Thai-Burma Border Politics and the Marginal People: the Mons in their Sanctuary in Kanchanaburi's Westernmost District of Sangkhlaburi

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This article will discuss the dynamic changes of border politics between the successive Thai governments and their Rangoon counterparts and their impact on the Mon people on the Thai-Burma border. These Mons have been deprived of their rights as Thai or Burmese citizens and become marginalized. Moreover, they have also been politically affected by the critical changes related to Thailand's policies on migrants and refugees from Burma, especially since "Constructive Engagement" has become a popular practice among the ASEAN countries in order to exploit Burma's rich natural resources. Nevertheless, the Mons in the Thai-Burma border have tried to maintain their ethnic identity and avoid being assimilated into either the Thai or the Burmese mainstream by means of symbolic boundaries.

1. Introduction

Thailand and Burma were archenemies from the Ayutthaya until the early Bangkok periods. However, when the Burmese regime fell under British colonial rule, the wars between these two neighboring countries ceased. Normally, the Mons, who dwelled

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in the lowlands of Burma, were exploited by both the Siamese and Burmese armies during wartime. Historically, wave after wave of Mons were forced to leave their homeland by the malfeasance of the Burman regime and took permanent refuge in the Kingdom of Siam.

However, the migration of the Mons into Thailand has not terminated. Their situation became even more difficult once Burma became independent. Civil war erupted in Burma almost immediately after the country gained independence. Ethnic insurgents elected to go underground, heading for their strongholds in the borderlands and resorting to armed conflict in order to pursue their goal of self-determination. Thailand had an implicit policy of siding with these insurgents and using them as buffer armies to fight against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). However, successive Thai governments have adapted a different political policy in approaching the Rangoon regime, applying the policy called "Constructive Engagement" from the late Prime Minister Chartichai Chunhavan's regime until that of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinnawatra. My article will be divided into 3 main parts: (1) the Mon sanctuary at Sangkhlaburi (2) Thai-Burma border politics and (3) the maintenance of Mon ethnic identity.

2. A Mon Sanctuary at Sangkhlaburi Wangka Village

My fieldwork has been in one Mon village on the Thai-Burma border in Kanchanaburi province. In order to reflect the circumstances faced by the Mon migrants from their perspective, I would like to clarify what I have found from this particular site so far through interviews and research.

Most Mons from Sangkhlaburi lack the right to Thai citizenship even though they were born there to Mon parents who migrated to Thailand after 1948 and have made a home in Thailand. The deprivation of rights has had a variety of impacts on those people.

Several thousand Mons from Burma who arrived in Thailand before 1976 were issued "pink cards," whereas immigrants arriving in Thailand after 1976 were issued "orange cards."[1] Both identification

[1] According to the Thai Immigration Law, highlanders and displaced ethnic minority groups are classified into 19 groups with 19 different colored cards as can be further clarified.

(1)TPeople in the Hilly Areas (Highlands) (light blue card) holding non-Thai national ID cards and granted Thai citizenship by changing their nationality.

(2) KMT (Koumintang) Veterans (white cards): the 1st generation has been offered documents that specified a particular location of their permanent residence and allowed them to change their nationality, whereas the 2nd and 3rd generations are granted Thai citizenship.

(3) The non-military, Haw Chinese Migrants (yellow card): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(4) The Independent Haw Chinese (white card with an orange frame): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(5) Displaced Burmese Persons (pink card): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(6) Illegal Entrants from Burma who came into the country after March 6, 1976 (having permanent residence) (orange card) are allowed to extend their temporary stay with unlimited duration and have been granted permission to work.

(7) Illegal Entrants from Burma who came into the country after March 6, 1976 (staying with employers) (purple card) are allowed to extend their temporary stay with unlimited duration and have been granted permission to work.

(8) Vietnamese Migrants (white card with a navy blue frame): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(9) Laotian Migrants (light blue card): there is still no Cabinet Resolution to grant them any type of status yet.

(10) Nepalese Migrants (green card): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations

cards allowed them to stay indefinitely and to work in the border provinces but nowhere else. If they need to leave their settlement, they must ask permission from district officials. They are not able to look for a job in any other areas except as specified on their cards.

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who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(11) Malayo-Chinese, Communist Veterans (green card): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(12) Tai-Lue (orange card): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(13) Phi Tong Luang (light blue card): these indigenous people, the original inhabitants (khon tai dangdoem), have been endorsed to be Thai nationals according to the regulations.

(14) Migrants from Ko Kong, Cambodia (green card) who were born to Thai parents and came into the country prior to November 15, 1977: the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(15) Migrants from Ko Kong, Cambodia (green card) who were born to Thai parents and came into Thailand after November 15, 1977 have not yet been granted any type of status by Cabinet Resolution.

(16) Illegal Entrants from Cambodia (white card with a red frame): there is no Cabinet Resolution available to grant them any type of status yet.

(17) Displaced Burmese Persons who were born to Thai parents and came into Thailand prior to March 9, 1976 (yellow card with a navy blue frame): the 1st generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the 2nd and the 3rd generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(18) Displaced Burmese Persons who were born to Thai parents and entered Thailand after March 9, 1976 (yellow card with a navy blue frame) are allowed to extend their temporary stay with unlimited duration and have been granted permission to work.

