

February, 2010 Karen Villagers Under Threat

Burma's military regime has escalated attacks in eastern Burma, with the destruction of villages, schools and a vital health clinic coming amidst intense pressure from the Thai military to repatriate refugees to areas where they would once again be at extreme risk for landmine injury, forced labor and other human rights abuses.

In January, attacks on ten villages in an area about 60 miles from the Thailand-Burma border resulted in four deaths and at least 2,000 villagers forced into hiding. On February 8, Burmese soldiers attacked two villages in the same region, destroying a mobile health clinic run by the Karen Department of Health and Welfare, a GHAP-partner organization, and sending hundreds of villagers and health workers fleeing for their lives.

Medics escaped with their communities and are continuing to provide what basic services they can while hiding in the jungle, and planning alternate routes for re-supply and health care delivery. In addition to essential medical services, the attack has disrupted the GHAP-supported clinic's village health worker program, malaria control program, reproductive health program, and vitamin A and deworming program for the community.

Denial and destruction of health services provided by backpack health workers is a key component to the military regime's campaign. For years, humanitarian aid organizations have been denied access to ethnic minority areas of Burma, and community-based health workers with GHAP's partner organizations are routinely targeted by the regime's soldiers.

In addition to facing attack in Burma, displaced Karen were squeezed from the Thai side, when on Feb. 5, the army began the repatriation of refugees who fled from human rights abuses in the Ler Per Her region of Burma in June 2009. Under intense international pressure, the military halted the repatriation effort after one day, but signs are not encouraging that they will allow an estimated 3,000 remaining refugees to live in the temporary settlements where they have sheltered in Thailand.

Refugees have told GHAP partner organizations that they do not want to return to Burma because they will face the same dire conditions that drove them to Thailand: Landmine injuries, forced labor, extortion and starvation.

Since June, two refugees have been killed and at least seven have been maimed by landmines when attempting to visit their former homes to look after livestock, including a 13-year-old boy who lost a leg, and a pregnant woman who lost a foot on January 18, 2010.

Said Dr. Cynthia Maung, founder of the Mae Tao Clinic, which cares for many Karen refugees, "viable return at the moment is neither safe nor possible. Sending them back to Burma is to place them into harm's way, and they will likely be forced to come back to Thailand."