Helpdesk Research Report: Vulnerable groups in Burma and access to services
Date: 20.10.2011

Query: Who are the most vulnerable people in Burma? What barriers do they face in accessing services?

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1. Introduction

This report focuses on vulnerable groups in Burma and access to basic services. The first part of the report outlines groups considered to be vulnerable and marginalized. These include minority ethnic groups (such as the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rohingyas, Shan). In some cases, minorities’ ethnic identity is closely linked with a religion other than the majority Buddhism. Other vulnerable groups are internally displaced persons (IDPs); women and girls; and children generally. Intersectionality of these identities can exacerbate vulnerability. For example, minority ethnic groups often live in conflict zones or areas with government authorized development projects. They are thus more likely to suffer from internal displacement, which brings additional challenges and insecurities. Additionally, women and girls from ethnic minority groups may be specifically targeted by armed forces and become victims of sexual violence.
The second part of the report discusses barriers to accessing basic services, focusing on education and health care. While some of these barriers affect the entire population, ethnic minority groups, IDPs, women and children are often particularly affected.

Barriers to accessing both education and health care include: severe under-investment in such services by the government, affecting both quantity and quality; high costs of accessing such services; and difficulties associated with armed conflict and displacement. Additional obstacles to education include low teacher salaries and training, which undermine the quality of education and in some cases encourages corrupt behavior; and discrimination against ethnic minority groups in terms of language of education and curriculum content. Additional obstacles to health services, in particular reproductive services, include cultural taboos about talking about reproductive health.

2. Vulnerable groups in Burma

Minority ethnic groups

The most commonly cited vulnerable groups in Burma are the various minority ethnic groups in the country, some of whom have fled to neighbouring countries. Ethnic minorities comprise approximately 35-40% of Burma’s population. According to the government, there are at least 135 different ethnic nationalities in the country, however the exact number is difficult to confirm (Amnesty, 2010: 15). The seven officially recognized ethnic groups in Burma aside from the Burman majority are: the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni (Kayah), Mon, Rakhine (Arakanese) and Shan. The Rohingyas are a Muslim minority group that has not been officially recognized as an ethnic group. They have been denied citizenship by the government, rendering them one of the most vulnerable ethnic minority groups (HRW, 2009a; Beech, 2009).

Some minorities’ ethnic identity is closely linked with a religion other than the majority Buddhism: for many Chin, Kachin and Karen, it is Christianity; and as noted, for most Rohingyas, it is Islam. Government authorities have viewed these various social organisations with suspicion and members have experienced discrimination and harassment (Amnesty, 2010). Minority Rights Group International’s Index of ‘Peoples most under threat’ has over the past few years consistently placed Burma in the no. 5 position, citing the following groups as under threat: Kachin, Karen, Mons, Rakhine, Rohingyas, Shan, Chin (Zomi) and Wa.¹ The tool is designed to identify the ‘risk of genocide, mass killing or other systemic violent repression’.

Internal conflict between the government and various ethnic groups is ongoing. Civilians living in ethnic nationality areas have been the worst affected by the decades long conflict. Military campaigns in such areas, systematic attacks on villages and the widespread practice of land confiscation have resulted in extensive forced displacements (Harvard Law School, 2009; Ekeh and Smith, 2007).

Further, in the past couple of decades, many large-scale development and infrastructure projects initiated or agreed to by the government have been located in ethnic minority states. These include various natural resource projects and large-scale dams. Ethnic minority groups have opposed many of the projects as they threaten their livelihoods and way of life and have also resulted in mass displacement without adequate compensation. The government has in turn often cracked down on such opposition (Amnesty, 2010).

Ethnic minorities have also been subjected to forced labour, including working in ‘model’ or relocation villages; serving as porters, carrying heavy equipment for soldiers; and working on government-run infrastructure projects (Ekeh and Smith, 2007).

