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Human rights and political Report of Palaung Region Situation 2007

Brief History of Palaung Nationalities and their national liberation movement

Majority of Palaung nationalities reside in Namhsan, Mantong, West of Kyaukme, West of Hsiphaw Township, Mogok, Moe Mate, Namtu, West of Lashio Township, Kutkai, Namkham, and West of Muse Township of Northern Shan State. The rest of Palaung also reside in Kun Heng, Aung Ban, Ka Law, Pang Loung, and Ho Pong Townships of Southern Shan State. The Palaung has started their armed insurrection for national liberation in late 1950s, in cooperation with Shan armed forces, Shan State Army (SSA) and formed as Battalion No. 5 and 6 of SSA and revolted against the central government in Burma. Then in January 12, 1963, a leading party for Palaung national cause was formed under the name of Palaung National Front (PNF) and later it was transformed as Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) and continued for armed struggle for greater autonomy and self-determination in the Palaung region.

However, after series of ruthless military offensives against Palaung population in 1990, Palaung armed forces were forced to enter into a ceasefire agreement with the military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), on April 21, 1991. After the ceasefire agreement, PSLA was granted with some degree of autonomous administration in the areas of Namhsan, Mantong, West of Kyaukme, West of Hsiphaw, Namtu and in Namkham Township as Palaung Special Region No. (7).



A delegation of PSLA leaders, whom were sent earlier as representatives to National Democratic Front (NDF) — an allied front of ethnic nationalities waging liberation struggle against the military regime in Burma—were divided upon the idea of ceasefire with the PSLA leaders and rejected joining back to their mother organization. Later they founded Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), separately with the mother organization, PSLA, in Manerplaw on January 12, 1992, with the assistance of other resistance groups and has continued struggle raising the flag of Palaung national liberation.

Despite the PSLA has maintained its ceasefire agreement with the SPDC, it cannot pursue a political dialogue to end decades long conflict and it can't do much for betterment of Palaung people. The PSLA can enjoy a few development projects in the region and then PSLA delegates were invited to the military-sponsored National Convention, holding to draft for future constitution of Burma. Eventually, after 14 years of ceasefire, the PSLA was forced to surrender their arms to the Burmese military by manipulating various pressures and on April 29, 2005, the PSLA complied with the SPDC's order. The administrative authorities in the areas, formerly granted to PSLA were revoked after the laying down their arms and the organization was asked to be disbanded. Since then, PSLA control was ended and lawlessness situation prevails in the region. Meanwhile, Palaung population have been facing with extremely vulnerability by extension of SPDC's militarization in the region and by various means of oppression and harassment of SPDC's military forces, police forces, pro-SPDC militia forces, and pro-military civilian organization— Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and Myanmar Women Federation (MWF).

Present situation of PSLA and aspiration of Palaung Nationalities for their future

After the PSLA handed their weapons to the Burmese military, the granted semi-authorities and control in the region are revoked and the organizational structure is asked to be disbanded completely. At the same time, oppositely, the Burmese military has strengthened its control in the areas and deployed measures systematically to wipe out organizations and individuals who could lead the Palaung population in the future politics. The Burmese authorities also use divide and rule strategy against the ranks and files of former PSLA members to grow distrust and to weaken their influence. The whole situation has advisedly affected upon the future politics of Palaung nationalities and at this moment, it is in highest-stakes, because of personal weaknesses of Palaung top leadership and lack of transparency and democratic practices in the organization.



***PSLA marching in
40th Palaung
National
Revolution Day***

The representation of PSLA at the junta-sponsored National Convention — drafting principles for future Burma constitution— was also rescinded and the delegates are only allowed to be present as individuals and transferred and assigned them in the group of invited ethnic nationalities delegates. For the time being, the entitlement of PSLA is not so far mentioned even in the news reporting of junta media on the lists of National Convention attendees. Additionally, the SPDC has used effectively a strategy of divide-and-rule among the Palaung leadership to weaken the aspiration to uphold their national identity of Palaung population and eventually to annihilate the Palaung people's desire to control for their own future. It is miserable and worrisome for the future of Palaung nationalities, since the Palaung political leaders could not stand united even under these explicit circumstances of dividing-and-ruling among Palaung population and fail to adopt a clear political strategy and actions to end these measures.

