

Statement made by Mai Aik Phone, General Secretary of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), on the occasion of signing the Deed of Commitment to ban landmines held at Geneva on April 16, 2007

Thank you Ms Elisabeth Reusse-Decrey, President of Geneva Call and Mr. Claude Bonard, Secretary General of the Canton of the Chancellery of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, for inviting the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) to come to Geneva to sign the Deed of Commitment to ban landmines in this historic room.

When the PSLF was formed in 1992, we had many goals: We wanted to see all Burmese nationalities free from oppression: the removal of the military regime and the end of super-nationalism: the right to self-determination and to oppose the narcotics industry: a nationwide cease-fire and the opportunity to build a genuine federal union of Burma incorporating a national Palaung state and, The establishment of fundamental human and democratic rights according to international standards for our people.

The Palaung people are one of the indigenous nationalities of the multi-ethnic country that is the Union of Burma. We call ourselves Ta-ang. The Palaung people have a long history and a strong sense of their unique identity. We have our own language and literature, a distinctive traditional culture, our own territory and a sustainable economy. The Palaung are predominantly Buddhist with less than ten percent being Christian or Animist.

The Palaung number over one million, and most live in the mountains of the north western Shan State, which borders China. Large numbers also live in towns throughout the southern and eastern Shan State. The Palaung are famous in Burma for the high quality tea that is grown in their highland farms. Unfortunately, the Palaung have not been able to live and tend to their lands in peace. For centuries we have suffered from civil war.

The Palaung people have been victims of landmines planted by the Burmese Army, the Communist Party of Burma (now no longer militarily active), the former Mounng Tai Army, and the former Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA). To date, the official count of Palaung landmine victims is thirty-five wounded and more than 10 people dead.

In March 1984, my 68-year old grandmother went to the tea plantation on the hill near my village in Nam San Township. Unfortunately, she stepped on a land mine that was laid down in the tea plantation and it exploded. She was seriously wounded and sent to the nearest hospital. But, the incident occurred in a remote area, so it took some time for her to reach to the hospital and she passed away before she arrived. My relative E-Htay who accompanied her was also wounded. Many sad stories have been told about landmines in Palaung areas. Travelers who use the jungle paths take great risks when they go to the plantations to pick tea leaves or go to the towns for shopping. They are always anxious of these silent and invisible murderers. If a porter forcibly used by the military regime steps on a land mine and is wounded, sometimes the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) soldiers shot him/her dead on the spot because they did not want him/her as a burden.

Therefore, on behalf of the Palaung people, the PSLF would like to appeal to the Government and other armed groups to desist from planting landmines. We also appeal to the Burmese Army

to disband their bases in Palaung areas.

The PSLF has never resorted to utilizing landmines because it is against our culture to use such indiscriminate weapons. Having been victims of these weapons ourselves, we are only too aware of the terrible human and economic cost they inflict on the civilian population. We wish to express our support for the international campaign to ban landmines and also for Geneva Call's actions.

The PSLF is grateful for the opportunity to be a signatory to the Deed of Commitment to ban landmines and will fully cooperate in any way to stop the proliferation of landmines. The PSLF will endeavour to actively implement measures to create a landmine free Burma.

Thank you!