

## **Acknowledgments**

Penning acknowledgments is another occasion where the security predicament of the bravely outspoken people in our communities and fellow activists from Burma is brought to mind with melancholic reflection. The most important contributors to the production of this report cannot be thanked personally in public under the current political conditions in and around Burma. Of course this report is part of our continued struggle to work towards the day when their names can be proudly printed with assured safety. They know who they are and we thank them wholeheartedly.

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We are deeply grateful to the Burma Relief Centre who provided the funding for the report and their ongoing foundational support for the women of Burma.

The Women's League of Burma will continue to work for political change, environmental sustainability and the empowerment of women in Burma - the three axes of positive, sustainable development articulated in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

## **A. Introduction**

This paper was prepared and written by a team of the Women's League of Burma (WLB)<sup>1</sup>, an umbrella organization of 11 women's groups of Burma in exile, formed in December 1999. This paper will be submitted to the forty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2002.

This paper reflects the voices of women from Burma interviewed specifically for this purpose by representatives of the Women's League of Burma (WLB). The aim of this paper is to highlight some of the root causes of poverty and environmental degradation in Burma, and show how this has affected women and to give examples of how women are organizing themselves to survive and create an enabling environment for political and social change, and for gender equality.

As has been emphasized in the recent World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa in August- September 2001, root causes of poverty and environmental degradation are intersectional. That is, people experience poverty for more than one reason, and these multiple reasons combine to effect negative dynamics that result in complicated and tangled circumstances that are not reducible to any one cause. Nor can they be rectified through addressing only one cause at a time. For the purposes of explaining these intersecting root causes in this paper, section C identifies the following categories: the Burmese military regime's anti-insurgency policies, the regime's 'open door' trade policy for natural resources, and the regime's exploitative and irresponsible agriculture and development policies. In section D, the impact of these various root causes will be 'unpacked' from testimonies provided by women who have experienced various combinations of these state policies.

## **Methodology**

Data used to write this paper was compiled from interviews with individual women of different ethnic backgrounds, most of whom left Burma within the last three years, from publications produced with the permission of the regime's censor board in Burma, and from research reports by human rights and environment documentation groups, as well as other NGOs and academics.

The team was unable to locate information released by the SPDC on the status of women specifically in the rural and non-Burman ethnic areas. Moreover, to date, there are no publicly available government reports from Burma concerning women and the environment.

Data for the paper was collected in January, 2002, and compiled in February, 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> Details on page 18

**B. Background:**<sup>2</sup>

**Overview**

Burma, a country rich in natural resources and mineral ores, was once one of the most prosperous countries in Southeast Asia. Its population is approximately 50 million people, with 75 % living in rural and remote areas<sup>3</sup>, and made up of more than a dozen major ethnic groups. Burma was a British colony until it regained its independence in 1948. However, civil war broke out shortly after independence between the ethnic nationalities and the ruling authorities. There was a coup in 1962, which toppled the democratic government. The military rulers assumed total control over all aspects of the government, including the economy. After a quarter of a century of an isolationist policy combined with the mismanagement and corruption of the military dictators, Burma had become one of the poorest countries in the world. In 1987, Burma had to apply for least-developed country (LDC) status with the United Nations.

A year later, in 1988, resentment against Ne Win's SPDC boiled over into massive street demonstrations across the country demanding a restoration of democracy. The military responded brutally. Soldiers fired into crowds of unarmed demonstrators. Many were arrested and thousands fled to minority areas, and to neighboring countries. Thousands of young activists also joined the armed struggle against the military.

Due to international pressure on the military regime, elections were held in 1990 and resulted in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, later to become a Nobel peace laureate. However, the regime refused to honour the results of the elections and until today maintains tight military control over the country.

Since its take-over in 1988, the regime has tried to seek cease-fire agreements with armed ethnic groups while expanding its military forces. However, its severe human rights abuses have continued to be rampant, especially in the ethnic lands where the minorities live.

The war raging against the ethnic peoples and the anti-insurgency campaigns conducted by the military have created internally displaced persons (IDPs) and caused an exodus of refugees to neighboring countries.

**Social roles and gender stereotypes**

In accordance with the Burmese saying, "Respect son as Master and husband as God", men are the heads of the household and sons are valued more than daughters in the family. Culturally and traditionally, women are expected to care for the children, and also are responsible for the general well-being of each member of the family. In the face of poverty, women are expected to sacrifice for the family first. "Good" women are rarely single; they are expected to marry and bear children. Even women exceptional in their field rarely get recognition from society. Women's maternal

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<sup>2</sup> More comprehensive details in "The WLB's CEDAW shadow report, January 2000

<sup>3</sup>United Nations Population Fund ( UNFPA) Documents: DP/FPA/MMR ( July 13, 2001)

functions are thus considered in Burma to be their only duty. However, the crucial value of maternity for the whole society is not acknowledged at all at present. Because of this, women are weighed down with the entire burden of their reproductive roles, which are expanded to include all of the private sphere duties.

The patriarchal nature of Burmese society is reinforced by the military regime, made up entirely of men.<sup>4</sup>

### **C. Poverty and Environmental Degradation in Burma**

#### **Overview**

Since 1962, the country's economy has been totally controlled by the military regime, now called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Because of their economic mismanagement, particularly in the last decade, there has been a high rate of inflation, causing prices of consumer goods to skyrocket, which has directly affected the general public. All the state policies imposed are for the regime's own political survival, and are heavily associated with human rights abuses such as forced labour, forced relocation and land confiscation. To keep tight control of the nation, the SPDC has built up the military, and to date the size of the army is more than 400,000<sup>5</sup>. By exploiting the country's natural resources through its so-called open door trade policy, and stealing agricultural produce through its agricultural policies, the SPDC has earned foreign income to spend on weapons, the armed forces and military intelligence. Overspending on military expenditure has nearly depleted the state revenue<sup>6</sup>. Increasing numbers of development projects implemented in the past decade by the regime have primarily benefited only the military and have resulted in environmental degradation and the further impoverishment of the peoples of Burma.