Furthermore, on September 26, 2006, the SPDC commander of North-East Military Command, Brig. Gen. Aung Than Htut, re-armed a former commander of PSLA and his unit— reportedly by the direction from the SPDC HQs and with consent of a former PSLA top official—and involuntarily formed militia forces to operate in the areas. This involuntary formation of local militia forces could lead to armed conflicts among the Palaung population and the hidden agenda of the SPDC's commander is questionable. Then Brig. Gen. Aung Than Htut held another meeting with the PSLA leaders on September 6, in order to put further wedge among the PSLA leaders. In the meeting, SPDC's commander proposed to form militia forces under the command of the SPDC military in order to maintain law and order in the region and for the defense of anti-state entities and foreign hostilities, however, no agreement was reached at the end, since the PSLA leaders were divided opinions on his proposal.

Even though no agreement was reached at the meeting; the SPDC commander, who is well informed about the weaknesses of the PSLA leaders, cut a deal with a PSLA top official and armed a former PSLA's commander and his unit with 20 (A. K. 22) rifles, 2 (M. 20) type pistols and forced them to act as a local militia forces. The uniforms issued to them are similar to those of former PSLA forces, but badge them with "a sun" logo, which is official badge of North-East Military Command of the SPDC. These recruits were assigned to a military training and additional 40 Palaung villagers from Mantong Township were given a military training to be ready as auxiliary militia forces.

The future sustainability of its structure and its role is at high-stake for the PSLA, if they cannot collaborate well with other ethnic revolutionary forces and ceasefire forces and formulate an effective political program, for assisting each other for defending their national identities and promoting their rights and freedom.

That is why; it is a vital time to work together with former members and leaders of the PSLA and the groups which are still actively struggling for the national liberation, such as PSLF, Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) and Palaung Youth Network Group (PYNG) to revitalize the Palaung people's struggle. It is the moment to brainstorm and open to the ideas and strategies, and to exert our maximum efforts along with all Palaung nationalities and to continue the struggle of rights and freedom of Palaung people.

Military recruitment at Palaung region

After the PLSA handed over their arms to the Burmese military, the SPDC officials has forced the Palaung youth to join into the military in excuse of defending the Palaung areas and has started involuntary conscription of soldiers for the Burmese army. On November 18, 2006, Commander of SPDC's Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)-130, Lt. Col. Tin Maung Win summoned a letter to the heads of the Palaung villages around Mantong Township and which mentioned a village needs sending of a new recruit compulsorily to the army. The villages then chose the new recruits for the army by lottery among the villagers. Those forcedly conscripted Palaung youth and another 20 Palaung youth who were arrested during anti-drug campaign were sent to Shwe Bo of Sagaing Division and given a military training at a military training facility since late 2006.



*SPDC
troops
LIB 144
doing
military
training in
Palaung
area
2006*

The authorities have still sending reminding letters to those villages which still left to send new recruits. For that reason, some families had to spend at least 500,000 Kyats to hire someone as a replacement of military recruit to serve in the army instead of their young ones. Under these pressure, the Palaung youth, especially from Mantong area, have been migrating to some other places like Phar Kant, Meng Shu gems mines, and to cities such as Rangoon, Mandalay and to border areas for their living. Meanwhile, there are a few youth left in the villages and the villages are depopulated.

On October 20, 2005, by the order of SPDC's N. E. Military Command tactical commander, Col. Than Oo, the authorities conscripted a hundred of Palaung youth from Namhsan region, given military training to them in Lashio and later separated the group and assigned them in the army units different regions. Similarly, another hundred Palaung youth from Kyaukme Township and Mai Ngob Township were

recruited through convincing their parents and sent them to a military training in Lashio. Beforehand, SPDC's captain Than Htun, militia leader Htun Myat Lay, USDA leaders U Khun Pwint and U Kyaw Yin, convinced the parents that their sons will be assigned later in the same region and the force will be used for maintaining of law and order in Palaung region, however, after the military training, they were sent to infantry battalions in Shwe Bo, Naung Cho, Kyaukme and Namtu under the command of Western Military Command and to the infantry battalions under the command of Central Region Military Command of the SPDC.



*SPDC troops
LIB 144
One of the
child soldiers
practice in
military
training in
Palaung area
2006*

Since these infantry battalions are regularly deployed as enforcement in the conflict-prone areas of Southern Shan State, in Karen State and in Karenni State, it is a crafty and brutal scheme of the SPDC to use Palaung youth to attack and annihilate another fellow ethnic nationalities. In late 2005 and in 2006, 200 Palaung youth were forcedly conscripted into the Burmese army and again in 2007, the authorities are recruiting another hundred Palaung youth from the Mantong region, formerly PSLA positioned its HQs, to serve in the Burmese army involuntarily.

