

The Burden of War

Women bear burden of displacement

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction.....	5
Background	6
Findings:	8
Causes of displacement	9
Women bear burden of displacement	12
IDP population figures.....	14
Gender and age disaggregation of IDPs	14
Conditions in IDP sites	15
1.Manton.....	15
a. Thohone Camp.....	15
b. Manton town.....	19
2.Namkham	21
Population flows from IDP sites	24
Humanitarian aid	24
Conclusion and Recommendations	25

“There is no medicine for our family. We have five people in our family and all of us are sick. These two children are also sick and cry all the time.” – one of the IDP mothers at Thoe Hone.



Executive Summary

Worsening conflict and abuses by Burmese government troops in northern Shan State have displaced over 2,000 Palaung villagers from fifteen villages in three townships since March 2011. About 1,000, mainly women and children, remain in three IDP settlements in Mantong and Namkham townships, facing serious shortages of food and medicine; most of the rest have dispersed to find work in China.

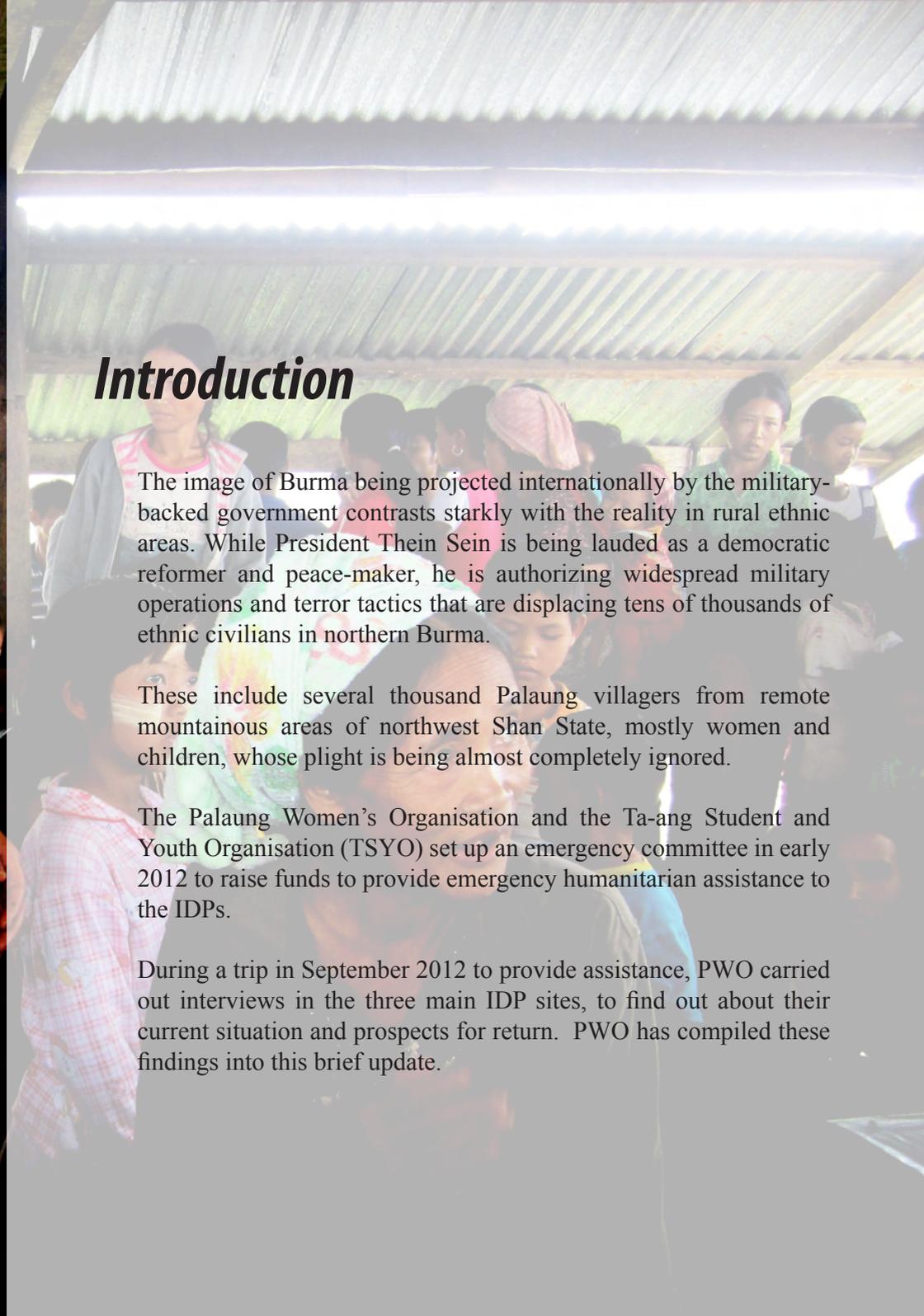
Burmese troops have been launching offensives to crush the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), to secure control of strategic trading and investment areas on the Chinese border, particularly the route of China's trans-Burma oil and gas pipelines. In rural Palaung areas, patrols from sixteen Burma Army battalions and local militia have been forcibly conscripting villagers as soldiers and porters, looting livestock and property, and torturing and killing villagers suspected of supporting the resistance. This has caused entire villages to become abandoned.

