

14 February 2008

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## Myanmar (Burma): No end in sight for internal displacement crisis

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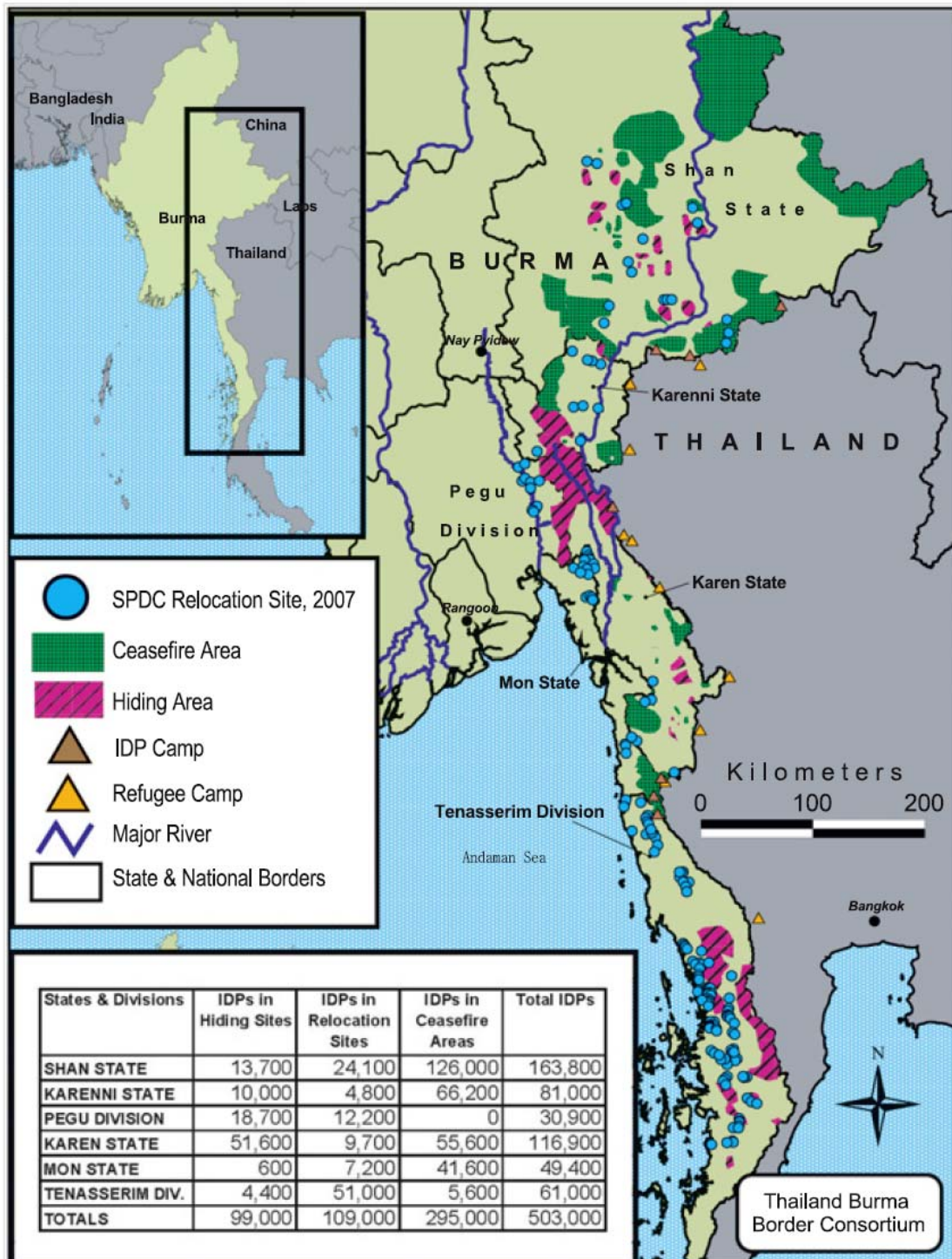
*Despite intense international focus on the human rights situation in Myanmar (Burma) in 2007, forced displacement, as a result of conflict and human rights violations, is ongoing in the country. The government remains the perpetrator of the majority of violations against civilians, particularly those belonging to ethnic minority groups. As a result of the abuses, hundreds of thousands of Burmese have been left with no choice but to migrate over the course of a number of years. As of October 2007, at least 500,000 people were estimated to be internally displaced in the country's eastern States. This is, however, a conservative figure as no information exists for several parts of the country.*

