Networks of Noncompliance: Grassroots Resistance and Sovereignty in Militarised Burma

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Kevin Malseed
Advisor, Karen Human Rights Group
Program Fellow in Agrarian Studies, Yale University

"There seemed not the ghost of a rebellion anywhere; only the annual attempt, as regular as the monsoon, of the villagers to avoid paying the capitation tax."

- George Orwell (1934), *Burmese Days*

"They can't call us to go [to state-controlled space] 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 villager (KHRG 2001:77)

In the mid 1990s, working on human rights issues with Karen villagers in Burma, I began to notice something while translating written order documents sent to villages by the military regime demanding forced labour and enforcing restrictions. Very often, an order was followed in subsequent days by another, and another, reiterating the demand, complaining that the village had not complied, expressing greater exasperation and more violent threats as the days passed. In other words, these villagers who could be killed and have their homes burned for the slightest noncompliance by a military with complete impunity, were being consistently and brazenly disobedient. Suddenly, what villagers had been telling me in interviews made more sense: their survival in apparently impossible circumstances, their determination to retain claims on their land, and their adeptness at undermining most of the military's attempts to take over their lives and livelihoods. It also explained the Burmese military's violent targeting of Karen hill villagers, often avoiding armed resistance forces to attack civilians in what I began to realise was a furious struggle over sovereignty and control.

The Burmese military, the *Tatmadaw*, has been accused of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, even genocide for its systematic destruction of over 3,200 villages in the past twelve

years (TBBC 2008), systematic destruction of food supplies, rape as a weapon of control, point-blank shooting of civilian women and children, and other crimes in its efforts to bring hill villages under control, into state-controlled spaces where they are treated as "a free labour pool to be exploited by the military as needed" (Fink 2001:123). Ignoring the villagers' side of this struggle, however, denies their agency and results in their exclusion from the political processes required to change their situation; in conflict resolution, only armed actors are typically invited to the table, even when the conflict is between state and society.

This paper attempts to confront this imbalance by examining repression through resistance. It also grew from an increasing unease at relief and development processes in Burma, which exploit the villagers' apparent voicelessness by speaking 'for' them using foreign frameworks. These actors can strengthen the military junta's control over villagers in the name of helping them. Thus far, their reach has been limited by the regime's paranoia of their independence; but seeing how rural people in other countries have been bulldozed by foreign agendas makes me fearful of what could result if the political landscape changes and outside agencies flood into Burma. The signs thus far are worrying.

The discussion below will focus on the Karen, an ethnicity comprising perhaps ten percent of Burma's fifty million people, because of my experience working with and among them over the past sixteen years with the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), but it will place this within a broader Burma context. As a caveat, this paper is a work in progress which could at some point become something larger. As such, I have tried to incorporate a wide range of ideas for comment by readers. My apologies if in places, particularly the last part of the paper, this appears as overambitious, or if some arguments seem only partly developed due to lack of space.

Context

In Burma[1] population figures are politically contested, but there is widespread agreement that it is ethnically diverse. The Burmans of the central plains and valleys probably make up 50-60% of the population, with the rest divided into twelve to fifteen major ethnicities with many

[1] Burma was renamed 'Myanmar Naing-Ngan' by the ruling military junta in 1989. This name change has been rejected as illegitimate by the leadership elected in 1990 (but never allowed to form a government), and as assimilationist by most ethnicity-based opposition groups; this paper therefore retains 'Burma'. 'Burman' refers to the dominant ethnic group, while 'Burmese' refers to their language and the nation-state.

subgroups. The regions outside the central plains are dominated by these non-Burman ethnicities, each concentrated within loosely identifiable regions (see Figure 1). The Karen and Shan are the largest such groups, with the Karen numbering between 4 and 7 million out of Burma's total of 50 million, concentrated in Karen State and Pegu, Irrawaddy and Tenasserim Divisions.[2] Over eighty percent of Burma's population, including Burmans, is rural and agrarian.

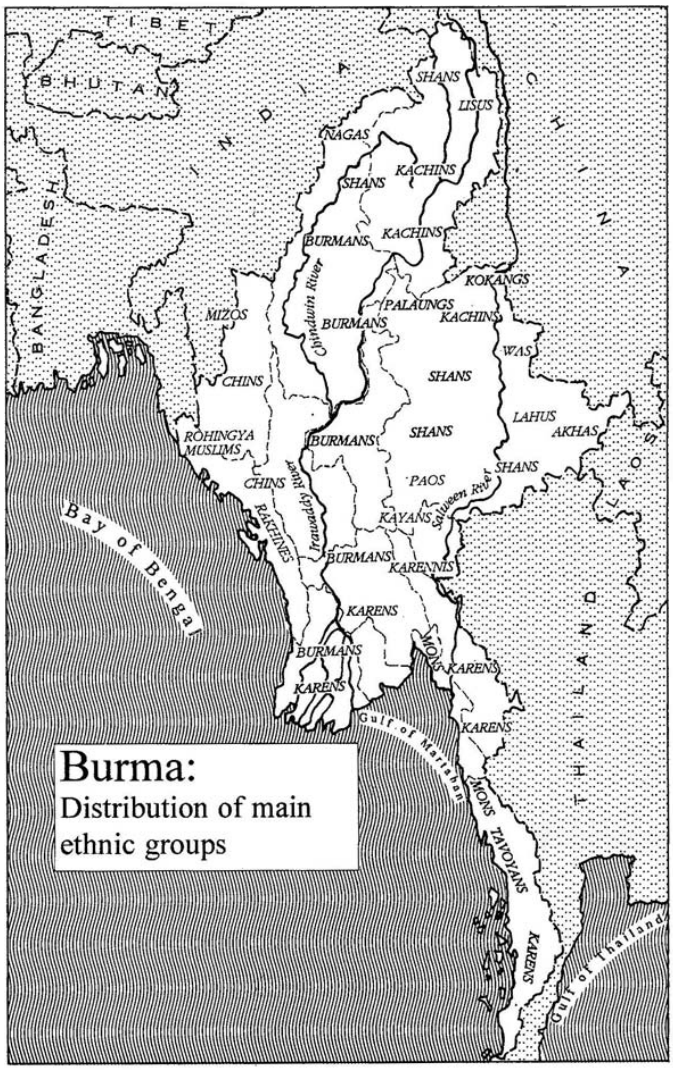

Figure 1. Source: Smith (1994:51)

[2] State censuses have set Karen population at "between 2 and 5 million, whereas Karen nationalists claim between 7 and 12 million." (Cheesman, 2002:203). The current regime claims the population is almost 70% Burman with the remainder divided among 135 so-called ethnic 'races', but does this by counting people with Burmese-language names as 'Burman' and classifying every small subgroup as a 'national race' in an apparent attempt to exaggerate Burman dominance while dividing the remainder into numerically insignificant polities. For a discussion of the state's political manipulation of census figures see Smith (1991:30).

These days most people find it difficult to imagine a world not divided up into territorially defined states, but this is actually a very recent phenomenon (Howitt et.al. 1996:13). In Burma, Scott (1998:185-187) has described how precolonial states consisted of royal courts controlling and taxing a sedentary population within a small radius of 'state space', surrounded by much larger areas of 'non-state space' which lay beyond central control; the best a regime could hope for from non-state spaces was to neutralise them, exact tribute from them, or capture farmers and slaves from them through periodic military forays. Most Karen people lived in these 'non-state spaces'. Unlike the Shan, they had no princedoms so they posed little threat to the Burman kings. Karen in the hills frequently travelled to lowland markets to trade, but otherwise they "primarily lived in small social units and had no involvement with the plains dwelling peoples"; while closer to state spaces, "valley-dwelling Karen periodically sought refuge in the Irrawaddy delta or in the mountains along the Siam and Arakan borders" to escape onerous taxation and forced labour (Hayami 2004:35-36). When the kingdoms sent Armies they evaded them as they could, sometimes got killed or enslaved, sometimes moved higher into the hills or paid 'tribute' to be left alone. Lowland Burmans considered Karen groups as forest people (Bryant 1996:39), often treating them with "unconcealed contempt as an inferior breed, the 'wild cattle of the hills'" (Cady 1958, cited in Hayami 2004:36).

