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Burmese military authorities threaten villagers before International Red Cross visit to Central Shan State

Before the visit of an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) team to Laikha town in Central Shan State on December 9th, 2002, village elders were threatened by the military authorities, according to reports from Shan refugees who have recently arrived at the border.

The ten-member ICRC team were conducting a ten-day assessment visit to Central Shan State, from 2-12 December, travelling by road east from Taunggyi to Loilem, Namzarng, Murng Nai and Laikha.

Two days prior to the visit to Laikha, police and military authorities ordered some of the local teachers, headmen and ex-government officials to come to the Laikha police station, and commanded them to form a civilian "committee" which would liaise with the ICRC. They were ordered to accompany the ICRC team and note down all questions asked, and threatened to be "careful" when answering any questions.

The ICRC has only recently been allowed by the regime into this area of Central Shan State, where over 300,000 villagers have been forcibly relocated by the military regime since 1996, and where the majority of the 173 rape incidents documented in the June 2002 report "Licence to Rape" by SWAN and the Shan Human Rights Foundation were committed.

The military regime has repeatedly rejected the findings of the report, citing the presence of international agencies, including the ICRC, in Shan State as evidence that the rapes could not have taken place. On December 26, 2002, it again denied it had been using rape as a weapon of war, in response to a US State Department report repeating the allegations.

"It is very clear that the military regime wants to use the presence of ICRC in Shan State to help deny the charges that they are licencing rape of ethnic women," said Mo Lao of the Shan Women's Action Network. "But if they really have nothing to hide, why are they asking villagers to be "careful" when answering questions?"

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