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Press release by Shan Community Based Organisations

Shan community groups fear signs of premature refugee repatriation

Shan community groups are concerned at signs that Burmese authorities are preparing to repatriate Shan refugees from a camp in northern Thailand, even though there is no guarantee for their safety.

Last month, Burmese policemen from Tachilek visited Koung Jor camp in Wiang Haeng district, northern Chiang Mai province, asking whether the refugees wanted to return back to Burma. Even though none expressed a desire to return, the camp leader was contacted shortly afterwards by the Burmese military commander at Mong Taw, 15 kilometers across the border, to say that new housing would be built for returning families in his area.

In August 2012, plans by a Norwegian NGO contracted under the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative to survey the Shan refugees about returning to Burma were cancelled, after it was publicized that the designated resettlement site at Mong Hta (near Mong Taw) was still an active war zone, strewn with land mines. It is unclear if international donors will be supporting the latest plans to build housing for returning refugees in the Mong Taw-Mong Hta area.

The security situation in this border area has not improved since last year. It remains heavily militarized, especially following increased tension between Burmese and Wa forces in southern Shan State in recent months.

There are currently about 500 refugees, almost half of whom are children, staying in Koung Jor camp, set up in 2002 after fighting on the border between the Burma Army and the Shan State Army-South. It is the only Shan refugee camp in Thailand. Most of the hundreds of thousands displaced by conflict from Shan State during the past few decades have had no access to refugee camps, and have been forced to survive as migrant workers throughout Thailand.

Koung Jor camp has a less formal status than the other nine camps in Thailand, which primarily house Karen and Karenni refugees. Shan community groups therefore worry about a higher likelihood of involuntary repatriation.

“The Shan refugee crisis has been pushed under the carpet for years,” said Ying Harn Fah of the Shan Women’s Action Network. “Just because most Shans don’t have refugee status, that is no excuse to deny the few recognized Shan refugees their right to safe and dignified return.”

The Shan community groups are demanding that any plans by Burmese, Thai and international stakeholders to repatriate Shan refugees be fully transparent and comply with international standards guaranteeing safety and dignity, and that any repatriation must be voluntary.

Shan community groups: *Shan Human Rights Foundation, Shan Sapawa Environmental Organisation, Shan Women’s Action Network, Shan Youth Power, Shan Youth Network Group*

Attachment: Map of planned resettlement site (August 2012)

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