#### **1. Civil war and anti-insurgency policies**

Civil war between the military and the ethnic nationalities has been continuing for more than half a century. Campaigns of systematic village evacuation and strategic forced relocation to cut support for armed resistance groups have been launched by the regime to cut support for armed resistance groups. Large portions of Burma's population, who live in rural and remote areas, especially in the areas of armed conflicts, have been affected. These anti-insurgency campaigns have been intensified since 1988 throughout the country. One of the most extensive campaigns of forced relocation took place in Central Shan State in 1996, which pushed a population of over 300,000 Shans from over 1,400 villages in an area of 7,000 square miles out of their land.<sup>7</sup> Having lost their livelihood, people forcibly relocated have moved to where they can survive.

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<sup>4</sup> For details, please see "Alternative Perspectives, other voices: Assessing Gender Equality in Burma", A 1999 report of Images Asia for the submission to the 23rd Session of the Committee of the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women(CEDAW)

<sup>5</sup> In 1988 there were approximately 175,000 and update there are over 400,000.  
(Source: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/eap/8260.htm>)

<sup>6</sup> The Junta spends more than six times more on maintaining and expanding the military than on education and health combined. (Source: 1998 United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report, New York : United Nations Development Programme, 1998)

<sup>7</sup> The Dispossessed: A 1998 report of the Shan Human Rights Foundation

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A Shan woman in her mid 30, who arrived in Thailand from central Shan State in January 2002 talked about her experience of forced relocation,

'It was five years ago when our village Na Yoak was ordered to move. The whole family including my mother aged 60 had to walk to a village called Ton Hong in Keng Tong District. It took us all day. In Ton Hong village we stayed at the back yard of my husband's relative where my mother died not long after. Her legs and arms swelled badly before she died.'

Apart from impoverishing local populations, forced relocation means that they are no longer able to practice traditional methods of preserving the environment. A Shan woman in her late 30s who fled to Thailand from Murng Paw, Muse Township in northern Shan State, in 2001, talks about how her community protected the forest:

"We have systematic and traditional way of preserving the environment descended from our ancestors that communities follow and practice. We have defined certain trees for the use of firewood only and people only cut them. This has nothing to do with government programs. We had practiced this preservation program for our whole life as far as I remember and until 1986 -- the time the Burmese army came into our area."<sup>8</sup>

Now, areas of forced relocation in Central Shan State, such as Keng Tong, are rapidly becoming deforested due to logging by companies close to the military.

### **2. Unregulated Open door' trade policy**

To encourage foreign investment and trade predominantly in natural resources located in ethnic states, the so-called open door trade policy was introduced in 1988. Concessions have been sold for logging, mining, gas and fishing, which are now causing severe environmental degradation in Burma.

*Logging:* Granting of logging concessions to the army, investors and the cease-fire groups is the main factor causing extensive deforestation in Burma.<sup>9</sup> For the last thirteen years, forests all over Burma have been heavily logged, especially in the areas bordering Thailand and China. Concessions granted to Thai logging firms have left the Shan, Karenni and Karen States with no significant forests, and in Kachin State, the area on the east side of the Nmai Ka River down to Sinbo and Bhamo has been clear-cut.<sup>10</sup>

The interviewee from northern Shan State describes her land and how logging has destroyed the forest in the area<sup>11</sup>

"Our place was rich with different kinds of hard wood, and our land used to produce plenty of oil crops such as peanut, sesame and sunflower. Our hills used to look so green with trees, but now they look empty because the army ordered villagers to cut down the trees for them."

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<sup>8</sup> Interview- file with WLB (January, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> Recent data from FAO suggested that Burma's annual rate of deforestation was at 1.4 percent, over the period of 1990 to 1995, double the rate of 1973-85 estimated in early studies.

<sup>10</sup> The Irrawaddy Magazine, Vol.9 NO.8 October-November 2001, Page 15, "The War on Kachin Forests"

<sup>11</sup> Interview -on file with WLB (January, 2002)

She reveals that the army used forced labour for the logging business:

"Every village in the township took turns to cut trees for the army. The village had to give one person per household to the army to work for two weeks at a time. The villagers never got paid for anything we had to do for the army and their militia groups. Besides, we had to go and work for them with our own expense. We had to cut the trees and then carry the logs to the designated areas -- to the main road or to the army post. We also had to clear the way to carry the logs to get to the road. Those who had bullock carts used their carts to carry the logs while those who did not had to carry it by hand. The army picked them up on the trucks and sent them to China."

She mentions the change of weather due to deforestation caused by logging:

"The weather in our area used to be quite cold. In winter water even turned to ice... so cold that we had to make bonfires to get warm in winter, but now it's very hot, as the thick forests we used to have are gone."

In addition to logging, charcoal production mostly organized by the army for fuel mainly used in Burma has resulted in the rapid depletion of forests. Recently, even the state-run Myanmar Timber Enterprise MTE announced it was short of teak<sup>12</sup> for export, the second largest source of official state income.<sup>13</sup>

*Mining:* Since Burma's mining legislation was changed to allow foreign ventures or individuals up to 100% shares in mining projects in 1988, there have been 62 mining corporations operating in Burma.<sup>14</sup> These mining concessions are another major factor leading to deforestation because the trees are clear-cut in mining areas for hard infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Not only are the forests being exploited, but the invasive mining practices are wreaking havoc on rivers and surrounding areas. Although the regulations for mining were updated in 1994 and a mining law was passed in 1994, up-to-date attempts to equitably promote, protect, democratise and make safer the overall mining environment in Burma have not been seriously been made.