Interviews conducted by PWO in September 2012 show that the burden of displacement is falling largely on women, as most men have fled or migrated to work elsewhere. The ratio of women to men of working age in the IDP camps is 4:1. Women, including pregnant mothers, had to walk for up to a week through the jungle to reach the camps, carrying their children and possessions, and avoiding Burmese army patrols and landmines. Elderly people were left behind.

Little aid has reached the IDP settlements, particular the largest camp housing over 500 in a remote mountainous area north of Manton, where shortages of water, food and medicines are causing widespread disease. Mothers are struggling to feed their families on loans of rice from local villagers, and have taken their daughters out of school. Some women have left children with relatives and gone to find work in China.

PWO is calling urgently for aid to these IDPs, and for political pressure on Burma's government to end its military offensives and abuses, pull back troops from conflict areas, and begin meaningful political dialogue to address the root causes of the conflict.



A group of people, including women and children, standing under a corrugated metal roof structure. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the side, creating a somber atmosphere. The people are dressed in simple, everyday clothing. Some women are wearing headscarves. The background shows the repetitive pattern of the corrugated metal roof.

Introduction

The image of Burma being projected internationally by the military-backed government contrasts starkly with the reality in rural ethnic areas. While President Thein Sein is being lauded as a democratic reformer and peace-maker, he is authorizing widespread military operations and terror tactics that are displacing tens of thousands of ethnic civilians in northern Burma.

These include several thousand Palaung villagers from remote mountainous areas of northwest Shan State, mostly women and children, whose plight is being almost completely ignored.

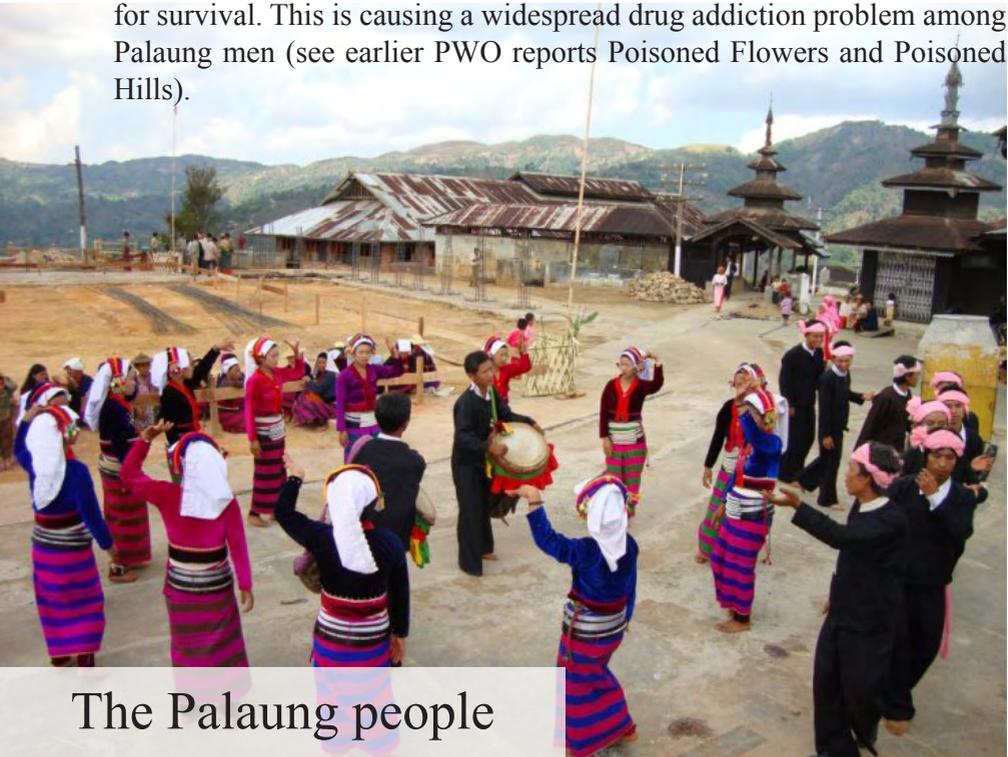
The Palaung Women's Organisation and the Ta-ang Student and Youth Organisation (TSYO) set up an emergency committee in early 2012 to raise funds to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to the IDPs.

During a trip in September 2012 to provide assistance, PWO carried out interviews in the three main IDP sites, to find out about their current situation and prospects for return. PWO has compiled these findings into this brief update.

Background

The Palaung people are one of the nationalities within the multi-national Union of Burma. The Palaung population is over one million, most living in the mountainous Palaung homelands in northern Shan State. A large number of Palaung also live in towns throughout southern and eastern Shan State. The Palaung people have their own language, literature and a distinctive traditional culture.

