



Palaung Women's Organization

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Stolen Lives: Human trafficking from Palaung areas of Burma to China

Embargo until 14th June 2010

Executive Summary

The Palaung Women's Organisation (PWO) has documented 72 cases of actual and suspected trafficking involving 110 people, which took place along the China-Burma border, mostly during the past six years. The majority of those trafficked were young Palaung women from tea farming communities in Namkham, Namhsan and Mantong townships.

PWO surveys in villages from which women have been trafficked show that up to 41% of the population have migrated to work elsewhere. Large scale migration began after the surrender in 2005 of the Palaung State Liberation Army, which had controlled Palaung areas under a ceasefire agreement since 1991. There has been a surge of Burma Army troops and proxy militia into the area since the surrender, who have imposed increased controls and taxes on agriculture and trading. Together with rising prices of food commodities from Central Burma, and increasing costs of health and education, this has meant that tea farmers can no longer earn a living and young people have to leave home to survive. This has led to an alarming increase in the incidence of trafficking of women, men and children, mainly to China.

Most of those trafficked were tricked into travelling to China by being offered well-paid jobs on farms or in factories. In 25% of the cases, women were forced to marry Chinese men, with brokers receiving up to 25,000 Yuan (approx 3,800 USD) for the transaction. 10% were forced into the sex trade. Some ended up being used as live feed for leeches. Known destinations were mainly in Yunnan province, but some ended up as far east as Shandong.

A disturbing trend is that eleven of the cases were children under 10, five of whom were under one year old. Most were boys. Some of these children were simply kidnapped from their homes, but others were sold by parents who were alcohol or drug users. As highlighted by PWO in earlier reports, opium cultivation in Palaung areas has skyrocketed in recent years due to the profits being made by the Burma Army and its militia from the drug trade. This has led to increasing addiction among Palaung men, who not only sell off all their possessions to buy drugs but also their children.

In only eleven cases were the trafficked persons able to escape, some after years of forced marriage to Chinese men. Family members seeking to trace trafficked persons sought help in vain from local Burmese authorities and social organizations. In some cases perpetrators were arrested and jailed, but several paid bribes or fines and were then released.

The Burmese military regime has passed anti-trafficking legislation since 2005 and set up special anti-trafficking units, including at Muse on the China-Burma border. However, these measures appear to have had little effect, due to failure to address the structural root causes driving human trafficking.

The situation looks set to worsen following the November 2010 elections. Burma's military rulers ensured that their cronies won in the Palaung areas, including well-known druglord Kyaw Myint, who is now an MP for Namkham. Militarization has continued unabated, and new military offensives by the regime against ethnic ceasefire groups have ignited fighting once again in northern Shan State. Even

before the new parliament was convened, a new national budget was approved which continued to prioritize military spending far above education and health.

Radical structural political changes are thus urgently needed to address the problem of human trafficking and migration in Burma.

PWO therefore makes the following recommendations:

To the military government

- To restore national reconciliation and genuine peace in Burma, the military government should immediately begin political dialogue with representatives of the pro-democracy forces and the ethnic nationalities
- To immediately implement a nationwide ceasefire and stop military offensives in the ethnic areas
- To review the policies of anti-trafficking in Burma to ensure they are addressing the root causes of the trafficking problem
- To lift all restrictions on activities of community based organisations, including those assisting trafficked persons

To the international community

- Not to recognise the undemocratic military-backed government in Burma
- To increase pressure on the military government to immediately start political dialogue towards genuine peace and democracy in Burma

To INGOs and NGOs

- To evaluate the effectiveness of anti-trafficking programs which are being supported inside Burma, and to monitor whether they are transparent and accountable
- To provide more support for civil society organisations, including those working cross-border, which provide direct assistance to people affected by trafficking

To the Chinese government

- To re-evaluate China's economic and diplomatic support of Burma's military government, whose policies are continuing to sink Burma's people deeper into conflict and poverty, causing mass migration and fuelling human trafficking to China.

To local communities:

- To accept trafficking survivors back into their community and to provide necessary support to them so that they can rebuild their lives

Background of Palaung Women's Organization

The Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) was established in 2000 to support the Palaung people of Burma. PWO provides gender and human rights training to Palaung women and their communities, increases international and community knowledge of the Palaung culture and history, and raises awareness of the human rights abuses suffered by Palaung people.

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