



Burma/Myanmar: End Marginalization of Displaced Ethnic Communities

[Yangon - 20 June, 2019] Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) must be recognized as equal citizens, adequately consulted and be able to meaningfully participate in all decision-making processes concerning their future to ensure that they are not further marginalized, said 15 local Myanmar/Burma civil society organizations in a new report released today - which coincides with the World Refugee Day. The National League for Democracy - led government, concerned international governments and other stakeholders should provide adequate humanitarian aid as well as ensure cross-border aid reaches displaced communities until a safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs can take place.

“The future of displaced communities must be in their hands, not decided by the Myanmar government and without pressure from the UNHCR,” said Khu Neh Reh of Karenni Refugee Committee. “They must be fully consulted on matters that deeply affect them,” he continued.

Nearly four years since the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, the Burma/Myanmar military has continued its offensives against various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that mount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. The increasing clashes - including in ceasefire areas - have led to new displacement and eroded what little trust has been built in the peace process thus far. Meanwhile, displaced communities continue to be left out of political discussions surrounding repatriation and return.

“The Myanmar government and military’s continuing violations against, and marginalization of, displaced communities demonstrates a lack of commitment and political will in fostering an inclusive and peaceful society that respects the aspirations of a federal democratic Myanmar,” said Aung Khaing Min of Progressive Voice.

The report, “There is No One Who Does Not Miss Home: A Report on Protracted Displacement Due to Armed Conflict in Burma/Myanmar,” is a pan-ethnic report on protracted displacement due to armed conflict and related human rights violations in Myanmar from the perspectives of local ethnic communities. The report documents the devastating impact of decades-long armed conflict and systematic persecution and oppression of ethnic communities, and reflects key concerns and pressing needs of the displaced Karen, Karenni, Mon, Ta’ang, Pa-Oh, Kachin and Shan refugee communities. The report findings are based primarily on 338 individual interviews and 21 focus group discussions with refugees and IDPs, as well as interviews with the EAOs, CSOs, UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations.

The vast majority of interviewees attributed their displacement to a systematic pattern of human rights violations that has accompanied the decades-long armed conflict perpetrated by the Burma/Myanmar military that continues to act with total impunity. The interviewees described torture, pillaging and burning of villages, forced labor, confiscation of crops, property and land, rape and sexual violence and forceable transfer of civilians among other human rights violations as the causes of their displacement. These human rights violations, combined with their impacts on health, education and livelihoods, have also led to displacement. Some described being displaced multiple times as a result of the Burma/Myanmar military burning down IDP camps or villages where they were sheltering. The report found that it is these abuses that displaced communities fear upon return and that ceasefires or a reduction of clashes alone are not an adequate measure of whether it is safe for them to return home. This is compounded by a lack of accountability which makes displaced people fear renewed conflict and serious human rights violations upon return.

“Peace and security to us means more than declarations and signing papers” says Way Lay of Karen Human Rights Group. “We have seen ceasefires and an end to fighting in one ethnic area only for it to resume in another area like a recurring bad dream. Absence of war in one part of the country is not an indication that the time is right for a safe and dignified return,” he continued.

All interviewees who relied on aid reported a reduction in aid to levels that made them seriously concerned about survival - in refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border this has become a push factor for refugees to return to Myanmar prematurely. Reduction in aid or an end to cross border aid coupled with prolonged displacement and the uncertainty of the future has led to higher rates of depression, suicide as well as increased domestic violence, gambling, drug and alcohol dependency among other social impacts in both IDP and refugee camps.

“While aid for our country is increasing and there is this supposed increase in economic opportunities, we are instead witnessing some of the worst conditions for displaced ethnic communities we have observed in decades,” Naw Blooming Night Zan of the Karen Refugee Committee said. “Refugees are getting starved out of camps, while IDPs are risking their lives to seek livelihoods in areas riddled with landmines, face getting trafficked to feed their families, and ethnic people are dying as a result.” she continued.

Many interviewees expressed concern about housing, land and property restitution if they were to return. Yet the 2012 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Law allows the government to take control of “vacant” or “fallow” land while further amendments impose hefty fines and possible imprisonment for unauthorized use of land. This is extremely harmful to the displaced communities who often lack the necessary paperwork and freedom of movement to register their lands. In addition, the law does not recognize customary land law in ethnic areas, which has helped preserve the culture and fabric of ethnic communities and protected the land owned by their ancestors.

The groups have called on the Myanmar government and the military to take concrete steps towards a genuine peace process that addresses the root causes of the conflict, including ending military offensives, holding the Burma/Myanmar military to account for human rights violations, the removal of the military from ethnic areas, halting land confiscation, and amending the 2008 Constitution to establish a genuine federal democratic system of governance based on equality and self-determination. The Myanmar government and other stakeholders should ensure the full and meaningful participation of displaced populations in the decision-making level of all policy process which affect them.

“Donors and international organizations should support the work of local ethnic community-based organizations who are doing the work that Myanmar government won’t, to ensure that equal assistance reaches all displaced communities regardless of their location, and that the essential role of local CBOs must be recognized whether or not they are registered” said Mie Mie of Karenni National Women’s Organization.

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10. Karenni Social Welfare and Development Center (KSWDC)
11. Koug Jor Shan Refugee Camp (KJSRC)
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