In the past, the Palaung people enjoyed their own territory and self-sufficient economy, cultivating tea and paddy farms. The customary lands of the Palaung people are also rich in gems and minerals such as silver, zinc, gold and aluminum. However, decades of dictatorship have left control of most resources in the hands of the Burmese military and their cronies. The tea industry has been monopolized, driving down prices of tea and causing loss of livelihoods. Increasing numbers of Palaung farmers are being forced to migrate, or have turned to opium growing for survival. This is causing a widespread drug addiction problem among Palaung men (see earlier PWO reports *Poisoned Flowers* and *Poisoned Hills*).



The Palaung people

These problems have been compounded by growing investment in large scale development projects in Palaung areas, such as the trans-national gas and oil pipelines from the Arakan coast to China, which have caused large-scale confiscation of land.

After the flawed election in Burma in November 2010, in which the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won the majority of votes with the support of the ruling junta, President Thein Sein has been seeking to assert control of the ethnic states, where most of the country’s natural resources are located. After failing to bring the major ethnic resistance groups under the Burma Army as Border Guard Forces, the government has been offering them new ceasefire agreements. However, there has so far been no substantive political dialogue to address ethnic demands for equal rights under a federal government. This has led to continued armed resistance, particularly in northern Burma, where the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Shan State Army–North (SSA-N) are active.

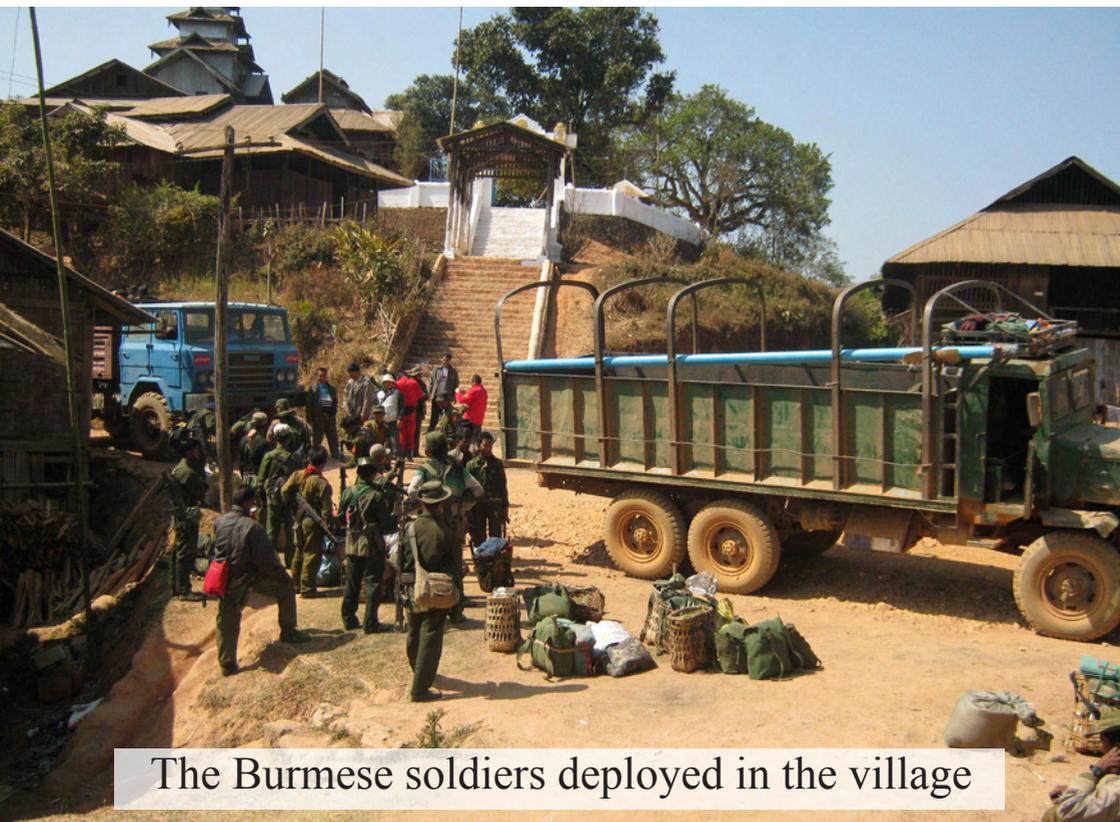


The fighting Area

The Burmese government has deployed sixteen main battalions in Palaung areas of northern Shan State to crush the resistance, and secure mega-projects such as the oil and gas pipelines. These Burmese troops, together with local militia, have been terrorizing civilians in rural areas as part of anti-insurgency operations. One of the main militia groups assisting the Burmese troops is headed by Pansay Kyaw Myint, an ethnic Chinese who is now an elected USDP MP for Namkham.

Despite the forming of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC), there has been no action taken to investigate and punish government troops who are committing serious violations against ethnic civilians.

