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Myanmar Wages Offensive Against Karen

By The Associated Press

CHIANG MAI, Thailand — The stories of horror arrive every day, from refugees and aid groups.

Severely ill and unable to run, Saw They Chur stayed behind when his wife, six children and other villagers fled the advancing Myanmar government troops. They say the soldiers burned the 47-year-old man alive as they torched every house in Play Hta.

Nine-year-old Eh Ywa Paw, whose name means "The flower that loves God," escaped but suffered a stomach wound when she ran from an ambush in which her father and 80-year-old grandmother were gunned down. Several months later she's reported on the run again as government units close in.

Nearly a year since the military regime of Myanmar, also known as Burma, launched a major offensive against the rebellious Karen minority, atrocities continue unabated, according to aid groups like the Free Burma Rangers, an advocacy group of Western and local volunteers that works inside Myanmar.

Condemnation from Western governments, U.N. officials, and human rights groups has had little effect.

"The world knows what is happening in Darfur and they know what took place in Rwanda," but they don't know about the plight of the Karen, "the world's least-known major disaster," said Cristina Moon of the U.S. Campaign for Burma, an activist group.

Josef Silverstein, professor emeritus from Rutgers University and author of several books on Myanmar, says the government's goal is nothing less than genocide. "They (the military) in my estimation are determined to destroy them forever and that is what they are doing," he says.

The Myanmar government rejects such characterizations.

"I can assure you that there is no policy or order to burn villages, kill civilians and commit other atrocities," said Ye Htut, a Ministry of Information official in Yangon, the Myanmar capital. "We have a military code and anyone who commits these crimes will be punished."

The government campaign's aim is "to win the hearts and minds of local people," the official said in an e-mailed response to questions. By contrast,

he said, the rebels were sowing "fear and destruction—the same tactics used by all insurgents, even in Iraq."

The Karen have been fighting for autonomy since Burma gained independence from Britain after World War II. Their fight, under the banner of the Karen National Union (KNU), is one of the world's longest-running insurgencies.

The government's latest major push against the KNU began last December, focusing on northern Karen State and adjacent areas.

U.N. Deputy Secretary General Mark Malloch Brown in September described it as a "devastating and terrible" offensive.

Aid agencies and refugees tell stories starkly different from the government line. The troops, they say, carry out killings, rapes, forced labor, burning of fields, and logging of community forests. Villagers are herded into military-controlled areas to cut them off from the rebels.

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium, the main aid agency caring for tens of thousands of refugees along the Thai-Myanmar frontier, estimates that this year alone the violence forced 82,000 people to leave their homes.

Since 1996, more than 3,000 villages have been destroyed or abandoned in eastern Myanmar and more than 1 million people displaced, according to its most recent report. Major uprooting and abuses have also occurred in other ethnic minority areas such as Shan State.

The government's next step will be to divide the region into quarters and cleanse each one of potential guerrillas, experts predict.

"They do seem intent on moving all villagers into villages under their direct control, with terrible consequences for those who resist," says Desmond Ball, a military analyst at The Australian National University who is tracking the offensive. He estimates some 7,000 troops are deployed in northern Karen State, the greatest number fielded against the Karen in 11 years.

Sudden attacks prevent farmers from returning to their fields as the vital harvest approaches. As a result, rice is being eaten by wild animals, a recent report the Free Burma Rangers said. Others describe residents forced by soldiers to build fences around their villages to restrict their own movement.

As troops of the 66th Division recently swept into his village and everyone fled, 75-year-old Poo Thu Kee Dee, quoted in a Free Burma Rangers report, told neighbors he would stay, because "even if they see me, I am old, so they will not shoot me." The report says his bullet-riddled body was found in a betel nut grove at the edge of the village.

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