It was British colonialists who first defined 'Burma' as a geographic space in the mid-19th century. Christian missionaries and colonial authorities, finding Burmans uncooperative, were keen to encourage the formation of non-Burman ethnic identities, and with their encouragement the Sgaw, Pwo, Bwe, Pa'O and various 'Karenni' groups began to identify themselves as part of a larger 'Karen' people (Buadaeng 2007:75; Cheesman 2002:203). Central to this identity are a "sense of oppression at the hands of their neighbors" (Keyes 1977:51) and self-characterization as "oppressed, uneducated and virtuous" (Cheesman 2002:204). In Karen folklore, the hero is often an orphan who overcomes the odds to achieve "victory over persons wielding political power" (Hayami 2004:176). In order to evade oppression and survive in non-state spaces, Karen social structure had developed a strong egalitarianism differing from their more hierarchical neighbours (Hayami 2004:15,27). They run their sovereign affairs at the village level. Village leaders are chosen by consensus, their authority is not absolute or hereditary and if they become overbearing they are likely to wake up one morning to find all their villagers gone (Hayami 2004:27; Marshall 1997:143). Hayami notes of the Sgaw Karen term *gkaw* (land) that

> Although the same term *kàu* [*gkaw*] is used for countries such as *kàu Jâu Tâe* (Thailand) or *kàu Peu Zö* [*gkaw p'yaw*] (Burma), for the Karen, *kàu* does not designate a political unit. There are no indigenous Karen polities, permanent leaders, nor ritual units above the community level. For Karen, the community referred to as *zi* (or *hi*) is typically the largest autonomous unit, although a parent community and its offshoots often form a cluster [*gk'ru*, or village tract]. … A community constitutes the basic ritual and moral entity that grounds a Karen person's sense of belonging. (Hayami 2004:140-141)

Within villages, people's identities largely revolve around connections to the land and subsistence rice farming. Ties to the land are both material, as an essential component of survival, and spiritual. Traditional Karen animism is based around forces residing in all things which must be appeased (Marshall 1997:210-211), beliefs which have been partially assimilated into local Buddhism and Christianity. While many Karen people live in plains areas, practicing irrigated rice agriculture and constantly interacting with Burmans and others through markets and state hierarchies, even they relate to a perceived Karen heartland in more remote forested areas, where people live in smaller villages of 5 to 100 households, practicing rotational swidden rice cultivation and more focused on subsistence and barter. Such forested hill areas are commonly perceived as a homeland, a source of livelihood and a sanctuary from politically stronger forces (Bryant 1996:39). 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.

With the creation of a Karen identity, Karen nationalism came into being: "Burmese nationalism and Karen nationalism each emerged during the colonial period. For decades, they confronted each other politically, attempting to enlist as allies powerful agents such as the colonial government, missionaries, the Japanese occupation government during World War II, and the leaders and organizations of other ethnicities and political ideologies." (Buadaeng 2007:86-87) While encouraging Karen identity formation, however, British colonial authorities "pointedly refused to entertain the idea of a separate Karen state. On the contrary, colonial rule clarified

the territorial limits of a Burma[n]-dominated Burmese state. Hitherto fuzzy frontiers were replaced with precise borders that spatially defined 'Burma' – a political entity sanctioned by international law. … As the new political contours of the region were mapped, the Karen found themselves under the jurisdiction of states over which they had no control." (Bryant 1996:33)

When independence came in 1948 the new state controlled by Burmans was keen to adopt colonial-style sovereignty and militarily extend its control over this new and bigger sovereign territory. Enter the civil war, as groups all over Burma took up arms (which they had learned from the British) to defend the local sovereignty of non-state spaces against state encroachment. By the 1970s the *Tatmadaw* (state military) was trying to fight twenty to thirty regional and ethnicity-based resistance armies at a time, plus a large Communist insurgency (which metamorphosed into an ethnicity-based Wa army in 1989). This civil war was used to convince Burmans to 'circle the nationalistic wagons' against the unthinkable evils of either an ethnic takeover or federalism, and as an excuse for the military to seize power in 1962 – power which it still holds today. However, most ethnic armed groups were not particularly interested in replacing the Burmese state, but in ejecting the Burmese military from their home areas so villagers could continue to practice local sovereignty as 'non-state people'. Drawn from the civilian populations, these resistance armies were only the extreme end of a spectrum of civilian resistance against state control. Any resistance group that began acting too much like a state was soon likely to find itself, like an overly authoritarian village head, facing mutinies and fractures.[3] Karen people still refer to the Burmese nation-state as *gkaw p'yaw*, literally 'land of the Burmans', and people still speak of 'going down into Burma'.

Of course, the Burman and other peoples living in central Burma found military rule not to their liking either, so the military quickly found itself confronted with an uncooperative population even in the Burman heartland. Like all military regimes, it responded by ratcheting up its repression of civil, political and economic rights, leading to a situation where urban and rural Burmans were almost as badly off as their non-Burman peers in remoter areas. As the economy, which had been the most vibrant in Southeast Asia in the 1950s, spiralled downward (Fink 2001:32-33), the regime found itself facing increasing unrest even in the cities, culminating in mass demonstrations in 1975 and 1988 which it brutally crushed, killing thousands (Lintner

[3] This led to the 1994 mutiny against the KNU/KNLA's entrenched bureaucracy and the formation of the DKBA in 1994. 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.

1990). This pushed Burman pro-democracy forces into engagement and alliances with ethnic resistance forces, leaving the regime with very little constituency beyond the officer corps and its business cronies. The current regime, calling itself the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), continues to expand the army to extend its sovereignty and intensify control through repression, but has difficulty finding voluntary recruits so it press-gangs people in the streets, many of them children. Morale is low, desertion rates are high, but the Army continues to expand and extend its reach, even though its soldiers are mostly driven by fear and hunger (HRW 2007). Meanwhile, large parts of Burma are still controlled by ethnic armed groups, the majority of which have agreed to 'ceasefires' with the regime since 1989 (HRW 2002). In Karen-populated regions of southeastern Burma, the main armed group is the Karen National Union / Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA), still in low-intensity armed conflict with the SPDC. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and several other smaller Karen splinter groups have entered ceasefires with the SPDC and sometimes work as proxy armies against the KNU/KNLA. The SPDC conscripts most of its troops in central Burma, but the Karen groups rely on local civilian support and recruits, sometimes voluntary, sometimes coerced (HRW 2007). Though grossly outnumbered and outgunned,[4] the KNU/KNLA survives by local civilian support, but more importantly by civilian non-cooperation with state forces (Malseed 2008). Most families have immediate or close relatives in the KNU/KNLA ranks, which have downsized and become predominantly voluntary since 1995. Civilian support is also predicated on the KNU's health and education programmes, its fight against state encroachment, and its ongoing actions to protect displaced civilians, though it is also criticised for taxation and occasional forced recruitment. The DKBA has a smaller support base, largely because it has alienated many civilians through its heavy demands for forced labour, extortion and forced recruitment; it seldom protects civilians against state predation, and its cooperation with the regime, though tense and reluctant, is seen by many as incompatible with the oppositional aspect of Karen identities. Other armed groups in Karen regions are small and localized, work with the regime and focus much of their energy on extortion and business.[5]

Even in apparently state-controlled regions, this control is often limited to the roadways and garrison towns, and walking just 300 metres from a roadside can place you in non-state spaces where state control is between tenuous and nonexistent. The *Tatmadaw* dares not move

[4] The *Tatmadaw* Army numbers approximately 350,000, the KNLA 3,000-5,000 (HRW 2002:19,121).
[5] This is drawn from my field research between 1991 and 2007; supporting interviews can be found in KHRG reports since 1995, at www.khrg.org.

around such areas with columns of less than 200 troops, and when it does the villagers and armed resistance groups like the Karen National Liberation Army disappear into thin air, only to reappear once the column passes.

Repression

The *Tatmadaw* continues to expand and establish bases throughout rural areas nationwide, including areas where there is no armed resistance (Selth 2002:35-36, 165-166). These bases radiate power over the surrounding villages, imposing restrictions on the activities and movements of civilians and extorting resources, crops, and labour, using human rights abuses as mechanisms of control. Skidmore uses the term 'deterritorialization' to refer to the SPDC's attempts to inflict fear and thus control by imposing itself into every sphere so people feel they no longer have any sanctuary and must submit (Skidmore 2004:14-16). This occurs on the physical plane, through placing soldiers on urban street-corners and *Tatmadaw* camps surrounding every rural village; on the spiritual plane, by spreading the word that there are 'military intelligence monks' in the *Sangha*[6] and by usurping *Sangha* authority in forcibly defrocking dissident monks; on the temporal plane, by making sure that villagers are ordered to do so much forced labour that they have insufficient time left for their own work; and on the economic plane, by demanding enough food and money to wipe out people's savings and force them into hand-to-mouth survival. The *Tatmadaw* and local SPDC authorities demand forced labour, food, resources and money to support their operations, build state infrastructure and enrich military officers and civil officials, but abuses are also used to engrain state-society hierarchy, such as pointless forced labour moving stones back and forth (Fink, 2001:121), summoning village leaders daily to military bases for no reason (KHRG 2003:231), or using rape as a means of dehumanisation (Belak, 2002:63).