Below is a brief summary of some of the vulnerable ethnic groups:

**Chin**
The Chin (or Zomi) live primarily in the remote mountainous region of northwest Burma (Chin State). They are of Sino-Tibetan origin and an estimated 80-90% of the Chin population is Christian. The Chin themselves are ethnically and linguistically diverse (Amnesty, 2010: 15; HRW 2009b; MRG, 2009). As with other minority groups, the number of Chin in Burma is uncertain due to the absence of reliable demographic statistics. Current estimates range between 0.5 to 1.5 million living in Chin State and Sagaing in the northwest of Burma (MRG, 2009; HRW, 2009b). It is reported that 70 percent of the population in Chin State lives below the poverty line and 40 percent are without sufficient food sources (cited in HRW, 2009b).

Since 1990, the Chin have been targeted by the military regime (the Tatmadaw – armed forces; and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government) in various ways which have amounted to violations of human rights and have contributed to widespread poverty in the region. Churches have been closed, church services have been disrupted by soldiers, pastors have been physically attacked, and religious symbols such as crosses have been removed. State schools primarily use Burmese as the language of instruction and Chin private schools, teaching in the Chin language, have been closed down by government authorities.

The use of forced labour by the army was implemented in the 1990s seemingly to convert the Chin to Buddhism. Despite the stated goal of the SPDC to abolish forced labour practices, there are still reports of high levels of forced labour in Chin state. Such abuses routinely disrupt people’s trade, businesses and daily work (Sollom et al., 2011; HRW, 2009; MRG, 2009). Further, The government has designated land for lucrative cash-crop plantations, resulting in the displacement of villagers. Some farmers are forced to plant cash-crops in place of subsistence crops and have thus been unable to feed and support their families (Partners Relief & Development, 2010). There are limited earning opportunities (outside of farming) due to ethnic and religious discrimination by the SPDC with regard to government jobs. In addition, arbitrary fees and extortion by the SPDC have limited the ability to maintain income and personal property (HRW, 2009b).

**Kachin**
The Kachin (or Jinghpaw) are located primarily in Kachin State in the far north of Burma. Along with the Chin, they are one of the country’s largest Christian minorities (between two-thirds and 90% are estimated to be Christians). While belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, the Kachin are also ethnically and linguistically diverse. There are an estimated 1 million Kachin in the country, although again it is difficult to confirm such figures. There are two key political bodies that aim to represent this group: The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), with formal control over some functions of local government, and the Kachin State National Congress for Democracy (KSNCD) (Amnesty, 2010: 6; MRG, 2009).

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Kachin state has been subjected to various unsustainable and unaccountable logging and mining activities over the past decade and a half which have adversely affected the environment and resulted in the displacement of thousands of local inhabitants. The Burmese military presence has also been increasing over this same period. There have been persistent allegations of human rights violations and abuses by the military such as land confiscation, forced labour and sexual violence (MRG, 2009; B.P.H.W.T., 2011).

The Kachin also still appear to be targeted by Burmese authorities for their Christian beliefs. The construction of churches has been denied and religious symbols have been destroyed. They have been discriminated against in state employment opportunities. There are also reports that the Kachin have been subjected to conversion activities, including in some cases the provision of rewards such as lower prices for basic foodstuffs, free schooling or exemption from forced labour should they convert (MRG, 2009).

Independent Kachin parties have been denied registration, resulting in fears of political marginalization. This has contributed to growing tensions between the government and the KIO (one of the parties to a ceasefire agreement) and the recent eruption of armed clashes (ICG, 2011).

Karen
The Karen are the second largest ethnic group after the Burmans, estimated at over 3.2 million living in the eastern border region of the country (US State Department figure, cited in MRG, 2009). They comprise a number of ethnically and linguistically diverse groups with Tibetan-Central Asian origins. The majority of Karen are Buddhists, although a large number converted to Christianity during British rule (MRG, 2009).

