

## Shan

### Profile

Most ethnic Shan live in the Shan State, though there are also pockets in other parts of Burma such as in Kachin State. Most of them are Theravada Buddhists, with some elements of animist practices, and speak a language which is part of the Tai-Kadai language family, and closely related to Thai and Lao.

As there are no reliable population figures for Burma since the Second World War, the size of the Shan minority is a matter of some uncertainty, though most outside sources appear to agree that the Shan are probably the country's largest minority (Ethnologue [www.ethnologue.com] estimates 3.2 million in 2001; the US State Department gave an estimate of over 4 million in 2007). The term Shan itself is however problematic, at least as it is used by Burma authorities, since they include under this term 33 ethnic groups that are in fact quite distinct and to a large degree unrelated except for close geographic proximity.

### Historical context

The Shan are thought to have started migrating southward from Yunnan, China as early as the first century. There were major population movements of Shan in the sixth and thirteenth centuries, with a Shan kingdom known as Mong Mao already in existence in Burma's northern reaches by the ninth century. From the thirteenth century, ethnic Shan dominated much of Burma until about the nineteenth century, by which time their power declined and was diffused into a large number of Shan states, many of which recognized the authority of the ethnic Burmese (or Bamar) king. British colonial rule from the nineteenth century resulted in Shan states being ruled by their hereditary chiefs as British protectorates.

Most of these protectorates were brought together in 1922 under the banner of the 'Federated Shan States' administered by an appointed commissioner. This eventually led to the creation of a Shan State under the 1948 Constitution of independent Burma, which also provided for a right to secession after 10 years. But the absence of any real federal structure for Burma, contrary to the aspirations in the 1947 Panglong Agreement (an agreement concluded between Aung San and the leaders of a number of ethnic groups of Burma which, among other things, set out a commitment to cooperate for the establishment of federal structure for soon to be independent Burma), and the perception that the government authorities in Yangon (Rangoon) were completely dominated by ethnic Burmese and discriminating against non-Burmese contributed to the emergence of violent opposition by some minority groups such as the Karen and Mon.

This increased between 1958 and 1960, during General Ne Win's caretaker government, as the uprising also moved into Shan areas. The theoretical right to secession given by the constitution was effectively cast aside after General Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962, and was seen by some as an important factor fuelling the Shan uprising against the increasingly centralizing efforts of state authorities, especially with the 1974 Constitution. It was also from 1962 that the government's increased 'Burmanization'

efforts became more blatant, such as making Burmese the exclusive medium of instruction in state schools (with on occasion some teaching of English).

Two main armed groups were based in Shan State: the Shan State Army (also known as the Mong Tai Army, led by drug kingpin Khun Sa) and the Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State. The former concluded a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government in 1995 and effectively disbanded in 2005, though some of its units joined the Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State or continued to operate as distinct factions, such as the Shan United Revolutionary Party and the Shan State Army-South.

There was a massive counterinsurgency campaign against Shan groups after 1995. Especially since this date thousands of Shan have been seeking refuge in Thailand, as the Burmese army began to forcibly relocate hundreds of villages and expel hundreds of thousands of ethnic Shan (300,000 according to according to the NGO Refugees International, 2004), with some displacement also occurring because of land confiscation by the Burmese army and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The situation was further complicated more recently with the arrival of the Wa, who are being relocated to parts of the Shan State by the Burmese government. This is seen as an attempt by the Burmese government to use the Wa to fight the Shan resistance forces. From 1995 there have been widespread reports of Shan being subjected to human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, torture, rape, extra-judicial executions, forced labour, destruction of property and discrimination against members of the Shan minority. Hundreds of thousands of Shan are thought to have fled their homes as a result, as well as to avoid fighting between rebel groups and the Burmese army.

## **Current issues**

There has not been any significant improvement in 2006 and 2007: the Shan continue to be at the receiving end of violations of their human rights because of the ongoing conflict between some Shan rebel groups and the Burmese army. Military and other government authorities are persistently reported as still engaged in 2006 and 2007 in patterns of gross violation of human rights, including forced labour, conscription, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, sexual slavery and extra-judicial killings, especially in central and southern Shan State as the SPDC's armed forces engage the Shan State Army-South. Many Shan fled to Thailand in 2006 as refugees from central townships of Shan State due to village relocations, forced labour (to work for example in castor oil plantations), and other human rights violations. Leaders of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (closely associated with Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy), first arrested in 2005, were still detained in early 2007.

Their language is still not provided for as a medium of instruction in state schools and, in most Shan villages outside of towns, Burmese educational authorities are either unwilling or unable to provide free education to Shan children. Even private community schools set up and paid for by the Shan have been ordered to stop teaching the Shan language, and there are reports of military officers in 2006 ordering their troops to search for and destroy all Shan-language school materials. The government in addition has been continuing various measures to forcibly assimilate the Shan or 'dilute' their culture, including by 'importing' Burman and Wa settlers into Shan State as part of a three-year resettlement campaign in 2006.

Reports continue to emerge of the military confiscating large tracts of land farmed by Shan, and then 'renting' the land back to them for an annual fee. This and other obstacles and regulations imposed by government authorities, such as forbidding the trade of rice and other foodstuffs outside of local areas, has effectively led to a decrease in overall goods productivity in some Shan areas, contrary to

government reports.

A new development with harmful consequences for members of the ethnic Shan minority is the proposed Tasang Dam in Shan State which, if completed, would be the tallest hydroelectric dam in South-East Asia. The SPDC signed an agreement with a Thai company in April 2006 for the construction of the dam, which is expected to have a flood plain covering hundreds of square kilometres: a Shan environmental group has reported that 60,000 people – mainly ethnic Shan – have already been forcibly relocated from the flood zone, while the Burmese army has tripled the number of its battalions in the area, accompanied by an increase in forced labour and other human rights abuses.