

Introduction

The policies of the SPDC, including land confiscation, forced labor and chemical fertilizer distribution are causing food insecurity in Rathedaung Township. This report examines the failed SPDC agricultural policy in Arakan State. The first section of the report deals with land confiscation. Land confiscation has been taking place throughout the country since the military seized the power in 1962. In 1972 the new constitution adopted by the ruler general Nay Win made the state the ultimate owner of the land. Since then there has been no legal protection of land rights for Burmese people.

Section two examines the consequences of forced labor on food security. Forced labor is common in Arakan State. Although Burma is a member of the ILO and ratified their membership in 1955, the SPDC forces farmers to work for their benefit in some areas. Especially in the rainy season, the farmers have to plough the farms for the military.

Section three of the report outlines the SPDC policy concerning chemical fertilization. The SPDC has forced farmers to use chemical fertilizers without providing training. The result has been destruction of the land causing increased local food insecurity. This report is based on research conducted in Rathidaung Township, Northern Arakan State. Fourteen people were interviewed including farmers and workers.



This boy has to beg for food for his family from house in Arakan State. (Photo by Zaw Zaw).

Background of Arakan State

Arakan State is one of seven states in Burma, located on the Bay of Bengal. It is bordered by Bangladesh to the northeast, Chin State to the north, and the Irrawaddy, Maue and Pegu Divisions to the east. It has seventeen townships and the capital city is Sittwe. The State has an area of 36,778 square kilometers and population of 3,077,712.³⁸² The ethnic groups are Arakanese, Mro, Khami, Kaman, Dienet, Maramargri, and Thak. Most people are farmers and fishermen.

Arakan State is one of the most highly militarized states in Burma. According to Supply and Command, a report by the Shwe Gas Movement, since 1988 the number of battalions in Arakan State has increased from 3 to 43 battalions.³⁸³ By looking at that fact, it can be imagined that farmers in Arakan State are facing serious livelihood problems. The local people are losing their farmland and other natural resources such as mangrove forests, bamboo, wood, brooks and rivers that provide their daily food and shelter. Before the military confiscated the land, the people got vegetables, fruits and crabs from the mangrove forests. Now the authorities don't allow the villagers to enter into mangrove forests. The people have to buy their food from the market. The vegetable and fish sellers also lost their jobs.

Rathidaung is one of the townships in Arakan State and it located 41.7 kilometers from Sittwe. According to Township Peace and Development Council's documentation, its total population is 156,240 people and there are 217 villages and 4 quarters. The people earn money by farming. Before 1993, farmers could work on their ancestral farms without fearing soldiers. They could produce enough rice for their family. They didn't need to go too much to work as forced labor for the military. Fishermen also could catch fish without paying high taxes. In 1993 three SPDC battalions arrived and confiscated the local farms without providing any compensation. Since then township people have had to work for the SPDC as forced labor. The SPDC's policy of forced labor has meant that people are facing a lack of livelihood and food insecurity.

³⁸² Ministry of Information, 2007, page 110.

³⁸³ 'Supply and Command', Shwe Gas Movement, July 2006.

Land Confiscation

According to ND Burma (the Network for Human Rights Documentation-Burma) land confiscation is “An arbitrary and unlawful confiscation, deprivation, or destruction of housing, land, and/or other assets and material goods by State authorities, often times committed without permission and under menace of threat or penalty, that can lead to an inadequate standard of living, obstructions to improvements in living conditions, unlawful forced evictions and displacements, and other hardships.”³⁸⁴

According to this definition, there has been land confiscation widely occurring in Rathidaung Township since 1993. The local authorities confiscate land from the local people without compensation. The main reasons for land confiscation are militarization, military projects and road construction. Owners of the confiscated land commonly get no payment for their land or inadequate compensation. The consequences are terrible for local farmers who face unemployment, loss of livelihood, food insecurity, debt, and unlawful imprisonment as well.

