

## RESISTING STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND WAR

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The Burmese Refugee Project (BRP), a grantee of the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights, aims to improve the mental and physical well-being of a community of refugees hailing from Shan State in Burma (officially known as “Myanmar” by the ruling military junta). Shan State borders Thailand, and at first glance the BRP community seems far away from the dramatic monk-led Saffron Revolution protests which took place in September 2007. After all, the protests, and subsequent brutal repression, took place primarily in distant cities like Pakakku and Rangoon, far from Burma’s eastern border. Nevertheless, Shan State residents and refugees suffer the brunt of the on-going military dictatorship every day.

Shan State is at war with the Burmese Army. As a result, the government has generally put the more cooperative minority groups, such as the Wa, in charge. In the north, they have also encouraged Chinese entrepreneurs to cross over the border into Burma to set up businesses. This process of ethnic cleansing is officially called *Burmanization* because it usually involves conversion to an “official” Burman culture. In the north, *Burmanization*, fueled by the opium trade and China’s booming economy, quickly erased thousands of years’ worth of Shan architecture (see photo, this page).

The Shan were told to give up their land and move further and further out of rapidly developing towns. They were compensated only with new, smaller plots of land which

would again be taken away from them as the towns grew further. As Ekaphan, a Shan refugee working with the BRP, noted:

*The Burmese [are] not just fighting us with guns; they [are] eviscerating our culture.*

One of the junta’s favorite weapons of structural violence is to



deprive the Shan of education. In many villages, schools have been closed, depriving the Shan both of their written script and of education, the society’s strongest means of empowerment.

Elsewhere in Shan State, ethnic cleansing occurs at gunpoint. This violence has escalated since the September 2007 protests, as the junta formed the *Swan Arr Shin* (Possessors of Strength) forces, which are assigned to infiltrate and clamp down on organized dissent.

According to young Shan monks who came to the BRP community in November 2007, the Burmese military junta has recently stepped up its efforts to conscript child soldiers,

forcibly sequestering boys as young as ten years old. One novice named Tejaniya said:

*Burmese soldiers came to my village and asked for food. They promised that if villagers carried their weapons until the next village, they could return home. But they did not keep their promise and held on to the villagers.*

Other Shan novices said that soldiers stole their temples’ meager food supplies in the middle of the night. Shan novice Tun told of how soldiers

*came to the temple and asked the abbot if any of the monks and novices had come from Rangoon.*

The abbot knew better than to tell the truth. Monks returning from Rangoon were probably involved in the protests, and would likely be killed.

The U.S. and its allies have a spotty record on Burma, which borders countries that were major U.S. allies during the Vietnam War. Thailand’s Prime Minister, for instance, dismissed Burma’s horrible record on human rights, quipping:

*Burma is a Buddhist country. Burma’s leaders meditate. They say the country lives in peace.*

Only six months since the junta’s violent crackdowns on peacefully marching Buddhist monks, Mr. Samak’s remarks suggest that the BRP’s work in combating state-imposed violence—whether structural or at gunpoint—is far from done. ♦