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CHURCHES AND CIVIL SOCIETY AS AGENTS OF PEACE: PREVENTION, MITIGATION, RECONCILIATION

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The purpose of this presentation is not so much to discuss how we consider our own role in relation to peace-building, as a church-based non-governmental organization working with partners in countries where protection from abuses is needed. Rather it is to argue why the norm of responsibility to protect (R2P) ought to apply to the situation in Burma.

In order to do so, I would like to draw your attention to five issues, which apply to the R2P norm in general as well as to the situation in Burma in particular:

1. Introduction

Firstly, there is the issue of the **timeline**.

The word disaster often brings with it the association of something that happens all of a sudden and within a limited period of time, for instance in Rwanda, where an estimated 800,000 people were killed within 100 days, or in Srebrenica, where more than 7,000 people were killed in the summer of 1995[1]. But this is not always the case. The situation in Burma has more often been different; Burma has more often been the slow burning and forgotten disaster, which should trigger the responsibility to protect of the international community because the suffering goes on for such a long time.

Furthermore, while on a conceptual level, a distinction can be made between three dimensions of R2P – the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react and the responsibility to rebuild - these distinctions are blurred on the ground. The need to address all three dimensions can be simultaneous and efforts to address either of them will often impact on one or both of the others.

Secondly, R2P is a responsibility that stretches **across generations.** To quote the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson: "Today's human rights violations are the causes of tomorrow's conflicts". In other words, the responsibility of states and of the international community to end abuses today is in part a responsibility to end ongoing suffering, but it is also a responsibility to create a better future for coming generations and prevent future abuses.

Thirdly, R2P has a **gender:** In order to effectively advance R2P as international norm, increased awareness is needed of the ways in which abuses affect men and women, boys and girls differently, and hence of the need to ensure that protection is gender-sensitive. There is also a need to call for the role of women and women's organisations as actors in their own right in

[1] Rwanda: How the genocide happened, BBC News, April 1st, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1288230.stm, last visited on January 15, 2008; Timeline: Siege of Srebrenica, BBC News, June 9, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/675945.stm, last visited on January 15, 2008.

peace-building to be duly recognised. This is a pertinent challenge for churches, where religious leaders are often men.

Fourthly, **R2P and justice** go together: Churches once played a key role in establishing the fundamental international norms of human rights, by ensuring that these were drafted into the UN Charter and that the former UN Human Rights Commission, now the UN Human Rights Council, was established. Today's challenge is to turn these norms into reality, globally and locally by promoting an international regime of rule of law as well as by ensuring that this international human rights regime has a real impact within the borders of nation-states. The churches have a role to play in taking up this challenge again.

5. Fifthly, there is the need to **work across religious lines**, with people and communities from different religions and faiths, in order to be effective in advancing the norm of R2P.

2. R2P for children:

To grow up in Burma today is to grow up in circumstances that are not conducive to a safe childhood, and where there seems to be little hope for the future for young people.

The country is the sad holder of a number of world records. Burma has been under military rule for 45 years. It is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, and also the stage for one of the world's longest running civil wars. The war came to Burma merely three months after the country gained its independence from Great Britain in January 1948.

Burma is also the country with the largest number of child soldiers in the world. In 2002, an estimated 70,000 children were combatants in Burma[2]. The total number of troops in Burma is estimated at 400,000[3]. In other words, a significant number of troops in Burma are under 18 years of age. To these can be added those who are above 18 years today, but who were children at the time of their original recruitment.

Turning children into soldiers is a war crime. It is because of abuses such as these that the international community agreed upon its common responsibility, during the UN Summit in 2005, to protect civilian populations when the state fails to do so.

The vast majority of Burma's child soldiers have been forcibly recruited by the military authorities into the government army, because of an increasing demand for new recruits to fill the goal of army expansion, high desertion rates, and a lack of willing adult volunteers. The fact that the majority of the country's child soldiers serve in the government's forces is one factor that distinguishes Burma from many other countries with child soldiers[4].

The Burma Army is notorious for its brutality in combat and for its human rights abuses against civilians. Children who are enlisted into the Burma Army are themselves subjected to abuses; they are forced to commit abuses, and they are witnesses to abuses. They are both victims and perpetrators.

