system for IDP management, not a system for responding to locally expressed needs. It ignores non-state identities and state-society struggles, and favours state sovereignty over Karen villagers who seek to preserve non-state spaces. When Karen villagers request help, it is not usually return/resettlement/reintegration but protection from hostile (usually state) forces and material (food, medical, and educational) support for the survival strategies which help them evade state control while retaining access to their land. For example, local surveys conducted in 2005 among Karen and other IDPs in Burma found that “Villagers were primarily concerned with protection against human rights abuses, landmine clearance and access to land.” (TBBC, 2005:52)

However, few outside actors seek much information on what local people see as the solution to their problems, or bother to seriously study people’s relationship to their context. The need for human rights is rendered secondary when Karen displacement is labelled as ‘[armed] conflict-induced’; as shown earlier, some analyses even use this label despite clearly acknowledging that people have been displaced by human rights abuses not directly related to

armed conflict (see TBBC, 2005:18; Hynes, 2003:1; GIDPP, 2002:5). Fagen et.al. (2003:52) have observed in Colombia that considering displacement “solely as a derivative of war” creates assumptions that it will end with a ceasefire and that “little can be done beyond palliative emergency assistance” in the meantime. Karen villagers could be undermined in two main ways by such assumptions. Firstly, “palliative” relief, if not driven by local participation in decision-making, can override villagers’ survival strategies and undermine any potential for villagers to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the state. Secondly, assuming that displacement will end with a ceasefire shifts the focus from supporting villagers to negotiating with combatants, prioritising their needs so they will be convinced to stop fighting. Most conflict resolution leaves villagers out of the political process, ignoring their strategic role and weakening their position while strengthening the state and other combatants (Gilgan, 2001:11). This is exactly what has happened in Burma’s other ceasefire zones, leading to continued displacement of villagers now exploited by both state and non-state armed groups (Lanjouw et.al., 2000:233,234). Blaming displacement solely on armed conflict thus favours sovereignty of the state and other armed actors over villagers’ own struggles for local sovereignty.

Only when a situation is understood from local perspectives can appropriate responses be considered from “a reactive rather than pro-active stance” (Doornbos, 2002:813). Technocratic approaches to displacement based on foreign frameworks while ignoring local contexts can work to undermine human rights and human security, yet these approaches are often favoured by international organisations. Many organisations working in Burma claim humanitarian impartiality (“provision of relief solely on the basis of need”¹³) and neutrality (“refusal to take sides in a conflict”¹⁴), which require a willingness to work in both state and non-state spaces regardless of politics – yet most of these organisations refuse to work in any area not controlled by the SPDC or without SPDC permission, thereby violating neutrality and impartiality and demonstrating a clear pro-state bias. Instead, ‘impartiality’ and ‘neutrality’ are redefined to mean that assistance should only go to people with no direct role in the conflict. Villagers’ opposition to the state and connections to resistance movements are ignored or even “deplored” (Stepputat and Sørensen, 2001:778). People are expected to adjust this behaviour if they wish to qualify for assistance; in other words, they must abandon any resistance to the state. Such biased application of humanitarian principles tends to be the norm rather than the exception, leading many writers to question their applicability in intrastate conflicts and to call for acknowledgement that all humanitarian assistance is political and cannot be neutral (Barnett, 2001:270; Schafer, 2002:31). By rejecting the existence of non-state spaces and refusing to accept that people may not see themselves as subjects of the “internationally recognized” state, commonly used international definitions, labels and guidelines favour the idea that Karen villagers should give up their struggle for land and identities, submit to state authority and accept aid from the state or outside actors in state-controlled spaces.

Starting from local perspectives instead of international definitions and labels makes clear the agency of displaced people. Through their survival and resistance, Karen villagers occupy what Gilgan (2001:15) calls “a strategic position within the conflict itself.” She argues that outsiders should support such actors rather than seeking to disengage them from resistance or pretending they are bystanders to their own context. Supporting Karen agency through survival strategies requires a willingness to accept the aspects of resistance in those strategies and the political role of all aid. Possibilities are then created for empowering assistance even in the midst of armed conflict.