International human rights law expressly forbids land confiscation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 17 explains:

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

According to international human rights law, the SPDC is abusing the human rights in Rathidaung Township. They confiscate the local people's properties such as rice farms, vegetable fields, pastures for cattle and natural resources without due process. As a consequence, people are suffering from a food shortage. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) Article: 11 (1) states that the state parties must recognize the rights of every person to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing. The SPDC has not ratified this convention because they are abusing those rights. Nevertheless, they should respect the UDHR article (25) which states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for himself and of his family, including food, clothing and housing.”

³⁸⁴ ND Burma.



*LIB 537 confiscates the garden from Taung Hla.
(Photo by Zaw Zaw).*

Confiscation of Rice Farms

In 1993, three SPDC battalions (LIB 536, 537 and 538) confiscated over 150 acres of paddy (rice) farms from local farmers without providing any compensation. They built some barracks in those areas and grew rice for the families of the military. After three years, they rented the land back to the original farm owners. The farmers have to give the military 28 tins of rice per acre per year. The farmers cannot get enough rice for their families by giving that high amount of rice. Although the farmers don't get enough rice for their families by renting farms from the militaries, they don't dare to surrender this job because that is their ancestral work.

"I have no rice left for the rainy season by renting farms from the military. There are there points why I rent the farms from them. First, I don't have any other job. Second, if I don't rent the farms, they don't allow my cattle to enter into the military boundary. There is no pasture for my cattle and I have to sell them. These are my ancestral farms. I don't want to see other people work in my farms."³⁸⁵

Agriculture is the main economy in Rathedaung Township. Rice is the common crop and the staple food. Before the authorities seized the local farmers' rice fields, they exchanged their rice for vegetables and they could send their children to school by selling rice. A local farmer explained their family condition before they lost their farms:

³⁸⁵ Interview 6.

"I didn't need to be worried about rice for my family and also I could sell extra rice to make money. I could spend money for clothes, housing, health and my children's education. My family's economic situation was good."³⁸⁶

It was common in Rathedaung Township for the farmers to only grow rice. When farmers lose their paddy farms, it leads directly to a food scarcity.

"When they confiscated my farms, I couldn't sleep well every night. Looking for a new job was my only thought because I need money to buy rice and my children were studying. I didn't know which job would be suitable for me. At that time, my mind was not regular, I was like a mad person."³⁸⁷

Confiscation of Pastures

The farmers in Ratheduang Township use cattle and buffalo to plough their farms, they are very important for agriculture. Most farmers usually don't grow rice paddies in some acres of farms and keep it as pastures for cattle. But the local authorities don't want to see the pasture and forced the farmers to grown rice. If the farmers don't follow their order, the SPDC confiscates those pastures. The SPDC's goal is to grow paddies on all farms. Almost nine acres of green farms from Wor Thick village were confiscated by local authorities to grow cast-Nat plants.

The SPDC confiscated the fields and pastures in In Taung Hla village in 1993. Almost all of the village's pastures were lost. The farmers who had cattle faced problems. The SPDC military did not allow the cattle to enter into their area. If there is no pasture, there will not cattle. If there are no cattle, the farmers cannot plough their farms and grow rice. Cattle also are important as the maker of organic fertilizer in the farms through their waste.

"In the hot season, they confiscated my farm. The first problem for me was losing pasture for my cattle. They didn't allow the cattle to enter their areas which they confiscated from us. So I had to sell some cattle with a low price."³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Interview 5.

³⁸⁷ Interview 5, farmer.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

If one buffalo or cow enters into the SPDC's area (the farms which are confiscated by the military), they order villagers to give 1,000 kyat for one buffalo as a punishment. Moreover, they beat the cattle owners.