Findings



The Burmese soldiers deployed in the village

Causes of displacement

Most of the Palaung IDPs are from remote mountainous areas along the Kachin-Shan State border at the frontline of fighting between the Burma Army and KIA, SSA-N and TNLA.

The Burma Army has set up new military outposts in these areas, and sent out regular patrols into the hills to flush out the resistance forces. Troops have been conscripting villagers as porters and guides, looting livestock and other food, and torturing and killing those suspected of supporting the resistance. Fear of these abuses has caused over 2,000 villagers from 15 villages to flee their homes.



The villagers leaving their homes in groups

Many of the IDPs currently sheltering north of Manton are from villages west of the Shweli river. When fighting broke out between the Burma Army and SSA-N in March 2011, Burmese troops from LIB 130, LIB 144 from Manton and LIB 522 from Lashio stepped up patrols in the area, and in June 2011 set up an army outpost in Pan Khar village, warning villagers they should move out of the area for their own safety. All the livestock, including cows, chickens and pigs, was looted until none was left. Villagers were forced to become porters carrying supplies for troops, and used as human shields during fighting. A 58-year-old male villager

described being taken as a porter in December 2011:

“When I came back from my paddy farm, I was arrested by a Burmese soldier without any reason. The soldier told me that I had to lead them from our village to another village. I was scared that I would step on the bombs (landmines) but I could not refuse.”

A curfew was imposed in Pan Khar village and villagers found outside their homes at night were beaten and fined. In October 2011, the village headman U Maung Swe was drinking in his house late one evening with his secretary Mai Yine Naw, when Burmese troops of LIB 130 came and arrested the two of them, beating them so badly that U Maung Swe died of his injuries. Landmines were laid around the village, and in November 2011, a 30-year-old villager called Jam Swe died from stepping on a mine.

Due to these ongoing abuses, by the end of 2011, the entire village of Pan Khar, originally over 50 households, had become deserted.



Thoe Hone Village: IDP camp

In other villages, direct attacks and shelling drove villagers out of their homes. In December 2011, a patrol of Burmese troops entered the village of Man Lwe without warning and fired shells at a 49-year-old civilian wearing a camouflage jacket. His body was blown apart, and the rest of the villagers fled in terror.

Some villagers fled straight to large villages or towns. Others hid in the forest near their villages for several weeks, in the hope of being able to return home soon. However, when fighting continued, they realized they had to seek refuge elsewhere.

The need to avoid Burmese patrols meant that villagers had to flee along mountainous jungle paths. Those fleeing from villages west of the Shweli River had to cross the river, either swimming or using bamboo poles to form makeshift bridges.

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Women bear burden of displacement



Women bear burden of displacement

The majority of villagers fleeing from their homes were women and children, as many men had already left to avoid forcible conscription as soldiers or porters, and to try and earn money in other areas. Women therefore had to bear the physical hardship and psychological trauma of displacement alone.

A woman now sheltering in Namkham camp said: *“My husband didn’t know we were fleeing because he was working on the China-Burma border. He only knew after we had arrived at the camp. I had a terrible time bringing my children and food with me on our trip. I was crying.”*

Another woman said: *“I had to carry my family things and children during our trip to the Namkham camp. We spent five days on our trip and my husband was not with me. Two of my children could walk but the youngest couldn’t walk yet and I had to carry him and flee. On the way, I tried not to let my children cry in case the soldiers heard us. But they were so hungry that they kept crying.”*

The fear of being caught by Burmese troops meant that villagers did not dare cook food along the way. Some women described how they just fed their children with dried noodles or snacks, but did not eat anything

themselves, only drinking water from streams.

Land-mines were another threat for those fleeing. Many ended up following cattle tracks through the jungle, hoping that cattle would have detonated any mines along the path.

PWO interviewed 15 women who were pregnant when they fled from their homes. One pregnant woman made a 3-day journey barefoot because she was afraid that her Chinese plimsoles would leave tracks which could be followed by Burmese troops:

“I was so scared of the shooting in the village. My husband had gone to work in the town to earn income for our family and he didn’t know I had to flee. I couldn’t wear any shoes, and I didn’t have any food to eat or any place to sleep on my trip.”



Women gave birth in the camp without any medical treatment

A 17-year-old girl who was 6 months pregnant suffered a miscarriage on arrival at Thoe Hone IDP settlement. There was no medical assistance, and she was cared for only by her mother, as her husband had disappeared.