Drug abuses and trafficking in Palaung region

Drug abuses and trafficking, particularly on opium and heroin; have dramatically increased in the region after the PSLA handed over their arms to the SPDC. The numbers of opium growers are doubled. When the PSLA was in control of the region, it banned uses of illicit drugs and trading them in the region. The PSLA had even adopted some drug eradication programs. Since there is no more such control in the region, it is virtually free to grow, use and trade opium and illicit drugs by unofficial dealing with virtual authorities of the region— local militias, police and military officers.

Maj. Gen. Aung Than Htut of Lashio-based SPDC N. E. Military Division Commander issued an order on October 15, 2006, as a attempt to eradicate illicit drugs in the region, mentioning opium growers will be executed on the spot by concerning police and military forces. Then the direction was explained in public meetings to those villagers presumably living in opium farming villages by Namkham Township PDC chairman U Htay Lwin, while traveling with military column combined with military and police forces.



Since then the Palung villages situated in the South of Namkham Township, presumably in connection with infamous opium grower Pang-say Kyaw Myint, such as Nong Ai, Say Kone, Mang Sup, Mang Pu, Pang Roe, So Khai, Mang Mai, Mai Wee village tracts and Mar Waw, Naw Ron villages, and some small villages of Mantong Township, where were the villagers slatternly farmed opium, were searched frequently and villagers were arrested often in suspicion of drug-related crimes by police, military, local militia and pro-military civilian organization, USDA members. Under the title of this drug eradication program, the authorities have frequently arrested, beaten innocent Palaung villagers and confiscated their properties and made their lives more difficult to survive. Additionally, some Palaung youth are arrested in suspicion of drug-related crimes and later sent them to military training and forcedly conscripted them as soldiers in the Burmese army. Generally, human rights abuses are explicitly practised by authorities by the name of anti-drug scheme.

Despite the authorities imposing such remarkable pressure against Palaung villagers, a Chinese ethnic village of local anti-insurgent militia group (*Tha-Ka-Sa-Pha*) leader Pang-say Kyaw Myint is yet left free and untouched. The Chinese village is well-known for opium farming among in the region and which poses really questionable for the intention of the authorities' drug eradication program. It is obvious that the drug eradication program in Palaung region would not be successful, since the major culprits are let free and it is doubtful why Kut-Kai based SPDC's tactical commander, Col. San Shwe Thar has forbidden his soldiers traveling to the mountain range situated near by Pang-say Chinese village.

Major opium farmers and drug dealers in the region are some Chinese, Kachin, Shan, Palaung businessmen and they have traded freely by cutting unofficial deals with authorities of local militia, police and the military. Furthermore, in Namkham Township and in some Palaung villages, local militia and anti-insurgent militia group (*Tha-Ka-Sa-Pha*) leaders themselves even manage opium farming by themselves. Drugs are easily accessible in the region, since they are easily trafficked into the region by paying bribes to those officials who are assigned for security on the major trading routes to Palaung region. At the same time, the government employees are also involving in the drug business, for instance, school teachers in Mantong, the HQs area of PSLA, are convincing the villagers to farm opium and they said they would assist to reach a deal with law enforcement officials. The main areas of Palaung region presently growing opium are; ethnic Chinese villages in Pang-say area, Palaung villages in Man Wee area, and some Palaung and Chinese villages in Mantong Township. Although the village headmen, police, military and local militia officers virtually let free opium farming and drugs trafficking by taking bribes, they often harass, arrest, extort money and threaten to some villagers by giving excuses of anti-drug campaign and for maintenance of law and orders.

Presently, majority of Palaung youth are addicted to drug and in some areas, we have witnessed under-aged boys, girls and even the whole family become victims of drug abuses. Making the situation worse, *Ya Ba* (a. k. a) Methamphetamine psycho stimulants are widely available in the region and most are using it. The drug addition has negatively effected on social cohesion of Palaung region and crimes such as incursions, thefts, robberies, are increasingly committed and domestic violence are common by post-drug addition.

Forced labor practices in the region

In order to organize a convenient trip for N. E. Military Commander, Brig. Gen. Aung Than Htut, for his personal observation to drug eradication campaign, commander of Mantong based LIB- 130, Col. Tin Maung Win forced the local villagers to repair roads between Mantong-Mang Kan, and in Loi Kan and

*SPDC troops
Forced Palaung
villagers in their
construction field
2006*



Jae Kong. The authorities had forced the villagers, compulsorily one per household, to go for road construction since November 27, 2006 until December of the same year. This forced labor practices have added extra burden to livelihood of Palaung population, while they are struggling with the skyrocketing living expenses. It makes the Palaung population sink into the vicious cycle of loans to survive and into deep poverty.