(19) Communities in the Highlands (green card with a red frame): the 1st generation who migrated into Thailand are granted documents specifying their permanent residence. (Kritaya Archavanitkul (2005), Chon khum-noi ti dai rab sa-tha-na hai yu a-sai nai prathet thai). (Mimeographed).

They lack official documents such as ID cards or house registration documents when applying for a job or for furthering their education. Moreover, some of them are discriminated against by Thai local officials when they are required to renew their cards every year. Officials may demand to see their cards at any time (Paphatsaun et al., 2004, p. 459; Sunthorn, 2000, 208).

However, since 2004 a number of the pink card holders have been allowed to apply for Thai citizenship with the local administrator known as the phuyaiban. About 3,000 people applied and submitted relevant documents. Some are not eligible to apply for this status because they were born in Burma, but their offspring born in Thailand are. Some parents felt that their status did not matter so long as their children could become Thai citizens with full rights (Author's interview with the Mons at the fieldsite at Wangka Village, August 5, 2004).

The Mon children of Wangka Village attend a locally-run pre-school and a three-in-one, state-run kindergarten, primary and secondary school which are located within a short walking distance from the village center. The language used as a medium of instruction in all Thai schools is exclusively standard or Central Thai so the young generation of Mon people is facing cultural assimilation into the Thai mainstream.

There is a total ban on speaking Mon in the school. The teachers give a psychological reason for the ban, saying that they do not want their students to feel inferior to their Thai counterparts once they grow up and attend a higher secondary school located in Sangkhlaburi town. This idea is in accordance with the assimilation policy of the Thai authorities. As Khachadphai Burutsapatana writes about applying the process of acculturation or 'Thai-ization' to Mon descendants by means of schooling, "Mon children who were born here in Thailand (at Sangkhlaburi) have been accommodated in the local school system, and they are quite literate in Thai. Hopefully, it will not be difficult for them to be *acculturated* (italics added) to become Thais one day" (Kachadphai, 1997, p. 81).

However, from my informal interviews with some of the new generation of Mon descendants in Sangkhlaburi who are from well to do families, I found that they lacked motivation to further their education after finishing Mattayom 6 since it is impossible for them to get legal jobs after graduation. They could only be hired as illegal migrant workers in sweatshop industries located in suburban areas of Bangkok and in other parts of the country due to their status as non-Thai citizens.

Nevertheless since 2005, there is a positive outlook that the Thai government has allowed the Mon workers who hold pink cards to work in Kanchanaburi Province, Bangkok or even any other provinces in the country on the condition that they have to report to the Sangkhlaburi district officers at the end of every 3 months.

In practice, the Mon descendants at Sangkhlaburi have encountered various barriers due to their lack of Thai citizenship.[2] Consequently, Mon village leaders have tried to find ways for the new Mon generation to become Thai by giving them a chance to apply for citizenship since they were born in Thailand. Meanwhile, these immigrants are on the brink of losing their Monness by being gradually assimilated into the Thai mainstream. However, there has been a new trend in Wangka Village when some well-to-do Mons opt to migrate further and settle down in neutral countries like Australia or the U.S. in stead of waiting for the result of their

[2] From my personal contact with one of the female hua na khum (a leader of an informally divided group of houses located in the same neighborhood), Aranya Sakunwong about 2,000 of the Mon villagers who were born here on the Thai soil but to the Burmese displaced persons have applied for the Thai citizenship whereas about 600 of their parents who were born in Burma and migrated to live in Sangkhlaburi about 10-30 years ago have applied for the non-Thai citizenship (kho tangdao). Consequently, in December 2005, ones who have applied for the Thai citizenship have been granted their rights by the Ministry of Interior, General Khongsak Wantana. Now they are in the process of applying for Thai ID. cards (Matichon rai-wan, January 3, 2549 (2006); Informal conversation with Aranya Sakunwong, February 12, 2006).

applications for Thai citizenship.

3. The Migration of the Mons into Sangkhlaburi

Wangka Village is a semi-permanent settlement located in the Thai borderland. Members of this community migrated into Thailand after World War II because of political conflicts among various ethnic groups in Burma, causing the Burmese military to crack down on ethnic insurgents. Groups of immigrants fled both from armed conflict situations and starvation in their homelands and took refuge along the Thai-Burma border. Some of the Mon ethnic groups resided temporarily in the settlements provided by the Thai government for humanitarian reasons in Sangkhlaburi, surrounded by a neighborhood of other Mon communities, such as Ban Mongsatay, Ban Mai, Songkalia, and Three Pagodas Pass (Praphatsuan et al., 2004, p. 316-317; Sunthorn, 2000, 218).

The first group of Mons arriving at Sangkhlaburi in June 1949 numbered about 60 households, including two Buddhist monks. They were originally from Yebu Village about 40 km northwest of Three Pagodas Pass. These villagers were accused of being sympathizers of Mon resistance groups, so Burmese troops sacked and burned their village. Thousands of villagers became homeless and some fled to Thailand seeking help from their relatives there. (Praphatsuan et al., 2004, p. 323). Since then, they have settled down permanently on Thai soil, and most have married Mons, Thai, Mon-Thai, or Thai-Raman from old Mon communities near Bangkok. Some have married Burmese (Author's interview with Mon women at the fieldsite, June 8, 2005; Sunthorn, 2000, 218).