Some families were forced to leave behind elderly family members who could not manage the journey. A woman IDP now staying in Namkham described leaving her grandmother behind when she fled:

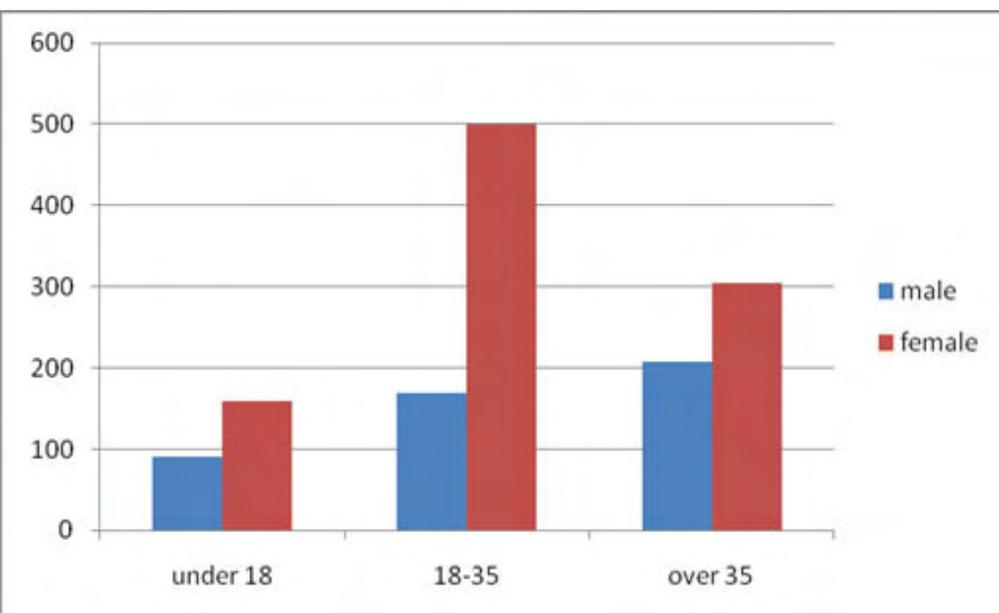
“We had to leave our grandmother behind because she is too old and I just fled with my three kids. My kids were crying because they were hungry, so other villagers were angry with me because they were worried that the soldiers would find us. All the children had to be quiet.”

Some devout elderly people have also chosen to stay behind, in spite of danger, to look after the village monastery and any remaining monks. Now only a few old people and monks are left in the affected Palaung villages.

IDP population figures

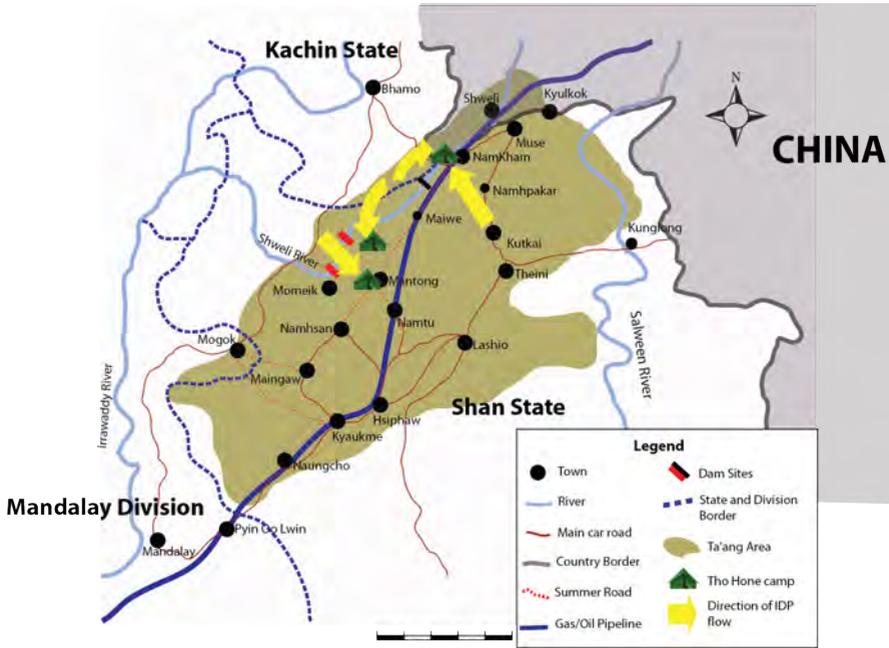
No	Location of IDPs		Approx. no. of IDPs	Original villages of Palaung IDPs
1	Manton township	Thoe Hone Village	500 +	Pan Khar, Mine Kha and Pan Hlone villages
2		Manton town (church compound)	260 (incl. 50 Palaung)	Lwae Mauk and Man San villages
3	Namkham township	Namkham town (Ta-ang National Party office)	430 +	Man Lwae (1), Man Lwae (2), Kyu Sai and Auu Lan Par villages

Gender and age disaggregation of IDPs in all sites



The overall ratio of females to males in all three camps is 3:1. In the age range of 18-35 years, the discrepancy is highest, with a ratio of 4:1, as many adult men have gone to find work elsewhere. The higher proportion of girls to boys under 18 is because Palaung parents commonly send their sons to study in towns elsewhere, particularly in monastery schools.

