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'If they had hope, they would speak'

The ongoing use of state sponsored sexual violence in Burma's ethnic communities

(Yangon, November 24, 2014) – Burma Army soldiers continue to engage in acts of sexual violence on a widespread scale, and women and human rights defenders in ethnic communities face harassment and persecution, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) said in a new report published today to coincide with International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. To achieve sustainable peace and help safeguard the rights of ethnic women, the government of Burma must immediately stop its military offensives in the ethnic areas, pull back its troops and begin political dialogue with the ethnic armed groups towards genuine federalism.

The WLB's new report, *'If they had hope, they would speak': The ongoing use of state-sponsored sexual violence in Burma's ethnic communities*, highlights 118 incidences of gang-rape, rape, and attempted sexual assault that have been documented in Burma since 2010, in both ceasefire and non-ceasefire areas. This number is believed to be a fraction of the actual number of cases that have taken place. These abuses—which are widespread and systematic—must be investigated, and may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity under international criminal law.

'The government of Burma has worked hard to show its reformist credentials to the world, but for women in Burma's ethnic communities, human rights abuses and sexual violence at the hands of the Burma Army remain a constant threat', said Tin Tin Nyo, General Secretary of the Women's League of Burma. 'Any positive changes coming out of Naypyidaw have not improved the lived experience of women in Burma.'

The cases highlighted in the WLB's report demonstrate the ongoing de facto impunity for human rights abuses enjoyed by Burma military personnel. Interviews conducted with survivors and human rights defenders highlight the intimidation and harassment faced by women who demand accountability for the perpetrators of sexual violence. The involvement of both the military and police – either through the act of the crime, or the complicity in covering it up – is clear evidence of how little Burma's reform process is helping safeguard the human rights of women across the country.

The impact of large-scale development projects in many ethnic communities has resulted in increased militarization, poverty and sexual violence. Across Burma, the military has been violating the terms of ceasefire agreements signed with Ethnic Armed Organisations, and directing harassment and persecution against ethnic communities and human rights defenders.

'The military is sending a clear message that it is willing to use violence and coercion against those brave enough to speak out about human rights abuses', said Tin Tin Nyo.

The absence of women's voices in Burma's political and public life further contributes to the marginalisation of issues affecting women. The dearth of women in formal decision making positions, and the persecution of civil society organisations – in which women play a more active role – further undermines women's ability to address the challenges and abuses they face.

Despite the Burma government's public commitment to advance the status of women – including by developing the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) and issuing the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict – few steps have been taken to improve the lives of women in ethnic communities. The absence of concrete and time-bound plans of action has meant that amidst Burma's 'transition', the country's women continue to be denied their basic human rights.

'The Burma Army must be brought under civilian control, and there must be a negotiated settlement to the civil war that will grant ethnic peoples equality under a genuine federal system of government', said Tin Tin Nyo. 'If these actions are not taken, state-sponsored sexual violence against women of ethnic communities will not stop.'

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