*At present, the displacement crisis is most acute in Karen State in the east of the country, where upwards of 40,000 civilians have been forced from their homes since late 2005 by the Burmese army's latest offensive against insurgent groups. The offensive, the most intense in ten years, has been characterised by the army attacking rural villages, forcibly moving people to relocation sites, and extending its authority over civilian populations. Humanitarian access to the most vulnerable IDP populations in the eastern part of the country remains very limited.*

*Forced displacement is also occurring in areas where armed conflict has come to an end and ceasefires have been negotiated between the central government and ethnic minority leaders. Communities in ceasefire areas continue to lose land due to confiscation by the army, as well as large development and infrastructure projects which, according to various reports, have involved forced evictions.*

*In 2007, the human rights situation in Myanmar (Burma) came under the scrutiny of the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council, and both responded to the government's September crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrations. Neither body gave the same priority to the widespread and ongoing violations of the rights of ethnic minorities in the country. International and regional actors must respond to the humanitarian situation of the ethnic minority populations and hold the government accountable for its policies and practices which violate their rights, otherwise there is unlikely to be an end to the internal displacement crisis in the country.*

## Relocation Sites, Hiding Areas & Ceasefire Areas in Eastern Burma, 2007



Source: Thailand Burma Border Consortium, October 2007

More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

## Background

Intense international attention in 2007 focused on the crackdown against demonstrators during the largest anti-government protests since 1988. However, there continued to be significantly lower awareness of the many years of human rights violations against ethnic minorities in the country which have caused one of the worst internal displacement crises in Asia.

For decades, the country's Burman-controlled military government, currently known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has perpetrated violations against its citizens, particularly those belonging to the non-Burman ethnic minority groups that make up about 35 per cent of the country's population of 52 million. To a lesser extent, the ethnic groups fighting the government have also committed human rights abuses. These violations and abuses are especially widespread in the areas affected by the country's various internal armed conflicts (RI, June 2006, p.1).

Following independence from Britain in 1948, civil war broke out in Burma between the central government and various armed opposition groups. An insurgency by communist forces collapsed in 1989, but a diverse collection of armed ethno-nationalist groups continued to fight for greater political autonomy. Today almost all the insurgent ethnic groups have accepted the existence of the "Union of Burma" and rather seek increased local authority within a federal state structure.

The government, however, still pursues an anti-federal goal of "national reconsolidation" including through repressive

and often brutal policies in minority areas. Ethnic minority groups have accused successive governments not only of marginalising them economically, but also of depriving them of their social, cultural, and religious rights through a policy of "Burmanisation" (ICG, May 2003, p.1). The country's ethnic conflict must be resolved if a lasting political solution is to be found. Nonetheless, the conflict between pro-democracy parties and the military government is better known and has received more international attention.

The repressive political conditions and deteriorating economy culminated in mass uprisings in 1988 and 2007. Pro-democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi propelled the National League for Democracy to an election victory in 1990 but the party was prevented from taking power, and she has spent most of the years since 1989 under house arrest.

Following the removal of moderate leaders in 2004, the government has withdrawn into diplomatic isolation, moving its seat from Rangoon to the more inaccessible Naypyidaw, and international efforts to initiate political change in the country have been largely without result. During and after the 2007 "Saffron Revolution" and its brutal suppression, the international community has shown renewed interest in attempting to resolve the longstanding political stalemate.

## Causes of forced displacement and other movements

The army has been fighting ethnic insurgent groups along the country's eastern border with Thailand for more than five decades. Government forces continue to target civilians using a counter-

insurgency tactic known as the Four Cuts which aims to sever resistance groups' links to local civilians and so block their access to food, funds, recruits and information. This approach aims to transform "black" rebel-held areas into "brown" contested areas and then into "white" government-held areas (RI, June 2006, p.5).

Under the Four Cuts, the army forces villagers living in "black" or "brown" zones to move to relocation sites in government-controlled areas, often with little or no warning. Following a "scorched earth" policy, the army attacks villagers, destroys houses and crops, plants landmines in fields and on paths, and shoots on sight those found returning to their homes. To escape the army, many villagers have gone into hiding in the jungle, some living there for years. Displaced civilians found hiding risk being identified as possible rebel supporters and subjected to human rights violations (CA, May 2004, p.5).