A typical village in rural Karen State may have to deal with two *Tatmadaw* camps within a few hours' walk, plus the SPDC township authorities further away. These channel their demands to the village head, who is responsible for allocating the burden among the villagers. From the township authorities the village receives monthly orders for multi-day rotating shifts of unpaid forced labour on road maintenance, and regular demands for extortion money; while each *Tatmadaw* camp might demand that the whole village come out one day per month to carry

[6] The association of monks. The 'Three Gems' of Buddhism providing spiritual refuge to the faithful are the Buddha, the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (Skidmore 2004).

rations from the roadhead to the camp, plus regular rotational shifts of forced labour as camp messengers, servants, and porters, seasonal forced labour growing crops to feed the soldiers on land which has been taken from the village, regular supplies of building materials to 'maintain' the camps (but actually for the officers to sell for profit), and regular supplies of food, alcohol, cheroots and dry goods. Travelling outside the village requires a military pass, and many villages are forced to fence themselves in – ostensibly to 'keep out rebels' but actually to contain the villagers when the soldiers come on raids to pillage and capture forced labourers. Village leaders are under standing orders to report any visitors or opposition activity, and failure to comply with this or any other demand is punished by arbitrary detention and torture until they can be ransomed. Repeated insubordination results in threats to burn the village and forcibly relocate the population into forced labour 'relocation' camps sometimes called 'peace villages'.[7] People cannot comply with so many demands at once, so children are sent to fill forced labour quotas while adults work the family fields. People sell off livestock and other forms of savings to pay bribes to get out of forced labour. Eventually there is nothing left to sell, and they face displacement or arrest.

Where villages are difficult to reach, noncompliant, or considered subversive, the *Tatmadaw* orders them to move to Army-controlled garrisons along roadsides, where they lose access to their land and are provided with nothing, while being used daily for forced labour. Since 1992, forced relocation has grown from a means of neutralising non-state spaces to a means of controlling their populations and land, and from a local military tactic to a policy of depopulating entire regions. The *Tatmadaw* sweeps villages, shelling them without warning, then storming them with small arms fire; the houses are looted, any civilians found are killed or taken as porters, and the houses are burned. The crops and food supplies are destroyed, fields are landmined and orders issued that any civilian seen in or around the village is to be shot on sight (see KHRG 2007b; KHRG 2006b). Local organisations have documented the destruction and dispossession of 3,200 villages throughout Burma since 1996 through this type of unilateral *Tatmadaw* action (TBBC 2008). It is important to emphasise that this destruction and displacement has not occurred in the crossfire of combat; civilians are not 'collateral damage', they are the deliberate target, and there are usually no armed resistance forces around when the villages are destroyed (Heppner 2006). In fact, the armed conflict is very low-intensity, limited to the occasional resistance ambush. The *Tatmadaw* usually avoids confrontation with armed opposition, preferring to attack civilians and then report to headquarters that they have

[7] See Karen Human Rights Group reports 1992-2008 at www.khrg.org. On 'peace villages', see KHRG (2000).

'engaged the enemy' (KHRG 1997). Even though the civilians evade them (as I will discuss below), the killings, rape, torture, destruction, and forced labour associated with all of this is so extensive that it has been categorised as 'crimes against humanity' by Amnesty International and others.[8]

Expanded *Tatmadaw* presence and operations have been backed up by laws established in 1974 that cede control over all land to the state (Hudson-Rodd et.al. 2003). At present,

> The State controls all land. Farmers have rights only to cultivation, which household members can inherit if permitted by the authorities … 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)

In most areas the state has decreed that villagers must grow paddy as the dominant crop and must maximize output; those failing to do so have been stripped of their land rights and/or jailed (Hudson-Rodd et.al. 2003). Production increases have been attempted through forced double- and triple-cropping schemes, which often fail when corrupt officials steal the required fertilizers and money for irrigation infrastructure, leaving villagers to pay quota penalties at harvest time (Thawnghmung 2004:1; 156-157; KHRG 2007a:43-45). Though the regime claims to have abolished in 2003 its paddy procurement system, which forced villagers to hand over roughly 20 percent of each crop at well below market prices (Fujita and Okamoto 2006:9-10), Karen villagers in most areas say that this has only resulted in increased *ad hoc* demands on their harvests by local military officials.[9] Military and civil authorities routinely confiscate land and demand uncompensated labour whenever required for roads, *Tatmadaw* bases or *Tatmadaw* supply farms (KHRG 2007a:20; 57-58). Trade in rice and other commodities, though no longer tightly controlled by state monopolies, is still restricted by controls on moving goods in 'sensitive' areas like the Karen hills, and by the high costs of bribing officials and checkpoints to move produce to market.[10]

[8] www.amnesty.org, accessed 27/2/08.
[9] Author's interviews with Karen health workers, September 2005, unpublished.
[10] See World Food Programme, http://www.wfp.org/country_brief/indexcountry.asp?country=104, accessed 17/9/2007.

These policies have placed the state in direct conflict with villagers' traditional systems of land management. In Karen villages, some land around the village is communal while cropping land is held under traditional tenure within families; land allocation and disputes are handled by village elders, and if they occur between villages they are dealt with at meetings of elders within the 'village tract', a unit of several villages in an area. A 2005 study among Karen hill villagers found that only 23 percent held any government-issued documents granting them some form of tenure over their land, while over 70 percent held land rights through customary ownership or the permission of village elders (TBBC 2005).

State decrees on land use, forced cropping programmes and crop seizures combine with forced labour, extortion and other demands to violate what Scott (1976) called the "subsistence ethic". He defines this as peasants' concern first and foremost with having enough to live on, including what is needed for food, clothing, shelter, and social and spiritual obligations "to be a fully functioning member of village society" (1976:9). As a result, people delimit justice or injustice based on what they are left with, rather than what is taken from them; a tax that varies with their production and always leaves them enough can be perceived as more just than a lower tax that is fixed but in some years leaves them short. Everyone has a "right to subsistence" (ibid.:11), and thus when times are hard people are expected to help one another and the state is expected to make allowances. This combines with what Scott calls the "norm of reciprocity" (ibid.:167), through which peasants accept authority as legitimate to the extent that its demands are balanced by its obligations to help in troubled times; this is most commonly characterised in patron-client relationships, where peasants willingly give surplus in good times in return for the security of knowing that the patron, or state, will help in hard times. Together, the subsistence ethic and the norm of reciprocity form part of the peasant's "moral heritage", which is the shared sense of just value and norms within a community. This sets expected patterns of exchange and the just values of exchange and behaviour that, when violated, lead to a commonly-felt "moral outrage" (ibid.:167).

My observations in Karen regions suggest that this way of thinking grounds village conceptions of human rights. Villagers are not adamantly opposed to all forms of state taxation or predation, but primarily to those which threaten their subsistence. The theft of a cookpot can thus be seen as a worse human rights violation than an incident of torture, depending on the circumstances. Forced labour, as an abuse that steals people's time from activities needed to sustain the family, consistently tops the list of village grievances, surpassing even killings. The state's

economic predations are accepted if minimal, but are listed as serious abuses when the same demands occur in times of shortage; and it is the combined effects of ongoing and repeated demands and repression that most often leads to vulnerability, hunger, and death. The key to village perceptions of human rights often lies in the ways that forms of repression combine, rather than in specific abuses; and this key can also help us to understand the response strategies that people devise.

Responses

Human rights reports and other writing on Burma usually limit themselves to documenting the repression described above and the suffering caused, without exploring the many ways in which civilians respond and resist. This can lead to assumptions that people living in repressive situations lack agency or political identities, that military power is incontestable except by armed struggle and that civilians are apathetic bystanders; which in turn leads to the exclusion of village voices from negotiation processes. Taking a different approach, Michel Foucault insists that power relations by definition include the possibility of resistance; otherwise the relationship is not power, which seeks to influence behaviour, but simply administration (Foucault 1994:339-341). He suggests that we can understand power best by starting from resistance, "in using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used. Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies." (ibid.:329) He also contends that an abstract 'Power' as such doesn't really exist, power only exists in the form of 'power relations'; "Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action" (ibid.:340) While the prevailing view of the situation of civilians in Burma is that through territorial sovereignty the State has Power and the civilians can do little about it, a Foucauldian perspective suggests that the State only has territorial sovereignty to the extent that it can enact a power relation in any particular place, and that doing so automatically entails resistance. Thus territorial sovereignty becomes not a given, but merely an objective of the state which it has a great deal of difficulty producing and reproducing in many places, particularly non-state space. Violence against civilians is not power, but a confrontation of strategies which the state seeks to transform into a power relationship; "every strategy of confrontation dreams of becoming a relationship of power" (ibid.:347). To properly understand repression in Burma, then, it is important to study how people respond to it.