There is a general ceasefire framework in place with the central government, but occasional flashpoints of fighting continue, resulting in growing numbers of displaced persons (Beech, 2009; MRG, 2009). Further, Karen villagers, who tend to live in the Irrawaddy Delta and the border region between Burma and Thailand have continued to suffer from forced relocation and labour programmes conducted by the military. The implementation of a number of development projects by government authorities has displaced thousands of Karen, many of whom have gone to Thailand (Beech, 2009; MRG, 2009).

Similar to the other ethnic minority groups, the Karen face discrimination in state employment and in state education; there is no access to such services in Karen languages. After Cyclone Nargis hit Burma in May 2008, there were reports that the government had systematically excluded the Karen in Irrwaddy Delta (the hardest-hit region), from all forms of assistance (MRG, 2009).

Karenni
The Karenni (or Red Karen or the Kayah) live in the east of Burma, bordering Thailand. They also comprise an ethnically and linguistically diverse group; however, the Karenni language is a common language. It is estimated that there are approximately 250,000 Karenni, with the majority of them concentrated in Kayah State. This is Burma’s smallest state and it is also the least developed region and one of the most closed to foreigners (MRG, 2009; Amnesty International, 2010). The main representative of the Karenni is the armed opposition group, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) (Amnesty, 2010). A ceasefire agreement was concluded with the KNPP; and the Karenni

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Nationalities People’s Liberation Front and Kayan New Land Party. However, the agreement with the KNPP has since broken down due to logging and mining claims rights (MRG, 2009).

Mining of mineral reserves and logging projects in the region authorized by government have not benefited most Karenni. Instead, they have ignored pre-existing land or usage rights of the indigenous Karenni. In addition, environmental degradation and deforestation has adversely affected many of the Karenni’s traditional agricultural and economic activities. Controversy also continues over the construction of dams on the Salween River that would result in the further loss of land and livelihoods (MRG, 2009).

Mon
The Mon live primarily in Mon State in southeast Burma, although smaller populations live in Ayerawaddy Division along the Burma-Thailand border. There are debates over the size of the Mon population that range from 1 million (US State Department) to 4-8 million (some Mon groups) (MRG, 2009). The majority of the Mon are Theravada Buddhists and speak the language Mon. Despite the ceasefire agreement adopted in 1995 and some initial improvements such as the expansion of Mon-language community schools, hopes for greater development opportunities have not materialized. Private Mon language schools have also been reportedly banned since the late 1990s. Similar to other minority ethnic groups, the Mon are under-represented in most state institutions due to discriminatory government hiring and promotion processes that favour ethnic Burman (MRG, 2009).

Rohingya
The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group living in North Arakan State (also known as Rakhine State) in Western Burma. There are an estimated 800,000 in Arakan State, and many hundreds of thousands of refugees in other countries (Schabas et al., 2010: 9). They speak the language ‘Rohingya’, which is derived from the Bengali language. Some believe that the Rohingya are the most ill-treated and marginalized group. The Burmese government refuses to recognize them as an official ethnic group and since 1982, they have denied the Rohingya citizenship, rendering them stateless (HRW, 2009a; Ekah and Smith, 2007; MRG, 2009). Since then, they have been severely persecuted and oppressed, and subjected to various forms of violence and abuse. Religious repression is widespread, with the destruction of mosques by the military and bans on their reconstruction. The denial of citizenship has also resulted in the denial of the right to education, to necessary social services, to marry, to work in state agencies and various other rights (MRG, 2009). They also experience travel restrictions, which further limits employment and educational opportunities. Chronic poverty and food insecurity is widespread in the state (HRW, 2009a).

The Rohingya in Burma have also been subjected to land confiscation and forced displacement. Forced labour by armed forces that maintain a significant presence in the region is also common. The Rohingya are forced to engage in portering, building and infrastructure construction (including the establishment of ‘model’ villages), cultivation and agriculture (Schabas et al., 2010; MRG, 2009).