Since 1989, the SPDC has made ceasefire arrangements with 28 armed groups, who have retained their arms and in some cases still control extensive areas. The ceasefire agreements are all military accords rather than political settlements. They have not led to an end to displacement, and communities in ceasefire areas still continue to lose land, due to post-ceasefire militarisation and confiscation of civilian property by the army, as well as large economic, development and infrastructure projects which involve forced evictions and forced labour at construction sites (HRW, June 2005, p.55).

Development projects such as mine construction and hydroelectric dams are lead-

ing to the forcible displacement of communities without compensation. The army has used severe tactics in some cases to secure control over sites, with entire villages being relocated (KRW, November 2004, p.1).

The government has also carried out urban evictions and forcibly relocated at least half a million people in the 1980s and 1990s from around Rangoon and other cities to new satellite towns. Those displaced to the satellite towns were offered little compensation and were ordered to pay for their plots of land at the new locations (COHRE, October 2004, p.20). Since 2005, at least 10,000 local people have been uprooted due to construction of the new capital in Naypidaw (South, February 2007, p.22).

The lack of any means to maintain a livelihood, as a result of government policy, is the primary cause of migration within and from the country. The main causes are ineffective government practices, insecurity of tenure, limited availability of productive land, and poor access to markets, often resulting in food insecurity (COHRE, November 2007, p.29).

### **Displacement in eastern States**

According to the 2007 survey by the Thailand Burmese Border Consortium (TBBC), 273 infantry and light infantry battalions are active in the country's eastern States, more than 30 per cent of the army's complement. During the past year, around 76,000 people have been forced to leave their homes as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of armed conflict and associated human rights violations (TBBC, October 2007, p.2).

The TBBC previously reported that more than 3,000 villages had been destroyed, relocated or abandoned in the east between 1996 and 2006. According to the organisation, from 2006 to 2007, at least 167 more villages were displaced in their entirety. Although the Burmese government has long denied these accusations, satellite photos taken by the American Association for the Advancement of Science during 2007 supported claims of human rights violations, and provided evidence of burnt-out villages, an increasing military presence, and growing populations of displaced people (BBC News, 17 November 2007).

As of October 2007, at least 500,000 IDPs were estimated by the TBBC to be unable to return, resettle or reintegrate after being forced to leave their homes in eastern States. They included 295,000 people in temporary settlements or ceasefire areas administered by ethnic nationalities, an estimated 99,000 hiding from the army in areas most affected by ongoing conflict, and 109,000 villagers who had moved into designated relocation sites following SPDC eviction orders. During 2007, estimates of the number of IDPs in relocation sites decreased, while those of the number in ceasefire areas and hiding sites increased. The largest group of civilians in hiding in the east in 2007, approximately 30,800 people, were in Karen State's Papun district (TBBC, October 2007).

Forced migration in eastern States in 2007 was most concentrated in northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Division, where counter-insurgency operations displaced approximately 43,000 civilians. These operations, which began in late 2005, have led to the most intense mili-

tary activity in ten years, and civilians in the districts of Toungoo, Papun and Ny-aunglebin have been particularly hard hit. By attacking rural villages, upgrading and constructing new roads, forcibly relocating local populations to relocation sites, and establishing new army bases in Toungoo district, the SPDC has extended its authority over civilian communities (KHRG, May 2007, p.1).

Civilians in Karen State are also exploited for forced labour and have their money confiscated by the army and its proxy forces. Extortion by soldiers has served to redistribute wealth from agrarian farmers to the local military elite. In Toungoo district in 2007, men and women as old as 60 and children as young as 16 were engaged in forced labour without compensation (KHRG, May 2007, p.4). In March 2007, SPDC township administrations in Dooplaya district circulated a notice stressing that local officials could no longer demand certain forms of forced labour from civilians, but these notices have had little impact on the military perpetrators of forced labour, and the violations have led to many villagers becoming displaced (KHRG, October 2007, p.5).

In southern Shan State, where there are at least 163,000 IDPs, the SPDC has over the last year increased pressure on ethnic leaders, and on the civilian population, with militarisation and state-sponsored development projects displacing more people and contributing to further insecurity. Systematic human rights violations in 12 townships displaced over 15,000 people from their homes in 2007. In areas of Shan State where the compliance of ceasefire authorities had decreased, the army deployed more troops to maintain

control. 2,500 civilians in a ceasefire territory administered by the United Wa State Army reportedly fled their homes to avoid harassment by government forces (TBBC, October 2007, p.32).