After 1962, the peak productivity of the Thai-Burma border trade at Sangkhlaburi brought about a new wave of immigrants from Burma into Sangkhlaburi. Thus, the village was enlarged. In 1984, about 800 households in Sangkhlaburi Mon village were relocated to their present site when the Electricity Generating

Authority of Thailand (EGAT) constructed a hydroelectric dam at their old site. However, the Thai authorities did not provide them with land for housing or for farming, though they had lost their land for the construction of the hydroelectric project. Meanwhile the authorities provided 12 rai (about 5 acres) of farmland and a housing site to each Thai citizen's family in that area (Sunthorn, 2000, 218).

"In the mid-1990s, with a population of over one thousand households, the Mon village of Wangka is the largest long-term Mon settlement of its kind in the Thai borderland" (Lang, 2002, p. 137). Nowadays, the Mons have become the dominant segment of the population in the village of about 6,000. Almost all of them are living on the monastery grounds of Wat Wangka Wiwaikaram founded by the Venerable Abbot Luang Pho Uttama, a Mon monk who has been a "firm foundation stone" for the village and a negotiator between the Mon villagers and the Thai authorities. This Venerable Abbot was also well known for humanitarian relief work along the Thai-Burma border, distributing rice and other provisions to displaced persons taking refuge in the nearby border areas, regardless of their ethnic background or political ideologies, using supplies donated by his religious followers in Thailand (Lang, 2002, p. 136-37).

Most of the villagers in Wangka are engaged in small business, day labor, trading or fishing, whereas a numbers of young women and men are hired as migrant workers in the industrial provinces located on the periphery of Bangkok. Nevertheless, very few of them have been granted Thai citizenship or have full Thai identification. Most are issued with short-lived ID in the form of different colored cards; for example, "pink cards" signifying the status of being "displaced persons" though they are Thai-born descendants of Mons who migrated to Thailand sometimes as long as 50 years ago.

4. Thai-Burma Border Politics

Burma shares its longest border of about 2,532 kilometers with Thailand. However, historically relations between the two neighboring countries have waxed and waned between amity and enmity. Typically, they were foes rather than friends. Moreover, the situation worsened when the Thai government in the era of nationalism (1932-1970) encouraged Thais to shun the Burmese and treat them as their "traditional enemyé or çhistorical archenemy," because new histories of Thailand highlighted the Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767. Ayutthaya symbolized the greatness and prosperity of the Siamese kingdom, the center of its political, economic, and spiritual world (Charnvit, 1998, p. 16; Sunait, 2004, p. 27-67).

According to Vella (1957, p. 101) Siamese kings in the early Bangkok Period, "had remained on the alert for new invasions from Burma and had successfully repulsed a number of minor Burmese attacks." In fact, wars between the Thai and Burmese continued to occur from the Thonburi period into the early Bangkok period in the reigns of King Rama I and King Rama II.

Moreover, until today relations between Thailand and Burma have fluctuated between the two poles of cooperation and conflict. Very little of the Thai-Burma border had been jointly demarcated, and the actual location of the border is still in dispute in several areas. Border politics have been very unpredictable (Fink, 2001, p. 20, 235).

When Burma gained her independence from the British in 1948, civil war broke out in the country almost immediately, with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) electing to go underground. Meanwhile, a number of ethno-nationalist movements emerged and called for the right of self-determination and a federal system with autonomous states (Rajah in Rotberg, 1998, p. 135).

By the late 1940s, several communist and ethnic insurgent organizations occupied more than half of Burma, but by the 1960s

the Mon and other groups had been forced back to strongholds in the border regions. After 1962 the Tatmadaw, the Burma Army, came to dominate affairs of state but General Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" failed to meet the economic and political demands of the Burmese people. At the same time, widespread abuse of human rights occurred (South, 2003, p. 10).

In the 1950s, Thailand developed a border policy of surrounding itself with anticommunist buffer groups. In the 1950s, the main beneficiaries of this policy were the Kuomintang remnants from China who had fled into the Shan State. In the Vietnam War era of the 1960s and 1970s, this policy was discreetly expanded to include the KNU, New Mon State Party (NMSP), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) and Khun Sa's (then) Shan United Army. This strategy was still being supported in high military circles in Bangkok when the SLORC came to power in 1988 (Smith in Carey 1997, p. 109).

However, in 1988 after the massacre of demonstrators in Rangoon, the SLORC regime pursued an open door policy for joint investment with foreign countries. According to Smith, "China and Thailand, in particular, were quick to take advantage of some extremely attractive conditions for trade after September 1988, including low prices for timber, fisheries, precious stones and other natural resources" (Smith in Carey, 1997, p.108). In so doing, the Thai governments had to change their policy toward the "buffer armies" and opted to establish closer ties with the Rangoon regime instead to further their economic interests.

In practice, the successive Thai governments were heavily involved in supporting insurgent movements and their "buffer armies" inside Burma, because Thai government policy was to guard against the expansion of communist ideologies and to fight against the various communist parties with their strongholds on the Thai-Burma border. At the same time, the Thai regime had to maintain diplomatic relations with its counterpart in Rangoon. Nonetheless, after the eclipse of communist parties in both Thailand and Burma,

which coincided with the establishment of direct military rule in Burma, Thailand sought to compromise with the Rangoon regime because of the economic benefits to be gained from resolution of the conflict (Silverstein in Carey, 1997, p. 140).