¹³ Griffiths et.al. (1995:78)

¹⁴ Ibid.

Real and potential responses

Though the SPDC is highly unlikely to allow full-scale international aid to Karen IDPs, the situation could change, particularly if the KNU-SPDC ceasefire is renegotiated and formalised in future. International agencies are already preparing for this. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have negotiated for over two years already with the SPDC for access to areas where displacement has occurred (Christian Aid, 2004:21). In early 2004, UNHCR obtained SPDC permission to “improve basic health, education, community services and infrastructure facilities in locations of potential refugee return” in eastern Karen State (UNHCR, 2004:1). The aim is to facilitate immediate repatriation of over 120,000 Karen refugees in Thailand as soon as a formal KNU-SPDC ceasefire exists, to areas where forced displacement is still occurring (see KHRG, 2004b:1). The repatriation operation, if it occurs, would involve major international actors such as UNHCR and ICRC and could grow into a wider international intervention, which would affect villagers and IDPs throughout the region.

The UNHCR approach comes from framing the problem based on state sovereignty. The framework is imported from other repatriation situations: the government agrees to prepare the ground for return, resources are provided to do so, then when the Burmese and Thai governments and UNHCR agree, repatriation commences. A KNU-SPDC ceasefire agreement has been set as the only political precondition for repatriation (UNHCR, 2004:1), but the KNU is excluded from the process. UNHCR notes that there are “600,000 internally displaced people in this area of Myanmar” (ibid.), implying that its intervention will also affect them. Yet refugees, local people in the area of return, and IDPs are all excluded from the discussions. UNHCR will channel resources through Burmese “locally active NGOs” (ibid.), to which Human Rights Watch responded as follows:

“In a worrying development, UNHCR reportedly plans to implement health and education programs in areas of refugee return through the Myanmar Red Cross (MRC), though it has dropped plans to work with the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA). ... Both groups are widely considered to be fronts for the Burmese military.” (HRW, 2005:62)

Andrew Selth, a leading analyst of Burmese military affairs, wrote the following about UNHCR’s potential partners:

“basic military training has been given to members of the Auxiliary Fire Brigades and the Myanmar Red Cross Society. ... The latter, ‘a reserve force for peace and stability in addition to its normal duties’, has 250,000 members ... Together with the War Veterans Association, these organisations are now considered an integral part of Burma’s broader ‘Defence Services’. They even march with the army, navy and air force at the annual Armed Forces Day celebrations.” (Selth, 2002:81)

Organisations truly independent of state interference are not allowed to exist in Burma (Steinberg, 1999:13). Not all groups are as closely connected to the military as MRC and MMCWA, but none can work without state involvement in their affairs, particularly when foreign aid is involved. The improved infrastructure and services UNHCR provides will be in state hands, thereby forcing returnees and IDPs to submit to the state for access. State militarisation will continue and possibly even intensify in the area to ‘protect’ the foreign agencies and the aid materials. With this increased militarisation the human rights abuses which actually created the displacement will continue and create further displacement, but this time with stronger state infrastructure and a veneer of international presence to make the

situation appear stable. All of this has already occurred in the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Burma, an operation still ongoing after eleven years because returnees continue to flee human rights abuses and end up back in Bangladesh, despite a UNHCR presence in the repatriation areas in Burma. In response, UNHCR uses its presence in Burma to claim that persecution has ended in the repatriation areas, and labels any new Rohingya refugees as “economic migrants” (Barnett, 2001:264-265; Lewa, 2003:8; TBBC, 2005:62). Despite this and evidence that human rights abuses continue to create displacement in other ceasefire regions (Lanjouw et.al., 2000:233,234; TBBC, 2005:66), any UNHCR operation in Karen State will probably find international support and funding because it achieves ‘return’ of the displaced, claims to follow humanitarian principles, and respects state sovereignty. It is, however, likely to undermine the human security of Karen villagers and bring them further under the control of an abusive state.