We can begin with the urban context. During the mass urban uprisings in 1988, the state pulled the police and the military off the streets, sure that chaos would ensue so they could step back in to 'save the nation'. Instead, communities formed committees that maintained order, while monks directed traffic and controlled food distribution. The state then opened the prisons to flood the cities with criminals, many of whom they paid to create chaos. But the civilian committees arrested troublemakers, and still there was no chaos. Finally, the Army had no choice but simply to *proclaim* chaos, and deployed to mow down thousands of people with machine-guns, arresting and torturing thousands more to stop this chaos and declare the nation saved (Lintner 1990). But the community networks which had been formed, and the memory of them, did not die – they simply vanished underground. Today, most people's resistance takes the form of the covert and everyday – evading taxes, misreporting resources and family members, grumbling and spreading jokes about junta leaders, spreading subversive news and rumours, leaking information to outside agencies (Fink 2001; Skidmore 2004). People bribe officers and civil servants, undermining their authority. Civil servants drag their feet; even the junta's propaganda writers pen statements and stories *so* outlandish that they are patently unbelievable. State news reports of infrastructure projects celebrate the "voluntary contribution of labour" by tens of thousands (with exact numbers given) of farmers, which provides activists with detailed statistics on forced labour. The text of pro-democracy pamphlets is reprinted in state media in articles condemning them as 'subversive'. It is difficult not to smell subversion in all of this.

Then there is the semi-covert, or semi-overt. With any verbal political expression punished by long prison terms, in 2006 word circulated that wearing a white shirt on Mondays stood for opposition to the junta. The state then prohibited white shirts on Mondays. Then people gathered at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon on Tuesdays, wearing yellow and praying silently for political prisoners. The state sent thugs to douse them with hoses. In 2007 petitions circulated condemning the junta, and thousands signed them.[11] Here we are moving into the overt, toward the events of August-September 2007, when monks imposed religious boycotts on military families. After monks had been attacked by state-supported thugs during marches to protest the suffering brought on by SPDC economic policies, civilians began forming human chains to protect the monks' processions, and in several cases civilians armed only with sticks and kitchen knives successfully drove away Army battalions that arrived at monasteries

[11] These campaigns are reported in 'Junta warns of action against student group', The Irrawaddy, 3/11/2006 (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=6307, accessed 31/10/2007).

intending to sack them and arrest all the monks.[12] The state tried to invade the temples, defrock monks and co-opt the *Sangha* in an act of 'deterritorialization' (Skidmore 2004), to exert fear and control by infiltrating spiritual and spatial sanctuaries, but found itself blocked by walls of civilians. Even after the monks' processions were violently crushed, new forms of semi-overt resistance continued to appear: stray dogs ran city streets with junta leaders' names hung around their necks, soldiers frantically trying to catch them while onlookers laughed. People imposed mass boycotts of forced-attendance pro-state rallies, or attended but sat inert and expressionless, frowning resolutely at the ground instead of shouting slogans.[13] Urban civilians have seized the offensive in this struggle of contending strategies, with the state on the defensive, forced to respond to every new strategy of subversion. Recent reports from Rangoon claim that some civilians are now campaigning for rejection of the SPDC's proposed constitution in an upcoming referendum, by appearing on the streets in T-shirts that simply read 'NO'.[14]

In rural areas, orders and demands are coursed through village heads. The frequency and scale of these demands from several sources at once make it almost impossible for any village to comply with all of them while still producing enough to survive, so village heads must be adept negotiators in order to evade some demands while bringing others down to manageable levels. Many orders from military units and civil authorities are sent in written form, and extensive sets gathered by the Karen Human Rights Group in different regions (KHRG 2003; KHRG 2002) demonstrate that village heads routinely ignore these demands until they are reinforced by threats of violence; demands for forced labourers, money, or food, for example, are followed up in subsequent days by a second, third, even fourth and fifth notice summoning the village head to explain why the demand has not yet been met, and gradually becoming more threatening. Village heads interviewed on this topic speak of strategies such as ignoring the first request, pretending absence from the village, feigning illness, sending a spouse to report, claiming that the village was busy with a similar demand from a different *Tatmadaw* camp, or pleading poverty and inability to comply. While complete evasion and noncompliance can be dangerous, it is common for demands for twenty forced labourers within 24 hours to be 'obeyed' by sending five forced labourers a week later, plus a bottle of rice whisky. This, of course, greatly weakens the military's ability to establish and maintain infrastructure and other

[12] See 'Residents surround security forces at raided monastery', Democratic Voice of Burma, 27/9/2007.
[13] See 'Protesting dogs are now on the regime's wanted list', The Irrawaddy, 12/10/2007 (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8998, accessed 31/10/2007), and 'Unlikely resistance in Burma's Mandalay', BBC News, 25/10/2007 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7060424.stm, accessed 31/10/2007).
[14] 'T-shirt campaign promotes No vote', Democratic Voice of Burma, March 26 2008. http://english.dvb.no/news.php?id=1085, accessed 31/3/2008.

mechanisms of control or to effectively administer the countryside; meanwhile, control is further undermined by officers falsely reporting completed objectives rather than admit that they were unable to coerce villagers into timely compliance. The motivations given by village heads for this noncompliance tend to straddle the boundaries between the need to survive and moral perceptions of just versus unjust demands – reflecting the "subsistence ethic" already discussed.

Village heads routinely underreport the village population, acreage tilled, crop harvests, population of draught animals, and other resources in order to reduce compliance with material demands, while villagers position hidden storage barns in nearby forests to conceal food and resources and as a cache in case they have to flee state control. They devise rotating duty systems to spread the burden of forced labour; asset pooling systems requiring larger or wealthier families to subsidise poor or smaller families to cope with extortion and forced labour, and even communal fishponds to finance the bribing of *Tatmadaw* officers (KHRG 2006c). Sometimes village heads evade demands by telling officers that other authorities made the same demand, even if they didn't, thus pitting officers against each other in turf battles. In 2005-06, *Tatmadaw* forces in central Papun district chose to bring in bulldozers and heavy equipment to rebuild a road rather than using manual civilian forced labour as they normally would, because village heads had convinced them that if excessive road labour was demanded the villagers would flee into the surrounding hills, leaving the officers without a population to tax (KHRG 2005a).

Another strategy, which in effect turns the regime's 'deterritorialization' back on itself, is to make sure that officers know their actions are being reported to armed resistance groups and human rights organisations, thereby making officers fear that the opposition knows their every move, and that they could one day face charges. In 2006, for example, a village headman in Papun district was under standing orders to report any strangers to the local *Tatmadaw* camp. When a Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) researcher visited his village to conduct interviews, he waited until the interviews were done before going to report. On the researcher's next visit, the headman described how the officer had been quite upset, demanding to know, 'What did you tell them?' To which the village head replied, 'Well, we were afraid of them so we told them everything you've done to our village.' The officer was clearly flustered by this, but couldn't

legitimately punish the headman because he was reporting as ordered.[15] Yet he had effectively served warning to the officer that every abuse he commits will be reported to the outside world. Some officers appear to modify their behaviour in fear of this. In another interview, an elderly woman told a researcher that for the first time, a group of soldiers had walked past her house without trying to steal her chickens, so she called out, 'Aren't you going to steal my chickens?' They answered, 'No, grandmother, you'll report us to the BBC.'[16]

Negotiating power is augmented by appointing elderly women as village leaders. Exploiting the reverence for mother-figures in Burmese cultures, these women routinely scold or challenge the young military officers who give the orders, knowing that their sense of power and authority becomes confused when confronted with a mother-figure. In written orders to villages, it is very common for *Tatmadaw* officers to address village headwomen as 'Mother' and refer to themselves as 'Son'.[17] In late 2005, for example, a village headwoman in Papun district received an order to send several villagers as 'guides' for a military patrol. Knowing that this meant forced labour as human minesweepers, she went to the base to confront the officer. She related afterward that she had told him, 'You know I cannot ask my villagers to do this. I cannot ask them to walk in front of your troops to step on mines.' He apologised and said there was nothing he could do; 'It is my duty and these are orders from above, you will have to do it or your village will be punished.' She said, 'Then take me instead. I will go. But on one condition. I'm afraid of mines, and I'm sure you're afraid of mines too. So let's walk in front together, hand in hand. If I step on a mine or you step on a mine, we'll both die together. I can be content with that.' The officer eventually responded, 'I'll think about it, go home Mother and I'll tell you my decision later.' The demand didn't come again.[18] She knew that the officer had impunity to kill her on the spot or detain her indefinitely without charge, and that if he did so the villagers could do little but plead or pay for her release. Yet she knew him sufficiently and was confident enough in her maternal authority to gamble against this possibility. Such examples are remarkably common.

