

BEHIND THE NEWS REFUGEES

For the thousands of villagers fleeing the repressive Myanmar regime, jungle life is fraught with hunger, disease and fear of the army finding them. Meanwhile, foreign intervention is elusive, writes *Daniel Pepper*

The dispossessed

Leaning on a worn wooden crutch, Saw Pa Pwe, 48, a short, muscular man, hobbles on one leg from his brother's exposed platform to the raised hut he now calls home. The makeshift bamboo and plastic shelter sits a metre from the ground on the low point of a wet, sloping hill where 1,300 displaced villagers are starting from scratch in the Ei Tu Hta refugee camp.

His wife sits silently in the stifling mid-morning heat in the rolling hills of eastern Myanmar – she hasn't spoken since the trauma of a landmine maimed her farmer husband as he walked to his fields in 2002.

Saw Pa Pwe is now one of the tens of thousands of displaced villagers who spend their life on the run, choosing to live a nomadic life in the jungle rather than under the repressive Myanmar military regime, which is intent on subjugating opposition groups such as those from the Karen ethnic minority of eastern Myanmar.

"Living under their control means forced labour," said Saw Pa Pwe's sister-in-law, Naw Pi Htoo, 44, who has lost three of her seven children to disease in the malaria-infested hills. "They use the people to clear landmines and women and children to carry military supplies."

Their plight and that of millions of other Myanmar is set to gain greater international attention after the UN Security Council last Friday moved to put Myanmar on its permanent agenda – despite sharp objections from Russia and China, the latter being the largest trading partner of Myanmar authorities, constituting a US\$1 billion bilateral trade relationship.

The 10-4 Security Council vote was welcomed by US authorities lobbying for international pressure against the military dictatorship. US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, highlighted drug smuggling, a refugee crisis and human rights abuses in Myanmar as ongoing threats to the region.

Myanmar was once one of the richest countries in Southeast Asia, endowed with fertile land, precious teak wood and gems, and blessed with natural gas. Since 1996, the US and European Union have had economic sanctions on the regime, citing the house arrest of democracy advocate and Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi for 10 of the past 17 years.

Even foreign ministers from the normally deferential regional economic body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have issued harsh rebukes against the regime's foot-dragging on promised reforms. In July, the foreign ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia criticised the regime for being slow on reforms.

But this is a regime notoriously unresponsive to outside pressure and, public rhetoric notwithstanding, signs point to it becoming more reclusive, not less. Earlier this year, it suddenly moved its capital upcountry, to a construction site in a jungle town of Pyinmana, 320km north of Yangon, the largest city and former capital. Government employees were given no warning and were expected to relocate with their families immediately.

"It's bizarre," said a senior western diplomat in Yangon. "It wasn't designed to be a workable city. It was de-



Karen villager Saw Pa Pwe, who lost the lower part of his left leg to a landmine, sits in the Ei Tu Hta refugee camp on the border with Thailand. Photo: Daniel Pepper

signed to isolate. This is a country that's trying to close itself in.

"The regime is impervious to outside influence – whether positive or negative – they don't care what the world thinks of them," said the diplomat.

The government monitors telephone calls, censors websites such as Hotmail and any sites related to Myanmar democracy activism, and asks internet cafe providers to take periodic "snapshots" of their customers' monitors. Mobile phones are reserved for those in the military or with close ties, or those who can afford the US\$3,000 it takes to purchase a new line.

The UN vote last week comes as human rights advocates based along the border in Thailand say the current military offensive under way in eastern Myanmar, against the Karen ethnic minority, is the worst they've seen in 10 years, displacing about 18,000 people since the end of last year, according to the Thai Burma Border Consortium, an advocacy group based in Bangkok.

"This vote is a major step towards getting the UN to accept its responsibility to act on Burma," said Yvette Mahon, director of the London-based charity Burma Campaign UK. "This is a case of the US and UK acting on principle, while China and Russia are putting trade and profit before the interests of ordinary Burmese people."

The vast majority of the Ei Tu Hta refugee camp's inhabitants are from the Karen ethnic minority, long accustomed to living free of foreign rule. Saw Thein Win, 43, and his family came

from the country's dominant Myanmar tribe. He was imprisoned for three years in 2002 when the authorities accused him of collaborating with the Karen National Union (KNU), a resistance group. It's a claim he denies. He was beaten mercilessly by a group of soldiers when caught in his village in the east and lost his left eye; once imprisoned the guards tattooed statements of Myanmar military conquest on his arms and chest.