Conditions in IDP sites



The direction of IDP flow

(A) Manton Township

1. Thoe Hone village

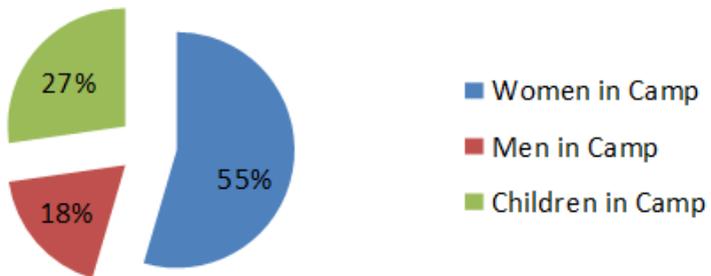
There are over five hundred IDPs sheltering in Thoe Hone, a remote Palaung hill-top village on the east bank of the Shweli River in the north of Manton township. There is no paved access road. It takes several days to reach the village by motorbike from Manton town.

There were originally about 50 houses in Thoe Hone. The influx of IDPs, from three villages to the west of the Shweli river, has doubled the size of the village.

Among the IDPs, there are over 300 women, over 100 men and over 150 children in the camp.

The Thoe Hone village headman is taking responsibility for managing the welfare of the IDPs. He keeps a record of the IDP household members, and has helped donors to distribute aid.

The number of IDPs at Thoe Hone village

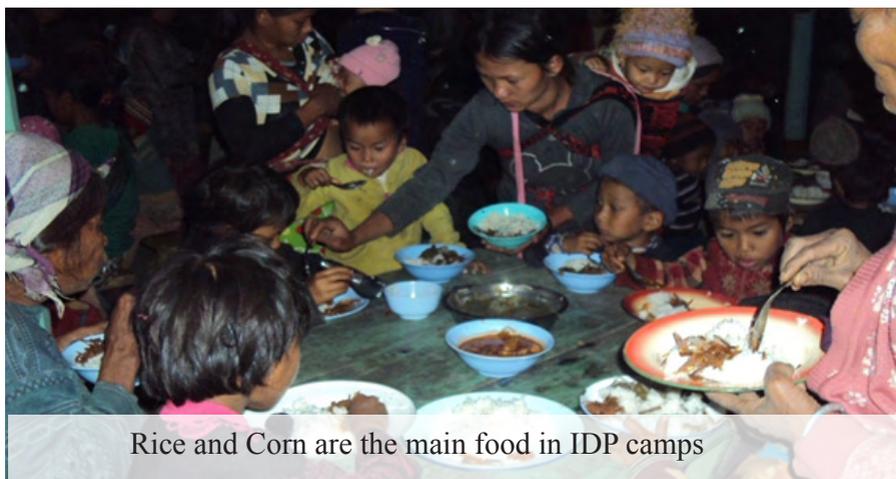


Breakdown of IDPs in Thoe Hone Camp

Food

“I am very sad because I have left my all things in Pan Khar village, my home place. I have left my animals at my home, my cows, my farms, everything. Now, we have seven people in the family but I don’t have anything to eat and I cannot provide for my daughter to attend the school. We have no home, no land, no farms, no future. We didn’t have any income for our family, therefore my daughter left school and works for our survival. We have to go to work at other people’s farm to get money. We have income of only 1,500 kyat (US1.75) per day. I am just a day laborer.” IDP at Thoe Hone

Most of the IDPs fled before their rice harvest in 2011, arriving with only the clothes on their backs, having walked for several days to reach Thoe Hone.



Rice and Corn are the main food in IDP camps

The IDPs have therefore been relying on donations or loans of food from local villagers, but this year have begun planting rice and corn in limited plots of land shared by the local villagers. As the local livelihood is subsistence agriculture, there is little wage labour available for the IDPs to earn money to support themselves.

The main diet of the IDPs is rice or corn, supplemented with bamboo shoots or other wild vegetables collected from the forest. Even salt is a luxury.

Sheltver



PHOTO -TSYO

The Palaung IDPs in the camp

There is no separate area in the village designated for the IDPs. IDP families are living in small plastic tents in different parts of the village.

Water and Sanitation

As the village is on a hill-top, there is little water available. The villagers and IDPs mostly rely on collection of rain water for domestic use and drinking, but during the dry months in winter and summer they must walk for half an hour to fetch water from the nearest stream.

The IDPs do not have their own toilets, and usually defecate in the open outside the village.



Water source for the camps

Health

“There is no medicine for our family. We have five people in our family and all of us are sick. These two children are also sick and cry all the time.” – one of the IDP mothers at Thoe Hone.



Mother and her six month old baby. He was there days old when they fled.

Due to the long journey through the hills to reach Thoe Hone, many IDPs were in poor health when they arrived. The lack of water and poor sanitation has worsened the health risks for the IDPs, and there is a high incidence of diarrhea and skin infections. The IDPs also complain that temperatures in Thoe Hone are higher than in their home villages, and the heat is worsened by the plastic roofing. Many have been suffering from malaria.

There are no government medical facilities or personnel in the village. The IDPs therefore need to rely on traditional healers for treatment.