An estimated 81,000 IDPs were living in Karenni State as of October 2007. The majority were in conditions of absolute poverty in ceasefire areas administered by ethnic groups, but the most vulnerable were the 10,000 IDPs hiding from the SPDC and ceasefire party patrols in Shadaw, Pruso and Pasaung townships. Almost 5,000 villagers remained in eight relocation sites in 2007. Over 70,000 civilians from Mon State were estimated to be internally displaced in 2007, with the vast majority having moved to ceasefire areas in Ye township of Mon State, Kyain Seikkgyi township of Karen State and Yebyu township of Tenasserim Division. In Tenasserim Division, military rule resulted in approximately 61,000 villagers remaining as IDPs, including almost 2,000 people forced to leave their homes during 2007 (TBBC, October 2007).

Anti-personnel landmines deployed by the army and insurgent groups continue to fuel displacement in the east. The Burmese government is the only government in the world that used anti-personnel mines on a regular basis. Villagers and relief workers have recorded the army entering villages from which inhabitants had fled or been relocated and planting landmines to discourage return. The mines have reportedly been planted in essential sites such as plantations, storage barns and schools (HRW, December 2006). Given the intensity of conflict in Karen State, it is likely that the Karen National Liberation Army was the resis-

tance group using mines most frequently between 2006 and 2007, although other groups such as the Karenni Army, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and the Shan State Army-South also deployed anti-personnel mines in 2007 (LM, 2006).

Hundreds of thousands of people, after exhausting all coping mechanisms, have fled across the border into Thailand. Some have joined the estimated two million Burmese workers in Thailand, while others have claimed refugee status, and live in camps along the border (IRC, November 2006).

### **Displacement in other regions**

In the western Arakan State, the government maintains its policy of persecuting the largely Muslim ethnic Rohingya population. The Rohingya, numbering roughly 800,000, are denied full Burmese citizenship and rendered stateless. They are frequently pressed into forced labour, denied access to medical care and education, and they face severe restrictions on their rights to travel and marry. A minor low-intensity armed conflict with associated human rights violations is ongoing between the army and an ethnic insurgent group. Civilians continue to flee within the State or to Bangladesh and other countries in the region. There are several hundred thousand repatriated and/or displaced Rohingya in Arakan State, including many who fled to Bangladesh in the early 1990s and were sent back. According to local sources, approximately 80,000 IDPs are in hiding or in temporary settlements in the jungles and mountainous areas of the State. IDPs in Arakan State have insufficient food and clothing, no schooling,

and almost no international contact or support (COHRE, November 2007, p.58).

Arakan State hosts the largest gas project currently being developed in the country, at the offshore Shwe field. In 2006, the Burmese government signed an agreement with a Chinese state-owned company to supply natural gas from Arakan State to China via an overland pipeline. The pipeline is expected to stretch from Arakan State and through Shan State into China's Yunnan province. Construction of the pipeline could lead to human rights violations such as land confiscation, forced labour and displacement in both states (SGB, January 2006, p.3).

In the western Chin State, SPDC militarisation and the activities of SPDC troops, including various abuses, have led to the migration of between 40,000 and 50,000 people, often across the border to India. There are a small number of IDPs in Paletwa township of southern Chin State, where Chin armed groups are active. In Sagaing Division, greater counter-insurgency cooperation between the Burmese and Indian armies against Naga ethnic insurgents on both sides of the border has displaced an unknown number of civilians since 2003 (COHRE, November 2007, p.58).

In the northern Kachin State, where a ceasefire has been in place between Kachin leaders and the Burmese government since 1994, communities continue to lose land due to post-ceasefire militarisation and confiscation of farm land by the army, mostly to build garrisons. Large-scale jade mining and agricultural projects have also displaced several thousand people in western Kachin State (HRW, June 2005, p.54).

### **Displacement due to livelihoods restrictions**

In all rural areas, taxes and restrictions on economic activity have undermined human and food security, and contributed to people's decision to leave their homes. In order to extend the land used for agricultural production, the government introduced a "land reclamation plan" in the mid-1990s. In practice, however, existing farmland has been confiscated from local communities, particularly in minority-populated areas (COHRE, November 2007).

Since 2004, the government has forcibly promoted the nationwide cultivation of physic nut, a shrub whose toxic seeds are used to produce biodiesel. A quota of 500,000 acres has reportedly been set for each state and division in the country to plant the crop, and authorities carry out forced labour practices at some physic nut plots. The government is also believed to have agreed to lease seven million hectares of land in the east to Thai companies to grow sugar and cassava. These practices have caused widespread displacement (COHRE, November 2007).