Village heads act as tacticians and coordinators of village noncompliance, with widespread consensus and support because villagers are fully aware of the necessity and justice of evading

[15] From author's interview with the KHRG researcher, 2007.
[16] From author's interview with KHRG researcher, 2007.
[17] For examples see KHRG (2003) and KHRG (2002).
[18] Author's interview in November 2005 with a Karen human rights researcher who had interviewed the headwoman.

excessive demands; thus is created the "supportive subculture" that Scott (1985:35) noted was crucial to the sustainability of everyday peasant resistance. As explained by a woman villager in southern Karen State,

> Village heads … are elected by the villagers themselves. They are usually women, because men cannot survive the repeated beatings and punishments by the soldiers. Therefore, nobody wants to be a village head throughout the whole region. Some villages operate a rotation system for the position, and change the village head as often as every two weeks or every month. As a result, even 17- or 18-year-old girls sometimes act as village heads, but they can control the villagers and will be obeyed because everyone knows that they are being instructed and guided by the village elders, usually monastic leaders, and so they never misuse their powers. (KHRG 2006a, 68)

Some villagers choose to evade the state completely. Two weeks before the October 2005 rice harvest, over 300 *Tatmadaw* soldiers came up the Shwegyin River to force Karen villagers to move to state-controlled areas to the west, so they could live 'peacefully' under the jurisdiction of the Burmese state. About 1,000 villagers fled their villages as the troops approached. On September 19th the column shot dead a villager they spotted in the ricefields, then began shelling Ler Wah and nearby villages with mortars. The 35 Karen resistance soldiers based nearby harassed the column briefly and then withdrew as the *Tatmadaw* targetted the villages, tearing down and burning houses, slashing the villagers' winnowing trays and puncturing their water tins to prevent them living there. For the villagers this was nothing new: the Army first burned their villages in 1975, causing them to disperse into smaller settlements hidden in the forest where they keep working their land but disappear whenever the columns come, usually once or twice a year. They prefer this to the forced labour and repression they say they would face under state control.

This time they headed uphill to the east, the men to a nearby hillside where they could monitor the Army's movements, the families higher into the hills. While adults quickly built shelters, teenaged students were dispatched to retrieve rice from hidden storage barns. Schoolteachers leaned blackboards against trees and resumed school for younger children right away to keep up a sense of community continuity. Village elders contacted Karen resistance forces to obtain information and a few homemade landmines for use in defending their hiding places should the

Army attempt pursuit. The Army never came up the hill, probably afraid of ambush, and withdrew a month later without having captured a single villager. People immediately returned to their fields along the river to begin their overdue harvest, while Karen resistance forces swept the villages and fields for any landmines left behind by the departing column.[19]

Meanwhile, villagers living in twenty state-controlled villages just to the west – where the Ler Wah villagers had been ordered to go – were being forced to maintain a military access road without pay. Through their organized flight and evasion, the Ler Wah villagers had not only retained their harvest and access to their land, but also evaded unpaid forced labour for the state. This insubordination came at a price: it was the second time their land had been attacked in 2005, and in early 2006 state troops came and burned their villages yet again. The *Tatmadaw* then established a permanent post in the area, creating a food crisis because it became much harder for people to work their land, and causing many villagers to head for refugee camps in Thailand; but large numbers remain there, monitoring *Tatmadaw* movements while encamped in the forests to continue farming and to exert their continuing claim on their lands.

To drive such people out of the hills, the *Tatmadaw* landmines fields, snipes at villagers harvesting in open fields, seeks out and burns hidden food caches. But people persist – if their fields are mined, they switch to small clearings in the forest. They harvest at night, with Karen soldiers as sentries. They grow cash crops, then contact sedentary villages in state-controlled areas to arrange covert one-day markets deep in the forest where they can barter forest products and cash crops for rice, oil, salt and dry goods. After a few hours, these markets disappear as though they had never existed (KHRG 2006a:80-81). They switch reliance over to root crops that can be left in the ground for years without rotting, and they forage in the forests. They send out unarmed patrols to monitor *Tatmadaw* movements, and they swap intelligence with Karen resistance forces. They exploit their connections to armed resistance groups for protection and information, while retaining self-identification as 'villagers' rather than combatants; but as villagers engaged with their context, not bystanders to it. They refer to themselves not as 'refugees' (*bgha gkaw bgha gkeh*, suggesting people who have fled), but as '*bgha khay gk'mwee*' – literally, people who move/run around the area. Note here the 'area' means within easy reach of their village, implying continued access to both the village and their

[19] This account from author's interviews with villagers and soldiers in the area, November 2005. See also KHRG (2005b).

lands. Displacement is thus more temporal and psychosocial rather than spatial. Temporally, villagers move in and around the village site as *Tatmadaw* units flow in and out of the surrounding area; while the psychosocial aspects are described by Tha Lay, himself a Karen refugee:

> it is not just material things. Each time you move you lose something … 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)

In response to this, displaced Karen villagers tend to expend great effort continuing primary schools and religious practices while hiding in the forests, working to preserve a sense of community and continuity which defies conventional ideas that displaced people reduce their existence to bare survival. Displacement has increased the need for women to take on leadership roles in the family and the community, and greater involvement in traditionally male activities like building and trading; as a result they have "transcended many traditional restrictions … and thereby altered local understandings of appropriate gender roles" (KHRG 2006a:6). On the negative side, this has increased their exposure to landmines and violent abuse by roving forces, making it an empowerment with a heavy price.

Even the SPDC refers to these people collectively as '*ywa bone*', literally 'hiding villages' (KHRG 2000), suggesting not spatial displacement, but villages playing hide and seek with the state. The SPDC calls them to come and live a 'peaceful' life under the state (in 'peace villages', the SPDC term for relocation sites and garrison villages), but displaced Karen villagers often state very different needs when interviewed: 1) food so we can continue evading them; 2) weapons/radios to defend ourselves or stay ahead of them; and ultimately, 3) we need the SPDC authorities and military to leave our area. As stated by displaced Karen villager David Loo, "People can't go back because the SPDC has taken all the land. If the SPDC does not withdraw, the villagers cannot go home."[20]

[20] 'Karen refugees *[sic]* hope UN will put pressure on Myanmar', Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA), 26 May 2006.

When the state orders you to move to an area they control, it means in effect that you have succeeded in keeping your *own* area out of their control. This is not displacement as usually understood, but more fluid, moving around your home area playing cat and mouse with the military while keeping close enough to work your land and access your hidden food caches. It is not 'panic displacement' but 'strategic displacement'. Most outsiders think of displacement as a sign of weakness, as people's final desperate option, but in this context if you are weak you obey orders, you go to the relocation site; if you are strong you evade, you hide in the forest. This is why Michael Adas described such forms of displacement as "avoidance protest", noting that it is "perilous and thus more rarely adopted by hardpressed peasants, usually when everyday defences are not sufficient to hold elite exactions at a tolerable level" (Adas 1986:68-69). It requires coordination, mutual understanding, resourcefulness, and incredible resilience, and it has been successful (I would argue more successful than the armed resistance) in denying the hills to the Burmese state.

While the September 2007 demonstrations were happening in the cities, the *Tatmadaw* was destroying crop fields in the upper Yunzalin valley in Karen State, establishing permanent posts to make it impossible for villagers to continue hiding in the area. At a meeting, even Karen resistance officers told local village leaders they should abandon the area. But the leaders of four villages refused, saying, 'If we move to another area the KNLA cannot secure it for us, and the SPDC will make bases around our villages so we won't be able to come back.' They said they would rather stay on their land and flee when necessary, and that they were banding their villages together under the name '*Gher Der*' ('Defend [our] homes'). Their statement at the meeting reveals the strong sense of injustice that motivates many village response strategies, taking them beyond rational self-interest or 'coping strategies' and into the realm of resistance:

> We don't want to go. If we are told to go to another place we won't go. If we are told to go to a place under SPDC control we also won't go. Whether we live or die, we will fight back. They burned our villages and our paddy barns, and also ate our livestock and killed our villagers. The SPDC is a bad government, so we won't go to stay under their control and we won't work with them.[21]

[21] Information and quotes translated from field report of KHRG researcher who was present. Village names are omitted to protect the villages concerned.