Approaches like UNHCR’s are supported by a growing tendency among some analysts and organisations to declare that military government is a reality in Burma, it is not about to end, and that the international community should accept the fact and engage the military regime in order to help the people through aid. This was the tone of a major report released by the International Crisis Group in 2004 (see ICG, 2004) followed by two conferences sponsored by the European Commission and the British government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) respectively.¹⁵ Based entirely on a sense of *realpolitik*, none of these drew on or sought local opinion in Burma.¹⁶ On a practical level, this tone is reflected in a discussion among NGOs as to whether aid should be provided through state-controlled or state-monitored channels to forced relocation sites. An August 2005 Human Rights Watch report suggested that international agencies should “form partnerships with local civil society groups ... [including] CBOs active in government-controlled areas, including some relocation sites” (HRW, 2005:62). The report did not specify which CBOs; it may have meant NGOs, because people in relocation sites are not allowed to form community-based organisations. An October 2005 report by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, which provides aid to refugees in Thailand and some cross-border aid to IDPs, supported this view by stating that surveys conducted in 2005 showed that “While experiences of sustainable return or successful resettlement were negligible amongst those in hiding, ... significant rates of sustainable resettlement were ... identified after forced migration into relocation sites.” (TBBC, 2005:52) From this statement, moving to a relocation site would appear to be a much better idea than remaining ‘in hiding’. However, the report counts anyone who has ‘re-established a livelihood’ as ‘sustainably resettled’ (ibid.:52); a highly questionable definition, particularly when the same report describes the conditions in relocation sites as follows:

“Restrictions on movement outside of relocation sites vary, with travel passes for between a day to a week generally available for purchase from SPDC military commanders ... single day passes are often not long enough to enable people to return to their homes and fields. Apart from the fundamentally coercive nature of population movements into SPDC relocation sites and the loss of property as a result of displacement, possibilities for resettlement and reintegration are also restricted by limited livelihood options. Limited access to suitable agricultural land results either from relocation sites being located close to towns, adjacent to SPDC army bases where lands

¹⁵ The EC-organised ‘Burma Day 2005’ conference in Brussels in April 2005 was widely criticised for inviting only known SPDC apologists and excluding any critics, with the apparent intent of translating the ICG pro-engagement recommendations into EU policy. In the UK, DFAIT then organised the secretive ‘Wilton Park’ conference on September 4-6, 2005, which regime critics suspected had similar intent toward British policy. (Irrawaddy, 2005a)

¹⁶ The ICG report claimed to be published in ‘Yangon [Rangoon] and Brussels’, but ICG has no presence at all in Burma; its Burma researchers are permanently based in Brussels, and the report was written there.

have been confiscated to support the livelihoods of soldiers, or due to population density and barren soil. Proximity to SPDC bases results in orders to work without compensation, taking time away from earning an income, as well as demands for payment of arbitrary taxes at irregular and short notice.” (TBBC, 2005:28)

It is doubtful whether life under these conditions would be defined by many villagers as ‘sustainable resettlement’, even if they have found a way to scrape out a living. Yet the TBBC report advocates seeking a “sustainable end to displacement” by engaging “national authorities” among others (ibid.:52), and opposes any restrictions or conditionalities on aid to international organisations working through the state (ibid.:61), though admitting that these organisations do not generally raise specific human rights and protection issues with the government (ibid.:63). Though the report draws on the testimony of villagers, its entire analysis is rigidly based on the Guiding Principles and international categorisations of displacement, bending the villagers’ statements to fit these frameworks. This demonstrates how even with access to detailed information from villagers themselves, their voices are easily drowned out by the interests of the sovereign state if international frameworks are given precedence over local perceptions.