### **Assistance and protection of IDPs**

Government policies have directly and indirectly caused the majority of displacements in Myanmar (Burma) and the IDP issue has acquired political sensitivity. The government does not recognise the existence of IDPs and has no specific programmes to address their needs. Consequently, Burmese IDPs have no incentive to come forward and identify themselves to government agencies or the

international community (RI, June 2006, p.10).

A majority of IDPs are living in government-controlled or ceasefire areas and some can be reached by agencies operating in the country. As they live alongside non-displaced people in peri-urban and rural groups, their humanitarian needs are similar to those of settled residents and relate primarily to lack of employment and income. Conditions for IDPs in these areas are believed to be considerably better than for those living in areas of armed conflict (RI, June 2006, p.10).

The IDPs who seek shelter in remote areas are at extreme risk, surviving on a diet of rice and wild vegetables. When searching for food or returning to destroyed villages to salvage rice or cooking pots, they are exposed to mines laid by SPDC troops. Malnutrition and a lack of shelter, especially in the rainy season, are other constant problems facing the IDPs in hiding (FMR 28, July 2007, p.46).

Healthcare, in particular, has remained inaccessible to many IDPs and serious medical concerns have long remained untreated. Every year thousands of civilians die in border areas during health emergencies or epidemics. Malaria is usually the major health problem, but illnesses such as tuberculosis, tetanus, typhoid, diarrhea, pneumonia, hepatitis and cholera are also a constant threat. Surveys of IDPs show that some in the remote areas have never even heard of HIV/AIDS even though the country hosts one of the most serious epidemics in all of Asia (DFID, July 2007, p.31).

Women IDPs in eastern States have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group with regard to sexual and reproductive health. A 2002-03 survey of households there found very high rates of maternal mortality, with 27 per cent of adult female deaths being pregnancy-related (DFID, July 2007, p.31).

#### *Humanitarian support inside the country*

Currently ten UN agencies and 48 international NGOs hold Memorandums of Understanding with the Burmese government. Between November 2003 and September 2004, the humanitarian space briefly expanded under the government of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, who was forced from office in October 2004. Since then NGOs have had to carry out activities in an increasingly difficult climate. Restrictions imposed in 2006, although not fully implemented, include state officials accompanying UN and international NGO staff on all field trips and limitations on the employment of national staff (DFID, July 2007, p.19). Between 2005 and 2006, the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis and Medecins Sans Frontieres-France made the decision to withdraw, citing restrictions on programme implementation and monitoring.

The government prevents UN agencies and NGOs from providing humanitarian assistance in the conflict and some ceasefire areas in the east. The ICRC was the only international organisation successful in gaining independent entry to ongoing conflict zones, but since 2005, its ability to carry out its protection and monitoring work in eastern States has been severely impacted, forcing it to close some field offices. In June 2007, the ICRC publicly

denounced the government's violations of civilians' rights (BBC News, 29 June 2007).

Since 2004, UNHCR has had access to parts of Karen State, Mon State and Tenasserim Division in communities affected by displacement, including areas of potential return for Burmese refugees in Thailand. The agency acts as one of the UN interlocutors with local authorities and establishes partnerships with the few humanitarian NGOs active in the south-eastern areas. In 2005, UNHCR was able to map the activities of these NGOs and identify the particular vulnerabilities of the communities affected by displacement (UNHCR, 2007, p.3).

International organisations do not have access to more tightly-controlled IDP relocation sites. The affected communities rely on self-help initiatives undertaken by extended family and ethnic nationality networks mediated by local religious leaders, or on more systematic assistance provided by community-based organisations (CBOs) and local NGOs which have established low-profile aid programmes in some relocated sites and ceasefire areas (COHRE, November 2007, p.125).

In areas away from conflict and border zones, humanitarian agencies assist populations that include IDPs. Few international organisations in the country have programmes aimed specifically at IDPs, and because a large number of conflict-affected people have been displaced at some point, it is very difficult to distinguish IDPs from other vulnerable groups (DFID, July 2007, p.19).

The presence of representatives of international organisations has prevented some populations from being forcibly displaced and contributed to reductions in forced labour (RI, June 2006, p.16). Burmese civil society organisations have also had some success in engaging with authorities to protect local communities, and many local NGOs and CBOs continue to find ways to work for local development, and build independent community networks (COHRE, November 2007, p.127).