However, after SLORC's suppression of the democracy uprising in 1988 and the 1990 election results, which led to a smashing victory for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was denied office, the military regime turned to its Open Door Economic Policy to stimulate foreign investment in Burma, since Burma's Western and Japanese donors had withdrawn all development assistance to the SLORC regime (South, 2003, p. 195).

The international community as well as the immediate neighbors of Burma have approached the SLORC and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime that replaced it in 1997 in four ways: (1) the "Human Rights" approach; (2) the "Constructive Engagement" approach; (3) the "State versus Business" approach; and (4) the "Friendship" approach.[3]

One particular approach favored by Burma's neighbors, including Thailand and other ASEAN members, is that of "Constructive Engagement." Fundamentally, Constructive Engagement is a policy that advocates the maintenance of economic and diplomatic relationships with an authoritarian state as opposed to imposing sanctions and embargoes on it. It has been described as "promoting economic and political ties, while at the same time pressing for democracy, open markets, and human rights" (Minn Niang Oo, 2000, p. 1)

Thailand has resorted to the "Constructive Engagement" approach with the Rangoon regime by implementing the policy of the late Prime Minister General Chartichai Chunhavan (1988-91) of "Changing Battlefields into Marketplaces" (Venika, 1997, p.4).

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[3] See Tanet Charoenmuang (1997) Living Meaningfully with Wolves. In John Brandon (ed) *Burma/Myanmar: Towards the Twenty-first Century; Dynamics of Continuity and Change*. Bangkok: TK Printing, p. 45-67.

General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who was the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army, paid a formal visit to his SLORC counterparts in Rangoon in 1988. On that occasion, General Saw Maung, the chairman of SLORC, declared "a new open door policy" for the economy and a foreign capital investment act with a view to enhancing the national economy. In response, the Thai general announced his government's policy of repatriating Burmese students who had taken refuge in Thailand after the coup in 1988 (Silverstein in Taylor, 2001, p. 121). However, "the policy was later reversed due to international protests amid reports that the returning students were arrested and punished by the Burmese authorities" (Ruland in Taylor, 2001, p. 139).

The Thai general also negotiated concessions for Thai logging companies in the Karen State and for fisheries in the Andaman Sea. Logging interests, which reportedly included General Chavalit, had a significant role in changing Thai attitudes toward the ethnic insurgencies across its border. Formerly, they were perceived as "buffer armies" to fight against the communists from China, Burma and Thailand and prevent them from linking up with one another. However, after the cold war period, these "buffer armies" became a hindrance to peace and development in the region. New topics of cross border talks focused on trade, commerce, infrastructure, and power generation that crossed international frontiers (Smith in Burma Center Netherlands (BCN),1999, p. 33). Consequently, armed opposition groups were now under threat of being bypassed or pacified through ceasefire agreements with SLORC, as exemplified by the case of the NMSP-SLORC ceasefire, discussed below.

Moreover, despite the objections of opposition voices, the Yadana gas pipeline, a joint venture between TOTAL (France), UNOCAL(USA), PTTEP(Thailand) and the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, was initiated in 1994 when Thailand signed a memorandum of understanding to buy cheap natural gas from the SLORC regime. France's TOTAL company has constructed and

connected both offshore and onshore pipelines to reach the Thai border at Ban Nat-ei-aung to flow natural gas from the Gulf of Martaban to a power plant in Ratchaburi, Thailand (The Mon Forum, March 31, 1999, p. 3) via territory that was in the hands of Mon and Karen insurgent armies. Accordingly, the Thai authorities have been using this as their underlying rationale to encourage the rebel groups to enter into ceasefire agreements with SLORC. Nevertheless, Thailand's efforts were not sufficient to satisfy SLORC, which demanded more cooperation in their war against the ethnic insurgencies and at the same time insisted that refugees be returned to their original residences in Burma and threatened further cross border aggression (Donkers and Nijhuis, 1996, p.98).

The Yadana gas pipeline construction has had an impact on thousands of villagers in Burma's Mon and Karen States who are being threatened with forced labor as well as permanent relocation since SLORC/SPDC is deploying many thousands of Tatmadaw troops along the pipeline area and in areas around the pipeline and company project sites to secure foreign investment (The Mon Forum, March 31, 1999, p. 3).These human rights problems have led to lawsuits arguing that UNOCAL must take responsibility for the Tatmadaw's confiscation of villagers' land without compensation and its alleged use of forced labor to construct military outposts and access roads along the pipeline route (Fink, 2001, p. 242).

Moreover, as a result, Thailand as well as many ASEAN countries that have pursued "Constructive Engagement" with the Rangoon regime have been criticized by the international community as countries whose most explicit objective is economic or the exploitation of Burma's natural resources and cheap labor. Thus, they have willingly overlooked the human rights problems in Burma under the SPDC regime (Minn Naign Oo, 2000, p. 2).