There is no question that aid to state-controlled spaces, even to relocation sites, can save lives and benefit people in the short term, if adequately monitored.¹⁷ However, the nature of relocation sites needs to be understood before blindly channelling aid there. As shown earlier, Karen displacement is a fluid process and people generally do not stay in relocation sites for any length of time; the lack of access to land and livelihoods leads to hunger, forcing SPDC authorities to relax restrictions, which in turn allows most people to escape these sites within a year. Most move back to their home areas, or to villages where relatives can help them find a livelihood. The relocation site is progressively abandoned, though it may be repopulated by the next wave of forced relocation a year or two later. In this sense, the only positive characteristic of relocation sites is their lack of sustainability, which eventually frees villagers to leave. If aid is channelled to these sites this will make them much more permanent. The state will gain a vested interest in keeping the site active so the aid will continue to flow, and will increase the military presence there to prevent the departure of villagers and to ‘protect’ the aid and aid workers. The aid organisations will gain a vested interest in presenting the site as a sustainable solution and showing that no human rights abuses occur there – possibly to the extent of covering up human rights abuses which do occur. Populations in the site will become aid dependent, and this dependency will combine with the military presence to make it much harder for them to leave the site. Meanwhile, the aid will legitimise forced relocation processes and even provide the state with an incentive to create additional forced relocation sites to attract more assistance. The state’s aim of bringing the villagers under control and separating them from their land would be achieved. The existence of villagers who choose to continue evading state control by remaining in the hills would tend to undermine the legitimacy of the sites, so the state and the international organisations would probably choose to label them as people with political connections, ‘rebels’. This will make it easier for the state to send armed columns to confiscate their lands, destroy their villages and round them up. In this way, what begins as aid to save the lives of displaced villagers can easily become a means to destroy their struggle for local sovereignty, bring them and their land under control of a predatory state, and subject them to poverty, forced labour and other human rights abuses for the foreseeable future.

However, the discourse in favour of aid to state-controlled spaces is already affecting the routing of aid resources. Funders and operational agencies including Swissaid and Médecins

¹⁷ There are serious doubts about whether most organisations working in SPDC-controlled areas adequately monitor their aid, though this is the subject for another discussion.

Sans Frontières have closed down operations along the Thai-Burma border to facilitate their entry into Rangoon. Following upon the abovementioned ICG report and the pro-engagement Burma conference in Brussels sponsored by the European Commission, the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) announced that it is quadrupling its humanitarian aid to Burma¹⁸ – most of it to go through a newly-opened ECHO Rangoon office¹⁹ to UN agencies and international organisations like ICRC, with some of it almost certainly ending up in forced relocation sites.

Alternatives

Villagers have already developed effective survival strategies for evading, mitigating and resisting human rights abuses by the state and other actors, and one thing that emerges from interviews is the incredible courage, and often surprising degree of success, with which they deploy these strategies to retain control of their land, livelihoods, and lives. However, the militarisation of their areas is increasing at a rapid rate, and their suffering increases with it. Each year hundreds of Karen villagers are killed by the Tatmadaw and thousands more by disease and other causes in the forests and relocation sites (KHRG, 2001:175-185). Refugees arriving in Thailand report that after surviving as IDPs for years, they can no longer survive the intensifying Tatmadaw campaigns of destroying crops, landmining fields and building military access roads. Resistance forces are now too weak in numbers and arms to provide much protection (Christian Aid, 2004:6). As one villager expressed it, “If there is no help we are in trouble. ... If our leaders and the other countries help us then we can stand. If they don’t help us, it will be too hard for us to stand.” (KHRG, 2001:169) Note, however, that he is asking for help in their effort to make a stand, not help which ignores that stand and forces them to submit to state authority. This requires increased consciousness and acknowledgement of the villagers’ struggle, from outside but also among the villagers themselves, and grassroots empowerment to retain local sovereignty.

In recent years some initiatives have sought to help displaced Karen villagers without undermining their survival strategies or their resistance. Most of these are small local Karen organisations which were established to covertly deliver food and medical aid to Karen IDPs by bringing it across the border from Thailand. The rugged terrain, lack of roads and fear of detection allows only small quantities of rice, basic foods, medical and school materials to be taken from Thailand on foot by small groups, who must evade SPDC Army camps and landmines on the way. Access to many areas is only possible with a KNLA military escort. Assistance to IDPs far from the Burma-Thai border can only be delivered in cash form, making monitoring of results difficult. Moreover, many donors who are willing to work in Tatmadaw-controlled areas with armed Tatmadaw escorts refuse to give aid to Karen areas using Karen military escorts. These issues create difficulties in raising funds. This assistance has saved many lives and livelihoods (Lanjouw et.al., 2000:238), but logistical and resource limitations currently limit it to sporadic support for a small percentage of the hundreds of thousands of Karen IDPs.