Thousands of Rohingya have attempted dangerous journeys in fishing boats from Burma and Bangladesh in order to escape marginalization and persecution in both countries (HRW, 2009a).

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Shan

The Shan live primarily in Shan State, in the east of Burma bordering China, Laos and Thailand; there are also pockets in other parts of the country. Most of the Shan are Theravada Buddhists and speak a language that is closely related to Thai and Lao. The term ‘Shan’ is used to include 33 ethnic groups that are actually rather distinct and unrelated apart from close geographic proximity (MRG, 2009). The key party that seeks to represent the Shan is the National League for Democracy (SNLD) (Amnesty, 2010).

Conflict has continued between the army and some Shan rebel groups, including armed clashes early this year (see ICG, 2011). The military and other government authorities have been reported to be persistently engaging in patterns of gross human rights violations, including forced labour, confiscation of land, conscription, torture, and sexual slavery (MRG, 2009). Renewed offences by the army earlier this year have further displaced thousands of people, including through forced relocation and destruction of particular households (B.P.H.W.T., 2011).

Similar to other minority ethnic groups, the Shan face discrimination in education; state schools do not provide for instruction in the Shan language and private schools have been order to stop teaching in the Shan language. There are also reports that the government has forbidden the trade of foodstuffs outside of local areas which has resulted in a decrease in overall goods productivity in some Shan areas (MRG, 2009).

Internally displaced persons

Displacement is widespread in Burma. It is estimated that there are at least 1 million internally displaced persons in Burma (with close to half a million in the eastern areas alone) and more than a million refugees in the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia and Thailand (Shukla, 2008; Harvard Law School, 2009; see also Brees, 2008; and Partners Relief&Development, 2010).

Much of this displacement stems from conflict and government initiated or authorised development projects in ethnic regions and government policies of forced displacement of minority ethnic groups. As such, ethnic minority groups comprise a significant portion of IDPs. Displacement contributes another layer of vulnerability to ethnic minority populations (Shukla, 2008). A significant number of civilians from Karen, Kachin and Shan states continue to flee from violence and human rights abuses. They have little recourse to international protection mechanisms and aid (B.P.H.W.T., 2011). The government in 2007 was reported as refusing to recognise the existence of IDPs within its borders, which severely restricted access by UN and other humanitarian actors (Harvard Law School, 2009).

Internal displacement seriously impacts on the security and well-being of people forced out of their homes, with few possessions and much uncertainty. Displaced persons are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and health problems. They suffer from inadequate access to food sources and services, such as sanitation facilities or potable water supplies; education and health care (Partners Relief&Development). (See section on Barriers to accessing services section).

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Women and girls

Burma is a male-dominated society, where women and girls generally do not have equal status to men. They are vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and violence. Violence against women and girls, particularly rape and sexual violence, has been documented in a wide number of reports by NGOs and UN organisations (Schabas et al., 2010).

Ethnic minority women and girls are particularly vulnerable (Schabas et al., 2010; Nobel Women’s Initiative, 2010). The majority of rape and sexual violence committed by state actors (SPDC armed forces and authorities) take place in ethnic regions (Women’s League, 2008). These violations are considered a means to terrorise and subjugate ethnic minorities (Nobel Women’s Initiative, 2010).

Women (including pregnant women) have also been subjected to forced labour, such as portering, and have been victims of sexual violence and torture while carrying out this compulsory work (Women’s League, 2010; Women’s League of Burma, 2008). In Karen State, for example, women and girls are reported to have been forcibly recruited to help build roads and bridges, clear landmines and carry military supplies. Many women taken as porters are also raped (Karen Women’s Organisation, 2008). Women and girls have also been trafficked from Burma to other countries in the region, particularly China. Women facing extreme poverty with little education and few economic opportunities are especially at risk (Nobel Women’s Initiative, 2008).