In general, after 1988, though the relationship between the two great Theravada Buddhist countries, Thailand and Burma, was friendly, various strains did occur that affected their relations. For instance, there were incursions into Thai territory by Tatmadaw

troops fighting insurgents, an attack by Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army on Tachilek from Thai territory, border demarcation disputes, the treatment of Thai prisoners in Burmese jails, raids by the pro-junta Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) on refugee camps in Thailand, and waves of Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan refugees arriving in Thailand. In 1993 the junta cancelled the concessions for Thai logging and fishing companies. These strains led to Thailand's more reserved attitude toward early admission of Burma into ASEAN in spite of its key role previously in pushing for Burma's admission. Furthermore, in response to the financial crisis in 1997, the Thai authorities repatriated some 300,000 illegal Burmese migrant workers and more irritations arose as a result (Ruland in Taylor, 2001, p. 140).

In conclusion, Thailand has uncritically interpreted "constructive engagement" with the Rangoon regime to mean that it would no longer support the latter's enemies. Having been lured by economic opportunities in Burma, Thailand has changed course and turned to strict measures in the management and control of Burmese political activists by means of arrests, harassment, restrictions on travel, and the closure of all offices in the country run by political opposition and advocacy groups from Burma. Meanwhile, Thailand became more cooperative with SLORC/SPDC in its wars against its insurgents and in the repatriation of Burmese refugees in camps located on Thai-Burma border. During the past 50 years relations between the two countries have fluctuated between conflict and cooperation with different degrees of bilateral interaction, but since 1988 there has been a renewed emphasis on cooperation (Lang, 2002, p. 139).

5. The New Mon State Party (NMSP)-SLORC Ceasefire

In 1995, the New Mon State Party (NMSP),[4] the well-known Mon nationalist insurgent group entered into a ceasefire agreement with SLORC because the Mons had been scattered by a massive Burmese military presence related to the construction of a gas pipeline from the Yadana gas fields to Thailand. The Royal Thai Army and the National Security Council forced the NMSP to agree to a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw through the relocation of Mon r efugees who were victims of the civil war. The intention was to open the way for the economic exploitation of parts of Lower Burma (Rajah in Rotberg, 1998, p. 136).

However, the new Mon nationalist organization under the name Mon Unity League (MUL), a non-violent political movement based in Thailand with a network in Europe and North America, has criticized the so-called improvements gained in the Mon State after the NMSP entered into the ceasefire agreement with SLORC.

Although the NMSP has for its part and for over five years conformed to the ceasefire agreement entered into with the SLORC/ SPDC military government of Burma in 1996, the human rights situation in Mon areas of Burma has not improved as had been expected. In many respects similar to the fates of Burma' s other under and unrepresented ethnic minorities, the Mon continue to suffer from regular and frequent conscription of forced labor (including as porters for the military), various types of illegal and arbitrary taxes, paddy collection and land seizures, as well as

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[4] Nai Shwe Kyin established both the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Mon National Army, which is the NMSP paramilitary wing in 1958. The reason for the establishment of this party, according to its founder was "to establish an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a confederation of free nationalities exercising the full right of self-determination inclusive of right of secession" (Lang, 2002, p. 117).

continued interruption and harassment of Mon efforts in language education and cultural and literary production (Mon Unity League, 2000, p.1).

A number of western academics have criticized the ceasefire agreements made by SLORC/SPDC and representatives from ethnic insurgent groups. As Silverstein notes, "They have failed to address the basic economic, political and constitutional questions of concern to the minorities, issues which have divided the minorities and Burmans since the nation recovered its independence in 1948é (Silverstein in Taylor, 2001, p. 151).

Rather, the ceasefire agreement has shared some characteristics with a military truce and when it was finally concluded, the government acclaimed it as "national reconciliation achieved through sincerity and mutual understanding" (Lang, 2002, p. 117). Moreover, the NMSP-SLORC truce itself was treated as a "gentleman's agreement" since no treaty or memorandum was signed (Kachadphai, 1997, p. 56; South, 2003, p. 223). What was to be gained as a result of going into the "legal fold" or the NMSP being "steadfast" with the Rangoon regime was "national development," like funding for the restoration of deteriorated infrastructure facilities, such as roads in Mon State. The NMSP also launched negotiations to conduct business; namely, import-export activities, logging, fishing, and other joint ventures (Lang, 2002, p. 117). On the matter of forced labor and porter services, the Rangoon regime agreed in principle that these practices would finally cease and that contracts would finally be applied to secure labor for infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, SLORC could not promise that the Tatmadaw would cease conscripting porters when troops were sent in and around the area once the ceasefire process was concluded (Lang, 2001, p.117).

6. Mon Refugees on the Thai-Burma Border

After the fall of Three Pagodas Pass to the Tatmadaw in 1988, the first permanent Mon refugee camps were established in Thailand

in 1990.[5] Permission to organize the camps was granted by the Ministry of Interior. Also, the district officer at Sangkhlaburi accepted the displaced people, but on the condition that they return to Burma once the fighting ceased and it was safe. However, a steady wave of newly displaced people continued to take refuge in the Thai border area although the overall number of inhabitants in the Mon camps did not increase. Rather, people moved out and disappeared further into Thailand to join the ranks of illegal migrant workers. In 1991, the total number of the refugees in the camps had amounted to twelve thousand (Lang, 2002, pp. 102-03).