Since the early 1990s, ruby-mining in Loi Hseng, in Muang Shu in Central Shan State, has seriously affected local communities. A 2000 report on mining in Burma reveals how local people have been impoverished and the environment destroyed in Muang Hsu:<sup>16</sup>

"Lands and homes were confiscated. The army took control of farm paddies, and then sectioned them into plots and sold them off for excavation. Farmers became landless and jobless."

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<sup>12</sup> According to MTE figures, Myanmar( Burma): Teak production in 1970s was 400,000 tons, and since 1997-98 fiscal year, it has been 200,000 tons (Source: Xihua News Agency , January 10, 2002)

<sup>13</sup> In the fiscal year 2000-01, Burma's (Myanmar) forestry sector earned about 280 million U.S. dollars through timber export, of which the state sector accounted for 200 million, while the rest went to the private sector. (Source: Xihua News Agency , January 10, 2002)

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix IV for Location of small & large scale mines in Burma (Source: Grave Diggers: A 2000 report on mining in Burma by Roger Moody)

<sup>15</sup> Grave Diggers: A 2000 report on mining in Burma by Roger Moody

<sup>16</sup> Extract from Appendix II: Stripping Rubyland, Grave Diggers: A 2000 report on mining in Burma by Roger Moody, page 59

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"Forests were depleted at an alarming rate as larger plots were cleared for excavation. Mine tailings created during the washing process of gem extraction were dumped directly into the Nam Ngaa River that past through the district, blackening the water."

*Gas:* In 1990 and 1991, concessions to develop the existing natural gas deposits off Burma's coast to Thailand were given to multi-national investors including Premier Oil, Total and Unocal. This involved delivery of gas through two giant pipelines across Tennassarim Division, Southern Burma to Kanchanaburi in Thailand. The construction of the pipelines has had serious environmental impacts on the ecosystem, forest and wildlife in this part of Burma and has involved extreme human rights violation committed by the SPDC.<sup>17</sup>

Since 1996, charges of human rights abuses including torture, rape and summary execution around the Yadana gas pipeline have been brought against Unocal in a US court case. The plaintiffs are ethnic Mon and Karen villagers who lived near the pipeline. From the beginning of the projects, the oil companies have not acknowledged the associated human rights abuses. Ironically, they have been 'spin doctoring' their public image through holding a series of human rights trainings under SPDC-supervised conditions and with selected participants.

### **3. Exploitative Agricultural Policies**

The SPDC claims that as a base for all-round development of other sectors in the economy, it is paying particular attention to the agricultural sector. Its agricultural policies are aimed to increase the export of rice, its main official source of foreign income<sup>18</sup>, and to contribute to food supply both domestically and regionally. It has also claimed that it has laid down five strategic measures: rice quotas, the double paddy system, land reclamation, irrigation and provision of credit to promote agricultural productivity.<sup>19</sup> In reality, the SPDC has not allocated sufficient state budget for the agriculture-related expenditures. For example, in the 1998-99 fiscal year, the SPDC spent more than two times the combined expenditure on agriculture and forestry on the military.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, all measures carried out under the agricultural policies have involved the regime's common practices of forced labour, forced relocation, land confiscation and extortion, and are thus only exacerbating the already serious problems of poverty and environmental destruction<sup>21</sup>.

*Rice quota:* Farmers are forced to sell rice to the SPDC based not on the amount planted or harvested, but on the amount of land that they own. If they cannot sell the required amount, they face confiscation of their land or expulsion.

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<sup>17</sup> For details, please see Total Denial, 1996 & Total Denial Continues, 2000

<sup>18</sup> Profits from the export of rice remains the biggest legal moneymaker for the military SPDC. In 2000, Burma exported 64.9 million tonnes of rice worth 120.4 million dollars. ( Source: Asia 2002 Yearbook Far Eastern Economic Review, Burma )

<sup>19</sup> United Nation Economic and Social Council Document. No: E/CN. 4/2001/140 (21 March 2001)

<sup>20</sup> The budget for agriculture and forestry was 14 % while that of defense was 32% of State annual revenue. (Source: 1998 United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report, New York : United Nations Development Programme, 1998)

<sup>21</sup> For comprehensive details, see Warr, Peter G., The Failure of Myanmar's Agricultural Policies, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2000*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2000

The following quote by a Shan woman of 29, who arrived in Thailand on 26 January 2002 with her family due to forced relocation, explains her experience of the rice quota system:

"We had to sell rice to the SPDC troops whether or not we got enough rice from our farm. We had to sell ten times more rice to the SPDC troops than what we had to give away to the resistance armed group. And also we had to sell the rice very cheaply. The selling price was five times lower than the local price."

Another Shan woman of 38, who came from Kung Hing, central Shan State talks about the burden that the rice quota puts on to people, making them poorer:<sup>22</sup>

"The government demanded a larger quota from the monsoon paddy. And those farmers who could not produce enough to meet the quota had to buy the rice from others and give it to the government. Before I had my own land and livestock, but later I had to sell my property in order to meet their demands."

*Double Paddy System:* To create more rice to be exported, in 1994, the SPDC launched the Double Paddy System, under which farmers are forced to produce two crops of rice a year. The system robs the soil of nutrients it needs and farmers face decreased land productivity. Farmers need fertilizers, pesticides and machinery to cope with the technical complications of the added crop. Often, farmers are not able to afford them. Consequently, they lose their land because their unproductive land, officially designated for double-cropping, is reassigned to a more able household<sup>23</sup>. Using chemicals like fertilizers and pesticides without access to proper information on how to use them safely has been dangerous not only to the environment, but also to the people.