Children are also recruited into the ethnic armed opposition groups in Burma, albeit in smaller numbers and under different circumstances. The majority of Burma's ethnic armies do not

[2] Human Rights Watch. 2002. My gun was as tall as me. Child soldiers in Burma, available at . http://hrw.org/reports/2002/burma/, last visited on November 15, 2007.
[3] Andrew Selth. 2002. Burma's Armed Forces: Power without Glory. Norwalk: EastBridge.
[4] Human Rights Watch. 2007. Sold to Be Soldiers - The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma, available at http://hrw.org/reports/2007/burma1007/, last visited January 15, 2008.

forcibly recruit children. However, children in Burma's ethnic minority areas, where civil war is raging, often grow up in circumstances where there seems to be little choice but to take up arms.

One illustration is the story of one of these child soldiers from Burma, Doo Gler. This story was told by a former guerrilla with the Karen National Union, or KNU – one of the oldest ethnic armed opposition groups in Burma - who was Doo Gler's commander for about eight years.

Doo Gler was found at the age of eight by a patrol from the KNU hiding under a bush near his village. This happened in the mid-1980s. He had just witnessed the Burma Army murder his parents and then rape and kill his sisters, and was deeply traumatised. He could not even remember his name, so Doo Gler is the name that was given to him by the Karen troops at the time.

Doo Gler had nowhere to go, so the Karen troops took him back to their barracks. Since he was in school age, they decided that he should be sent to school, which was two-three hours walk away, depending on the weather.

But Doo Gler resisted. He was finally assured that it would be only for five days a week and that he would be able to come back to his "family" at the barracks. It didn't work. Within a few days, he was back at the barracks, having walked alone in the jungle for hours because he wanted to "go home". This story repeated itself for many times until the adults gave up. So Doo Gler was allowed to stay at the barracks, where he picked up basic infantry training from playing around the trainees and mimicking their actions. When asked to go and play somewhere else, he would answer "I have to avenge those who destroyed my family". Doo Gler was killed at the age of 16 in 1992 during the battle of Sleeping Dog hill, which is one of the main battles fought between the Burma Army and the KNU during the 1990s.

Doo Gler's story is in not unique – neither for Burma's child soldiers, nor for child soldiers in general. It is a story of abuses that have been experienced and witnessed by young children, of a desire of revenge, and of adults who are at a loss of what to do, because the circumstances are not conducive to ensure a safe childhood for the younger ones.

But in addition to children like Doo Gler, there are also many other children in Burma, who have not have taken up arms themselves, but who are deeply affected by growing up in a country that has already been in civil war for generations.

A simple illustration of the impact of war and military rule on Burma's children is the destruction of the healthcare and education systems.

In Burma, social sectors such as health and education rank very low in government priorities. An estimated 40 percent of Burma's annual state budget goes to military purposes, while WHO estimated that in 2004, only 2,2% of GDP was used for health care[5]. A similar low share was used for education.

This shows: National statistics show that Burma is already at the bottom of most regional statistics for Asia-Pacific, and even global, health statistics.

[5] Andrew Selth. 2002. Burma's Armed Forces: Power without Glory. Norwalk: EastBridge; World Health Organization. **Core Health Indicators**. Available at http://www.who.int/whosis/database/core/core_select_process.cfm?country=mmr&indicators=nha# (November 15, 2007).

However, in eastern Burma, where civil war is raging, the situation is worse. In these areas, standard public health indicators such as infant mortality rates, child mortality rates, and maternal mortality ratios are comparable to other countries facing widespread humanitarian disasters in Africa, such as Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola, or Cambodia shortly after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge. The most common cause of death in these areas is malaria. One out of every twelve women may lose her life around the time of childbirth. Over 15 percent of all children at any time show evidence of at least mild malnutrition. Knowledge of sanitation and safe drinking water use remains low[6].

The education sector in Burma is also in a shambles. Nationwide, one of four children in Burma do not complete the full first five years of compulsory basic schooling, according to UNICEF. Even fewer go on to higher education or to university. In ethnic minority areas the situation is worse.

In early November, UNESCO published a study on the impact of conflict on education. This study finds that students, teachers and schools are increasingly under concerted and deliberate attack in a number of countries, including Burma. Targeting education is also a war crime, but, as the UNESCO study concludes, the right to education has so far failed to attract the global attention that it ought to have[7].