Children – boys and girls

Burma is one of the few countries that continues to recruit and use children in their armed forces. Although the minimum age for enlistment in the army is 18 years, it is reported that authorities in the country regularly falsify papers of those under age 18. Many children are forcibly recruited. While some enlist voluntarily, they often join under based on false pretences, such as the incentive of a job (Child Rights Forum, 2011; HRW, 2007). Some armed opposition groups have also been reported to recruit and use child soldiers (HRW, 2007). The government established a Committee for Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children; however, this Committee appears to have taken little action apart from claiming that charges of child recruitment are false (HRW, 2007).

Poverty increases children’s vulnerability to recruitment. Poverty also increases the likelihood that children will be sent or permitted to work by their parents in order to contribute to family income. They may work in agriculture, factories, construction or other types of work. Some children may end up as beggars, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, trafficking, forced labour (such as portering for the military or armed opposition groups), and recruitment into the armed forces (Child Rights Forum, 2011).

Displaced children are at high risk of malnutrition and acquiring serious illnesses and diseases. Malaria, acute respiratory infections, anaemia and dysentery are particularly common for children living in SPDC-designated relocation sites, in ceasefire areas or in hiding, with inadequate shelter and poor or non-existent water and sanitation facilities. Health services are also limited. Life for children in such contexts, particularly those who are continually displaced while in hiding, can be destabilising, dangerous and traumatic (Partners Relief & Development, 2010).
3. Barriers to accessing services in Burma

Government investment in basic services in Burma has been severely limited, resulting in poor and inadequate service delivery in areas such as health, education, water and sanitation. While this affects the entire population, ethnic minorities, IDPs, women and girls, and the poor face additional barriers to accessing services. This section will focus on education and health care as these were the two services most frequently discussed in the literature.

Education

There are various barriers to education in Burma. These include:

Under-investment and differentiated investment in education
The education sector has long been neglected by the state. State expenditure on education is 1.3% of GDP, which remains one of the lowest levels in the world, representing less than US$1 per person, per year (Child Rights Forum, 2011; Women’s League of Burma, 2008). Further, there is no overall education budget and finances are fragmented, with 13 ministries running educational institutions (Child Rights Forum, 2011). School facilities are inadequate: ‘only 46 percent of government schools in Burma have sanitation facilities and 17 percent have running water’ (cited in Partners Relief&Development, 2010). While the public school system has been neglected, however, the government has invested in military educational institutions in order to privilege military personnel (Women’s League, 2008).

Under-investment in education is particularly pronounced in ethnic and rural areas. A 2003 report by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions finds that ‘there is an average of one school for every two villages in rural communities of Burman-dominated regions, while there is on average only one school for every 25 villages in ethnic border areas’ (cited in Women’s League of Burma, 2008: 45). In Chin State, for example, the lack of school facilities in many villages means that Chin children have to walk long distances to neighbouring towns and villages or pay expensive boarding fees to attend class. For Chin children who are able to attend school, the education received is considered to be of extremely poor quality (HRW, 2009b).

Inadequate teacher salaries and training affect access to quality education
Teachers in Burma are extremely underpaid, or at times not paid at all. This means that teachers often need to work two or three jobs in order to meet basic needs, which limits the time they have available to spend in the classroom and prepare for lessons. In addition, low teacher salaries have encouraged unethical behaviour and corruption among educational staff, such as giving private tuition after school hours or taking bribes in exchange for good marks. Students have reported that important aspects of the curriculum are often taught only in these after-school classes. In the case of bribes, students can ultimately graduate without any understanding of their courses (Child Rights Forum, 2011; Women’s League, 2008). Teachers are also poorly trained; according to UNICEF, ‘less than 20 percent of the teachers in Burma have received adequate training’ (cited in Partners Relief&Development, 2010).