"Last year, in the rainy season, I was looking after my cattle. One of the cattle entered into their farms. The captain beat me."³⁸⁹

Some farmers didn't want to face problems with the military so that they sold their cattle. The cattle are the second income for farmers because they sell extra cattle which are not needed to plough in order to buy food. Using cattle labor is their traditional and sustainable way of farming. That is the only way of farming for them because there is no engine to plough the farms for farmers.

Confiscation of Natural Resources

In Rathiduang Township, the people in rural areas were very connected with mangrove forests. The mangrove forests provided their livelihoods. They picked the vegetables and fruits from it. They could catch the fish and crab from small brooks of the mangrove forests. Moreover the forest provided the local people with firewood, leaves for roofs and wood for shelter so they didn't need to spend money for those things. They got it all for free from mangrove forest.

After 1993, the SPDC confiscated the mangrove forest beside the May Yu River for shrimp farming (which is very popular in Arakan State). First they put red flats in the mangrove forest to signal that land was then owned by the SPDC military. Then, they rent those areas to the local businessmen.

Confiscation of natural resources affects the local people and causes them to be poorer, jobless and eventually migrant workers. After their lands are confiscated, the local people are not allowed to enter the mangrove forest. The businessmen cut the mangrove trees and sell them in the market as firewood. The authorities and the businessmen don't allow the local people to use the natural resources from mangrove forests. They sell all of the resources. Given this situation, local people have to spend more money for their daily lives than before. Rural people are facing food shortages.

³⁸⁹ Interview 9.

"I had a shrimp farm beside my paddy farm. My shrimp farm was very popular in this area. It could produce a lot of shrimp prawn and fish. If they didn't confiscate it, now I will be a rich man."³⁹⁰

- One of the local farmers from Taung Hla village



A shrimp farm

Confiscation of Gardens

There are a lot of small hills in Rathidaung Township. The local people have grown gardens in those hills for many years. They grow mango trees, marian trees, plum trees and some vegetables. The local garden owners earned money by selling seasonal vegetables and fruits from those gardens. Today the SPDC is confiscating these local gardens to supply military families without proving any compensation. The SPDC's policy is to confiscate the land that they can and then they will rent the land back to the local people in order to get more money. They take half of income from the people. It is pure exploitation. The people cannot support their family by earning income from those gardens. On another hand, they don't have other jobs. They are worried because they may lose their job anytime.

"They confiscated my garden, almost three acres, in 1994. At that time, I was faced with many problems because I didn't have any other job. After three years, they rented me my land. Later I realized that why they rented me that garden. They didn't get the money they expected because the soldiers and their families stole the fruits from the garden. I also now do not get enough money for my family because they still steal the fruits from the garden."³⁹¹

-One of the garden owners

³⁹⁰ Interview 8.

³⁹¹ Interview 13.

Consequences of Land Confiscation

In Arakan State, agriculture is the most important livelihood; the agricultural land is the life of Arakan people. Mangrove forests are also important for the people because they are very connected with the livelihoods of the local people. After land confiscation, the Arakanese people, especially the farmers, are directly suffering from food shortages. By the SPDC confiscating farmland, not only have the farmers been affected but also the employees. Often times in large paddy farms, farmers have to hire laborers to work. When the land is confiscated by the SPDC, the laborers were out of work as well.

Land confiscation changed the livelihoods of farmers immediately. Some farmers have had to find new jobs that are not familiar to them. They often don't get enough money for their families. Some farmers rent the farms from the military but they don't get enough rice because of exploitation by SPDC military. They have to give two thirds of their rice production to the military.

As a result, the farmers are faced with debt year after. Husbands are forced to migrate to make money. This creates a condition in which the wives and children to famish. The children have to work for their food so they cannot go to school. The children do not get an education and are in poor health because of hard work.

"After they confiscated my farm, I could not send my children to school. They had to help me to make money for daily food. One of my daughters died because of illness in 1996. I couldn't send her to hospital because I didn't have money. I tried to borrow money from other people but no one lent me."³⁹²

-A local father

Forced Labor

Burma ratified ILO Convention No. 29 Concerning Force Labor in 1930, which defines forced labor in Article 2.1 as, "All work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily." According to this article, the people from Taung Hla village, Rathidaung Township are having their human rights violated by SPDC LIB 538. The LIB 538 forces the people to build the barracks and to plough their farms every year.