By decreeing that civilians should not get involved in politics and seeking to control their livelihoods and activities, the SPDC tries to cast everyone as what Agamben termed 'homo sacer', people included in society only by being excluded from it, whose lives are to be administered and taken from them on the whim of the state with no possibility of resistance or protest (Agamben 1998). People can resist by exposing their categorisation as 'homo sacer', offering up their bodies for slaughter (as the monks did in September 2007) and thus forcing the state to choose between killing them or answering to the issues they were raising; "faced with the naked life of the subject, sovereign power has a choice: it can either respond politically or it has to reveal the relations of violence on which it depends. Whichever route it takes, it can no longer conceal its violence under the pretence of politics." (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004:17-18). Violence usually comes into play when a power relationship has been unachievable in other ways (Foucault 1994:340); thus, state violence in different regions of Burma is inversely proportional to the degree of state power over members of the population in that region. Just as displacement is a form of resistance and not submission, violence against civilians reflects not control but an absence of control, a will to power rather than power itself.

In this paper I have used state and non-state spaces as ideal types, but the examples already presented show that neither of these is fully achievable. Rather than mutually exclusive categories, state and non-state spaces form two ends of a spectrum, with reality always falling between. A pure state space is an aspiration of the state, which the examples show is never wholly achieved (like territorial sovereignty); even in the SPDC-defined 'white areas' of the cities, the state is not fully in command. Similarly, the state can penetrate non-state spaces with military columns at any time, and has administrative structures in these places; people evade the columns and the administration, reflecting an aspiration to non-state space, even moving out of the way and reappearing when the column is gone, but it is not a pure non-state space. It is also important to note that 'space' here refers not only to geographic space; a state or non-state space can be a temporal space, such as a place, institution, community or family which may be military-controlled this week but not next, or a place where people disappear while the column passes through, then re-emerge from the forest. It can be a social space, such as a planned group gathering or 'jungle market', or even a psychological/spiritual space, particularly important in urban areas, where people can live under apparent state control without complying; for example, people attending forced-attendance state rallies who turn these into non-state spaces by calling out opposition slogans when called on to shout out in favour of military rule. The state

uses 'deterritorialisation' as a strategy in this struggle over spaces, but never fully succeeds.[22] Thus, calling something a state or non-state space merely represents who has the upper hand for the moment in a specific case, while the tug of war continues.

This struggle is enacted as a broad state-society conflict to which most people are responding in their own ways – and it has created an implicit consensus in support of noncompliance, a "supportive subculture" (Scott 1985:35). Many of these responses could be classified as what Scott (1985) named "weapons of the weak", forms of everyday resistance carried out without direct confrontation. To this we can add the mutual support networks which do not resist in themselves, but which villagers use to evade the state or mitigate the effects of abuses. Anderson (1994) includes these in formulating his "political ecology of the modern peasant", noting that villagers responding to vulnerability tend to combine rational self-interested behaviour with community-oriented behaviour. The lines between the two, and the lines between resistance and self-preservation, are usually unclear, and both serve to undermine state control over non-state spaces. "The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual, autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and inflect the visible facts of overall domination, and whose purposes and calculations, desires and choices resist any simple division into the political and the apolitical." (Foucault 1980, cited in Turton 1986:36) On the ground, the specific intentions of any response strategy become secondary to whatever effects that strategy has on the state-society struggle over lives and livelihoods.

Such a conflict cannot be represented through the conventional dichotomy wherein soldiers carry out 'armed conflict' while civilians submit and suffer as disengaged bystanders or 'collateral damage'. It is a society-wide conflict: the vast majority resent the current state and each resists its predation in whatever ways they feel able. Anderson has noted that civilian responses occur "along a wide spectrum, from quiescence to rebellion and including collective nonviolent tactics in between these two" (1994:5). This fits the Burma context, though I would argue that in Burma, apparent "quiescence" is usually misleading, more likely to be what Skidmore refers to as "veneers of conformity" (Skidmore 2004:7); as noted earlier, in rural areas complete quiescence or compliance can be incompatible with survival. At the most subtle end of the spectrum, people resist simply by *not supporting* – they don't report things they see, don't give as much food as they could, and perhaps exaggerate their resource poverty. Then there are those who actively undermine – they hide resources, ignore orders, fill road embankments

[22] Leach (1977) has described state and nonstate areas and peoples as mutually symbiotic and mutually defining.

with sticks when doing forced labour, give information to human rights groups but not to the military. Further along the spectrum are those who evade all state control, choosing displacement over state spaces. There is active material support for armed groups, and finally, at the extreme end of the spectrum, active participation in armed resistance.

Rather than portraying civilians as being on the margins of the armed conflict, it would therefore be more accurate to say they are at the heart of a state-society conflict, while it is the armed combatants who are at its margins; yet they still claim identity and rights as civilians. I would argue that the main reason that SPDC and *Tatmadaw* are so weak in non-state spaces is not armed resistance, but civilian noncompliance. Whether people are living under nominal state 'control' or in a condition of strategic displacement, theirs is a struggle for sovereignty, not just over territory but sovereignty over people's lives and livelihoods; sovereignty as Agamben meant it in his use of the term "sovereign power" (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004:15-17).

The Outside Response

Despite their well-developed response strategies, many villagers throughout Burma are on the brink, struggling to survive and dying in thousands from human rights abuses and their ripple effects. Malnutrition and treatable diseases are endemic, and villages are disintegrating as poorer farmers flee the ever-increasing demands for forced labour and money (Bosson 2007). In the words of a Karen villager in the hills adjacent to central Burma, "Along the 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) Estimates of internal displacement run between one and four million nationwide,[23] villages continue to be destroyed and hundreds of new Karen refugees arrive in Thailand each month saying they could no longer survive the cat-and-mouse game with the military. The humanitarian crisis cries out for international help, but how can outside actors engage with the context already described?

[23] See Lanjouw et.al. (2000:237), PWF (2003:1), GIDPP (2003:1), TBBC (2005:24).

Relief and development

Relief and development aid to Burma tends to be divided into two (often contentious) camps: assistance 'via Rangoon' (via state spaces) and assistance 'across borders' (via non-state spaces). These could be more generally seen as engaging the state to gain access to the people, and circumventing the state to access the people.

'Engage the state to access the people' is the norm among UN agencies, big international NGOs, and most governments. Some of these are diplomatically mandated such that they can only operate this way, and it is the only way to reach many areas of central Burma. To do this requires a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the military regime, in which you agree to comply with restrictions which the junta regularly alters. At present these include hiring staff only from the junta's approved list, only going where and when they allow, working only with state-sanctioned organisations, and being accompanied by 'Liaison Officers' from Military Intelligence every step of the way (at the agency's expense). Agencies complain that they are often denied access to their project sites to monitor their projects and are forced to hand over resources to state-controlled entities who may or may not deliver. Some, including Médécins Sans Frontières (MSF)-France and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have withdrawn or slashed operations, stating that the restrictions did not allow them to work according to their minimum standards (MSF 2006; ICRC 2006). The UN Global Fund to combat malaria, tuberculosis and HIV withdrew its 98.4-million dollar project in 2005 on this basis, but donors quickly rallied to replace it with the '3D (for three diseases) Fund', raising almost 100 million dollars in aid without any specific plan of how it could be efficiently spent on the ground.[24] Throughout 2007 the SPDC has increased restrictions on humanitarian access and local hiring, and in March 2008 new restrictions decreed that agencies could only implement rural HIV programmes in conjunction with the Ministry of Health,[25] possibly aiming to divert 3D Fund money into state coffers.

Accounts from local people suggest that despite the restrictions some projects have managed to achieve positive results on issues like local water supply and small clinics; generally this has occurred when agencies have 'scaled down' to local level, engaging local people directly in

[24] See 'UN offers aid incentives to Burma', Washington Post, May 26 2006. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/25/AR2006052501939.html, accessed 2/4/2008.