High costs of education
Despite deterioration in the quality of education, students and parents, including those in rural and ethnic areas, have been subjected to rising educational costs. The low salaries provided to state-appointed teachers has resulted in additional burdens for communities, particularly in rural areas, to raise funds to supplement salaries in order to convince teachers to stay (Women’s League, 2008).
addition to these costs, the limited investment of funds by the state means that students and parents also need to cover the costs of books and supplies, maintenance of school facilities and intermittent ‘donations’ for ceremonies organised by local authorities (Child Rights Forum, 2011). These costs are a significant barrier to accessible and free schooling: according to Save the Children, ‘80% of children aged five through nine enrol in primary school, but more than half fail to complete their schooling’ (cited in Child Rights Forum, 2011: 11).

**Discrimination in education and Burmanization**

The official language of education is Burmese and all subjects except for English are taught in Burmese. Ethnic languages are not allowed to be taught in schools in ethnic states, and teachers who teach such languages after hours outside of school are at constant risk of being harassed by authorities (Women’s League, 2008). Such language barriers pose significant obstacles to children who are unfamiliar with the Burmese language and can discourage minority ethnic children from pursuing education and attending school. In Karenni State, for example, only 7-8% of the population can read Burmese; and this percentage may be even lower in other ethnic areas (Partners Relief & Development, 2010: 38).

Further, the SPDC government in Burma has censored curriculum and devised a curriculum that focuses on Burman history and culture, neglecting the diverse histories of minority ethnic groups (Partners Relief & Development, 2010). The government has a policy of sending teachers from central Burma to ethnic states instead of training people from local communities (Women’s League, 2008). The state has also used state resources to promote Buddhism through the Ministry for Development of Border Areas and National Races and Municipal Affairs. In Chin State, for example, the ministry is running a school that is separate from the regular public school system. Students can receive free tuition, uniforms and monthly meal rations to attend this school, but only if they convert to Buddhism from Christianity and document this change on their identity cards (Child Rights Forum, 2011).

In some ethnic areas with ceasefire agreements, parties to the agreement have been able to operate their own school systems within the ceasefire territory. However, children who have attended schools run by such groups may then have difficulty continuing their education in Burmese-language government schools. There have been cases where the SPDC Education Ministry has refused to issue graduation certificates to such students. In one instance, for example, students studying at schools administered by the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) were not considered eligible to sit for matriculation examinations that are necessary to graduate with a certificate (Partners Relief & Development, 2010).

**Gender inequalities**

There are entrenched cultural and social norms in Burma, upheld by all ethnic groups, that perpetuate a male-dominated society. This gender inequality constrains girls from accessing education as sons’ education is prioritised over daughters’. Girls also commonly have to leave school to help support their families or engage in part time jobs while studying (Child Rights Forum, 2011; Women’s League, 2008).

School girls also face the risk of sexual and gender based violence due to the need to travel dangerous routes to get to school. As noted, the few schools in ethnic areas means that girls living in such areas have to travel long distances, which increases their risk. Some families thus take their daughters out of school to avoid this danger (Child Rights Forum, 2011; Women’s League, 2008).
Armed conflict
Ongoing armed conflicts, primarily in ethnic rural areas, have had a devastating effect on children’s education. In some cases, armed forces have purposely destroyed schools. In other cases, local schools have been forced to close due to the risk of destruction. The presence of armed conflict has also made it dangerous and difficult for civilians to take particular routes that may have checkpoints, landmines or that may come under fire. In some cases the armed forces have ordered people not to use designated local roads. This has constrained the ability of children to attend school and contributes to high dropout rates (Child Rights Forum, 2011; B.P.H.W.T, 2011; Partners Relief&Development).

