

# Burma's Hollow Reforms

Military sexual assaults on ethnic women persist

**I**N NOVEMBER 2012, A 26-YEAR-old woman from Putao Township was gang-raped by seven Burma army soldiers, one of more than 100 women and girls whose sexual attacks were documented between 2010 and 2013. No one knows how many more cases were not reported. These attacks indicate a pattern of sexual violence by the military that contradicts Burmese president Thein Sein's reform agenda, as well as the government's claims of democratic transition.

Praising Burma's reforms, as President Obama did during a visit to the country (called Myanmar by the military) that same month, masks the fact that ethnic women are still not safe from sexual violence at the hands of a military that has operated, since a coup in 1962, with impunity. The military may have engineered the drafting and adoption of a new con-

stitution in 2008, which it heralded as a transition to democratic rule and which the international community thought signaled a sea change, but such "reforms" have done little for ethnic women.

Burma is home to more than 130 ethnic groups spread over seven states, and for decades their struggle for self-determination and control over natural resources has given rise to armed conflicts with the military—with women being the direct victims. The military uses systematic sexual violence to quell ethnic opposition and achieve multiple goals: to instill fear in the populace, humiliate and destroy communities, gain information about the strategy of ethnic armies, punish support for ethnic groups and even accomplish ethnic "cleansing." Military culture fails to hold perpetrators accountable, giving soldiers what they consider to be a license to rape.

Moreover, the 2008 constitution granted the military immunity for its actions and denies the civilian government control over military matters, imposing almost insurmountable structural barriers to accountability.

Current peace negotiations between the civilian government and ethnic groups offer scant hope for improvement. Both sides are led by men and consider sexual violence by the military a secondary issue—to be addressed, if at all, after peace is negotiated. This failure to include sexual violence and women's concerns in the peace process conflicts with such international accountability mandates as U.N. Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security and recent global commitments to end sexual violence in conflict areas.

In January 2014, the U.S. government stipulated that funds allocated to the Burmese government be contingent on constitutional reform and protections for human rights—but made no mention of sexual violence or protections for ethnic women. Civil-society organizations have repeatedly asked the Burmese government, political leaders—including international hero Aung San Suu Kyi—and the international community to focus attention on this crisis, with limited success.

All these obstacles suggest that the ethnic women of Burma still have a long way to go before they see justice or enjoy any real benefits of democratic reforms.

—MICHELLE ONELLO AND  
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◀ A woman who says she was raped by Burmese security forces stands in the doorway of her home.