"The Burmese soldiers should be attacking their enemy – the KNU soldiers," he said. "But instead they attack the villagers."

Fourteen new families arrived in Ei Tu Hta on August 24 after a 12-day trek, surviving on an occasional handout of boiled rice and by foraging for bamboo shoots and vegetables.

Saw Pa Pwe says that since Thailand closed its border camps in March to refugees, there is a "gentleman's agreement" between the Thai and Myanmar authorities allowing them to congregate in camps near the border, with Thai-based aid groups allowed to deliver limited amounts of food and medicine to the camps.

Bringing a rare statistical basis to the health crisis in eastern Myanmar, a report released this month by the Back Pack Health Worker Team, a mostly Myanmar cross-border medical relief group based in Thailand, painted a picture of a humanitarian crisis as bad as any in an African war zone.

Based on several surveys since 2000, it found that, at any given time, 12 per cent of the population is infected with drug-resistant malaria, the most common cause of death, and that more than 15 per cent of children are malnourished. HIV is also a problem. Importantly, the report links high rates of death and disease to life under military rule, where forced labour and displacements are common.

"Sometimes, people don't want to talk about politics, but we're health-care providers, so must look at the big picture," said last year's Nobel Peace

Prize nominee Cynthia Maung, who chairs the Back Pack Health Worker Team. She also runs the Mae Tao clinic along the border, which gave medical aid to 45,000 individuals last year, the majority of them Myanmar refugees. Dr Maung works with teams of backpackers that carry medical supplies through military-controlled areas. She estimates they have access to about 150,000 of the half a million who are displaced within eastern Myanmar.

Voravit Suwanvanichkij, a physician and researcher with the Centre for Public Health and Human Rights at Johns Hopkins University, who worked with Dr Maung on the report, said the medical crisis was vast.

"The lack of rule of law, collapse of public health, and extensive corruption have resulted in widespread availability of medicines without control, which often means medications are adulterated or taken inappropriately," he said. "The end result of which is, for entities such as malaria and TB, increasing drug resistance rates, already documented along the Thai-Burma border. Similar things may also be occurring for HIV."

India and China have come in for sharp criticism over links to the Myanmar regime, with the countries poised to benefit from natural gas fields being developed off Myanmar's west coast. The fields are being opened by South Korea's Daewoo corporation, which could earn the regime between US\$12 billion and US\$17 billion over the next 20 years, according to figures released in June by Thai-based NGO Shwe Gas Movement. So far, advocacy groups from Thailand, the US, South Korea and India have condemned the venture as providing direct support for a regime with an atrocious human rights record.

As the world's second largest energy consumer, China this year signed a memorandum of understanding with Myanmar for the sale of large off-shore natural gas imports, worth an estimated US\$37 billion to US\$52 billion.

"The only way to conduct business in Burma is by gaining the trust and favour of the junta, which is a notoriously difficult business partner," said Matthew Smith, with Earth Rights International, an environmental and human rights organisation.

Aid groups point to the experience of the Yadana pipeline, a gas supply line built in the 1990s across a short span of eastern Myanmar, where thousands of villagers were forcibly displaced, raped and murdered. Lawsuits ensued, resulting in out-of-court settlements in the US and France over the past few years, indicating that the western businesses invested in the project – the French company Total and the American Unocal (now controlled by Chevron) – were guilty of complicity as the abuses took place.

"Why do human rights abuses happen in Burma?" asked David Mathieson, a researcher with New York-based Human Rights Watch in Thailand. "You just allow business from three countries to finance repression in Burma for another 20 years. Where do you think that the money is going to go? It's not going to education or health programmes – it's going to the military to build a better command centre to repress the population as the regime sells off the wealth of the nation."

SCMP Graphic

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Chile applies pressure as US stalls assassination probe

30 years after the slaying in Washington of an opponent to Pinochet, an inquiry is still under way, writes *Larry Rohter*

Thirty years after a Chilean-organised hit squad assassinated former foreign minister Orlando Letelier and an American colleague on the streets of Washington, investigators in Santiago are drawing closer to implicating former dictator Augusto Pinochet in the killings.

But they say their efforts are being hindered by a parallel inquiry in the US that's been stalled since President George W. Bush took office, which is withholding documents.

Letelier, one of the most visible leaders of opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship, and Ronni Karpen Moffitt were killed on September 21, 1976, when a bomb planted under their car exploded. Even after the 9/11 attacks, the Letelier assassination remains the most audacious act of state-sponsored terrorism committed on US soil.

