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Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Washington, DC

December 17, 2002

Rape by the Burmese Military in Ethnic Regions

The United States Government is appalled by reports that the Burmese military is using rape as a weapon against civilian populations in the ethnic regions of the country. We vehemently condemn rape and all other forms of sexual violence against civilians.

Several reports by non-governmental organizations have been published this year alleging human rights abuses by the Burmese military against ethnic civilian populations. One of those reports presents dates, places, battalion numbers, and names of individual perpetrators involved in the alleged incidents. The report details 173 attacks on 625 girls and women; 83% of these incidents are said to have been committed by officers in the Burmese army often in front of their troops.

In August 2002, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in coordination with the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai, conducted a preliminary investigation into the reports of rape by the Burmese military against ethnic Shan women. During this short, preliminary investigation Department officers were able to locate many victims whose stories were similar to those documented in NGO reports that state that the rape of ethnic women by the Burmese military has been and continues to be a widespread and serious problem. Of the 12 rape victims interviewed, all stated that they had been gang-raped by Burmese soldiers sometime over the past 5 years. Most also reported knowing several other women or girls who had been raped and/or killed. The most recent incident was reported by a 13-year-old girl who said that she was raped in June 2002. All these victims said that they had been forcibly relocated by the Burmese military between 1995 and 1997. All of the victims under 15 appeared severely traumatized by their experiences, were disturbed mentally, and spoke in whispers, if at all. The older women sobbed violently as they recalled horrific incidents of their own rapes as well as brutal rapes, torture, and execution of family members. While these interviews are necessarily anecdotal, we note the consistency of the stories across three different locations, among differing groups of women.

The United States has expressed its deep concern about these abuses to the Burmese regime on several occasions and has urged it to investigate fully any and all allegations of the systematic rape of girls and women in Burma regardless of ethnicity, and appropriately punish those guilty of such heinous crimes. We have also worked closely with other concerned nations to draft a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly that condemns the systematic violation of human rights in Burma and specifically calls for cooperation in an independent investigation of these charges and other abuses wherever they occur. The United States has, moreover, urged the United Nations to undertake a serious investigation of these reports.

The Burmese regime responded by requesting that the International Committee for the Red Cross participate in an investigation. They were unable to do so due to the confidential nature of their operating procedures. More recently the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Burma, Paulo Pinheiro, raised this issue and the possibility of an investigation when he visited Burma in October 2002. We are awaiting the official report of the Special Rapporteur's visit while we continue to urge the Burmese regime to cooperate with an independent investigation and take concrete steps to investigate and punish those who may have acted in violation of domestic law, international humanitarian law, or the laws of land warfare. Furthermore, we call on the Burmese regime to hold its military accountable for any lapses and to exercise command and control over their troops.

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