[25] 'Regime Restricts More NGO Activities', The Irrawaddy, March 26 2008. http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=11125, accessed 11/4/2008.

places where local authorities are relatively cooperative. Unfortunately, large agencies often find it difficult to break up large budgets into small local projects, which require extensive local capacity building and monitoring. Meanwhile, larger-scale national level projects have regularly been implicated in land confiscation and forced labour, like the UN-funded Asia Highway, the UNDP-supported Loikaw-Aungban railway, and most other infrastructure projects (KHRG 2007a);[26] while national-level vaccination and health projects funded from international agencies but implemented by SPDC ministries often include coercion, extortion, strong-arm tactics and intimidation, above and beyond the endemic corruption and 'leakage' so normal to such projects all over the world (ibid.). Unfortunately, most such agencies gloss over these issues because it could affect operations if such information went public (Terry 2002:229), and no other outsiders are allowed access to most rural areas so the real effects go unreported. Instead, the overarching problem is recast as one of poverty, and agencies call for increased foreign investment and aid and 'humanitarian access' to larger areas of the country, without much consideration of the political context.

Agencies claim that despite the restrictions, their aid observes the core humanitarian principles of being 'neutral', 'impartial', and 'apolitical'.[27] Griffiths et.al. (1995:78) define humanitarian impartiality as "provision of relief solely on the basis of need" and neutrality as "refusal to take sides in a conflict". 'Apolitical' aid is supposed to operate independently of politics, suggesting that it can occur with no political ramifications. Handcuffed by their MOUs with the regime, however, agencies limit their operations to state spaces, in direct contradiction to neutrality and impartiality. Moreover, 'apolitical' is often implemented as ignoring the political context and possible political ramifications, turning a blind eye to human rights abuses, or requiring that assistance only go to people with no direct role in conflict or politics (creating a direct contradiction with 'impartiality'). In Burma, many NGOs refuse to work in non-state spaces because resistance forces are active there, yet have no qualms about working in state spaces where the *Tatmadaw* is in command. This is sometimes rationalised by setting or accepting limits on one's operations, then claiming neutrality and impartiality *within* those conditions, even

[26] State media reported in 1993 that "over 800,000 farmers" had "contributed labour" on the Loikaw-Aungban railway, admitted that "people are dying every day", and noted UN support (KHRG 1994). UNDP refused to answer questions on its involvement, but was eventually ordered by the donor countries on its Board of Governors to restrict its activities to local water and health projects, with no major infrastructure. In recent years, UNDP Rangoon has lobbied for a resumption of infrastructure aid, falsely claiming that it was stopped by Western economic sanctions.

[27] See 'Joint Principles of Operation of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) Providing Humanitarian Assistance in Burma/Myanmar, June 2000' agreed by international agencies in Rangoon. http://burmalibrary.org/docs3/Joint_Principles_of_Operation.htm, accessed 11/4/2008. Ironically, this document includes several principles, such as freedom of access and hiring, which directly contradict their MOUs.

when the conditions themselves violate these principles. For example, agencies agree to state conditions limiting their aid to state-designated locations or recipients, then claim impartiality without noting these qualifications. The biased application of humanitarian principles has led 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). Operating under a Memorandum of Understanding with the state in a place where most people are opposed to the state may be necessary in a humanitarian sense, but it is certainly *not* neutral or apolitical, and presenting it as such creates a blindness to its real impacts. Interventions can still be beneficial, but only by discarding the fantasy of neutral, apolitical aid can we see potential pitfalls and adapt accordingly.

In Lesotho, James Ferguson documented how the "development apparatus" acts as "an 'anti-politics machine', depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power." (1994:xv) In Burma, the call for greater "humanitarian access" by foreign agencies operating under MOUs equates to a call for expansion of state spaces, because they cannot or will not operate elsewhere. It therefore requires expanding the state's reach and hold over people who, as discussed earlier, are struggling to remain beyond that reach. Ferguson argued that behind this behaviour was the need of agencies to move large sums of money, which is most easily done through "standardized 'development' packages"; "It thus suits the agencies to portray developing countries in terms that make them suitable targets for such packages. It is not surprising, therefore, that the 'country profiles' on which the agencies base their interventions frequently bear little or no relation to economic and social realities." (Ferguson 1994:176) Former MSF coordinator Fiona Terry agrees, noting that one of the ways humanitarian workers deal with the frustrations of working in intractable situations is "reality distortion" to create "false illusions of success" (Terry 2002:226). This can include convincing oneself that humanitarian neutrality, apolitical aid and impartiality are possible in a context like Burma, or planning as though the government can be relied on to act in the public interest despite evidence to the contrary. In Rangoon, Skidmore (2004:43-46) has described how fear, paranoia and self-censorship tend to infect even expatriates who have little to fear from the regime. Combined with the pressure to 'distort reality' for agencies handcuffed by restrictive MOUs, it becomes easier to understand the origins of the rosy success stories coming from some international agencies.

Distortions also extend to representations of Karen villagers as people living in 'border areas', an inaccurate euphemism for non-state spaces, many of which are closer to the central plains than to any border. The state imposes this marginalising language through its 'Programme for the Development of Border Areas and National Races', among others, and it is also common in relief and development agency language, differentiating events 'in Burma' (i.e. state spaces) from events in 'the border areas', which are automatically categorised as remote and peripheral (and, significantly, where outside agencies operating through Rangoon are not permitted access). Ironically, those using this language would probably insist that Karen villagers are 'Burmese' citizens subject to the Burmese state, a double standard that reinforces Burmese authority over people like the Karen while simultaneously denying their right to a separate voice or a different reality by placing them 'on the border'. Even agencies working with refugees in Thailand, who are not bound by SPDC restrictions, consistently use this language.[28] In Thailand, Buadaeng describes how foreign donors have tried to "reduce the nationalist content of the curriculum" in Karen refugee camp schools, insisting that "any Karen history suggesting antagonistic relations with the Burmans be glossed over." (2007:90) This extremely political intervention has been performed in order to declare educational aid to the camps 'apolitical'.

Ongoing calls for "humanitarian access" via Rangoon to Karen and other internally displaced people (IDPs) are based largely on moral imperatives laid out in the UN-adopted Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.[29] These frame internal displacement as a spatial phenomenon to be resolved by "emplacement" (Malkki, 1995:515) - fixing people to locations where they can be controlled and cared for by a sovereign state with outside help. This ignores the use of displacement as a state-evasion strategy and threatens to undermine the survival of the very people it aims to help (see Heppner 2006). The negative effects of aid interventions on IDPs and villagers in state-society conflicts when their multiple (including political) identities and resistance strategies are ignored has been well documented in the Sudan (Duffield 2002), the Peruvian Andes (Stepputat and Sørensen 2001); Colombia (Fagen et.al. 2001), Thailand and Laos (McCaskill 1997:42-46), Lesotho (Ferguson 1994), Rwanda (Terry 2002), and elsewhere.

An example that brings together many of these issues concerns relief to forced relocation sites. These are garrisoned state spaces where the *Tatmadaw* tries to gather and confine hill people from non-state spaces it can't control, and then uses them for forced labour. The state provides

[28] Witnessed through author's participation in UN/NGO meetings in Thailand from 1992-2007.
[29] See http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html, accessed 11/4/2008.

no food or medical aid so people starve, creating a clear need for relief, and foreign agencies in Rangoon have been requesting access for relief aid (South 2006). But here it is important to understand how such sites operate and fit within villagers' strategies. Many Karen villagers have been in such sites several times and know the conditions there, so they only comply if it is impossible to evade the intense military presence around their home villages. Most sites last no longer than a year or two because people soon begin to starve; the commanders, who do not want hundreds of corpses on their hands, relax movement restrictions so people can forage. One by one, families escape and return to their home areas, by which time the *Tatmadaw* unit that displaced them may have rotated out of the area, leaving them to re-establish their village or survive in hiding nearby. In other words, people use the relocation site as a temporary refuge to outwait the *Tatmadaw* occupation of their village, until they can escape and return home; the best thing about these sites is their very lack of sustainability. As a Karen human rights researcher described in Toungoo district,

> 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 2000:18)

Aid to these sites enables the *Tatmadaw* to confine people completely without any need to forage, and provides incentive to create more such sites because some aid can always be skimmed off the top. Aid can actually undermine the villagers' possibility of escape and their strategies to evade state predation. In this context, ignoring 'politics' creates blindness to the actual impacts of relief. On the other hand, if food can be slipped through the back fence without the *Tatmadaw*'s knowledge, starvation is prevented without reducing the villagers' options; they can hide the food, pretend hunger and plead for a right to forage. This can and has been done successfully in many cases. The line between 'good' aid and 'bad' aid is seldom clear, but one important consideration is whether aid increases people's options – like food slipped through the back fence – or reduces them, like aid to the relocation site via the military. Both are political, neither is neutral. In this context, any form of action or inaction brings the outside actor into the state-society conflict.