At the very beginning, the response by Thai authorities to the Mon refugees was that of sympathy. But during the period of 1990-1996, the Mon refugees in the camps in the borderland of Kanchanaburi province encountered repeated orders for a series of camp re-locations enforced by local Thai military authorities motivated by a desire to return the refugees to their home country. Once there was a relocation, the refugees were affected by a variety of obstacles and hardships, such as weather conditions, access to hospital facilities, fresh water and food stuffs, the violent means of operation used by local Thai officers, and the proximity of the new camps to the nearest Burmese military outposts, causing refugees to be in constant peril of being attacked by Burmese soldiers as occurred in 1994 at the Halockhani camp, which was in an area disputed between Thailand and Burma (Lang, 2002, p. 106).

On July 21, 1994 at 7:30 am, Burmese troops from the 62nd Infantry Battalion (IB), based at Three Pagodas Pass, arrived without warning and occupied a section of Halockhani and arrested camp leaders for interrogation and tried to collect a number of men for use as human shields, but they were obstructed by an ambush staged

[5] Initially, there were five main camps on the Thai border, namely, Krone Kung, Panan Htaw, Beleh Hnook, Hla Brad, and Day Bung. In 1991, three new camps were established , at Pa Yaw, at Pa Mark near Thongpaphume, Kanchanaburi, and at Prachuab Khirikhan (Lang, 2002, p.102-03).

by Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) soldiers. The Burmese troops retreated after seizing some men as hostages and setting fire to part of the camp. Six thousand inhabitants of Halockhani fled the camp in fear to the Thai borderlands and set up a makeshift settlement, which was dubbed "New Halockhani" (Lang, 2002, p. 108).

However, Thailand pressured the Mon refugees to return to the "old" Halockhani. A number of deadlines for relocation were issued by Thailand. Still, the Mon refugees were reluctant to move due to the problem of insecurity from sporadic fighting between the Tatmadaw and insurgent troops in the area. They resisted the orders and chose to remain at New Halockhani. In response to the Mons' refusal to move, Thai local authorities, troops from the Ninth Infantry Division and rangers together with the Border Patrol Police (BPP) were assigned to move the Mon back to their old camp, which the Thai authorities now conceded was in Burma. A variety of measures were taken to carry out this mission; for instance, prior written permission from the Ninth Infantry was required of a visitor to the camps, a press conference was held with the Tatmadaw commander to guarantee to the audience that it was now safe for the refugees to return to the old Halockhani site; and the BPP outpost at the Thai-Burma border was temporarily turned into a protection unit for the Mon refugees (Lang, 2002, p. 112).

Eventually, on August 31, 1994, the BPP under the command of the Ninth Infantry Division in Kanchanaburi, denied access to the refugees' rice store located in Thailand but in the area of Halockhani. Access to the rice would be blocked unless the people agreed to go back. It was apparent that hunger became a tool for repatriation and the Mon were being starved back by the Thai government. Reluctantly the remaining refugees decided to return to the old Halockhani site on September 9 (Lang, 2002, p. 112-13).

It was obvious from the Halockhani incident that the Mon were unwelcome on the Thai side of the border, and the Commander of the Ninth Division hinted that refugees at the last Mon camp at

Pa Yaw would also be sent back. Accordingly, after the NMSP reached a ceasefire agreement with SLORC on June 26, 1995, the deadline for the final repatriation of the Mon refugees was set. Finally, by April 1996 the Mon returnees completed the scheduled repatriation and moved across the border into Burma, not to their original homes but to new resettlement areas located in nine new villages in Tavoy, Bee Ree on the Upper Ye River, the Three Pagodas Pass area, and Mergui, agreed upon by the NMSP and SLORC before the ceasefire process began (Lang, 2002, p. 116).

However, doubts have been raised among academics about the repatriation measures used by the Thai authorities since they failed to meet the basic requirements outlined by international standards in three ways. First, the pressure applied by Thai local authorities before the repatriation of people in the Pa Yaw camp in 1996 likely made the decision of the refugees to move involuntary. Second, despite the lack of voluntariness, the returnees were simply pushed across the border to resettlement areas in territory remaining under the administrative control of the NMSP and they were not allowed to return to their original residences. Third, the conditions for the Mon returnees were deficient in terms of the ideal, which states that refugees ought to be returned to their homes only when the causes of flight have been permanently and definitely eradicated (Lang, 2002, p. 116).

7. Thai Policies toward Burmese Refugees and Migrants

Since Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the "Refugee Convention") or its companion 1969 Protocol, (Human Rights Watch, 2004, p. 10) according to Thai national law, asylum seekers in Thailand are technically "illegal immigrants." Formally, the term "refugee" itself does not exist in Thailand. People who fled the Indochina war and took refuge in Thailand before the year 1979 were recognized as

"displaced persons" *(phu opphayop)*. This term is in accordance with the "Regulations Concerning Displaced Persons from Neighboring Countries" issued by the Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI) on April 8, 1954. According to the MOI, a "displaced person" is someone "who escapes from dangers due to an uprising, fighting, or war, and enters in breach of the Immigration Act" (Lang, 2002, p. 92).

However, when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinnawatra came to office in 2001, Thai policies on Burmese refugees and migrants dramatically changed as noted by the Human Rights Watch Group in its report, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*. "Thailand has steadily warmed its relations with the Burmese military government and advanced an increasingly harsh policy towards Burmese refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers." According to the report, (Human Rights Watch, 2004, p. 3,8)

In the past the Thai government took a fairly tolerant approach towards peaceful Burmese activist groups operating in Thailand. It is now adopting a more hardline stance. Thai authorities have begun to monitor, curtail, and shut down the activities of Burmese human rights defenders, opposition groups, and advocacy organizations. At the end of 2002, for example, Thai authorities closed Burmese opposition political offices in Sangkhlaburi and Mae Hong Son, near the Burma border. The government also produced new visa regulations that make it much more difficult for Burmese activists to obtain visa extensions to remain in Thailand.