³⁹² Interview 6.

Building Military Barracks

Since 1993, the SPDC military has (LIB 538) forced the villagers from Taung Hla village to build military barracks without providing any wage. During three years, the farmers had to go forced labor many times to cut the trees, to build the barracks and to build the roads. No pay was given for such labor. This pushes many families deeper into poverty. Nowadays, they use the villagers for forced labor when they build the new barracks. Therefore, people cannot work their jobs.

Farming for the Military

Every year the SPDC military forces the farmers from Taung Hla village to plough confiscated farms with their own food and tools. They exploit not only human labor but also animal labor. The farmers have to use their cattle to plough the farms.

In the rainy season, all farmers are very busy by working on their farms. This is the most important time for farmers. If farmers fail to work their crops on time, rice production will decrease significantly. The LIB 538, however, does not care about the well-being of the people or the farms – they force the farmers from Taung Hla village to plough their farms despite the dire consequences for their livelihoods. They also force the women from the village to clean the grass on the farms and plant the paddy plants.

"I have gone many times as forced labor. We, men have to plough their farms without getting money. Women also have to clean the grass and grow the paddy plant in their farms."³⁹³

-A local villager

According to one of my interviewees a man should earn 1,000 kyat a day and a woman should earn 800 kyat. The military does not provide any money for wages. It is a big problem for daily workers. They don't have money to buy rice. If there is no rice to cook in their home, how they will get food? How will their families survive?

³⁹³ Interview 8.

Consequences of Forced Labor

Most of the farmers don't have enough rice for their family. If they cannot earn money by working in each day, they face debt for each day of wages. They have to work everyday for their daily food especially in the rainy season. But the military does not care and they force the local farmers to plough their farms. Given this, there is no rice in the villagers' homes to cook for dinner. They have to borrow rice from other people, but this is not a reliable way for them to get food.

The SPDC ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention Article 29 and therefore they announced that if any person is forced into labor, he or she can complain to the ILO. But at the present, the SPDC ignores the ILO convention. They continue use the farmers as forced labor in Rathidaung Township.

Chemical Fertilizers & Rice Production

In Arakan State, most people support their families by farming. Arakan was one of the biggest rice production states in the past. However, farmers in Arakan State nowadays are facing serious livelihood-problems. According to the Natural Light Journal, in the last two decades most farmers have been forced to buy chemical fertilizers from the government, and its back-businessmen. But the government didn't give any training to the farmers in the methods of using chemical fertilizers. Given this lack of knowledge, chemical fertilizers have further destroyed the land in a short time period and left farmers in an even worse state of food shortage, joblessness, debt, and even long-term imprisonment.

According to one of my interviewees, some families have to satisfy their hunger with congee (surplus water that is drained off while rice is being cooked) in the rainy season. Some parents are not able to feed their children and let them beg for stuffs or food from other people.

Decreasing rice production is directly connected with food insecurity in Rathedaung Township. The rice production in Rathiduang Township is now very different that it was twenty years ago; It is almost 50% less now.

"It is very different from ten years ago. Same that time, I got four hundred tins of rice from my farm but now I got only two hundred tins of rice."³⁹⁴

- A local farmer

³⁹⁴ Interview 4.

The use of chemical fertilizers, the loss of traditional cultivation, the disappearance of traditional seeds and the lack of cattle for agriculture have all contributed to the decrease in rice production.