*Irrigation system:* Partly in order to produce the summer crop, the SPDC has during the past decade implemented numerous irrigation systems, involving the building of dams and canals. Local farmers are not consulted on the dam proposals, but their lands are confiscated. Added to losing their lands, they are forced to pay fees for the supplies and provide their own labor to build them.<sup>24</sup>

*Land reclamation scheme:* In 1998, the government introduced a land reclamation scheme under which "fallow" land was to be farmed by private entrepreneurs of large business firms with the objective of extending cultivation to ensure rice sufficiency for the people<sup>25</sup>. In fact, in the low lands, local communities have lost access to food resources in the wet lands being drained, as these wetlands have been replaced by large, capital-intensive agricultural enterprises. This land reclamation has been economically wasteful and has adversely affected local ecosystems<sup>26</sup>. The practice of

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<sup>22</sup> Interview - on file with WLB (January, 2002)

<sup>23</sup> For details, see Voice of the Hungry Nation: A report by the People's Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, published by Asia Human Rights Commission( AHRC), October 1999

<sup>24</sup> For details, see Voice of the Hungry Nation: A report by the People's Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, published by Asia Human Rights Commission( AHRC), October 1999

<sup>25</sup> The SPDC has claimed that land holdings are granted to the private companies, and 1.1million acres are held by the private sector. (Source: United Nation Economic and Social Council Document. No:E/CN.4/2001/140 (21 March 2001)

<sup>26</sup> For details, see Warr, Peter G., The Failure of Myanmar's Agricultural Policies, in *Southeast Asian*



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land reclamation is also being carried out, unofficially, throughout Burma for the military's bases and income-generation projects.

Under the land reclamation scheme, like other government programmes, people are forcibly moved out of their land, which later is cleared for project cultivation operated by the army, individuals or private companies.

### **4. Infrastructure Development Policy**

Parallel with the state policies mentioned above is the so-called development policy of the state, which was initiated in 1989.<sup>27</sup> The implementation of the policy has been intensified since the mid-1990s after the Ministry of Border and Ethnic Area Development was created. Under this policy, the SPDC has focused on hard infrastructure development to build roads, bridges and dams. Since 1988, the regime has boasted that 170 bridges, including 5 river-crossing bridges, 114 dams, and 3,844 miles of road have been completed.<sup>28</sup>

However, what the regime omits to mention is the lack of consultation with local communities in building this infrastructure; and environmental destruction and human rights abuses such as forced labour, extortion and forced relocation accompanying these projects.

A Shan woman in her late thirties, who has been a migrant worker in Thailand since last year, reveals that in her home village in northern Shan State the building of a dam was a sham:<sup>29</sup>

"The army said they would build a dam and canals so that we would be able to grow double crops. It was already ten years ago and the army collected 100,000 Kyat from each household which owned land, and at a rate of 10,000 up depending on the size of the family who owned no land. We were told that the government would fill in any amount needed to complete this project. However, until the day I left, I saw only piles of stones and sands, but no signs of dams nor roads built in our area. We did not get our money back either."

The use of forced labour has been extensively documented on large infrastructure projects in Burma in the 1990s in the cases of the Ye-Tavoy railroad, the Loikaw railroad, and in connection with the Yadana pipeline (ERI/SAIN 1996) in the past decade. Forced labour involving hundreds or thousands of workers has been used at major dam and irrigation projects throughout Burma, including one in Shan State, the Nam Wok (Mong Kwan) dam project near Kengtung, completed in 1994 (ILO 1998: §447 and note).

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*Affairs 2000*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2000

<sup>27</sup> The Committee of the Development of the Border and Ethnic Areas was formed on May 25, 1989 and the Law was passed on August 13, 1993. ( Source: Historic Records of Endeavors made by The State Law and Order Restoration Council, "*Nation-Building Endeavours: Taing Gyo Pyi Phyu* ", Vol 3, 1999)

<sup>28</sup> Note Verbal dated 9 March 2001 from the Permanent Mission of Myanmar to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the secretariat of the Commission on Human Rights, Page 8 (Source: United Nation Economic and Social Council Document. No: E/CN. 4/2001/140 (21 March 2001)

<sup>29</sup> Interview-on file with WLB (January, 2002)

A woman in her 30s who had to work in the army's development projects describes how her livelihood was destroyed, which has led to poverty.

"For the past over ten years, life has been getting very difficult for us as we have not enough time to work for our own living due to the SPDC ordering us to work on different things. Our means of living used to be farming, fishing and cutting bamboo and selling them. But these are all gone. We are not allowed to make living like that before anymore."

Unfortunately, no statistics are publicly available of the total numbers of people forced to lose their homes and lands as a result of the regime's 114 dam-building projects over the past decade. As one woman of mid 30s affected by the building of a dam reveals, villagers have no recourse to appeal against any dams that are built.<sup>30</sup>

"Nga Moe Yake Dam was built in Phaung Gyi [close to Rangoon] from 1992 to 1995. We didn't know what it was built for, nor were we told. We were only ordered to move out of from the area of our villages within one month. Altogether 24 villages in the area were forced to relocate. Villagers had to provide labor for the construction of the dam. One per each household and one village per day. Villagers had to build temporary tents in the forest and could not go back to the relocation site everyday as it is far."

Of serious concern is the current planned project to build a mega-dam on the Salween River near the Tasang crossing between Murng Pan and Murng Ton in southern Shan State<sup>31</sup>. The forced relocation of 300,000 Shan villagers since 1996 in this area is seen as closely linked to plans by the regime to build the dam, and at least 100,000 of these villagers have already fled to Thailand as refugees. Surveying has been carried out by GMS Power Public Co. Ltd. of Thailand. Lahmeyer International (Germany) and Electric Power Development Corporation (Japan) are among the consultants. It is estimated that the dam will cost at least 3 billion USD. There is already forced labour near the planned dam site of Tasang Army battalions forced villagers to work for periods of up to two weeks at Tasang throughout 1998, splitting rocks which were then sold by the army (DoL 2000).<sup>32</sup> If built, this dam will be the largest in Southeast Asia, and will have devastating social and environmental impacts.

