

Testimony by S Hkawng Naw of the Kachin Women's Association Thailand to the US Congress

Date: 28 February, 2013

Good afternoon.

Firstly I would like to say thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for inviting me to testify today.

I am from Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, home of the Kachin people and most of the Christian minority of Burma. In June 2011, the Burmese Army broke a 17-year long ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (the KIA). Since then, troops from over 140 Burmese battalions have launched a massive operation in Kachin state and Northern Shan state, using heavy artillery and aircraft. Over 100,000 people have been displaced, including my 78-year-old grandmother, who spent her earlier life fleeing the civil war, and is once again homeless.

Last month I was in the Kachin town of Laiza, on the border with China, a town where 20,000 civilians live, including over 10,000 displaced villagers who have been denied refuge in China. Laiza is also where the KIA headquarters is based. While I was in Laiza, I could hear heavy shelling every day. Like everyone else, I was terrified that a bomb would drop on me. On January 14, shells landed in a residential area of Laiza, killing three villagers, and injuring four people, including two children.

Attacks against civilians are a deliberate part of the Burmese army's strategy to cut off support for the resistance groups in ethnic areas. The Burmese army has deliberately tortured and killed civilians including children as young as 9 years old, burned down villages and churches, captured civilians as sexual slaves and porters, and committed widespread sexual violence in Kachin and other ethnic areas. Since June 2011, my organization has documented the rape of 64 women and girls in seventeen townships in Kachin state, committed by Burmese troops from fourteen battalions. Among these, there were many cases of gang-rape. About half of these victims were also killed, including a 14-year-old girl who was raped and killed in front of her parents. Burmese soldiers told villagers that they had been ordered to rape women. Both the Burmese army and the KIA are also laying landmines, and we know that the Burmese army has used civilians for demining.

The fighting and human rights abuses have caused large-scale displacement. 364 villages are now partially or completely deserted. About 66,000 internally displaced people are taking shelter in KIA-controlled areas along the China-Burma border, receiving hardly any aid from the international community, because the Burmese government has refused to allow international humanitarian organizations to access these areas. According to a survey by my organization last October, international aid reaching the IDP camps has totaled only 4% of the food need. Most aid is being provided by community-based organizations, who are struggling to keep up with growing numbers of IDPs and worsening conditions in the camps. There is a lack of food, lack of proper sanitation, spread of disease such as TB and diarrhea, and not enough medical supplies or care. In the first three weeks of January 2013 in Laiza alone, ten babies died of diarrhea.

There is total impunity for these human rights abuses, and Burma's new government has passed no legislative or institutional reforms to address or prevent these crimes. Even the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, established in September 2011, has publicly declared that it would not investigate any crimes committed in the ethnic areas.

To address this growing humanitarian crisis and end these terrible human rights abuses, the US must change its policy in Burma.

First, we ask that you allocate US aid money to community based organizations providing assistance to internally displaced persons in KIA-controlled areas, who are the only groups with sustained access to vulnerable communities in Kachin.

Second, the US should publicly call for the establishment of a UN-led Commission of Inquiry to investigate crimes against humanity and war crimes taking place in Kachin State and throughout Burma. Without this, human rights violations will continue because there are no consequences for the perpetrators.

Third, the US should act as an independent third party in the peace negotiations between the Burmese government and the KIA. Even though the KIA and Burmese government have met formally 10 times, the Burmese government continues to make promises of ceasefires and humanitarian access that they do not enforce. We therefore need an independent third party to be an ombudsperson, monitor, and guarantor for these negotiations.

Finally, the US must maintain existing sanctions against Burma and renew any sanctions that will expire. The United States had previously declared that for sanctions to be lifted, Burma had to release all political prisoners, and stop hostilities and seek true political settlements in ethnic areas. These benchmarks have not been met, so sanctions must remain in place.

I am also submitting for your reference a copy of *Kachin Women's Association Thailand's* most recent report, published this week, titled "*State Terror in the Kachin Hills*", outlining attacks against civilians committed by the Burmese Army.

Thank you