

## PRESS RELEASE, 22 OCTOBER 2008 IMPUNITY IN EASTERN BURMA CHALLENGED

Bangkok – The crackdown on peaceful protesters in Rangoon, the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta, and a flawed referendum on constitutional change have been the focus of international attention in Burma during the past year. However, a new report by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) suggests that violations of humanitarian and human rights law in the conflict-affected areas of eastern Burma are more widespread and systematic than ever.

“The extent of persecution and suffering in the border areas has been largely unseen and under-reported for decades. Yet the same brutal army that crushed protests on city streets last September marauds with impunity in rural Burma, bringing fear and disrupting the lives of villagers on a day to day basis”, said Jack Dunford, TBBC’s Executive Director.

TBBC is an alliance of eleven NGOs from nine countries working to provide food, shelter, non-food items and capacity building support to Burmese refugees and displaced persons. Apart from updating information about internal displacement, the new report compiles abuses reported during 2008 in relation to the legal framework for crimes against humanity.

Forced displacement remains most concentrated in the conflict-affected areas of northern Karen State and southern Shan State. However, displacement is more commonly caused by coercive factors at the household level. The imposition of forced labour, extortion, land confiscation, agricultural production quotas, and restrictions on access to fields and markets has a devastating effect on household incomes and a destabilising impact on populations.

While the total number of internally displaced persons in eastern Burma is likely to be well over half a million people, at least 451,000 people are currently estimated in the rural areas. Approximately 66,000 people were forced to leave their homes due to the effects of armed conflict and human rights abuses during the past year alone.

“Despite concessions made in the Irrawaddy Delta after Cyclone Nargis, the junta’s restrictions on humanitarian access continue to obstruct aid workers elsewhere in Burma, particularly in conflict-affected areas. Without assistance, coping strategies amongst the most vulnerable communities in eastern Burma will be exhausted and more refugees and migrants will be displaced into Thailand”, said Mr Dunford.

Evidence cited in the report appears to support Amnesty International’s recent assessment that the violations in eastern Burma meet the legal threshold to constitute crimes against humanity. Special Rapporteurs for the United Nations have consistently noted over the past decade that such abuses are systematic, rather than simply isolated acts, and that the junta has failed to implement recommendations formulated by relevant United Nations’ bodies.

Critics argue that raising allegations about crimes against humanity will merely frustrate the promotion of political dialogue. However, just as the provision of humanitarian assistance should not be dependent upon political reform, humanitarian protection and the administration of justice should not be sacrificed to expedite political dialogue. The threat of prosecution may actually increase the leverage of the diplomatic community and provide an incentive for the regime to end the climate of impunity.

“Given that the Burmese junta is targeting civilians in military operations, the responsibility to protect villagers in eastern Burma must shift to the international community. The causes of this humanitarian crisis are political, so diplomatic efforts to broker tri-partite dialogue and promote national reconciliation need to be renewed. Yet it remains essential to hold the junta to account for atrocities committed in eastern Burma, and to demand an immediate nation-wide ceasefire”, commented Mr Dunford.

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“Internal Displacement and International Law in Eastern Burma” is available from [www.tbbc.org/idps/idps.htm](http://www.tbbc.org/idps/idps.htm)  
Enquiries: Sally Thompson (+66) 02 2385027, (+66) 089 8508457.