

Dams as ethnic cleansing:

The Burmese junta's war against the Karenni ethnic people



IDP children in Shadaw Township

Photo: Karenni Social Welfare and Development Center (KSWDC) Relief Team

By Noel Rajesh

After half a century of war and violence waged on them by the Burmese military dictatorship, the Karenni are now facing the biggest ever threat to their continued existence - the Weigyi dam, one of several dams planned to be built on the Salween River by Thailand and Burma.

Based on a report by, and conversations with, Karenni people displaced and living in Thailand, Noel Rajesh writes about the Karenni experience with war and displacement and their fight to protect their homes, culture and identity.

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The information on the Karenni peoples and the Lawpita and Salween dams are based on the report *Dammed by Burma's Generals: The Karenni experience with hydropower development – from Lawpita to the Salween* published by the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG). The full report is available in English, Thai and Burmese at www.salweenwatch.org or contact kdrq05@yahoo.com.

Aung Ngyeh, a 31 year old Karenni, fled to Thailand in 2002, forced out of his home in Karenni State by the Burmese military's war against ethnic communities. He now lives with his wife in the refugee camp along the Thai border working with the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG) campaigning to stop foreign investment in the Burmese regime's dam projects on the Salween River.

For Aung Ngyeh and thousands of other displaced people like him, the Burmese military dictatorship's dam projects (as well as other "development" projects such as railway lines, highways, mines and natural gas pipelines) are tools of war used by the junta to harass and evict ethnic peoples.

When he was 16 years old, Aung Ngyeh worked as forced labour building the railway lines not far from the area of the Moby dam that feeds the Lawpita hydropower plants. Built with Japanese funding in the early 1960s on the Lawpita Falls in the Balu Chuang River in Karenni State, the Moby dam was Burma's first hydropower project.

About 12,500 ethnic peoples including Karenni and Shan people permanently lost their homes and fields to the dam reservoir covering about 207 square kilometres. Those living near the power plants were forced to leave at gunpoint and their fields were planted with land mines.

Since 1960, largely in efforts to control the Lawpita area, the Burmese

military increased its presence in Karenni State to over 24 permanent battalions resulting in a constant terrorisation of the population by the marauding soldiers. Forced labour and



The Weigyi dam site along the Thai-Burma border. According to the Karenni Development Research Group, the dam's reservoir would permanently displace an estimated 30,000 people, submerge fertile farmlands and forests, as well as disrupt riverine fisheries, trade and transportation routes.

portering, harassment, extortion and random killings are common as well as sexual violence specifically targeting ethnic women including military gang rape.

Despite the hardship endured, the Karenni themselves derive little benefit from the Lawpita dam. At least eight per cent of Karenni State does not get the electricity that is routed to Rangoon and Mandalay; anyway for most of the rural residents, the price of power is unaffordable. Moreover, as the water from the Balu Chuang River is diverted to the dam's turbines,

villagers cannot get water for their fields when they need it and suffer chronic water shortages.

