

Panel Presentation at "Remedies for the Survivors-Victims of Violence Against Women under Armed Conflict Situations"

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Thank you very much for inviting me to talk this morning.

My name is Paw Set Hser and I am from the Women's League of Burma currently working as an assistant researcher for the Information Documentation and Research Team.

As you may be aware, Burma has been ruled by successive military regimes since 1962. The military is in control of the country and denying people their basic rights and freedoms. Civil war has been going on for more than 50 years between the Burmese regime and the ethnic armed groups fighting for their self-determination. Under military rule people of Burma have faced systematic human rights violations.

We ethnic women who have lived in civil conflict for over 50 years have experienced unspeakable pain and loss at the hands of the Burmese military. In the civil war zones, rape is used as a weapon of war by the SPDC to oppress the ethnic women and to demoralize and destroy ethnic communities. It serves as a continuation of civil warfare off the battlefield.

Violence against women has been spreading all over ethnic states for such a long time but our women's voices have not been heard. International attention only began to focus on this issue with the release of "License to Rape" by the Shan Women's Action Network and Shan Human Rights Foundation, which detailed 173 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence against 625 women and girls in Shan State in eastern Burma between 1996 and 2001.

In March, 2004 the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) released a report "Shattering Silences". It documents 125 cases of sexual violence committed by the Burmese army in Karen State from 1988 to 2004. Half of the rape cases documented were committed by high-ranking officers, 40% were gang rape and in 28% of the cases, the women were killed after being raped.

Even though we have come up with evidence the regime is still trying to cover it up. There is a state of lawlessness in Burma. The soldiers and officers can do as they like without fear of reprisal. No action is taken against a member of the army if he commits a rape. Women are afraid to speak out about rape.

Here is one real example, which sadly is all too common:

Five of my friends and I went to a place to watch movies in the evening at about 5 p.m. On our way, we met with two of the SPDC soldiers with guns. They were returning from our village where they had been to ask for (FOOD??) but the villagers had not given them

any. Some of my friends ran away and two of us, my friend and I, were captured by the soldiers at gun point. We could not run away and they forced us to follow them. After we had crossed a river and traveled a long way, we told them that as it was getting dark we should return home. Instead of letting us go back home they pulled us deeper into the forest where we had never been at night. Deep in the jungle, at about 7pm, we saw some of our villagers coming with a monk carrying fire wood and calling our names. The two soldiers took out their knives and guns and threatened us that if we shouted back to the villagers they would kill us. When the villagers did not see or hear us, they went back. Then the soldiers tied us with rope and told us to stay with them and not to run or shout if we did not want to die. Around midnight they pushed us down on the ground and raped us. We were unable to defend ourselves as they were so big and strong. Cho Win said, "I needed to pass urine" and asked them to let me go. But they said, "you can go here, you can not go far from us". So I went to the place where I slept. Again they raped us a second time after midnight.

It caused pain and I felt such shame that I do not know how to tell how I felt. I could not move or breathe. They raped me for about half an hour because it took longer than the first time. Then it seemed that they were tired and so they slept with holding their guns. One of them slept on the ground ----. Now I thought it was a good chance for us to escape. But my friend was so afraid and she did not want to run. But I told her not to be afraid and to follow me. Then, we started run from them. I did not know the way to come back home and did not want to go the same way that we came because I know that if I ran the same way they could catch us easily. So, we ran and climbed up the mountain, went through the bushes and the valley. We did not see anything we just ran and ran. Fortunately, I saw a small light far away and I thought it must be a hut or a village. So I encouraged my friend and we ran straight towards it arriving in our about 4 am in the morning. I told my uncle and asked him to call the chief of the village to look for the two soldiers. If they left right away I told him he could catch them. But they were also afraid. Later they went to the Chief Commander and told them what happened. but the Chief Commander did not pay any attention. For my friend, she was so ashamed that she wanted to commit suicide. But her parents tried to prevent this and encourage her to live her life.

Now as for me, I went to the camp and told the doctor what had happened. They took care of me so that I believe I will be protected from any possible disease.

I remember my friend and I talked to one of the survivors and she is just blaming herself for what happened to her and said this is the last time to talk about it and asked us not to come again. Many women and girls are raped in front of their families. In two of the 35 detailed cases in the report, one woman was raped in front of her children and the other in front of her father. This is a very shameful action committed by the SPDC troops and it is difficult for women to speak out. The victim's health can be so damaged that she never recovers. Many suffer severe depression and we know of some who have committed suicide and some divorced their husbands as a result.

In order to help support the survivors, we women organizations have been trying to provide counseling services, temporary shelters and trying to reach out to as many survivors as we can.

We are also building up a team of women to give support to the survivors by providing counseling, program management, women's leadership, and other organizational skills training to enable them to work effectively with the women survivors.

We also find out what they want to do and we try our best to support them. One example is that one of the women did not want to stay with her family in IDP areas in the country and she wanted to move to a refugee camp. So, we tried to help her and we also made sure that she got access to other social assistance she needed.

Another activity we do is advocating for women locally, regionally and internationally. We are trying to bring awareness of the plight and the resilience of the women of Burma, like right now to all of you to get support and to pressure the regime to stop violence against women in Burma, and bring about social and political change in Burma.

Sexual violence of ethnic Shan, Karen and other ethnic women by the SPDC soldiers is still continuing until today, and the perpetrators go unpunished. It is evident that the military regime in Burma has taken no serious measures to improve the situation, despite the UN Commission on Human Rights adoption of resolutions each year on the situation of human rights in Burma since 1992.

If the military regime is in power in Burma and without a political solution to the issue of Burma's ethnic peoples, sexual violence and other abuses in the ethnic States will continue and women's lives will be at risk.

We believe one of the main root causes of the problem is the growing militarization in Burma. As long as the regime is still in power, the human rights situation will not improve. Therefore, I would like to urge you support our movement by writing to your governments:

- To give pressure to the regime to instate a nationwide ceasefire, and to demilitarize and withdraw troops from the ethnic states; there must be an immediate end to attacks on villagers and rape of women
- To press for tripartite dialogue, and insist on measurable progress towards democracy and national reconciliation
- To end all arms sales to Burma
- To support our programs for rape survivors and other women in crisis