"Every day it's clearer that Pinochet ordered my brother's death," said Fabiola Letelier, a prominent human rights lawyer in Chile. "But

for a proper investigation to take place we need access to the appropriate records and evidence."

Pinochet was detained in London in 1998 by prosecutors seeking to bring him to justice for abuses committed during his 17-year rule.

Afterwards, the administration of former US president Bill Clinton came under renewed pressure from the Letelier and Moffitt families, and it released more than 24,000 declassified diplomatic and intelligence cables. It also reopened an investigation of the assassination, which, when over, recommended that the US indict Pinochet, but attorney-general Janet Reno left the decision to her successors in the Bush administration.

The case remains politically sensitive in Washington, where previous Republican administrations supported the Pinochet dictatorship as a bulwark against leftist encroachment in Latin America during the cold war.

Though Mr Bush, whose father

was director of the CIA at the time of the assassination, promised to "direct every resource at our command" to defeating terrorism, the US investigation continues to languish, Ms Letelier and Chilean officials say. They and others complain that hundreds of secret documents are being withheld.

"It's been six years, three times longer than the original investigation that fingered the hit team, and nothing has happened," said Peter Kornbluh, a Chile specialist at the National Security Archive, which obtained the release of the original documents. "I've filed Freedom of Information Act requests, but the documents that come closest to Pinochet are still being withheld, ostensibly as evidence."

No one in Washington would comment on the case. William Blier, head of the unit in the office of the US attorney in Washington that's in charge of the case, declined a request for information on the status of the investigation.

Other lawyers involved in the case on the victims' side said the Bush administration's performance contrasted with promises made after 9/11 to put pressure on states that sponsored terrorism.

"It's stunning to me that with all

the energy being put into the war on terror, [the Bush administration] has been completely unresponsive to our queries," said Sam Buffone, a Washington lawyer representing Moffitt's widow, Michael. "The most basic lesson of that war is that anyone responsible for an act of domestic terrorism will never get away with it, no matter how long it takes," he said. "But that rule seems to have been honoured in the breach for Augusto Pinochet."

Pinochet, now 90, ailing and discredited in Chile, ruled from September 1973 to March 1990. Since mid-2004, investigations in the US and Chile have uncovered an illicit fortune of more than US\$27 million that he hid abroad.

He's now facing tax fraud and forgery charges, two indictments for human rights violations and several other inquiries into murders, kidnappings and disappearances.

John Dinges, co-author of *Assassination on Embassy Row* and a professor at Alberto Hurtado University in Santiago, said: "The evidence against Pinochet is as strong in the Letelier case as any of the other cases he's facing."

He said the dossier now included damning testimony from key officials. Among them are General



Firemen work to free the bodies of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt after the car bombing on September 21, 1976. Photo: AP

Manuel Contreras, the former chief of the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA), Pinochet's secret police, as well as Michael Townley, a US-born former DINA agent.

Facing diplomatic pressure, the Pinochet government handed Townley over to the US in 1978. He admitted organising and carrying out the killing with Cuban exiles recruited for the task. He served a jail term and was enrolled in the witness protection programme.

Pinochet refused to extradite

other officials of the intelligence directorate who were Chilean citizens. But in 1995 Contreras was convicted in Chile of the Letelier assassination and sentenced to seven years in prison. In interviews, Contreras, currently serving a prison term in Chile for the disappearance and torture of political prisoners, said Pinochet had known and approved of all the actions he took.

But he has not specifically said that Pinochet, whom US diplomatic cables show was irate about

Letelier's activities in exile, ordered the killing.

Most recently, Chilean courts agreed to consider a request that Pinochet be stripped of his immunity in a related case: the murder of Eugenio Berrios, a DINA agent nicknamed Pinochet's Mad Scientist, whose headless body was found in Uruguay in 1995.

Berrios had been spirited into exile there in 1992, in anticipation that he would soon be called to testify in an investigation of the Letelier and other assassinations.

In March, Chile asked that three senior Uruguayan military officers said to be involved in the Berrios killing be extradited. Uruguayan courts complied, and the men were recently interrogated by a Chilean investigative judge, Alejandro Madrid, whose inquiry into the Berrios case inevitably led him to the Letelier assassination.

"The Chileans have been exemplary, in going forward on Pinochet," E. Lawrence Barcella, the lead prosecutor in the original trial of Letelier's assassins in 1980, said from Washington. "In my view, outliving those you kill is not a defence. I hope nobody stops trying [to build the case against Pinochet]."

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