#### *Humanitarian support from Thailand*

Since the early 1990s, Thailand-based teams from the Karen and other Burmese ethnic groups have travelled into the conflict zones to deliver emergency assistance including cash, food, and education services to the IDPs. Though this mode of delivery is not neutral, these cross-border initiatives have stood alone in delivering assistance to many extremely vulnerable groups. Sustained medical assistance is provided to some IDPs by Back Pack Health Worker Teams, each made up of three to five medical staff, who run an independent service from Thailand to provide health and emergency care, including amputations for mine casualties (LM, 2006).

Some of the cross-border aid groups go beyond the provision of relief, and record and document human rights abuses and undertake advocacy work to help build the capacity of opposition groups (DFID, 18 July 2007, p.27).

#### **International political response**

The humanitarian crisis and displacement in Myanmar (Burma) will carry on as

long as the political situation remains unresolved. Various governments and international bodies have tried different tactics to break the political deadlock. Some have imposed comprehensive sanctions, others have opted for sanctions that permit humanitarian aid, and many nations still engage with the government.

Despite the UN General Assembly's and the Commission on Human Rights' adoption of at least 28 resolutions calling for national reconciliation and democratisation, and in spite of the "good offices" efforts undertaken by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, there had been little improvement in the political situation by 2005 (FIDH, 13 March, 2007). The SPDC was withdrawing further into diplomatic isolation; the Special Envoy of the Secretary General, Razali Ismail, had been denied entry to the country from 2004 onwards, while the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, had not been allowed in since 2003 (SCR, December 2005).

In December 2005, the UN Security Council held its first-ever briefing on the deteriorating situation in the country and its impact on the region. The briefing mentioned the large-scale internal displacement and the flow of refugees from the country. In September 2006, the country was formally voted onto the agenda of the Security Council, although in January 2007 the campaign for Security Council action suffered a setback when China and Russia vetoed a resolution calling for the restoration of democracy.

The Burmese government has come under renewed international pressure since the 2007 "Saffron Revolution". In

October 2007, the Security Council adopted a Presidential Statement deploring the government's crackdown against protesters and calling for genuine dialogue for national reconciliation between the government, democracy movement leaders and ethnic groups (UNSC/PRST, 11 October 2007). This was the Council's first formal action on the country.

The UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser Ibrahim Gambari has made two trips to Rangoon since September 2007 for talks with the SPDC. Following his first trip, the government appointed a liaison minister to handle dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi. However, prior to Gambari's second trip in November 2007, the government ordered UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Charles Petrie to leave the country. The expulsion call followed an October statement issued by Petrie's office drawing attention to the deepening poverty in the country and linking this to the September demonstrations (FT, 2 November 2007).

The UN's Human Rights Council condemned the government's response to the October 2007 protests and urged an immediate investigation of the rights situation. After a gap of four years, the government once more allowed the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar entry in November 2007 to determine how many people had been killed or detained since the start of the crackdown.

In October, the largest aid donor, Japan, cancelled an educational grant of almost \$5 million in reaction to the killing of a Japanese journalist during the government's response to the demonstrations (CBC News, 16 October 2007).

The following month, leaders at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit bent to the demands of Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein in refusing to allow Ibrahim Gambari to brief members and their dialogue partners on the government's crackdown on protesters. They also signed a charter which confirmed their support for non-interference in the internal affairs of member states (AFP, 23 November 2007). Although Myanmar (Burma) joined ASEAN a decade ago, the membership has had little impact on human rights, democratisation and governance in the country (ISN Security Watch, November 2007).

Many analysts believe that those with the most potential influence over the SPDC are its counterparts in neighbouring China and India. Currently, both countries remain generally supportive of the government. China is believed to be the largest foreign investor in Burma, and its growing role is cited by Indian officials as justification for their increasing military, political and trade agreements with Myanmar (Burma) (CRS, October 2007, p.12). At present, resolution of the political crisis – and the ethnic conflict – appears to be distant.

*Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Myanmar (Burma). The full country profile is available online [here](#).*

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## About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org).

Media contact:

**Anne-Sophie Lois**

Acting Head of Communication Department

Tel.: +41 22 799 07 06

Email: [anne-sophie.lois@nrc.ch](mailto:anne-sophie.lois@nrc.ch)

**Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre**

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Ballexert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

[www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701