Education

There is a small government primary school in Thoe Hone village. However, many IDP families have taken their children, particularly girls, out of school, as they need them to help work, and can no longer afford to let them study. Seventeen girls aged 12 and above had been forced to leave school for this reason. Formerly they had attended community-run schools in their original villages.



The school in Palaung village

Security

The proximity of the Burma Army outpost at Pan Khar, just across the river, and frequent Burmese patrols in the area, pose a security risk to the IDPs in Thoe Hone. In January 2012, a 13-year-old IDP girl narrowly escaped sexual assault by a Burmese soldier when she went outside the village. She explained: *“I have left school and sell food and vegetables for family income. When I went to sell the food and vegetables at a different village, a Burmese soldier tried to rape me but I was lucky. I ran to my friends and told them about it.”*

2. Manton town (church compound)

There are about 260 IDPs sheltering in a Kachin church in Manton town, out of an original 700 IDPs who had fled during 2011. Among the remaining IDPs are about 50 Palaung, from the villages of Lwae Mauk and Man San, two days’ walk away. The rest are Kachin and Lisu.

The Palaung IDPs did not originally seek shelter in the church, as they are Buddhist. When they first fled from their villages, they had camped in bamboo huts just outside the town. However, local Palaung community leaders concerned for their welfare and security organized for them to come and stay at the church with other Kachin and Lisu IDPs.



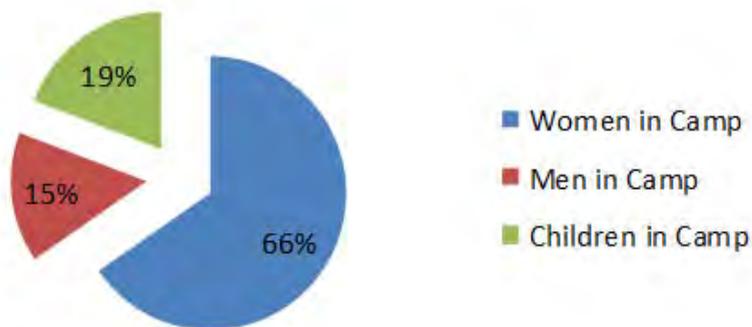
The IDP in church compound

The IDPs are staying in the church hall, and in plastic shelters set up in the church compound. In the hall, men, women and children live together communally. All must share the compound's bathrooms and toilets.

They have received some donations from private donors and aid agencies, but have also needed to rely on daily wage labour to earn money for food and basic necessities. Work is only available occasionally, on other people's farms or construction sites, with wages for men ranging between 1,000 and 2,500 kyat (US\$1.20-\$2.90) a day. Women are usually paid less, about 2/3 of what men can earn. Some young children aged 10 upwards have also left school to help their parents work, but are paid even less.

The IDPs can access medical facilities in Manton, but have to pay for treatment. There are also schools available, but it is hard for the IDPs to afford to send their children to study, and many IDP children are not being educated.

The number of IDP at Chruch in Manton Township



(B) Namkham

There are over 400 Palaung IDPs staying in a building belonging to the Ta-ang National Party (TNP) in the outskirts of Namkham. During 2011, over 700 Palaung IDPs had fled to Namkham, from Nampakkar, Kutkhai and Man Kyi in northern Shan State, and from villages along the Shan State-Kachin State border. The IDPs had travelled for up to one week to reach Namkham. The IDPs had initially stayed at some Buddhist temples in the town, but when these became too crowded, in November 2011, it was arranged for the IDPs to move to the TNP building.



The IDP in Namkham camp

The IDPs remaining are mostly from the Shan-Kachin border area, from the villages of Man Lwae (1), Man Lwae (2) and Kyu Sai, where heavy fighting is still continuing. There are 200 women, about 100 men and over 50 children.

Conditions are similar to those in the church compound in Manton, except that all the IDPs in Namkham are living in the building, and none are living outside in plastic shelters. Cooking is carried out communally.

The crowded living conditions are particularly hard on women who have just given birth. One mother of a small baby said: *“After delivery, I had to stay with all the noisy children around me in the camp. It made me feel faint. There is no separate place for mothers with newborn babies. We have to stay crowded together with everyone else.”*



The schools in Namkham report have had limited capacity to accept the influx of IDP children. As a result, some IDP children have been forced to change schools several times during the past year. One young girl complained:

“I attend the primary school in Namkham Township but I have had to change schools three times. The teacher just teaches me old lessons and I have to start old lessons every time I move to another school. I don’t want to attend the school anymore.”