*Arbitrary taxation / Extortion:* Apart from agricultural taxes, further "taxes" are regularly extorted from local communities by the army and district officials for a variety of reasons. For example, money is forcibly collected from people in various forms such as for fees for seasonal festivals, and ceremonies to mark the commemoration of National Days such as the Independence Day, Union Day and Army Day, as well as for "development" projects. The SPDC-controlled media describes such projects as "self-reliance basis" projects<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview - on file with WLB ( January, 2002)

<sup>31</sup> For further information, please see " Salween Watch " : <http://www.orchestraburma.org>

<sup>32</sup> See details in the report: "From Scorched Earth to Flooded Earth: The Generals' Dam on Burma's Salween River" a Salweenwatch submission to the World Commission of Dam, March 2000

<sup>33</sup> Burmese Migrant Women in Thailand by Nang Lao Liang Won, published by APWLD (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 1999

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Such extortion on a regular basis has made life untenable for many of Burma's citizens. A single Shan woman in her late 30s was forced from her home in northern State State by high taxation:<sup>34</sup>

"Since I have no man in my family, I could not hire people to work for me and sold my house. Another reason for selling my house is if you own a house or farm the tax is much higher than for those who do not own such property. Many people sold their land and homes and left the village. In our village, we used to have 600-800 households, but not any more. Even there is tax called "tea tax" that people have to pay to the army. In fact we grow tea for our family and community consumption -- not for commercial purposes. But because of these high taxes, people don't want to stay in their place any longer and sell everything and move. The hardship has become unbearable for us."

### **D. Impacts of Poverty and Environmental Degradation on Women**

The combination of the policies mentioned in Section C has resulted in poverty and environmental degradation in Burma. While this poverty and environmental destruction have directly affected the majority of people in Burma regardless of their gender, women, because of their social roles and biological nature have been impacted differently. It can be seen that their basic rights to education and health are being increasingly denied, and they are facing gender-based violence.

#### **1. Education**

Excessive spending on the military has affected the educational system. There are not enough educational facilities and resources including teachers especially in rural areas. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, people are becoming increasingly impoverished due to the state's agricultural and other development policies. This means that families have had to re-prioritize their ever-depleting resources – there is not enough money to send all kids to school, and less money to send those children to higher levels. According to social gender norms, boys have greater opportunities in the public sphere and girls' roles in the private sphere require no more than elementary reading and writing skills. Therefore, families suffering from poverty are forced to choose which children they can send to school, and those they will withdraw – mostly being girls.

A woman who recently migrated to Thailand describes a girl in her 20s who quit school and came to work in Thailand:

"I once asked a girl the reason she left for Thailand and she answered that she was the eldest one among her brothers and sisters and her family faced economic problems. Her brothers and sisters were students and each has to pay over one thousand Kyat for school fees, and when four of them went to school-- you can imagine that her parents cannot afford such an amount of money at all-- it was the reason why she decided to find a job in Thailand. Most left for Thailand because of their family's economic crisis. Their income could not keep up with consumer prices and so they could not overcome the economic crisis of their family."

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<sup>34</sup> Interview - on file with WLB (January, 2002)

## 2. Health

The SPDC's policy of expanding the army to control the nation and not allocating sufficient state budget for health has also resulted in insufficient health infrastructure in Burma. In the face of widespread poverty due to the SPDC policies, it is very difficult for many families in Burma to afford even basic health services. Women and children often suffer the most as there are not sufficient maternal and child healthcare services. This is especially true in remote rural areas, where poverty is most prevalent and where services are most deficient<sup>35</sup>. Women are therefore often in poor health. Malnutrition and anemia are common health problems among women.

The following interview shows how women's health has been affected because of food scarcity caused by the state's rice quota policy:<sup>36</sup>

"These days women face so much hardship as they have to sell so much rice to the government and are therefore left with not enough for the family to eat, so they have to mix the rice with **"Wa U" (a kind of root)** and corn to eat as their staple meal. I don't know why but nowadays 7 out of 10 women in our area have goitre and many children have got polio. Many people and children are malnourished."

*Reproductive Health:* In the family, women's lack of rights within the family is directly linked to lack of control over their reproductive rights. That means they cannot practice birth-spacing, and consequently, they often have unwanted pregnancies. In extremely impoverished conditions, they have no choice but to have dangerous abortions because the family cannot afford to have anymore children. Some die.

The state's spending of less than 5 per cent on health is directly linked to the poor health status of women in Burma. This means the SPDC has done little for women to get access to information on reproductive health, and to healthcare services including family planning<sup>37</sup>.

UNFPA's recent paper on Burma has proved how women are affected by widespread poverty. The paper says:<sup>38</sup>

"The maternal mortality ratio in Burma is one of the highest in the region. WHO and UNICEF estimate the ratio at 580 deaths per 100,000 live births. Among the most devastating consequences of the lack of availability of contraception are the high level of abortion, which is not legal in Burma, and the number of deaths resulting from unsafe abortions. It is estimated that one in three pregnancies ends in abortion. Such an estimate would indicate that approximately 750,000 abortions are carried out each year, or about 2,000 abortions per day. It is estimated that the consequences of unsafe abortion account for around for around 50 percent of maternal deaths."

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<sup>35</sup> United Nations Population Fund ( UNFPA) Documents: DP/FPA/MMR ( July 13, 2001)

<sup>36</sup> Interview - on file with WLB (January, 2002)

<sup>37</sup> Burma signed the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Population Fund ( UNFPA) Documents: DP/FPA/MMR ( July 13, 2001)

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The paper also states:

"Approximately 8 percent of maternal deaths are attributed to women less than 20 years of age. Unmarried adolescent and youth are especially vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, since reproductive health, including birth spacing, services have traditionally targeted only married women of reproductive age."