Accordingly, under the new policies the Thai government is arresting and intimidating Burmese political activists living in Bangkok and along the Thai-Burma border, harassing Burmese human rights and humanitarian groups, and deporting Burmese refugees, asylum seekers and others with a genuine fear of persecution in Burma.[6] One example of a strict measure applied by the Thai

[6] Human Rights Watch, *Thailand: End Crackdown on Burmese Fleeing Abuses*. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/02/25/thaila7656.htm.

authorities is the suspension of screening of new refugee applicants from Burma by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as can be seen in a note circulated by UNHCR.

The registration process will be for the purpose of referring new applicants foradmission to the camps located at the Thai-Myanmar border, in accordance with the Royal Thai Government's policy that [refugees and asylum seekers] from Myanmar may not remain in Bangkok or other urban centres. New applicants will not be eligible for financial assistance from UNHCR in urban areas. Admission to the border camps will be determined under screening procedures still to be decided by the Thai authorities. Following discussions with the Royal Thai Government, UNHCR understands that these new screening procedures will be established in the near future. Lists of those registered with UNHCR from 1 January 2004 will be shared with the Royal Thai Government and the screening body that is eventually established (UNHCR circulated note quoted in Human Rights Watch Group, (2) 2004, p. 3).

Once the screening of new Burmese asylum applications proceeds, the Thai government will likely undertake this crucial task. Since Thailand narrowly restricts its protection and assistance to çpeople fleeing fighting,é the government may start rejecting Burmese exiles and asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution for their pro-democracy activities in Burma. Those who are rejected would be categorized as illegal immigrants and confront the risk of being deported to Burma (Human Rights Watch, *Thailand...*, p.1). In July 2004 the Thai government announced plans to send all 4,000 Burmese refugees and asylum seekers living in Bangkok and other urban areas to Thai-Burma border camps, in spite of the fact that many of the camps are both physically and psychologically insecure due to cross-border violence as well as ethnic conflicts within the camps (Human Rights Watch Group, *Thailand:...* 2004, p.2).

In addition, the Thai authorities have initiated a new campaign to round up and banish thousands of Burmese migrant workers back

to Burma. Approximately one million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand fled their homeland for mixed political and economic reasons. Consequently, if forced to return, they could face serious retaliation from the Burmese authorities (Human Rights Watch Group, *Thailand:...* 2004, p. 2).

The Thai government deports Burmese migrant workers in two ways: (1) "informal deportations" by which they expel as many as 10,000 Burmese people each month to Burma through an unofficial border point at Mae Sot on the grounds that they are illegal migrant workers. However, many are able to bribe their way back into Thailand whereas others have faced persecution or ill-treatment from Tatmadaw soldiers, intelligence officials, and even other ethnic insurgent groups based along the border; and (2) "formal deportations" authorized under an agreement between the Thai government and SPDC. Since August 2003, Thailand has been deporting 400 "illegal" Burmese nationals a month directly to a holding center in Burma operated by Burmese military intelligence (Human Rights Watch Group, *Thailand:...* 2004, p. 6-7).

Moreover, in January 2004, Thailand and the United States came to an agreement to resettle at least 4,000 of the 140,000 Burmese refugees in Thailand to the United States. According to Human Rights Watch, this resettlement should help to improve the situation provided that "Thai authorities do not implement the agreement with the intention of making it harder for Burmese democracy activists to pursue their cause" (Human Rights Watch Group, *Thailand:...* 2004, p. 6-7).

These new policies have been widely criticized, especially by the executive director of Human Rights Watch, Brad Adams, who stated, "Thailand should not toughen its stance toward Burmese refugees when there has been no improvement in the abysmal conditions causing them to flee Burma." It "should not allow commercial or diplomatic interests to interfere with the ability of Burmese to seek safety in Thailand" (Human Rights Watch Group, *Thailand:...* 2004, p. 6-7).

Moreover, under international law, the Thai government has an obligation not to return anyone to a country where his or her life or freedom is at risk, which means it must not forcibly repatriate any Burmese who may have a claim to refugee status. Furthermore, he maintains that in this case Thailand should ensure that the UNHCR is able to identify and protect those who have a fear of persecution in Burma rather than expelling Burmese refugees, sealing the border, and refusing to protect newcomers (Human Rights Watch Group, *Thailand:* ...2004, p. 6-7).

8. The Maintenance of Mon Ethnic Identity

Though Mon people in the Thai-Burma borderlands have long been under the threat of assimilation from both the Thai and the Burmese mainstream, there is still empirical evidence from both documentary research and ethnographical fieldwork to support the remark made by an Englishman, Ashley South, who conducted field research for six years with the Mons in the borderlands in both Burma and Thailand, about the attempt of Mon nationalists to retain their Monness. "They have struggled to defend the historical Mon identity from assimilation into that of the Burman and Thai majorities" (South, 2001, 39). The maintenance of ethnic identity of the various Mon communities both in Burma and Thailand can be exemplified by the Mon language, Mon classical music and dance, and Mon invented traditions.