Use of Chemical Fertilizers

According to the interviewees, the farmers don't know which fertilizer to use, how much to use or how long to use it for. Now the soil in the farms has been almost depleted. Chemical fertilizers not only nourish plants and microbes, but also may have harmful effects on the soil and its life.³⁹⁵ Some plants and fish which were used for organic fertilizer are no longer available. Most of the farmers have to use chemical fertilizers to continue in their farms. There are three types of chemical fertilizers that are very popular in Arakan State; they are Urea, T Super and Three Cycles. They cost from 17,000 kyat to 40,000 kyat for one bag. If the use of chemical fertilizers is stopped in the farm, the rice production will decrease extremely. Now most farmers use depending on chemical fertilizer in the farm.

"There is no organic fertilizer in my farm. If I don't use chemical fertilizer in my farm, my farm will not give me rice."³⁹⁶

Farmers cannot buy enough chemical fertilizers because the price gets higher and higher year after year. On another hand, the soil has become depleted. So the farmers have to take loans (borrow) money from rich men with 20% interest or the farmers can borrow chemical fertilizers in the rainy season and they have to give 100 tins of rice for three bags of chemical fertilizers. If a person cannot give 100 tins of rice for three bags at that year, he must give 200 tins of rice the next year. That loan system pushes the farmers to starve.

Method of Chemical Fertilizer Distribution

According to Natural Light Journal, in western Burma, military authorities as well as heads of trading companies generally import chemical fertilizer from Bangladesh to Shwe Min Gan harbor in Arakan State's capital city Sittwe. Despite Bangladeshi authorities' crack down on fertilizer smuggling to Burma, the illegal trade of fertilizers to Burma from Bangladesh is still widespread.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵ www.metafro.be/leisa/1990/6_3_8.pdf

³⁹⁶ Interview 10.

³⁹⁷ www.narinjara.com/details.asp?id_1039

The fertilizers are received by closed committees in each township and these committees allow only specific “village representatives” to sell the product. The village representatives sell to the farmers with a loan system. In harvest time, the farmers have to give the village representatives 100 tins of rice for three chemical fertilizer bags. If some one cannot pay that amount of rice, they seized the farmers’ properties such as buffalo and farm fields.

Loss of Traditional Cultivation

Over twenty years ago, the farmers used the traditional method of farming. The farmers lived on the farms for a long time. They used grinds (hand mills to husk grain) step by step until the rice was ready to eat so they could put the paddy husk in the farms. The husk became organic fertilizer the next year. They also put the buffalo on their farms



for a long time. The waste of buffalo is a very good organic fertilizer for paddy plants and this there is how they farmed traditionally. With these methods, they could produce enough rice for their families.

“Over twenty years ago, I did not need to use chemical fertilizers in my farms. The soil was good. Paddy plants were good and rice production was also good. At that time, although I had to sell the rice to the government, I had enough rice for my family.”³⁹⁸

The Burmese government forced the farmers to use chemical fertilizer. They told the farmers propaganda about how much chemical fertilizers were good in the farms by showing their good farms. Since this time, the farmers have been using chemical fertilizers and they have been careless in forgetting their traditional methods.

³⁹⁸ Interview 10.

Nowadays, the farmers don't follow the traditional methods of farming. They send the paddy to the rice mill. The paddy husk goes into the rivers and brooks. There is no paddy husk left to be used as organic fertilizer in the farms. The chemical fertilizers have become the main staple of rice production. The farmers need money to buy chemical fertilizers for their farms. They borrow the money from the businessmen with 20% interest. This forces the farmers to be faced with debt. If they used traditional methods of farming, they would not need to use chemical fertilizers.

After farmers use chemical fertilizers, there is no balance between rice production and costly chemical fertilizers. Farmers don't get enough rice for their families so they need more time to make money. They thought that traditional farming waste a lot of time so they surrendered traditional farming. The main reason why they surrendered traditional methods was that they didn't have enough rice for their families, but now they have even less.

"I know if I use traditional method in rice production, the soil will be good. Now I get 200 tins from my farm. But of course, I need 300 rice tins for my family in a year. So I need more time to look for 100 tins of rice. So I have to choose the short time way to get enough rice for my family. Unfortunately, there is no regular work in my village."³⁹⁹

As a result, the farmers are poorer and poorer year by year.