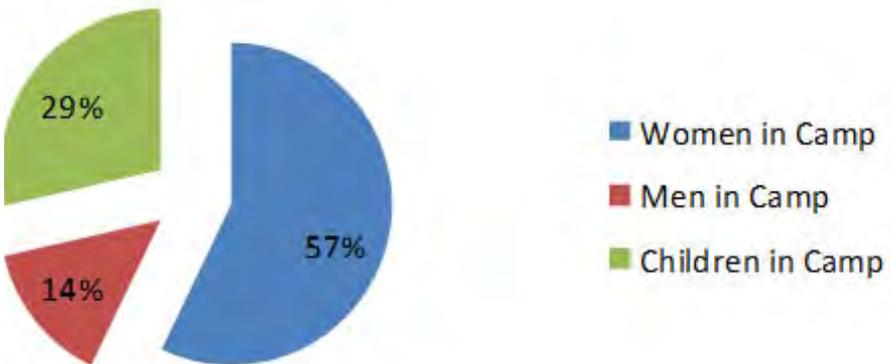
The IDP’s student who was not archived the education well



Another six-year-old girl faced discrimination at school: *“I don’t like other students to call me a ‘refugee child.’ Now, I am a student from Ma Nar school. I don’t want other students to discriminate against me. I want them to recognize me as a student from Ma Nar school. I don’t want to go back to my village because I am scared of Boom Boom (explosions).”*

six-year-old girl faced discrimination at school

The Number of IDPs in Namkhan Township



Breakdown of Palaung IDPs in Namkham town

Population flows from IDP sites

Due to the difficulties of staying in the IDP settlements, approximately half of the over 2,000 IDPs who had originally fled have now moved out. Several hundred have returned to their villages in the Kutkai and Namphakar areas, where fighting has died down in recent months. They still live in fear of ongoing Burmese army patrols, but at least can cultivate their own paddy and tea farms. One of the IDPs from Namkham said: *“We don’t want to stay at the camps because there is no guaranteed means of survival. If we go back to our homes, at least we have farms and houses, even if conditions are insecure.”*

However, most of the IDPs leaving the camps are unable to return home, as they are from villages along the Shan-Kachin border where heavy fighting is continuing. They have therefore gone to find work in China, or to mining areas such as Phakant in Kachin state. It is mainly adult men who leave to find work elsewhere, leaving their wives and children in the camps. Few manage to send money back to their families, and some men simply never return. Some women also leave their children with relatives and go to find work elsewhere. Particularly if they go to work in China, where they cannot speak the language, and often travel illegally, Palaung women run the risk of being trafficked (as documented in PWO’s 2011 report *“Stolen Lives”*).

Humanitarian Aid

Some UN and international aid agencies, such as Save the Children, have visited the IDPs in Namkham and Manton towns, and given assistance, including food, medicine, tarpaulins, blankets, bowls and plates. The IDPs in the towns have received 6-monthly supplies of rice and beans from the World Food Program (WFP).

However, international groups have been restricted from visiting the Thoe Hone camp, due to its remote location. WFP has only once visited the IDPs in Thoe Hone in 2011 and provided some rice.

Some local NGOs, including Metta Foundation, and Palaung community

based groups, such as Moe Tauk Kyae and Plang Sangai have also given aid to the IDPs. However, the aid has only been sporadic and not sufficient to address the needs of the IDPs, and provide them with adequate food, shelter, health care and education. The government has not provided any assistance at all.

The fact that people have been leaving the IDP sites shows that conditions there are not sustainable. The headman of Thoe Hone village warned that the large influx of IDPs was straining the coping mechanisms of his community. Even though they had been able to provide donations and loans of food during the past year, this was no longer possible. He was also concerned that he might face repercussions from the authorities, as none of the IDPs had identity cards, and had no legal permission to stay in his village.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Our findings show there is an urgent need to provide humanitarian aid to the estimated 1,000 Palaung IDPs who have fled conflict in northern Shan State. Food, shelter, medical assistance and educational support are urgently needed, particularly in Thoe Hone camp. There should also be special consideration for the needs of women, who constitute the majority of the IDPs.

IDP testimonies show that government troops are continuing to commit gross human rights violations against civilians with impunity, including forced portering, torture, killing and sexual violence. This contrasts sharply with President Thein Sein's denial of Burma Army abuses, reiterated during his recent trip to the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2012.

As the international community re-engages with Burma, it would be wise to start looking beyond the country's urban centres, and heed the voices of rural ethnic communities, particularly in the conflict zones. Premature rewards to Burma's military rulers are simply emboldening them to continue waging war, committing abuses, and driving ethnic peoples from their lands.

PWO therefore makes the following recommendations:

- (1) To allow UN agencies, international and local NGOs to freely access and provide assistance to IDP settlements in rural areas as well as towns.
- (2) To implement a nationwide ceasefire, pull back troops from conflict areas, and begin meaningful political dialogue to address the root causes of the conflict in Burma.

To the international community

- (1) To pressure the Burmese government to allow international aid agencies to access IDPs in rural ethnic areas.
- (2) To provide more aid to IDPs in ethnic areas so that their basic needs are addressed, and support community based organisations that are working closely with their communities.
- (3) To urge the Burmese government to implement a nationwide ceasefire, pull back troops from conflict areas, and begin meaningful political dialogue to address the root causes of the conflict in Burma.

Acknowledgments

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Published in October 2012 by the Palaung Women's Organization

We are Palaung women who will advocate and advance the status of women in all fields of development and working towards achieving gender equality, justice, peace and democratic society.

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