*Pregnancy and Forced labour:* Extreme poverty conditions and military oppression means that pregnant women frequently are forced to take dangerous risks with their pregnancies, that is, their lives and the lives of their unborn child. In conditions of extreme poverty, women cannot access the necessary health care, or make the necessary arrangements to get either the rest or the nutrition they need. On top of that, pregnant women are also forced into impossible decisions in order to prioritize and plan for the future of their children as the following example illustrates:

"There is a young woman who lives 3 houses away from me. She was 5-months pregnant and went to carry logs for the army from the top of the hill to the downhill to the road. I don't know where her husband was on that day. She went to do this by herself, as hiring another person to do the job would cost 1,500 Kyat, which she could save for her future baby. The task for the army was that everyone was given a pile of wood, and had to finish taking it down to the road as soon as possible. So she carried the wood down the hill, and walked up the hill to carry the wood down all day long. At one point, she had a miscarriage. It was a baby boy. She got unconscious and other men brought her back to the village. The medic was not at the nearest clinic, so I told people to send her to the hospital. So people carried her and walked to the main road where we could hitchhike a car and sent her to the hospital in China. She was saved."

### **3. Disintegration of Family Structures**

Poverty and environmental degradation due to the state policies have contributed to the disintegration of traditional family structures. Pressure on women and girls to find work outside the home to contribute to the family's survival becomes immense.

*Forced migration:*

People are losing their livelihood under the rule of the military SPDC. Rural households are no longer able to rely only on the income provided by agriculture work, due to the state policies. Since the economic opportunities are limited in rural areas, women choose rural-to-urban migration as the best solution for survival. They come through brokers, who recruit young women to work as housemaids, hospitality girls in restaurants and factory workers in urban areas or other parts of the country, especially border towns. Many others come to Thailand to work in labor intensive factories where they can get a relatively higher income than working in industrial zones<sup>39</sup> in Burma.

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<sup>39</sup> At present, there are over four hundred garment factories, employing around 300,000 people. Most of them are women. (Source: Drug or dud?: The Irrawaddy Magazine, Vol.9. No. 3, March 2001)

The idea of migrating to another place of greater opportunity may seem an attractive option for women, despite the risk and hardships. However, many hundreds of thousands of migrant women workers in Thailand from Burma are doing the "three D" jobs: dirty, difficult and dangerous, which Thai workers are unwilling to do.

Although the exact number is not known, it is estimated that at least two million people have left the country since 1988; many of these are ethnic people who have suffered from the regime's anti-insurgency policies as well as abuses accompanying the state's development policies. The January 2002 figures of the Burma Border Consortium (BBC), the largest relief organization assisting refugees from Burma in Thailand, show that the number of refugees inside camps is 137,934. There are also more than one million illegal immigrants from Burma. It is impossible to estimate the total number of undocumented migrant workers from Burma, but recent data from the Thai ministry of Labour and Social Welfare states that 257,354 men and 193,981 women registered workers are from Burma.

The state policies have also led to large numbers of Internally Displaced People (IDPs), who have fled or been driven out of their homes, and are living in the forests and hill tracts without security, regular food, or access to medical services, and are in heavily land-mined areas. The BBC estimates the number of IDPs in Burma's border areas has reached over a million.

#### **4. Gender-based violence**

The patriarchal culture reinforced by the military has also made women vulnerable when they are outside home.

*State violence:*<sup>40</sup> SPDC officers and troops frequently rape ethnic women in conflict areas with impunity. Rape is used as a tool to demoralize and destroy ethnic communities, and serves as a continuation of civil warfare off the battlefield. Attempts to seek justice by the survivors and their communities are either ignored or retaliated against, which heightens the terror induced by the crimes.

*Violence in migration:* Migrant women in neighbouring countries, because of their illegal status, continue to be vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse by authorities, employers and other civilians. Violence against women from Burma in neighbouring countries, such as Thailand, is more opportunistic than systematic as in Burma but remains a serious constraint on women's movement, as arrest, deportation and rape by authorities is a constant risk. Deeply entrenched systems of patronage in the government, police and army in Thailand, for example, offer effective legal and social protection to rapists.

*Trafficking and Forced Prostitution:*<sup>41</sup> Due to the expansion of both unregulated domestic work and the sex industry, these women often find themselves in entirely unfamiliar situations, without the support of usual family or social structures. Their inexperience exposes them to dangers that they are unprepared to navigate. Trafficking of girls and women is one of the most serious outcomes of poverty and

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<sup>40</sup> For details, see *School of Rape* by Betsy Apple

<sup>41</sup> For details, see *A modern form of Slavery: Trafficking Burmese Women and girls into brothels in Thailand* by Human Rights Watch, 1993

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environmental destruction in Burma. In some circumstances, girls and women make the difficult choice to engage in risky sex work. In others, many girls are trafficked into sex work without their prior knowledge, and are essentially imprisoned by their debt bondage. Deprived already of their land, their traditional livelihoods, and their food security, these women and girls are also denied the support provided by their families and communities.<sup>42</sup>

### **E. Breaking the Silence**

It can be seen that women face added burdens when suffering from the effects of poverty and environmental degradation. However, in struggling for their whole family to survive, women have increasingly come out of their traditional role of being supported and protected by men. Many migrate to neighbouring countries to have some income to support their family back home. A significant number join and support the pro-democracy movement. Some have even participated in the armed struggle to defend themselves, their family and their community.

Trying to survive in a different environment, women are organizing themselves to respond to the needs of fellow women and girls within and around the community. Women are developing strategies to survive, overcome and cope with the situations they are put into and to resist.

The following examples have proven how women are dealing with the problems in the positive ways.

#### **1. Health issues**

*i) Doctor Cynthia:*<sup>43</sup> Fleeing from arrest and persecution by the military following the crackdown on the nationwide pro-democracy uprisings, Dr. Cynthia Maung arrived at Mae La, a Karen refugee camp on the Thai- Burmese border in October, 1988. In February 1989 some Karen friends donated an unused barn on the border to Cynthia, to treat the Burmese pro-democracy students who had fled to the border. Cynthia sought donations from medical organizations and religious groups and catered for the patients.