In Burma, the situation in the health and education sectors goes beyond government neglect. The lack of social and economic development in ethnic minority areas is related to the state being at war against its own people.

Since the mid-1960s, the Burmese military has made use of a counter-insurgency strategy known as the "Four Cuts" aimed at cutting four key links between the armed opposition groups and local villages (food, funds, recruits, and information) and to increase the Burma Army's control over the local population in ethnic minority areas.

However, in a situation of guerrilla warfare, the distinction cannot easily be drawn between combatants and non-combatants. As a result, this strategy directly targets civilians. For instance, a central component is the forced relocation of civilians from contested areas to "relocation centres" more firmly under the control of the central administration, and the destruction of rice fields and food storage facilities[8].

The four cuts strategy is combined with a political and nationalist programme by the military government, since it first came to power in 1962, to assimilate Burma's ethnic and religious minorities.

The outcome is the deliberate denial of humanitarian access in ethnic minority areas, the lack of efforts to promote social and economic development in these same areas, an education system that does not take into account Burma's ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity – and the repression of voices calling for a broader acceptance of the country's diversity.

In urban areas, higher education has been deliberately neglected and targeted by the government because universities have traditionally been hotbeds of opposition to military rule. During the

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[6] Backpack Health Workers Team. 2006. **Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Burma**. Available at http://www.geocities.com/maesothtml/bphwt/ (November 15, 2007).

[7] Students, teachers, schools face deliberate attacks in conflict areas – UNESCO, Press release, November 8, 2007, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=24596&Cr=education&Cr1=unesco, last visited on January 15, 2008.

[8] Thai-Burma Border Consortium. 2004. **Internal Displacement and Vulnerability in Eastern Burma**. Bangkok, Thailand: Thailand Burma Border Consortium. Available at: www.tbbc.org/resources/2004-idp.pdf (November 15, 2007).

1990s, the government regularly closed down universities to prevent gatherings of students. Today, this is no longer the case. But various reforms in the education sector have been implemented instead, not so much in order to improve the quality of education, but rather in order to better control the student population.

The abuses committed by government troops in the course of military operations and the ongoing political crisis in Burma are two faces of the same military regime, which abuses civilians in civil war areas and represses dissent in urban areas. After 45 years at the helm of the state in Burma, the armed forces have shown that they are not capable of running the country and that they are out of touch with the rest of the population.

For the international community to exert its responsibility to protect the population of Burma, it is therefore essential to support efforts to ensure that civilians and ethnic minorities have a greater say in the running of the country, in other words to push for civilian rule and democratisation, as well as to push for political reform in order to ensure a better life for people in Burma, including the promotion of social and economic development and an end to gross violations of human rights.

3. R2P for women

Norwegian Church Aid has been working for several years with women's organizations from Burma in order to highlight the impact of civil war and military oppression on women and girls in Burma in particular. This collaboration began as a result of reports released by some women organisations regarding cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by Burma Army troops against ethnic minority women and girls in the course of military operations, and follows in the wake of UN Security Council resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, from 2000, which "*emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls*".

Sexual violence as a weapon in warfare is not a new crime. It has taken place for a long time in Burma. But, and this is a useful reminder of the need to pay attention both to men and to women as agents of peace, in a country where such abuses are associated with shame and stigma, women's organizations were the first to be able to talk about what was taking place.

There is a clear nexus between R2P and resolution 1325. This matters because the norm of R2P in itself is not sufficiently gender-sensitive. Indeed, the report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty that originally launched the concept of R2P fails to mention gender. Severe conflicts affect men and women, boys and girls differently, and both men and women play a key role in all three areas of R2P.

As a result, it matters that R2P and resolution 1325 be read together, in order to ensure that the commitments by governments to take decisive actions to prevent and stop mass crimes against populations also includes crimes committed against women and children, and that women and women's organisations be duly recognised as agents of peace.

4. R2P and modern warfare

Why highlight the situation of children and women in a consultation centred on armed intervention?

The responsibility to protect encompasses the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react and the responsibility to rebuild. Most important, however, remains prevention, which was the starting point for this presentation.

Armed intervention is a critical issue and it remains essential to debate whether armed intervention should take place, under what form, and in what circumstances. But a discussion about R2P should not be reduced to a discussion about armed intervention because:

Firstly, abuses such as recruiting children to go to war, targeting students, teachers and schools, or raping women and girls, are war crimes and crimes against humanity in international law. But in addition to the suffering caused today, they have a long-term impact on local communities and their ability to rebuild and reconcile.