This covert aid approach grew out of IDP calls for help, and frames the problem based on local perspectives. Karen and other local assistance groups began by providing small-scale assistance and requesting resources from NGOs working in Thailand, some of which responded. Villagers are not required to be ‘displaced’ to receive assistance, they need not come out of hiding, nor are their political connections or identities questioned. The relief teams, predominantly displaced Karens themselves, report back on vulnerabilities and needs

¹⁸ From US\$2.4 million to US\$9.6 million (Irrawaddy, 2005b).

¹⁹ Opened on December 6, 2005 (Irrawaddy, 2005b).

expressed by villagers and responses are adapted to these as possible. This aid is admittedly political. It relies on KNLA forces for intelligence and escort, it transmits information on human rights abuses to the outside world, and it provides information and resources to villagers to help them resist forced relocation and assimilation. However, because it is seen as violating principles of ‘neutrality’ and state sovereignty, resources are hard to obtain and it must remain covert, not openly acknowledged by the donors involved. Its scale is therefore insufficient as yet to benefit the majority of villagers. If it could expand to reach more people, it could help shift the political balance by strengthening the ability of villagers to survive without submitting to state control.

Another initiative is responding to requests by displaced villagers for human rights education. After gathering human rights information among Karen villagers for over a decade, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) saw these requests as an opportunity to help villagers strengthen their strategies for resisting human rights abuses. The organisation’s Karen field researchers have recently begun organising human rights workshops in villages. Instead of beginning from international human rights norms, these workshops begin by probing the villagers’ perceptions about human rights, then comparing these to international norms. Next, the villagers are asked to discuss the strategies they already employ to prevent, avoid, mitigate, and resist human rights abuses. These are then compared with strategies used in other villages, and those present are asked to brainstorm on ways to strengthen these strategies, then assign responsibilities among themselves for trying the new ideas. These can be entirely new strategies or very small enhancements to strategies they already employ – for example, several villages setting up a system to support each other with food or shelter in times of need; allocating rotating responsibilities for village guard patrols which have thus far been conducted on an *ad hoc* basis; or village leaders agreeing to always go as a group when they have to deal with SPDC officers. The results are totally dependent on the ideas of the villagers and the local context. This is more a matter of catalysing local action rather than giving ‘aid’ in a conventional sense. The hope is that it could catalyse a progressive grassroots empowerment; as new ideas are tried and a few of them prove effective, the villagers become more conscious of their own strength, and progressively move from *ad hoc* survival strategies to a more self-aware ‘emancipation model’ (Lieten and Nieuwenhuys, 1989:11) of survival and resistance. Once such a process begins it would be difficult for any armed actor, including Karen resistance forces, to stop or control it. Yet this process does not aim to compete with Karen resistance forces and structures; merely to help strengthen the villagers’ own voice such that no armed actor could ignore it, which is crucial if villagers are no longer to be marginalised in a ceasefire context. Where this could lead is entirely up to the villagers involved – which is precisely the objective.

‘Neutrality’ versus solidarity

The examples above demonstrate the stark difference epistemology makes to responses. For Karen villagers, ignoring or deploring the political role of their survival strategies strengthens the state while undermining their struggles to retain control of their land, livelihoods, and lives. In Burma, the cry of ‘humanitarian neutrality’ is used by those who believe humanitarian aid requires closing your eyes to the context, turning off your judgement – and working only in state-controlled areas. This paper argues that helping villagers requires instead a more engaged judgement – first listening to villagers, understanding their relationship to the context and their political involvement, acknowledging your own political role, and looking for ways to help them strengthen their position vis-à-vis more powerful actors, including the state. As the examples above show, there are ways to do this which do not require an end to the armed conflict or a change in the political situation.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