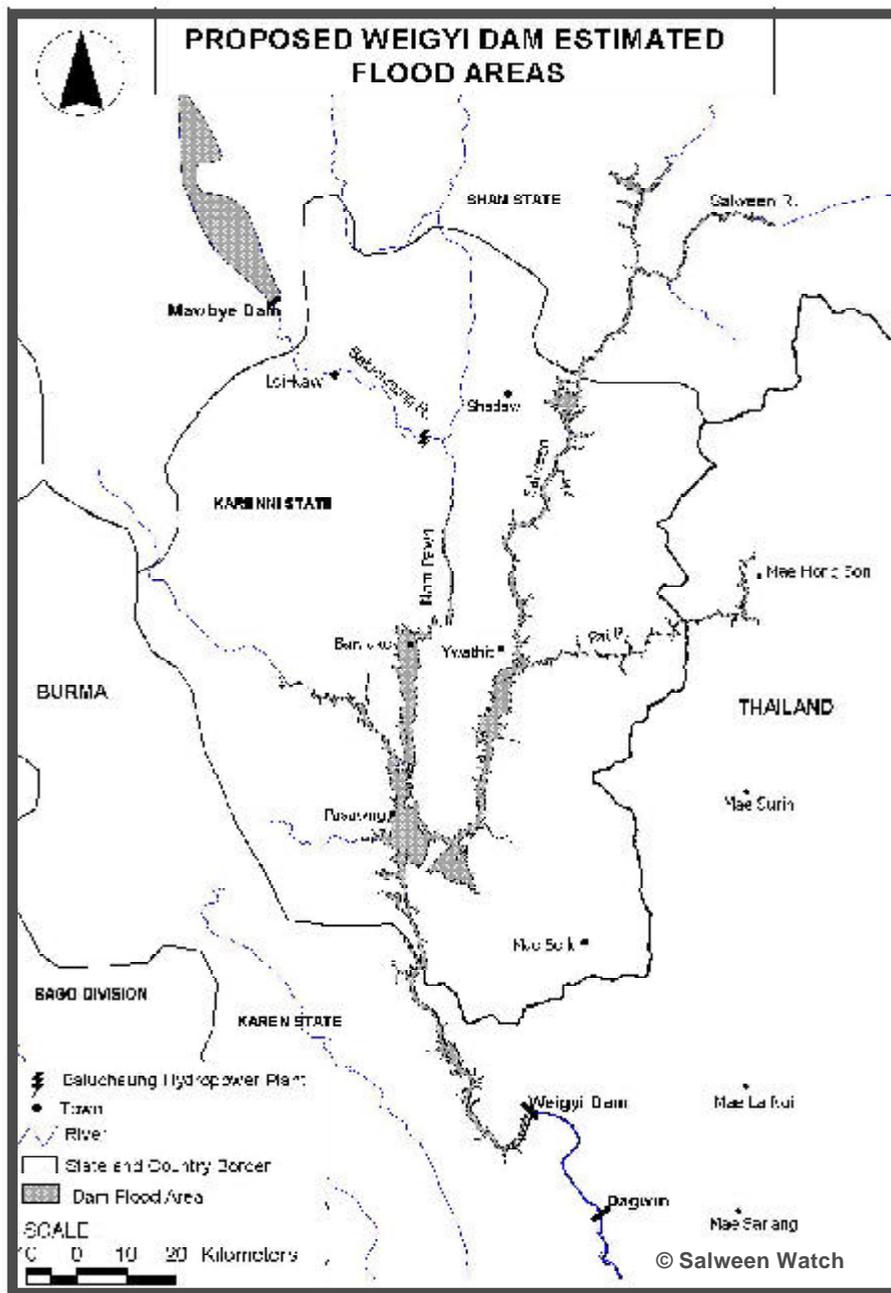
Karenni State is located on the eastern edge of Burma, between Thailand's Mae Hong Son province in the east, Shan State in the north, and Karen State in the south. The highly culturally diverse state has seven townships with a total population of about 300,000 that also includes "internally displaced populations".

Kayah peoples are the majority inhabitants of the state but there are other ethnic groups such as the Gekho, Geba, Karen, Kayan (Padaung), Kayaw, Bre, Manumanaw, Shan, Yinbaw and Yintalai. Each group has its own language, customs and beliefs; different dialects and other differences may also exist within each group. The majority of the people practise upland and lowland rice farming together with

fishing, hunting and collection of forest products.

The seven townships of Karenni State roughly equate to the former kingdoms under Karenni kings or Sawphyas that ruled independently. In what is a reflection of existing tensions today with the Burmese dictatorship, the Karenni kingdoms were never subjugated even under British colonial rule and remained separate and independent until 1948 when Burma gained independence from the British.

After independence, the Burmese set up the Anti-Fascist People's



the Burmese military. However, it still did not stop him going back sometime ago to other parts of the state, hiding in the forests and walking or hitching rides with villagers, travelling all the way up to Shan State in order to look at the present conditions.

He says that huge numbers of Karenni have already left the state: some to the border areas in Thailand, some hiding in the forests near their destroyed villages, and the vast majority forcibly moved to relocation camps where they are used as labour by the junta.

The villages affected by the forced relocations cover at least half the area of Karenni State and are home to at least 20,000-30,000 people. But in fact, many more people than this have been forcibly relocated. A recent report by the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) working on issues of internal displacement states that 92,500 ethnic people were internally displaced in 2005 and most of these people were probably forcibly relocated. The junta gave them no more than a week to move to the specified sites and stated that, if found

outside the relocation sites after that week, they would be considered as enemy troops and shot on sight.