Displacement and statelessness
Forced displacement and relocation in order to avoid persecution and attacks from armed forces; or due to government initiated or authorised development projects disrupts children’s education significantly. Access to education is very limited in IDP areas: according to statistics by the National Health and Education Committee, ‘educational facilities for nursery and early childhood care in IDP areas are zero while less than 20 percent of the population in IDP areas – Karen, Karenni, Shan and Wa regions – have access to primary education due to the instability of their situation and the lack of school facilities’ (cited in Women’s League, 2008: 47). While ad hoc schools are available in some circumstances, the makeshift nature of such schools makes it difficult to get a quality education. Often there are no educational aids or books or even shelter. Children living with their families in hiding face additional obstacles in accessing education (Child Rights Forum, 2011; Women’s League, 2008). Having to constantly move leaves little time to study in any systematic and meaningful way. Further, makeshift schools are often destroyed during military attacks on IDP hiding places (Partners Relief&Development, 2010).

Rohingya children in Arakan state face particular obstacles to education due to their status as non-citizens. Restrictions on the right to movement limits their access to education. While there are primary and secondary educational institutions at the village level in North Arakan state, these services are very neglected. In addition, Rakhine teachers are often not interested in teaching Rohingya children (Child Rights Forum, 2011).

Health
There are various barriers to accessing health care in Burma. These include:

Under-investment in health care
Public health services have also suffered from decades of neglect and inadequate investment. The government spends less than 3% of its budget annually on health care, resulting in weak health care services for most of the population (Women’s League of Burma, 2008: 8, Richard et al., 2009). Although health facilities are visible in most towns and cities in the country, under-investment has rendered these structures largely empty shells, with acute shortages of medicine, medical facilities and supplies and few trained health staff or none at all (Women’s League of Burma, 2008). Inadequate investment in clean water supplies and sanitation, particularly in rural areas, also increases the level of preventable diseases (Child Rights Forum, 2011).

Exacerbating the adverse effects of failing to invest in health care, the government has also restricted UN agencies and international NGOs from working in Burma and providing health services (Burma Medical Association et al., 2010; Women’s League of Burma, 2008).
Costly private health care
As a result of this significant under-investment in public health services, almost 90% of healthcare expenditures (including basic primary and preventive health care) are covered privately, out-of-pocket. This severely restricts access given the country’s very low per capita income and given that the average household in the country spends over 70% of their budget on food alone (Child Rights Forum; Burma Medical Association et al, 2010).

Armed conflict and displacement
Health care facilities and services are even worse in ethnic areas, due largely to decades of civil conflict, increased militarisation and government restrictions (Richard et al., 2009). In some cases where health care facilities are available, access may be controlled and based on the whims of the local military commanders (Child Rights Forum, 2011).

Health indicators for rural ethnic populations in the eastern areas are worse than Burma’s national rates; some populations in conflict areas, particularly IDP communities in eastern Burma, have maternal mortality rates that are far higher than national figures (Child Rights Forum, 2011; Burma Medical Association et al., 2010; Women’s League of Burma, 2008).

In relocation sites and areas with ceasefire agreements, access to proper medicines and health facilities is extremely limited. Where facilities do exist (often built through forced labour), they are inadequately staffed and lack medicines (Partners Relief&Development, 2010). For displaced persons in hiding, health services are often even more scarce (Partners Relief&Development, 2010).

Reproductive health issues
While the health of the entire population in Burma is affected by the government’s underinvestment, women and children bear much of the brunt of the extremely poor health system in terms of high levels of maternal mortality and infant deaths (Women’s League, 2008). Women in conflict areas are particularly affected: it is estimated that 1 in 12 women in eastern Burma will lose her life as a result of pregnancy-related causes, a figure far worse than Burma’s national figure of 1 in 75 (which is already the worst in the region) (cited in Women’s League, 2008: 56).

Access to family-planning programmes is hindered not only by inadequate investment but also due to cultural taboos about talking about reproductive health (Women’s League, 2008). The absence of family planning services may also be due to the government’s stated desire to increase the country’s population (Bercow, 2008). Women often turn to abortions as a form of fertility control; as abortion is illegal in Burma, the methods used are often dangerous to women’s health (Women’s League, 2008). The situation is particularly dire in conflict-affected and border areas as international agencies, private practitioners and private clinics are less able to access these areas.

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