In the past decade much has been achieved in raising the global profile of internal displacement, establishing norms and seeking appropriate ways to respond. Yet the benefits to IDPs on the ground remain questionable. With a few specific exceptions, Stavropoulou (1998:531) notes that “the human rights situation of the internally displaced has not improved significantly”, while Deng writes that the “quality, coherence and scope” of a suitable international response remain “far from being achieved.” (Deng, 2004:12) International interventions in IDP situations worldwide frequently fail to assist or directly harm IDPs because they ignore local perspectives and misidentify the ‘problem’, ignore or deplore local identities, agency, and political and social dynamics, and seek solutions by working through oppressive states or international military intervention (see Duffield, 2002:93; Stepputat and Sørensen, 2001:788-789; Fagen et.al., 2001:52). Many analysts blame this on poor coordination or political interests, and call for improved collaboration and accountability among UN agencies and international NGOs.²⁰ While these factors certainly play a role, this research suggests that the core problem lies in how internal displacement has been defined and delimited to begin with.

The prevalent state sovereignty-based framing of internal displacement is reflected in the Guiding Principles, most of the literature, and international responses to particular situations. This begins from the assumption that Westphalian sovereignty is universal, and defines internal displacement as spatial dislocation within a sovereign state. Where armed conflict exists, it is assumed to be a major cause of displacement even when displaced people themselves locate the causes elsewhere. IDPs are seen as passive bystanders who flee combat zones to safer regions where they become wholly dependent upon relief and protection by others. The state is the primary duty bearer in caring for them, and if it is unwilling or unable then international actors have a responsibility to intervene; if state approval is not forthcoming, militarised intervention is seen as justified. Internal displacement is to be resolved by ending hostilities between armed combatants and “return, resettlement and reintegration” of the displaced (UNOCHA, 1998:10).

Rather than use international definitions and norms to study the Karen ‘case’, this research began with the Karen perspective - their identities and worldview - then used this to study their perceptions and experiences of displacement and their responses to it. This revealed a very different picture of ‘internal displacement’ which contradicts the core assumptions of state sovereignty-based frameworks. Karen hill villagers see themselves not as subjects of the Burmese state, but as non-state people struggling to retain local sovereignty within traditionally non-state spaces. Along with much of Burma’s population, they are in conflict with a militarised state that seeks to assimilate and regiment them. By declaring itself the absolute owner of their land, adjudicator of their livelihoods, and supreme authority over their lives, the state has effectively declared war on them. Armed conflict is only one end of the spectrum of this conflict; part of the context, not the whole. Displacement rarely involves fleeing armed clashes; most often it results from human rights abuses which support a state strategy to extend territorial control into non-state spaces. The SPDC deploys battalions to round up villagers and bring them under control, while villagers deploy their local mobility and survival strategies to evade and resist. Flight and displacement are weapons they use in this struggle, rather than symptoms of weakness or surrender. Through their displacement they retain control over their own land and livelihoods, remain close to their villages, and

²⁰ See Deng (2004:21), GIDPP (2002:10-11), Phuong (2002:513-515), Natsios (1996:79), Taylor (1995:113-114), and Griffiths et. al. (1995:81-82).

avoid the forced labour, extortion and other abuses suffered by those living in state-controlled spaces.

Displacement is experienced as a fluid, ongoing process in and around the home village. It creates vulnerability more by separating people from socio-cultural connections than by spatial separation from 'home'. Villagers attempt to mitigate its effects by maintaining community networks, mutual support, education and religion even when in the most dire circumstances in the forest, focusing on needs at higher levels than mere physical sustenance. They monitor the movements of SPDC forces and mobilise their links with resistance forces to protect themselves and their livelihoods. When it becomes too difficult to continue evading state forces, many move to state-controlled villages and forced relocation sites, but for most this is only a temporary strategy until they can return to non-state spaces. Even when in state spaces, they deploy strategies to avoid, mitigate and resist human rights abuses, for example by evading forced labour, hiding food supplies, and collectively deceiving military officers. The state focuses most of its military operations against villages and villagers not simply because they are seen as supporters of the armed resistance, but because in the eyes of the state the villagers *are* the resistance – they are the main obstacle to the state's regimentation of land and population. The armed resistance is only one end of the spectrum of the state-society conflict being played out in Burma.

