



BURMA

# Dead Men Walking

Convict Porters on the Front Lines in Eastern Burma

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma



## **Summary and Recommendations**



Prisoners work on land belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture in Shan State.  
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# DEAD MEN WALKING

Convict Porters on the Front Lines in Eastern Burma



*We were carrying food up to the camp and one porter stepped on a mine and lost his leg. The soldiers left him, he was screaming but no one helped. When we came down the mountain he was dead. I looked up and saw bits of his clothing in the trees, and parts of his leg in a tree.*

ESCAPED CONVICT PORTER "MAUNG NYUNT," MARCH 2011

*The young boy told them [soldiers], "If I run you will shoot me." They said, "No, we won't kill you. You can run." They ordered the guy to run. Just as he walked down to the gorge, they shot him in the back. And they told us, "You guys see what happens? If you can't climb up, we will kill you." We were afraid.*

ESCAPED CONVICT PORTER "MATTHEW," JANUARY 2011

**For decades the Burmese army has forced civilians to risk life and limb serving as porters in barbaric conditions during military operations against rebel armed groups. Among those taken to do this often deadly work, for indefinite periods and without compensation, are common criminals serving time in Burma's prisons and labor camps.**



Escaped convict porters described to us how the authorities selected them in a seemingly random fashion from prison and transferred them to army units fighting on the front lines. They are forced to carry huge loads of supplies and munitions in mountainous terrain, and given inadequate food and no medical care. Often they are used as "human shields," put in

front of columns of troops facing ambush or sent first down mined roads or trails, the latter practice known as "atrocious demining." The wounded are left to die; those who try to escape are frequently executed.

Burma's military government promised that the November 2010 elections, the country's first elections in more than 20



years, would bring about human rights improvements. But soon after election day the Burmese army, the Tatmadaw, launched military operations that have been accompanied by a new round of abuses.

In January 2011, the Tatmadaw, in collusion with the Corrections Department and the Burmese police, gathered an

A Burmese army column with convict porters moves through a village in northern Karen State, January 2011.

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A Burmese army sergeant with a rocket-propelled grenade on patrol in northern Karen State.

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estimated 700 prisoners from approximately 12 prisons and labor camps throughout Burma to serve as porters for an ongoing offensive in southern Karen State, in the east of the country. The same month, another 500 prisoners were taken for use as porters during another separate military operation in northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Region, augmenting 500 porters used in the same area in an earlier stage of the operation in the preceding year. The men were a mix of serious and petty offenders, but their crimes or willingness to serve were not taken into consideration: only their ability to

carry heavy loads of ammunition, food, and supplies for more than 17 Tatmadaw battalions engaged in operations against ethnic Karen armed groups. Karen civilians living in the combat zone, who would normally be forced to porter for the military under similarly horrendous conditions, had already fled by the thousands to the Thai border.

The prisoners selected as porters described witnessing or enduring summary executions, torture and beatings, being used as “human shields” to trip landmines or shield soldiers from fire, and being denied medical attention and adequate food and shelter.

One convict porter, Ko Kyaw Htun (all prisoner names used in this report are pseudonyms), told how Burmese soldiers forced him to walk ahead when they suspected landmines were on the trails: “They followed behind us. In their minds, if the mine explodes, the mine will hit us first.” Another porter, Tun Mok, described how soldiers recaptured him after trying





to escape, and how they kicked and punched him, and then rolled a thick bamboo pole painfully up and down his shins.

This report, based on Human Rights Watch and Karen Human Rights Group interviews with 58 convict porters who escaped to Thailand between 2010 and 2011, details the abuses. The porters we spoke with ranged in age from 20 to 57 years, and included serious offenders such as murderers and drug dealers, as well as individuals convicted of brawling and fraud—even illegal lottery sellers. Their sentences ranged from just one year to more than 20 years' imprisonment, and they were taken from different facilities, including labor camps, maximum security prisons, such as Insein prison in Rangoon, and local prisons for less serious offenders.

The accounts shared by porters about the abuses they experienced in 2011 are horrific, but sadly not unusual. The use of convict porters is not an isolated, local, or rogue

A convict porter in telltale blue uniform carries a bamboo basket of supplies and a military pack on his head in Karen State.

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practice employed by some units or commanders, but has been credibly documented since as early as 1992. This report focuses on recent use of convict porters in Karen State, but the use of convict porters has also been reported in the past in Mon, Karenni, and Shan States. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has raised the issue of convict porters with the Burmese government since 1998, yet the problem persists, particularly during major offensive military operations.

Burmese army soldiers on patrol in Karen State in early 2011. The man in the middle (wearing a white shirt) is a civilian porter forced to carry supplies for the unit. Civilians, particularly from ethnic minority communities, have also long been forced to serve as porters for the army.

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Burma's forcible recruitment and mistreatment of convicts as uncompensated porters in conflict areas are grave violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law. Abuses include murder, torture, and the use of porters as human shields. Those responsible for ordering or participating in such mistreatment should be prosecuted for war crimes.

