



## The Burmese Junta's Hidden Victims

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Op-Ed

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The startling images of fearless saffron-robed monks in the streets of Rangoon and the violent crackdown that followed exposed Burma to world scrutiny. What we don't see behind these images is the desperation of the Burmese people whose freedom and livelihoods have been drastically curtailed under the repressive regime. Many of these people face literal enslavement at home and extreme exploitation in neighboring countries. They are victims of human trafficking, a phenomenon that destabilizes the region and bleeds trauma far beyond Burma's borders.

Burma's ruling generals systematically employ forced labor to maintain their repressive grip on the country. The regime forces men, women and children to work for its benefit -- providing rice to feed the huge parasitic military force, constructing roads and buildings, and serving as porters for military convoys and human mine sweepers in the battlefields in the border regions. As the regime continues its gross mismanagement of the country and economic and social conditions deteriorate further, the number of victims of trafficking can only be expected to grow.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has reported to the U.N. General Assembly that the Burmese military conscripts children into the army. Although the regime prevents an accurate assessment of the magnitude of this problem, many believe that Burma has the largest number of child soldiers in the world. Burma holds another notorious distinction: The International Labor Organization considers Burma to harbor a significant share of the estimated 2.2 million victims of state-imposed forced labor globally.

Facing bleak economic conditions and the prospect of forced labor at home, millions of Burmese have had to flee their homes and villages, usually without legal documents, making them even more vulnerable to human trafficking and the predations of corrupt officials.

Among these most vulnerable are girls and women from Burma's ethnic minorities, who reside in the horseshoe of mountainous regions surrounding Burma's flat heartland bordering China, India, Bangladesh and Thailand. Rape is widespread in Burma. Shan, Karen, Chin, Mon and other ethnic minority women and girls live in daily fear of sexual violence by their military oppressors, including as sex slaves in military camps in their regions. Their communities are powerless to protect them and so they flee.

After successfully escaping slavery in Burma, however, another cruel fate awaits too many Burmese. Instead of laying claim to the freedom and economic security they hoped for, they are preyed upon by traffickers and exploitative employers. They are pushed into the sex trade or into highly predatory economic sectors in neighboring countries. Some Kachin, Shan and Burman girls and women enter the sex trade in China and other neighboring countries. International Labor Organization research conducted in 2006 suggests that many of the estimated two million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand work under exploitative conditions.

The United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in Persons calls on governments to protect foreign victims of trafficking, including legal alternatives to deportation to countries where they face hardship or retribution. Greater government efforts need to be made to protect this highly vulnerable group of victims.

The only solution to address the underlying problems behind Burma's crisis is a genuine political dialogue between the regime and the Burmese people, leading to a transition to a government truly representative of the diverse Burmese population. The U.S. has intensified its financial sanctions targeting Burmese junta leaders. The international community is urging the regime to immediately and unconditionally release those detained for peaceful activism and to fully cooperate with U.N. Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari.

Regional leaders must recognize that the junta's iron rule, marked by night-time raids, detained political prisoners, slave-like conditions of Burmese at home and degradation in neighboring states are indicative of a rotten core -- and can no longer be dismissed as just "an internal matter."

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