Additionally, in 2005 and 2006, Palaung population were asked to grow castor seeds as a part of national project for bio-diesel and Palaung villagers were also asked to work for the plots of government's departments and for the military units growing of castor seeds. The authorities have also forced the Palaung villagers to grow some project crops, which are not suitable with the weather in the region. Moreover, some Palaung villagers are often asked to work in plantation of the army units and government's departments without fair compensation to their labor.



*SPDC troops
Forced local
villagers in their
road
construction
2006*

Since late 2005, more military forces are deployed in the region and because of extensive militarization; more forced labors are summoned from the Palaung villagers. The villagers are frequently asked for construction of military barracks, building fences for the military camps, assigned for sentry of the military units. They are also conscripted as porters to carry goods and logistics for the military. According to some sources, villagers from Mang Ei, Hona of Mai Maw (Nam Heng) area were forced to built buildings for the recently deployed military unit by company commander, Captain Kyi Win of LIB-130. Furthermore, the military units frequently summon Tollergies (locally-made vehicle), trucks, horses and cows for the transportations of its soldiers and its logistics.

Land confiscation

Additional ten battalions are deployed in Palaung region lately and these army units have confiscated land from the local villagers either without compensation or with little compensation, for building military camps, keeping plantations for the military units' self-sufficiency projects and for buildings, the family members of the military to be settled. These confiscated plots of land include presently growing farms, forest, tea plantations and other pasture lands. Some villagers did received compensation for taking of their lands but which were exceptionally lower than market prices and the nature is usually involuntarily. Since after the PSLA handed over their weapons to the Burmese army, more than a thousand acres of land were taken from the villagers by the Burmese army in Palaung region.



*SPDC troops
Confiscated
Palaung farms
for their
developing
projects
In Palaung areas
2006*

Additionally, houses and buildings in Mantong, Namhsan Township and in some other Palaung villages were also taken away by authorities with little compensation to open the military government's administration offices. In order to construct office for Mantong police department, immigration office and for a hospital, some residences of local people were forcedly confiscated and the villagers were relocated in new settlements on the plots of land confiscated from other villagers.

Moreover, the authorities have confiscated land from Mang Tup Palaung villagers for a 400 Mega-watts Hydropower project on Shwe-Li river, a joint investment of SPDC's Energy Ministry and Chinese government. Because of the project, Palaung villagers have been facing more human rights abuses and forced labors, asking them for construction of roads and buildings for the project and for the military guarding the facilities.

*SPDC troops
Confiscated
Palaung farms
to build their
military camp
In Palaung
areas
2006*



Education in the Palaung region

In villages of Palaung region, more than 65% of school-aged children cannot go to school and instead they are asked to work and assist in their parents' farms, such as in tea plantations, slash-and-burn farms, in paddy fields and in poppy growing fields. Although some parents sent their sons and daughters to schools, they found that their children could not get employed even after they finished high school and after their bachelor degrees and many parents lose incentive sending their children to schools and investing in their education. Most of the families are struggling hard to meet their ends and they cannot afford to send their children to schools.

Generally, the education Palaung children receive is poor, since there are not enough teachers in schools and the teacher are not serious in their teaching profession. The parents feel reluctant to send their children to schools, since it is hard to afford to meet with rising school fees, various costs imposed by the school teachers, such as extra school fees, fees for extra tutorial classes and obligatory "donations" requested by teachers. The school teachers are also struggling hard to survive by their profession and need to earn with second jobs. Basically, these teachers open extra tutorial classes and earn by taking tuitions fees. The students who cannot afford to attend extra tutorial classes are facing many difficulties to follow school lectures. Because of economic hardship, the school teachers are spending most of their time in some extra earning jobs than their profession of teaching, and it makes their hours less spending in the school. The teachers usually spend just 2 weeks in a month for their teaching profession and stay less hours in schools.

The school fees are extremely high in Palaung region and the parents have to spend from 500,000 Kyats to a million Kyats for a high-school student for an academic year. A secondary school student may cost from 300,000 Kyats to 500,000 Kyats a year and the parents may spend 200,000 Kyats to 300,000 Kyats for a primary student.

Health situation in Palaung region

In a vast Palaung region, there are only two public hospitals, Namhsan hospital and Mantong sub-township level hospital, are operating and they could not cover basic medical care of the local population, since because of scare medical personals and lack of medicines in these hospitals. Palaung population are not accessible for basic medical care and since after the PSLA handed over their arms to the SPDC, the services of mobile medical care and vaccinations to children and mothers by the assistance of UNICEF are terminated. The public hospitals and clinics are not provided enough with medicines and it makes high expenses to those sick villagers treated in these hospitals. Generally, the villagers cannot afford to treat in public hospitals because of their inaccessibility and by unaffordable costs.