Disappearance of Traditional Seeds

Twenty years ago, the farmers were usually careful about the paddy seeds. They chose the best seeds and kept them securely. Those were traditional seeds for them. They were very suitable with the soil and weather. The farmers could produce enough rice for their families.

Now the traditional paddy seeds have almost disappeared in Rathidaung Township. The government forced the farmers to buy the modern seeds. Some seeds are imported illegally from Bangladesh. The farmers need to produce more rice in a short time so they test the new paddy seeds.

³⁹⁹ Interview 1.

“Our traditional paddy seeds have disappeared. Now the seed which we are planting are early maturing paddy plants. They absorb the soil fertilizer in short time.”⁴⁰⁰

Now the farmers have to use chemical fertilizers more and more. As a result, the farmers have debt and cannot provide enough rice for their families.

Decreased Cattle for Agriculture

Cattle are very important in farming in Arakan State. Cattle plough the farms and their wastes are very good fertilizer for the paddy plant. Cattle are also an income for farmers because the farmers earn more by selling extra cattle. The cattle in Rathidaung Township are decreasing and decreasing year by year. There are two reasons why the cattle are decrease. First, the farmers don't have enough food and have to sell them. The other reason is there is not enough pasture available for the cattle so they are sold. The farmers send the buffalo and cattle to the mountains when there are no pastures. However, buffalos and cattle fall down the mountain and die.

“I have seven buffalos but I don't have green farm for them. So I sent them to the mountain. Last year, one of the buffalo fell down from the mountain and died. We face this problem almost every year.”⁴⁰¹

As a direct consequence of this situation, farmers are increasingly facing food insecurity.

Conclusion

Everybody knows that food is very important for people to live. It is also a human right, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 17. “Everybody has the right to have enough food.” But the people in Rathidaung Township, mostly in rural areas, are being abused in regard to these rights by the SPDC. The SPDC abuses the people by confiscating their land, forcing labor and requiring them to use chemical fertilizers. Having sufficient food is the main goal for most people in Arakan State. They don't have money to buy food because of extreme poverty. The people cannot escape from deep debt because of the economic monopoly imposed by the SPDC.

⁴⁰⁰ Interview 10.

⁴⁰¹ Interview 5.

Land confiscation not only affects the farmers but also the employees and the fishermen. If a farmer loses his fields, at least two or three employees will lose their jobs. In rural areas, the farmers and fishermen exchange their rice and fish. If the farmers don't have enough rice, it will be difficult for the fishermen to get rice, the staple food.

The people depended on each other. The SPDC has been exploiting the labor of people by forcing them to plough farms for them without providing any wage. The people cannot do their own work because they have to spend their time working for the military. They cannot earn money to support their families.

The SPDC's only policy on agriculture is to exploit the farmers. They forced the farmers to use chemical fertilizers. Consequently, agriculture in Arakan State is unsustainable. People are also faced with debt because they have to buy chemical fertilizers with high prices. Because of these problems the people from Rathidaung Township are facing a serious food shortage.

Recommendations

For the SPDC:

- Respect the livelihood of people in Burma
- Respect the UDHR and Follow the ILO convention
- Encourage the farmers to practice the sustainable agriculture
- Reduce the jobless people
- Take agreement with the local farmers for agricultural policy
- Give training the method of using chemical fertilizers

For farmers:

- Save the traditional farming
- Save the traditional seeds
- Teach and share traditional farming methods to youth

For businessmen:

- Stop doing business with the SPDC and trading in illegal fertilizers
- Respect the Human Rights and Environment

For the international community:

- Pressure the SPDC to follow the ILO Convention on Forced Labor
- Stop buying natural resources from Burma

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Cover photo by Thu Ra & Khon Nasa, ERSB Class of 2008.