• Mon Mother Tongue

Nowadays, Mon people dwelling in villages located in several townships as well as their satellite towns in Mon State, have chosen not to speak Burmese. They had a strong intention not to learn this language in school, even though the local authorities tried very hard to force it upon them. They were unable to force these villagers to speak Burmese, the national language of Burma

(Pisan, 1983, p. 171).

Furthermore, there has been an attempt by strongly motivated local Mon teachers and Mon monks to open evening classes in many schools or monasteries located in Mon communities in Burma in order to teach young Mon students Mon history and an appreciation of Mon literature. I met one elderly Mon lady about 82 years old who had migrated to Thailand from a small town in the Mon State about 50 years ago. She could not speak even a word in Burmese, whereas she was able to speak and understand some Thai words or expressions pretty well. The reason she gave was that she shuns the Burmese and accordingly decided to opt for Thailand as her refuge (Author's observation at the fieldsite in August 5, 2004).

From these incidents, it is apparent that the Mons in Burma have fought symbolically against local officials representing the dominant power of the Burman regime by opting to speak their mother tongue rather than Burmese, which in turn signifies the language of the oppressors. In this case, the Mon language is treated as an ethnic boundary that distinguishes the Mons from the dominant Burmans. This is in accordance with the ethnicity model of Fredrik Barth, who points out the importance of ethnic boundaries as markers in both physical and symbolic space that signify who is and who is not a member of an ethnic group. Consequently, ethnicity is a matter of who is inside and who is outside an ethnic boundary.[7]

[7] The ethnic boundary model was developed in the early work of anthropologist Fredrik Barth who began a conceptual "deconstruction" of ethnicity in the late 60s by drawing scholarly attention away from the cultural content that many anthropologists saw as the central core of ethnicity and by redirecting researchers' gaze toward the borders that mark the edges of ethnic communities. He argued that it was not simply culture that defines and divides individuals ethnically. However, ethnic boundaries play significant parts as markers in both physical and symbolic space that signify who is and who is not a member of an ethnic group. According to this view, ethnicity is a matter of who is inside and who is outside an ethnic boundary (Barth, 1969 quoted in Nagel 2003, p. 44).

• Mon Classical Dance and Music

Moreover, in my first informal interview with the assistant phuyaiban of Wangka Village about the conservation of Mon heritage in the form of Mon classical dances, he mentioned the dancing troupe consists mostly of girls as well as some boys in their pre-teen years. An ad hoc committee has raised funds in order to hire an instructor from Burma to teach these children as Mon children know the classical dances they are able to perform these kinds of dances on a variety of special occasions in order to promote Mon cultural heritage. Also, another group of children is being trained to play the Mon musical instruments by a local instructor.

• Mon Invented Traditions

The Mon people have also created a number of traditions such as the Mon National Flag, Mon National Day, the Mon National Anthem, Mon formal costumes and the legendary prophecy about their future political supremacy. All these symbols have been shared by the Mons on both sides of the Thai-Burma border as well as by Thai-Mon communities near Bangkok and even by the Mons in their diasporic communities overseas.

In short, it is obvious that the Mons in the Thai-Burma border have been affected physically and culturally by the Thai-Burma border politics as well as the civil war in Burma. However difficult it may be, the Mons from all walks of life have endeavored to maintain their ethnic identity or Monness at the utmost and in various forms, namely their mother tongue, their classical dances and music as well as their invented traditions like the Mon National Flag, Mon National Day, the Mon National Anthem, Mon formal costumes and legendary prophecy about their political transition in the future. These have been their ethnic boundary signifiers shared by every Mon alike in her/his homeland, in their international diaspora and also in the old Mon communities in Thailand.

9. Conclusion

Hazel Lang comments that modern Thai-Burma border politics "involves a multi-layered array of actors and relationships, operating across a variety of political, military, and economic dimensions, and occurring at various local, national, regional, and transnational levels" (Lang, 2002, p. 137). There have been waves of people fleeing from Burma to Thailand to escape killings, forced labor, and relocation by Tatmadaw soldiers as well as starvation when their villages have been burned down. Minority groups living along the border in Burma, such as the Mon, have been particularly subject to oppression and have become pawns on a larger geo-political stage. Thai policy towards those fleeing Burma has changed with the international climate and is now focused on reaping economic benefits from its neighbor. Thailand refuses to grant refugee status and treats all those fleeing Burma as illegal migrants. Most of the officials in charge of refugees and migrants at the Thai-Burma border are either military or paramilitary forces who are prone to use violence like their Burmese counterparts. Moreover, at the local level in Thailand there are many parties assigned to the management of Burmese refugees and migrants. Accordingly, there are discrepancies in implementing national policies and misunder-standings among officials and displaced people alike. Treatment has been rather arbitrary, and some officials seek personal benefits and extort bribes. Thailand repatriates migrants from Burma, who again flee oppression or bribe their way back into Thailand. There are at least a million illegal migrants from Burma filling the dirty, difficult, dangerous, dead-end jobs that Thais don't want, but they are often mistreated and risk deportation at any time. Thailand should conform to international standards in dealing with refugees, and it and other ASEAN countries should reconsider their policy of "constructive engagement" with Burma.

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