In such a context any intervention is political, whether it works covertly with the villagers or overtly with state approval. Claims of 'humanitarian neutrality' ring hollow, particularly as they come primarily from actors who refuse to work in non-state spaces. Every decision on where to work, who to work through, who should receive assistance and what form that assistance should take has an impact on the state-society conflict. The choice of epistemology – whether to approach displacement issues from a perspective driven by international norms and definitions or to begin from the perspective of the villagers themselves – affects whether the intervention is more likely to strengthen the state or the villagers, as was illustrated above using several examples.

UNHCR plans a programme for return and reintegration of over 120,000 Karen refugees from Thailand to areas where displacement is still occurring, on the assumption that a KNU-SPDC military ceasefire is sufficient condition for the 'return' of refugees and IDPs. UNHCR has negotiated this exclusively with the Burmese and Thai governments, completely excluding villagers and non-state actors. This approach sees 'return' and 'emplacement' of displaced people as the solution, 'ceasefire' as the only precondition, and the state as the lead operational actor. The infrastructure provided would strengthen SPDC control, state militarisation would probably increase in the target regions, and oppression and displacement would therefore continue but with a veneer of international legitimacy. The agency of villagers and their struggle to resist assimilation would be undermined, bringing them under the direct control of a regime they have resisted thus far. Other international organisations are now discussing the possibility of providing humanitarian aid to the SPDC's forced relocation sites. Although this could save some lives in the short term, it would also legitimise the sites and increase their sustainability, whereas until now it has been their *lack* of sustainability which has allowed villagers to escape back to their land and livelihoods. The state would gain a vested interest in militarising the sites while the aid organisations would have an interest in presenting them as 'sustainable resettlement'. Forcibly relocated villagers would more easily be subjugated, while those choosing to remain on their land and evade the state could more easily be labelled as 'rebels', thereby delegitimising their struggle against state assimilation.

Coming instead from the villagers' perspective leads to very different responses, based on their expressed needs and aimed at strengthening their existing survival strategies. Two examples of this are the covert relief and medical aid delivered to villagers by local Karen groups, and workshops to help villagers seek stronger strategies to resist human rights abuses. Both of these initiatives grew out of Karen villagers' specific calls for assistance. Both are admittedly political, and do not demand that villagers be apolitical bystanders to their context. Though limited in scope and capacity, these programmes help many villagers to continue surviving without undermining their resistance to state control. Instead, they actually seek to help the villagers strengthen their ability to retain control of their lives, livelihoods and land in their own way, regardless of whether this occurs at the expense of the state or other armed actors. The increasing military might of the Burmese state, the accompanying weakening of resistance forces, and the Tatmadaw's systematic targeting of civilian villages all make it particularly important for villagers to have this strength and a stronger voice to accompany it if they are not to be further marginalised.

While approaches based on state sovereignty and international frameworks seek refugee and IDP management within a sovereign state, the village-led approach responds to locally expressed needs and respects local control over land and livelihoods. Ironically, however, the state-based approaches are likely to find international support because they fit prevailing frameworks for resolving displacement; whereas the village-led approach is seen as political and an intrusion on state sovereignty, and therefore remains covert, small-scale, and under-resourced.

The potential for a KNU-SPDC ceasefire makes these issues particularly relevant and urgent. In Burma, ceasefire negotiations only address the interests of armed actors without confronting the militarisation which creates oppression and displacement, and efforts to 'return' villagers to fixed villages where they can easily be exploited by state and other forces under a ceasefire would be little different from present SPDC efforts to confine them in relocation sites. Supporting instead villagers' survival as they resist state assimilation strengthens their position vis-à-vis the state, other armed actors, and the international organisations they may have to deal with under a ceasefire, and can lead to forms of grassroots empowerment which are necessary if villagers are to influence the root causes of displacement, retain control over their land, livelihoods and lives, and have a say in their political future.

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