

WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

STATEMENT OF THE KAREN NATIONAL UNION

I am Saw Mae Plet Htoo, an indigenous person representing the Karen National Union in Burma. I wish to speak on the agenda item on self-determination.

The report of the special rapporteur, Mr. Martinez Cobo, spoke of the application of the principle of self-determination to indigenous peoples, noting that the right of self-determination may be expressed in various forms of autonomy within a State, without necessarily including a right to separate. The special rapporteur stressed the need to examine these issues in the light of the history, situation and goals of each indigenous group.

The experience of the indigenous nationalities in Burma is very relevant in any discussion of this important issue. The non-Burman indigenous nationalities in Burma were politically autonomous before the area became a British colony. This political autonomy continued under British colonialism. Non-Burman nationalities in almost half of Burma were separately administered, with traditional leaders retaining a degree of political control.

It is a historical fact that before independence in 1948 there had been no political integration of the minority national territories with the Burman areas. In the short period 1945 to 1948 a new state structure had to be developed for an independent Burma. Aung San, the great Burman independence leader, stated:

"In my opinion it will not be feasible to set up a unitary state. We must set up a Union with properly regulated provisions to safeguard the rights of the national minorities."

Independent Burma was created on the clear understanding that it would be a federal union. The separate political rights of the minority national areas were recognized in the January, 1947, agreement between Aung San and the British Prime Minister Attlee. The rights of the national groups were also recognized in the February, 1947, Panglong Agreement between Burman leaders and other national groups, in the commission of inquiry on the frontier areas and in the independence constitution of 1948. Each of these fundamental political and legal documents recognized rights of self-determination of the indigenous nationalities. The 1948 constitution gave each nationality representation in a Chamber of Nationalities at the national level. The constitution specifically recognized a right of the Shan and Kayah (Karenni) to separate after 10 years.

These promises of autonomy and self-determination were betrayed. The denial of these promises led to armed resistance which, in the case of the Karen, began in 1949. The present constitution of Burma, enacted in 1974, gives no autonomy to the various nationalities. In practice there is no respect for minority languages, cultures and political aspirations. The Government's response to the minority nationalities is purely military. In spite of this reality, Burma still claims to be a "union" and the anniversary of the Panglong Agreement is celebrated every year as "union" day.

In 1976 the minority nationalities formed the National Democratic Front, an alliance of ten national groups. The N.D.F. and its member groups, such as

the Karen National Union, are politically independent. The N.D.F. and its member groups oppose the traffic in opium. We seek a political solution to the national question in Burma. We want the fighting to end. We seek a genuine federal union in Burma, with equality and self-determination for the nationalities. The N.D.F. position, as restated at our 1987 congress, describes Burma as:

"a multi-national country, collectively inhabited and owned by the many indigenous peoples."

The political goal of a federal union is described as follows:

"Each republic government is to have full power of self-government, while the central government shall exercise the power over defence, foreign affairs, finance and monetary affairs, post and telecommunications, airways, waterways, railway communication and federal judiciary."

We seek two legislative bodies at the national level, a peoples assembly and a nationalities assembly.

You can see that we seek autonomy, not separation. As well, you can see that we seek to establish 'the relations between the indigenous nationalities that were solemnly promised in 1947 and 1948. It ~~is~~ is the betrayal of those promises which has led to 38 years of resistance. A recognition by the Government of Burma of the principles set out in the report of the special rapporteur on the issue of self-determination would have made this long resistance unnecessary.

Madam Chairman, we call on the Working Group to undertake a study on the question of self-determination which will take into account the special circumstances of indigenous peoples in particular countries, including Burma. We are confident that such a study will advance your work.

Thank you Madam Chairman.