Authorities in Burma have previously admitted the practice occurs, but have claimed that prisoners are not exposed to hostilities. The information gathered for this report, consistent with the evidence gathered over the past two decades, demonstrates that this simply is not true. The practice is ongoing, systematic, and is facilitated by several branches of government, suggesting decision-making at the highest levels of the Burmese military and political establishment. Officials and commanders who knew or should have known of such abuses but took no measures to

allegations of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Burma.

As the experiences contained in this report make clear, serious abuses that amount to war crimes are being committed with the involvement or knowledge of high-level civilian and military officials. Officers and soldiers commit atrocities with impunity. Credible and impartial investigations are needed into serious abuses committed by all parties to Burma's internal armed conflicts. The international community's failure to exert more effective pressure on the Burmese military to end the use of convict porters on the battlefield will condemn more men to take their place.



Burmese army mortar rounds carried by convict porters.  
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An escaped convict porter, originally from Mytkina prison in the far north of Burma, shows scars from carrying heavy loads of military supplies in Karen State.  
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stop it or punish those responsible should be held accountable as a matter of command responsibility.

The use of convict porters on the front line is only one facet of the brutal counterinsurgency practices Burmese officials have used against ethnic minority populations since independence in 1948. These include deliberate attacks on civilian villages and towns, large-scale forced relocation, torture, extrajudicial executions, rape and other sexual violence against women and girls, and the use of child soldiers. Rebel armed groups have also been involved in abuses such as indiscriminate use of landmines, using civilians as forced labor, and recruitment of child soldiers. These abuses have led to growing calls for the establishment of a United Nations commission of inquiry into longstanding



FORMER CONVICT PORTER MYINT SHWE (PSEUDONYM) WAS INTERVIEWED BY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH IN FEBRUARY 2011:

*“I really wanted to run away, the army was treating us like animals, but we couldn’t go anywhere. I shouldn’t have been put on the [convict porter] list; my sentence was only one-and-a-half years.”*

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Burmese army soldiers on parade in the capital, Naypyidaw. Despite a major expansion of the military and extensive weapons' purchases since 1989, the Burmese army continues to use convict porters on counterinsurgency operations in eastern Burma.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT

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- **Acknowledge past failures to pursue justice and fully support the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into allegations of serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by all parties to the internal armed conflicts in Burma.**
- **Immediately cease the practice of using civilian porters, including convict porters, in armed conflict areas in Burma.**
- **Credibly investigate and prosecute those responsible for abuses against porters during military operations, regardless of rank or position, including senior government officials and military commanders responsible for use of uncompensated porters in conflict areas.**

## TO CHINA, RUSSIA, US, EUROPEAN UNION, JAPAN, AND ASEAN MEMBER STATES

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- **Publicly support a UN commission of inquiry into serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by all parties to the internal armed conflicts in Burma. Actively mobilize other countries to support the creation of a UN commission of inquiry at the UN General Assembly or at the Human Rights Council.**
- **Publicly call on Burma to immediately end the practice of using civilian porters, including convicts, in armed conflict areas.**



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[www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org)

## Dead Men Walking

### Convict Porters on the Front Lines in Eastern Burma

For decades the Burmese army has forced civilians to risk life and limb serving as porters in barbaric conditions during military operations against rebel armed groups. Among those taken to do this often deadly work, for indefinite periods and without compensation, are common criminals serving time in Burma's prisons and labor camps.

Based on 58 interviews with convict porter survivors who escaped the Burmese army in 2010 and 2011, *Dead Men Walking* details the harsh treatment prisoners are forced to endure on military operations.

Escaped convict porters described how the authorities selected them in a seemingly random fashion from prison and transferred them to army units fighting ethnic armed groups on the front lines. Soldiers force them to carry huge loads of supplies and munitions in mountainous terrain, giving them little food and no medical care. Often they are used as "human shields," put in front of columns of troops facing ambush or sent first through heavily mined areas. The wounded are left to die; those who try to escape are frequently executed, beaten, or tortured. The use of convict porters is not an isolated, local, or rogue practice employed by some units or commanders, but has been credibly documented since as early as 1992, and has been reported in other conflict zones of Burma.

As this report makes clear, serious abuses that amount to war crimes are being committed in Burma with the involvement or knowledge of high-level civilian and military officials. Officers and soldiers commit atrocities with impunity.

The use of convict porters on the front line is only one of the brutal counterinsurgency practices Burmese officials have used against ethnic minority populations since Burma's independence in 1948. These abuses have led to growing calls for the establishment of a United Nations commission of inquiry into longstanding allegations of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by all parties to the armed conflicts in Burma.



*Convict porters in blue prison uniforms carry supplies for the Burmese army in northern Karen state, 2011. Forcing prisoners to work for the army in frontline areas is a longstanding practice in Burma.*

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