Sneaking aid past the *Tatmadaw* brings us to the second broad category of intervention, 'circumvent the state to engage the people'. This is also political and partisan, often unabashedly so. In Burma, much of this takes the form of cross-border aid from neighbouring countries, such as relief and medical aid to help displaced villagers in non-state spaces to stay one step ahead of the state rather than flee across the border to become refugees.[30] Delivering such aid is covert and dangerous, often requiring night marches through heavily landmined mountains with armed resistance forces as escorts. While distinguishing civilians from combatants, it recognises civilian links to armed groups as legitimate survival strategies and delivers aid based on need rather than political identity. Some international donors refuse to fund cross-border aid because some of it might be diverted to resistance forces or people with political links. As a result most cross-border aid is under-resourced, supplied only sporadically and in small quantities by local organisations. Forced to be efficient, it is run by villagers and refugees themselves and tends to be more responsive to needs expressed by villagers, rather than telling people what they need. In this way it strengthens the strategies they already use against the more powerful. As in the case of aid via Rangoon, the most positive results tend to come from those initiatives that are designed and controlled at local level.[31]

Human rights interventions

If the voices of villagers are to be better heard in political and aid processes, human rights work also has a role to play in recognising their agency rather than propagating the 'helpless victim' image. To this end, the Karen Human Rights Group organises what it calls 'human rights workshops' in villages. Instead of beginning from international human rights norms, these workshops begin by probing the villagers' perceptions about human rights and their experiences. Next, the villagers are asked to discuss the strategies they already employ to prevent, avoid, mitigate, and resist the injustices they have identified. Initially many people say 'we can't do anything, we're helpless' – which is what they tell the military as a defence strategy, and what they tell relief and human rights workers who expect them to fill that role. When asked to describe how they have responded to specific problems, however, strategies begin to emerge. These are compared with strategies used in other villages, and those present are asked to brainstorm on ways to strengthen these strategies. These can be entirely new

[30] Examples of such groups are the Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD), Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), Backpack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT), and Free Burma Rangers (FBR).
[31] Similar conclusions are reached by authors writing on other contexts, such as Elias (1989) on Central America.

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 *ad hoc*; or agreements between village heads to always confront SPDC officers as a group. The results are completely dependent on the ideas of the villagers and limitations or opportunities present in the local context. This is not 'community organising' but simply encouraging local discussion on ways to strengthen or fill any gaps in what people are already doing. Once such a process begins it can become difficult for any armed actor, including Karen resistance forces, to stop or control it. The 'Gher Der' village leaders mentioned earlier had attended these workshops, but the 'Gher Der' idea was entirely their own. Many villages and displaced people are requesting these workshops, which are unabashedly political and partisan within the state-society conflict.

Transnational movements

In recent years domestic and transnational peasant movements have become more prominent on the world stage (Borras 2004). Domestic movements like Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and transnational coalitions like Vía Campesina are engaged in struggles for land and livelihood rights, "food sovereignty"[32] and rights to subsistence which resemble many of the objectives of Karen villagers; the main difference is that Karen struggles are not formally organised like these movements and have no global presence. Thus far, these organised movements have not developed policies on, nor attempted to engage, villagers in Burma and other sites of unstructured struggle (Malseed 2008), yet there is strong potential here for peer-to-peer experience sharing, education and advocacy which deserves further exploration. Solidarity is far more likely to come from peers, people who may have lived in comparable environments and faced similar oppression, than from international agencies.

Academia

Academia is also implicated in this conflict. Like development agencies, academics face a dilemma: while striving for neutrality and objectivity, they are politically vulnerable because of their need for access. Bushnell et.al. (1991) have attributed the lack of scholarly study of the origins, instruments, politics, and effects of state-imposed terror to lack of access to information,

[32] For Vía Campesina, "food sovereignty" includes the right of farmers to decide production based on local needs, without interference, rights to land access, and other factors (Vía Campesina 2008).

being shut out by states in the name of sovereignty, and scholars' failure to identify "repressive state violence and terror as phenomena that are central to the modern state" (1991:4). In Burma, these factors are exacerbated by the scholar's need to maintain the physical access upon which academic research is dependent. The SPDC has proven adept at manipulating this phenomenon by blocking academic access to most of the country, rewarding those who write non-threatening literature with expanded access while punishing others by denying visas.[33] Misrepresentations due to self-censorship are reproduced and magnified when scholars draw on each other's work and published manifestos of international agencies, often privileging these over locally-produced 'grey materials' which may present a much more accurate picture. As with aid processes, all academic work becomes political in this context, and is more likely to be useful when it recognises the implications of this reality.

Conclusion

When repression is examined through the ways that people respond to and resist it, an entirely different perspective emerges. Conventional armed conflicts become broader state-society conflicts; displacement takes on shapes that defy international assumptions, and actions of villagers that appear superficially as abject submission or desperate panic reveal sublayers of resistance and well-developed strategies. Seen in this light, 'ethnic' conflicts in Burma are not conventional rebellions by armed groups seeking to replace the state, but broader struggles pitting a predatory state against both rural and urban people. While the state seeks to enforce territorial sovereignty and totalitarian control, people disobey and resist to retain control over lives and livelihoods, and develop mutual support networks to help each other in this resistance. They are the central actors in this struggle while the armed groups, though important, are an extreme expression of it, an expression only feasible with civilian support.

[33] For example, a hand-picked group of ten scholars, led by Robert Taylor of the University of Buckingham and financed by the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, were flown in by *Tatmadaw* helicopter to attend the inauguration of the newly formed state-allied 'KNU/KNLA Peace Council' armed group in February 2007 ('Karen National Union 7th Brigade Denies Surrender to Myanmar Junta', Deutsche Presse-Agentur, March 2 2007); in preparation for the ceremony, child soldiers were forcibly recruited to inflate the group's numbers before the visitors (HRW 2007). Meanwhile, scholars and journalists who have written books criticising regime policies have often been denied visas, and Charles Petrie, head of the UN delegation in Burma, was expelled in November 2007 after signing a statement that the September 2007 monks' marches were partly a response to Burma's humanitarian crisis ('Myanmar Junta Expels Top UN Official', International Herald Tribune, November 2 2007; http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/11/02/asia/03myanmar.php, accessed 11/4/2008).

The struggles of villagers point to the need for new ways to look at human rights, conflict, displacement and other issues. This is not a romantic call to replace the modern state with local sovereignty, but for the voices of villagers to be heard regarding their views on sovereignty, its forms, and its encroachments on their lives and their subsistence ethic. Even when not articulated in words, this voice speaks clearly through their actions and their resistance. To ignore it is to undermine their aspirations, working against them and in favour of those who try to gain power over them. Villagers' struggle for control over their own lives and land deserves recognition, respect and solidarity. They are not bystanders to their context: their role is political, they are partisan and they have ideas about the future. Rather than victims, they need to be accepted as agents of change, political actors; otherwise, outside intervention can support state efforts to cast them as subjects of administration, dehumanised, apolitical, *homo sacer*.

This may sound obvious, but it is notably absent in much reporting on Burma, and particularly in statements by outside agencies claiming expert prescience of 'solutions' or 'ways forward' – usually without ever discussing these with a villager. The discussion above on outside intervention is motivated by concern that pretensions to neutrality, apolitical intervention, or scientific objectivity in a context like Burma can lead to exactly the opposite: responses that empower state control while undermining the struggle for human rights of villagers. A blindness to history, political context and ramifications makes one a blind bull in a china shop, ensuring that any political ramifications will be magnified. This can occur through development projects, but also through relief processes and even academic and human rights work.

This is not a call for an end to humanitarian aid or to the calls for increased humanitarian access through Rangoon. But agencies should realise that in such a repressive context, doing more good than harm requires scaling down to local level, not the preferred scaling-up to national level. It requires recognition of the political ramifications of aid and the impossibility of complete neutrality. Examples of such honesty include the ICRC's recent statement on Burma's humanitarian situation (ICRC 2007), and the International Labour Organization's persistence since 1997 in refusing to hand 'carrots' to the state without measurable reduction of forced labour on the ground. Finally, like MSF-France (and ICRC in the 1990s), they should accept that the most courageous action sometimes takes the form of inaction, i.e. withdrawal (Brauman 1998:192; Terry 2002). Terry argues that a primary need is to create a "humanitarian space in which the spirit of humanitarian operations will be respected. Such a space entails the freedom to forge a relationship with the people we are there to help – to listen to their stories and discuss

their predicament as the first step to really respecting their dignity. Without this connection, we reduce human beings to their biological state, defined and represented by what they lack to stay alive." (Terry 2002:242) Karen villagers and others in Burma certainly deserve better, and when Burma's political situation eventually 'opens up', it can only be hoped that they will be in a position to impose their vision of the future.

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