After the twelfth year of operation, Dr. Cynthia's Mae Tao Clinic has grown into a multispeciality center providing free health care for refugees, Burmese migrant workers and others crossing the border from Burma into Thailand. Though exact numbers are difficult because of the fluidity of the patient population, the clinic serves a target population of 150,000 on the Thai-Burma border. The staff of 5 physicians, 80 health care workers, 40 trainees and 40 support staff provide comprehensive health services including inpatient and outpatient medicine, trauma care, blood transfusion, reproductive health, child health, eye care, and prosthetics for landmine survivors. The Clinic also hosts interns from local ethnic groups for 3 to 6 month periods. Each

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<sup>42</sup> The WLB's Shadow report, submitted to the 23rd Session of the Committee of the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women in January, 2000

<sup>43</sup> Source: <http://www.slomsic.org/burma/clinic.html> / Extract from Mae Tao Clinic 2001 Annual Report ( With permission)

year it trains a new class of Healthcare workers to serve people throughout the border region.

ii) *Backpack Program:*<sup>44</sup> Initiated in 1995 by Dr. Cynthia, who is the Director of the program, the backpack health worker team was created in August 1998 to respond to IDPs' health issues. The team's principle aim is to conduct a primary healthcare program to reach the isolated IDP areas within Burma. There are 60 teams providing health care to an estimated 130,000 displaced people in Karen, Mon, and Karenni areas. There are two to three health workers in each team, which serves an average population of 2000. These health workers are community-based and work with village leaders, traditional birth attendants (TBA's), and traditional healers. Their activities include primary health care services, training of traditional birth attendants, collecting and analyzing health data and upgrading the knowledge and skills of health workers. In 2001 approximately 200 TBA's were trained by the backpack health workers in the field and provided with supplies to conduct safe deliveries and promote women's health.

## **2. Education issues**

i) *School of Shan State Nationalities Youth:*<sup>45</sup> The school was founded by Nang Charmtong, a young Shan lady in her early 20s who has never spent more than a month with her parents since she was eight due to the civil war. Having grown up in the circle of the Shan resistance movement, Nang Chamtong got to know how the civil war had affected the livelihood of the Shan people and the education of youth and children, as she herself was sent from Shan State to a village on the Thai/Burma border to study. She has known the flow of Shan refugees into Thailand -- many of them youth and children. She has seen many young men end up working as unskilled labourers and young girls in the sex industry. There is an urgent need for proper education for Shan youth, who want to further their studies or to participate in the political arena more actively and effectively. To respond to the educational needs of the unrecognised children and youth refugees, who are working as undocumented migrant workers in Thailand, the school was set up in 2001. It also aims at preventing young refugees, who have little opportunity to access the Thai educational facilities, from being forced into crime and prostitution.

ii) *Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee:* Chaired by an experienced elderly Karen woman teacher known as Naw Lae Lay, the committee was formed in July 2000. Currently there are about 30 schools in the area along the border in Tak Province, Thailand, where children of Burmese migrant workers can access education.

## **3. Social and environmental issues**

Women have set up their own programmes or joined various social and environment organizations particularly operating in Thailand and the border areas to respond to the needs of people from Burma.

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<sup>44</sup> Extract from the 2001 Six month Report of the Backpack Health Worker Team( with permission)

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Nang Charmtong, the founder of SSSNY.



## *Breaking the Silence*

One example of an organisation tackling social and health issues of women working in the entertainment industry is EMPOWER, which has four centres in Thailand. Its basic philosophy and objective is to empower women in the entertainment industry in Thailand through education and information. Ann, who originally comes from Burma, is the coordinator of EMPOWER (Maesai). Having worked in Thailand since the age of thirteen, Ann has done many jobs, and has known a lot of girls who are doing different types of jobs including in the entertainment industry. She has been familiar with how they became involved in their work, what they do, and how they try to survive and protect themselves. Through them, she learned about EMPOWER (Chiangmai) where she had a chance to learn Thai, computer skills and about women's and health issues. She started to work there in 1996 and produced an audio-education program on HIV/AIDS in Akka language. There are many women from Burma working in the entertainment industry in the towns bordering with Burma. To give education and information to them, EMPOWER (Maesai) was set up in 1999.<sup>46</sup>

Another example is the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), formally known as the Karen Nature Conservation Group (KNCG), in which many Karen women are actively involved. It was formed in March of 1997 in Mae Ra Mo refugee camp in Thailand. The objective of KESAN is to educate people in the refugee camps about environmental preservation and organic gardening, so that they will share these ideas with future generations. The KESAN produces and publishes a magazine about the environment, which discusses such things as ways to grow food, planting shade plants that maintain the watersheds, and rubbish management. They have set up an organic garden to encourage sustainable agricultural training for women in the camp and also teach environmental issues to primary schools. Currently KESAN is working on a report about deforestation in the Karen State.

#### **4. Women's organizations**

Before 1988, there were only three ethnic women's organizations from Burma operating around the border, namely the Karen Women's Organization, Kachin Women's Association and Karenni National Women's Organization. Among these groups, KWO was founded first in 1949. Generally, they used to be the "women's wing" of ethnic armed resistance groups and their main tasks were seen as social welfare, health and education.

Between 1988 to 1998, women in exile started organizing themselves to form small groups of their own to respond to problems of health and education and social issues such as trafficking and violence against women. and more women's organizations were founded. Among them are the Burmese Women's Union, Chin Women's Organization and Mon Women's Organization. These women's groups started to focus on women' rights and women's participation in politics. To date, there are about 25 women's organizations from Burma around the border, most with a strong focus on women's rights and gender equality and also demanding women's participation in state affairs.

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<sup>46</sup> Telephone interview with Anna, the Coordinator of EMPOWER(Maesai)

These women's organizations are working hard to educate themselves in issues of human rights, women's rights, politics, languages, confidence-building and other skills that can empower them to work effectively within their own communities and also to advocate their struggle to the international community.