When rape is used as a weapon in war, it is targeted against both women and men. For men, it is a message that they are unable to protect their wives, sisters and daughters. For women, it often leads to rejection by their families and communities. The outcome is to destroy the very social fabric that binds local communities together. The suffering is also felt by new generations. Children who are born from such war rapes often grow up under difficult circumstances, in surroundings that know far too well about their background. In other words, these are not regular human rights abuses. They are some of the weapons being used in today's wars.

Armed intervention is a measure intended to provide immediate protection to populations at risk when such abuses are being committed on a large scale. But armed intervention cannot solve the long-term challenges of rebuilding shattered communities and societies.

So the question remains: How to put an end to such forms of warfare? How to deal with the consequences?

Secondly, armed intervention is a measure of last resort to protect vulnerable populations. A discussion of how to apply R2P needs to be broadened to include all instruments available, non-coercive and coercive. And among coercive instruments, armed intervention stands together, in the ICSS report, with sanctions and international criminal accountability through the International Criminal Court and other bodies.

WCC once played a key role in ensuring that human rights were written into the UN charter and that the UN Human Rights Commission was established. Human rights norms are part and parcel of the history of the founding of WCC and CCIA. As a result, the key legal instruments exist today that define fundamental human rights. But what is still lacking is the enforcement of these instruments. The coming into force of the ICC in 2002 was a major step forward. But much more needs to be done. This is an area where the churches could play a stronger role to promote global rule of law in such a manner that it has an effective impact within states as well.

5. Role of churches in Burma and in relation to Burma

Burma is an environment in which it is very difficult for churches to operate. This is true for the churches within Burma – but it is also true for churches outside of Burma seeking to extend their solidarity with the churches and the people of Burma. The question is how to express such solidarity in a manner that would be helpful to those who are primarily affected by the situation in the country.

What do we do?

To refrain from speaking out is to serve the purposes of the authoritarian rulers. But to speak out too loudly is to expose vulnerable churches in Burma to further persecution. One solution so far has been to leave it up to different member churches and organisations to play different roles in relation to Burma. However, we could still do more to find new ways to work, in between too much silence and speaking out too loudly.

Part of what renders the churches in Burma vulnerable is the fact that they represent a double minority. They are a religious minority in a country where the vast majority of the population are Buddhists. And they represent ethnic minorities in a country where the majority of the population are Burmans or belong to the larger ethnic groups that are chiefly non-Christians, such as Mon, Shan and Arakanese.

Churches and church leaders in Burma have played a key role in the context of the civil war in this country, in efforts to bring peace to their local communities by brokering ceasefire agreements between ethnic armed opposition groups and the government forces.

But ceasefires without proper peace settlements do not restore sustainable and just peace, and they have not been able to end the cycle of abuses that ethnic minorities are subjected to. And as long as the junta remains in power, it also seems unlikely that the military will concede to proper peace settlements.

The past few months, however, have shown that the Buddhist Sangha does have the potential of challenging the regime and to have an impact that the churches alone cannot have.

The British historian J.S. Furnivall, who studied ethnic relations in Burma during the British colonial era, once observed that ethnic groups in this country seem to live by side. They mix but do not combine.

This seems still to be at times a fairly accurate description of how various religious groups still live side by side in a plural society. There is religious discrimination in Burma by the state and state actors against Christians and other religious minorities, but little religious strife between religious groups as such. However, there is also not a high degree of interaction, for many different reasons. Sustainable and lasting progress in Burma hinges on people in this country coming together across ethnic and religious lines such as these and others, and building bridges across some of the many cleavages that divide Burma and cause conflicts. Churches and other faith communities have a key role to play in this respect.

In addition, the challenge now also lies at the doorstep of the international community. The commitment that follows from the adoption of the norm of R2P during the UN Summit in 2005 should deliver tangible results for the people of Burma. Churches and church-based civil society organisations can, and should, play an active role in this regard. Church-based organisations have long been involved in providing relief to those in need of it in Burma, but more could be done, especially in active cooperation with others, in order to hold the Burmese government and the international community accountable for their responsibility to protect the people of Burma.

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