For that reasons, the maternal and child deaths rates have been increasing in Palaung region and especially by deaths of preventable infectious diseases—such as Malaria and Dengue Hemorrhagic Fever (DHF). Public clinics in the region are mostly closed by lack of finance and medical supply from the government. In one incident, in the months of June and July of 2006, 30 villagers from Nar-Au-Gyi, Kho Mong and Naw Rin villages of Mantong Township died by cholera outbreaks and lack of proper medical care to them.

Economic situation and Transportation

Palaung population has to struggle hard in economic hardship, because of high inflation and lack of earning opportunities in the region. There are more check points deployed by local militia and police forces, virtually in almost every village on the routes in the region and impose taxes and extortions on travelers and on goods flowing in and out of the territories. These security check points are deployed more in the region since after the PSLA abandoned their weapons to the SPDC. At the same time, vague



*Very bad
transportation In
Palaung areas still
use house to carry
things*

and unreasonable trade regulations of authorities exert more pressure on prices of the goods trading in the region. In 2006, when the custom department checked for illegal items at 105-miles gate of the Sino-Burma border trade zone, tea from Palaung area are also arrested and confiscated, as they are carried and traded without permission. Tea is a major product of Palaung region and a vital business for Palaung people since earlier period and Namkhan is prominent for their high-quality tea. The teas have been usually trading along Namkham-Muse and Mandalay routes and now the trade vague regulations make business more unpredictable and more difficult.

Additionally, the authorities have restricted the flow out of some agricultural goods such as rice, beans and maize from the country and most of these goods are checked and seized at 24-miles gate situated outskirts of Mandalay. The check point is situated on the trade route connecting Central Burma and Northern Shan State and the restriction makes more scare of staple foods in the ethnic mountainous region. These restricted goods are only allowed to transport with permission from the authorities, which may added large sum of cost for getting official permission to trade these restricted items.

Traditionally, Palaung region has produced high-quality tea as a major product and trade off the tea with rice and some necessary items from central Burma. The restriction practice makes commodities' prices more expensive in Palaung region. It could be adequate if these restrictions are enforced in the border trading zone in order to hinder unofficial export of these agricultural goods, however, the restrictions have imposed upon the major trading route inland and on the route connecting between the Central Burma and the ethnic states. These practices impose more distress upon ethnic population living in the mountainous areas. Generally, Palaung person earns 500 to 1,000 Kyats daily in average and now it could not cover for a basket of rice (0.25 Liter), which cost 1,000 to 1,500 Kyats. Some households could not even spend their earning for enough rice. Some families are eating maize, corns, sweet potatoes and rootstock of taro together with rice, and some families are eating rice gruel, instead of their staple foods, rice.

Since the days of PSLA handed over their arms to the SPDC, the aspects of social, economic, health and education situations in the Palaung region have been deteriorating and drug addiction has increased dramatically among the Palaung population. Generally, lawlessness prevails in the region, since there is no control and groups of local armed forces are allowed freely to blunder in the regions.

Conclusion

The military junta has been using various tactics to weaken the Palaung national liberation movement and to extend their control in the Palaung region. The junta has used divide-and-rule tactic among the Palaung political activists and forced to form pro-military militia groups by bribing and giving personal incentives to local militia leaders, pro-military USDA leaders, police and former PSLA commanders. Additionally, the SPDC forced to form pro-military civilian organizations, such as USDA and women organization in the region and forced the people to join in them. At the worst, the junta has conscripted some Palaung youth to join in the Burmese army.

The junta has then extended its militarization in the region. The officials has confiscated farming land of the locals for construction of its military camps and administrative building either without compensation or with little compensation and continued various human rights abuses against the Palaung population, such as conscripting for porters, forced labors, forced conscription of properties, extra judiciary arrests, killings and tortures in excuse of anti-drug campaign. The whole situation makes Palaung people more vulnerable and lack of security under lawlessness.

If the military junta, SPDC, really wants to promote the living standard of Palaung people and if the junta is really sincere to address the political, social, economic, education and health crises of Palaung people facing today, the SPDC must stop its harassments and oppression against the Palaung population and must acknowledge the birth right of Palaung people for their autonomous rule to designate their own future. Additionally, the SPDC must hold a genuine political dialogue with ethnic leaders and democratic opposition groups lead by National League for Democracy (NLD). Solving the political problem by the mean of political dialogue is just the only a way to pursue towards national reconciliation and it could be opening of the gate leading towards a democratic federal union with the promises of basic rights and freedom.

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