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December 27, 1997

The need for assistance and protection for refugee children from Burma's Shan State in Thailand

Currently there are approximately 115,000 refugees from Burma staying in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. These refugees, although they have not been accorded refugee status by the Thai government, have at least been permitted to stay temporarily in the camps, and have the right to receive basic humanitarian assistance and their children can attend schools in the camps. These refugees are primarily from Burma's Karen and Karenni States, and have fled the ongoing civil war in these areas, and the human rights abuses committed by the Burmese military against civilians.

It is imperative that these refugees currently in camps should have the right to continued asylum in Thailand until the situation is safe enough for them to return home. Meanwhile, however, BRC is very concerned at the plight of refugees from other areas of Burma, specifically from Shan State, who up till now have had no access to refugee camps in Thailand, despite the fact they are fleeing from exactly the same abuses as those committed against the Karen and Karenni refugees.

There has been a steady flow of refugees from Shan State to Thailand over the last few decades, but the flow increased sharply following a massive forced relocation program conducted by the SLORC military regime in central Shan State in early 1996. (See Appendix 1: "Uprooting the Shan") An estimated 60-70,000 Shan refugees have fled to Thailand in 1996-1997, to escape the ongoing brutality of the Burmese military towards civilians in the forced relocation areas (see Appendix 2: monthly reports of the Shan Human Rights Foundation, January-November 1997). Most of these refugees have fled as entire families, including the very old and very young.

However, the Thai government has continued to ignore the Shan refugee crisis, and whenever the refugees have congregated at the border in noticeable groups, they have been forcibly repatriated into Burma. Thus, most Shan refugees immediately disperse on arrival in Thailand to try and find work as illegal labourers, either on farms at the border areas, or in construction sites in Thailand's cities. However, as illegal migrants, they have great difficulty surviving on their meager wages and feeding all their family members. The living conditions in the construction sites in towns are also unsanitary and diseases are rife (see Appendix 3: monthly reports of the Migrant Assistance Program health project December 1996 -April 1997, and Appendix 4: photos taken by Burmese Relief Centre



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of Shan refugee children in a construction site in Chiang Ma

The situation for the refugee children at such worksites is of special concern. Not only are they malnourished and have to live in unsanitary conditions, but most have no access to schooling. These children should have the right to proper food, medical care and education, like other children living in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border.

Now, with the current economic crisis in Thailand, many of the construction sites are closing down, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for migrants to find work. At the same time, there have been calls by members of the Thai government to send the estimated one million migrant workers in Thailand back to their countries.

BRC is very concerned that the Shan refugees currently working in Thailand may therefore be forcibly repatriated together with other migrant workers. Given the continued "ethnic cleansing" program by the Burmese military in Shan State, it is certain that their lives will be in danger if they return. The Thai government should recognize the right of the Shan refugees, particularly children, to asylum until it is safe for them to return home.

Attached:

Appendix 1: Uprooting the Shan, by the Shan Human Rights Foundation

Appendix 2: monthly reports of the Shan Human Rights Foundation, Jan-Nov 1997

Appendix 3: monthly reports of the Migrant Assistance Program health project, Dec 96-April 97

Appendix 4: photos taken by Burmese Relief Centre of Shan refugee children at a construction site in Chiang Mai