## **5. The Women's League of Burma (WLB)**

The women's groups operating around Burma's borders strongly believe that the contribution of women in the struggle towards democracy in Burma to bring about equal rights for all nationalities will have a great impact, and their participation in the national reconciliation and peace-building process is essential.

The formation of the first umbrella organization for women' groups from Burma in December 1999 was a milestone in the history of Burma. This umbrella organization, named the Women's League of Burma (WLB) comprises eleven women's organizations.<sup>47</sup>

WLB:

- lobbies for political change in Burma through broad based social movements inside Burma and through garnering support at the international level. They call for gender sensitivity in all social processes that will lead to equality for all through a future federated Burma.
- works for increased women's political participation at all levels of decision-making, the provision of welfare services where possible to war- and poverty-displaced communities, and the education of women at the grassroots level.
- works to enhance cooperation, mutual understanding and trust among the women of Burma that crosses ethnic divisions to promote genuine national reconciliation.

One of the main objectives of the WLB is to raise awareness of the importance of preserving natural resources and the environment, and to work for peace and freedom in society.

Since its formation, the WLB has been working constantly to have the Burma issue raised at international forums and UN conferences. It regularly attends the United Nations' CSW sessions and CHR sessions every year.

Last August, the WLB sent a delegation to the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa. The WLB representatives attended all events: the Youth Forum, NGO Forum and Government Forum.

The WLB activities in WCAR were in the December 2001 issue of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)' s Forum News. It reads,

"At the NGO Forum, the WLB, while having very limited space for highlighting their issue, was still able to collect hundreds of signatures for a petition against the Burmese government. In addition, by joining other discussion groups, on occupied territories, using large posters and linking with people who came to their exhibition

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<sup>47</sup> See Appendix I, Page 20 for WLB's 11 member organizations

## ***Breaking the Silence***

booth, they were able to garner significant support for their issues, including substantial media attention."

Another example of their work is the two reports produced in 2000 on women in conflict areas in Burma. The first was a Shadow report submitted to the CEDAW committee in January 2000 and the second was a similar report submitted to APDC as part of a regional report on Women in Armed Conflict in the Asia Pacific Region and used to lobby at the UN Conference – Beijing+5 in New York in June 2000.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

This report has explored some of the root causes of poverty and environment destruction in Burma, which are intersectional, and the connection between state policies and human rights violations in the name of development, particular problems faced by women due to their gender and how women are trying to enable themselves, their family and their communities to survive.

It is clear that the military regime's policies are directly responsible for poverty and systematic environmental destruction in Burma. Until there is radical political reform, and restoration of the rule of law, impoverishment and widespread environmental abuse will continue, and people inside Burma will not be able to escape from this vicious cycle of suffering.

## **Recommendations to the SPDC**

1. A moratorium on current logging should be imposed and maintained until a complete and thorough survey and participatory analysis of the remaining forest resources of the land has been carried out to determine which areas need urgent protection or restoration and those areas which can be sustainably used. The survey data must be made accessible to the peoples' organisations
2. Logged and degraded areas should be reforested, biologically enriched and helped to regenerate without the use of forced labour or extortion.
3. Concessionary rights for logging and mining should not be granted without the informed approval and willing participation of the local communities affected by exploitation of the natural resources.
4. Women, local communities and states should fairly benefit from any exploitation of resources from their surrounding environment.
5. Laws requiring logging and mining enterprises to abide by environmental safeguards should be implemented and enforced. Women, children and other members of local communities must not be left with long term and health endangering problems of pollution and irreparable environmental degradation.
6. Local people's customary rights to the land and resources of the land should be recognized, respected and inalienable.
7. In cases where land is needed for appropriate development projects, adequate and timely consultation with affected communities should be carried out, and fair compensation, sufficient time for relocation and viable options for environmentally-sound alternative livelihoods must be provided.

8. Farmers should be given the right and responsibility to manage the land in ways that maintain its long-term fertility and productivity.
9. Fair rice taxes should be implemented. Taxation policy should be reviewed and should take into account the season's actual harvest, and in no case should taxes be so heavy that people are unable to feed their families
10. The national and state constitutions should include the rights of women and their families to a healthy environment that supports life.

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**Appendix I: The member organizations of the Women's League of Burma**

All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization (ABDLWO)  
Burmese Women's Union (BWU)  
Chin Women's Organization (CWO)  
Kachin Women's Association/Thailand (KWAT)  
Karen Women's Organization (KWO)  
Lahu Women's Organization (LWO)  
Pa-O Women's Union (PWU)  
Rakhine Women's Union (RWU)  
Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)  
Tavoy Women's Union (TWU)  
Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB)

**Appendix II: Contact information of the WLB Secretariat & member organizations**

The Secretariat of the Women's League of Burma (WLB)  
P.O Box 413, G P O  
Chiangmai 50000 Thailand  
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New Delhi, India  
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Email: cnab@del3.vsnl.net.in

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Burmese Women's Union (BWU)  
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Chin Women's Organization (CWO)  
A1/A-17, Chanakya Place  
Janapuri, New Dehli/ 59 India  
Tel: + 91 11 5624112  
Email: kyikyil2@yahoo.com

Kachin Women Association, Thailand  
P.O.Box 415, G P O  
Chiangmai 50000 Thailand  
Tel/Fax: +66 53 243363  
Email: kwat@chmai2.loxinfo.co.th

Karen Women's Organization  
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Email: kwo@loxinfo.co.th

Lahu Women's Organization  
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Email: lahunet@chmai2.loxinfo.co.th

Pa-O Women's Union  
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Rakhine Women's Union (RWU)  
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Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)  
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Tavoy Women's Union  
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Email:twu98@yahoo.com

Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB)  
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**Appendix III: Contact details for further information on environment in Burma**

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EDesk, Images Asia  
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Tel: +66 53 406 155  
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Shan Sapawa Environment Organization (SSEO)  
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Earthrights International (ERI)  
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www.earthrights.org

**Appendix IV: Location of small & large scale mines in Burma**

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