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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATIONS THAT REQUIRE THE COUNCIL'S ATTENTION

Written statement^{*} submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 February 2008]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Myanmar

The brutal crackdown of the peaceful protests of several thousand people, led by monks, shocked the world in September 2007. According to reports at least 700 people were imprisoned. The regime claims that there were 15 casualties, Mr. Pinheiro, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar said that at least 31 died in the demonstrations. However, the true death toll is guessed to be higher. The “Saffron Revolution” revealed the catastrophic situation in the country and the cruelty of the inhuman regime one more time to the rest of the world.

As a result, the international community put pressure on the regime. This achieved sporadic releases of prisoners, and the junta was poised to meet UN envoys. The military government even agreed for the UN to talk to Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi who is kept under house arrest. But all of Gambari’s, the UN Special Representative, attempts to moderate the generals remained unsuccessful. Imprisonments of dissidents and monks continued, the repression of civilians is still part of everyday life. There were no talks between the government and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The public’s obtainment of information through the internet has been further constrained.

Persisting human rights violations against ethnic nationalities

For the enrichment of the generals parts of the population are coerced to do forced labour. Despite an agreement on the eradication of forced labour in Myanmar between the government and the ILO on 26 February 2007, there has been no progress concerning the issue in the country. Time and again there have been reports on how people – especially in rural areas – were forced to build streets or plantations; others were used as carriers or diggers in stem digging. Not only men and women but also more and more children are affected by this. Myanmar’s regime recruits preferably children for its army. Some reports estimate the number of child soldiers to be as high as 70,000. Forced child labour is also used in the digging for gemstones. Gemstones and noble metals like jade, rubies and gold are mined in the north, especially in the Kachin and northern Shan state. The minorities living in the area suffer greatly from the harsh actions of the military.

Sanctions by the European Union and the United Nations on the trade with gemstones have sent a clear signal but their effect remains questionable. Raw gemstones can still get into Myanmar’s neighbouring countries, be finished there and finally sold on the international market. Especially in Asian countries a great demand for gemstones has persisted so that the government receives large amounts of money through the big auctions which take place at least twice a year. In 2007, it was reported that five of these gemstone auctions took place.

Expulsions due to dam constructions

Due to the construction of dams along the Salween River the existence and livelihood of minorities are threatened. The ecological effects of the dam project are devastating, too. According to reports, two out of five dam construction projects have already been launched. At the Ta Sang Dam in the southern Shan state has already caused the forced relocation of about 300,000 people – most of whom are Shan. Their villages were

destroyed and they cannot maintain their livelihood through the river any longer. For the Hut Gyi Dam in the Karen State so far about 15,000 people were expelled by the military.

Many of the displaced persons attempt, among other things, to cross the border to Thailand. In 2007, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) identified about 76,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Due to severe human rights violations they had to leave their homes. At least 167 villages were destroyed by the military. Many fled in fear of violent assaults, rape or forced labour. The innumerable rapes, often resulting in death, committed by SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) soldiers affected especially members of the minority groups and went along with expulsion, destruction and forced labour. The military regime extended its military presence in the northern Karen and southern Karenni state to about 10 divisions. In the north-western Chin state the social and economic situation has deteriorated so drastically that presently about 80,000 Chin live as unrecognized refugees in the Indian state of Mizoram.

Palm-oil plantations are a threat

Time and again there were reports that palm-oil is planted in south-eastern Myanmar. Farmers were forced to plant palm-oil plants. Some reports claim that some 60,000 hectares are supposed to have been allocated by the government for a Malaysian palm-oil producer. In March 2007 about 40,000 hectares had been allocated already in the Irrawaddy River Valley. For this production the Burmese military also uses forced labour.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to:

- urge the government of Myanmar to free all political prisoners and to start a credible dialogue with the political opposition on democratic reforms,
- appeal to the government of Myanmar to abolish forced labour according to the agreement between Myanmar and the ILO,
- pressure Myanmar to end human rights violations against ethnic minorities, especially to stop controversial dam projects along the Salween river,
- appeal to the government of Myanmar to search for a peaceful solution to all armed conflicts with ethnic nationalities,
- urge an improvement of the situation of refugees in states adjacent to Myanmar.

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