During resettlement, the military went around looting and burning granaries, killing livestock and forcing everyone including children, pregnant women and elderly to walk through the hills to distant relocation sites.

Near the crowded relocation camps, there is little arable land to grow crops. Lacking proper food and

Freedom League (AFPFL) government while the Karenni formed a parallel government, the Karenni Resistance Government (KRG), led by U Be Tu Re.

In 1948, Burmese troops invaded the Karenni states and assassinated U Be Tu Re. Ever since then, many armed Karenni groups such as the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front or KNPLF have fought the Burmese. As of 2002, all groups except the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) – formed in

1957 from the KRG – had signed ceasefire agreements with the Burmese junta. In 1995, the junta used the ceasefire – which only lasted a few months – as a pretext to move into more strategic positions for greater control over Karenni areas. After the 1995 ceasefire, the junta also collected the names of people involved in various Karenni liberation groups.

This is why, Aung Ngyeh says, he cannot yet return to his home in Karenni State as he is a marked man by

The Yintalai (also formerly known as the Yintalaing or Yangtalaing) ethnic peoples live in their ancestral lands of Pasaung and Bawlake townships that would be completely submerged by the Weigyi dam.

The Yintalai are a sub-group of the Kayah ethnic group with a slightly different language that has no written alphabet. They practise a combination of Buddhism and animism with every household having a Buddhist altar and a spirit shrine. Animist beliefs such as worship of traditional spirits are very strong among the Yintalai people. They believe there are powerful spirits guarding the mountains, forests and large trees. Thus when choosing and cultivating farm plots, they always give offerings to the spirits and request for plentiful yields. The Yintalai practise rain-fed farming, breeding livestock and hunting as well as handicrafts to support their livelihoods.



Photo: KDRG

Source: *Dammed by Burma's Generals: The Karenni experience with hydropower development – from Lawpita to the Salween* published by the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG).

medical care, people suffer from malnutrition and diseases such as malaria; women are constantly raped by armed soldiers and those who are captured escaping are killed.

Given the impacts of the Lawpita dam and the continuing war and forced relocations by the junta, Aung Ngyeh says that future projects such as the dams on the Salween River can only worsen an already unbearable situation for the Karenni peoples.

Presently, Thailand and Burma have agreed to build at least four dams along the Salween River in Burma, at Tasang in Shan State and Hatgyi, Weigyi, and Dagwin in Karen State. The Salween

dams in total will produce 15-20,000 megawatts of electricity that will be sold to Thailand. The Weigyi dam, slated to begin construction in 2007, is at least ten times higher than the Moby dam, and will have the biggest impacts on the Karenni. Although sited in Karen State, the dam reservoir would flood over 640 square kilometres of Karenni State, including

most of the area's lowland forests and agriculture land and disrupt riverine fisheries.

Although no studies are available about the forests in the Salween area of Karenni State, it is known that the hundreds of square kilometres of



An IDP family struggles to make do in the forest, Pasaung. Photo: KSWDC

lowland forests to be submerged by the Weigyi reservoir lie within an ecoregion considered rich in biodiversity. These lowland forests are also an integral part of the Karenni people's livelihoods, providing countless varieties of wild fruits, vegetables, mushrooms and other non-timber forest products for sustenance and income generation.

The Weigyi dam would completely submerge 28 villages in four Karenni townships including the entire towns of Pasaung and Bawlake, and although many villagers have already been forcibly relocated over the years, the dam would still directly affect an estimated 30,000 people. This includes the entire tribe of the Yintalai – about 1,000 people – a sub-ethnic group of the Kayah whose ancestral lands are in Pasaung and Bawlake (see Box).

Meanwhile, an estimated one third of the population are already forcibly resettled or displaced and over 22,000 Karenni refugees registered in camps in Thailand. If the Salween dams go ahead, many of these people will never be able to return home.

The Karenni groups are urging Thailand and other investors like China to halt all plans for dams on the Salween including the Weigyi dam. For the Karenni, already ravaged by half a century of war and violence waged by the Burmese military, the Salween dams only promise to bring more suffering.