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**Ei Htu Hta IDPs Supporting Committee Letter of Appeal  
for  
Continue Cross Border Humanitarian Aid**

4, September, 2017

To whom it may concern,

We write this urgent appeal to you to help us through a grave and dangerous situation. As you may know, all food assistance at the EiHtuHta IDP camp is scheduled to end in September of this year. Additionally, there have been enormous cuts to vital services within the camp. We have worked for the past 2 years with the residents at the camp to see if they had somewhere to return to and under what conditions they would be willing to leave the camp. We ensured that they knew food assistance would be cut and that conditions at EiHtuHta would likely continue to become more and more dire. Despite these discussions and efforts, the majority of residents remain in the camp. Eliminating food assistance and cuts to education and health, pose the risks of starvation, spread of disease and children going uneducated and hungry. There are more details below, but we are asking you to help fund these vital services while the peace process continues, safety can be established, and land and livelihood issues dealt with. We are afraid lives will be lost if this assistance is not provided. There are currently 2,670 people in the camp who need your help.

**1. BACKGROUND:**

**EiHtuHta (ETT) Humanitarian Assistance History:**

EiHtuHta IDP camp was established in April 2006 due to a major operation by the Burma military in the Taungoo District of Karen State. The operation resulted in enormous displacements. Initially approximately 700 people settled in the camp. An administrative committee of 11 members led the camp. The camp has grown with continued displacements and currently hosts 2,670 people. The camp committee has increased to 21 people. The camp has been supported by community-based organizations (CBO's) since its inception, providing and monitoring sustainability, food, education, health and livelihood support.

Karen CBO's, providing services to ETT camp, were told early in 2015 that the food assistance would stop in September 2015. In response, the Karen CBO's, together with The Border Consortium (TBC) and INGO's who provide food support to ETT for more than a decade, advocated and helped provide a voice for the people in the camp. Food support was extended to September 2017. A preparedness committee was formed to ensure the camp residents were well informed about the ending of their food support. This required that, within two years, people needed to go back to their villages or have some relatives they could return to live with. The preparedness committee facilitated their return together with local leaders to ensure safety.

There were not less than three surveys done to ensure the choices of the IDPs themselves was known and understood. All results were the same: less than one third of the population was willing to return to their homes, the rest are afraid to return to their place of origin and have no other option. CBO representatives, ETT IDP Camp Committee representatives, TBC, and the Karen National Union (KNU) Central Committee held many public forums to ensure everyone knew food assistance to the camp was ending.



The Committee visited three districts and held a range of community consultations within the ETT camp and at host communities. As the date approaches for ending food support, there is an urgent need to support those who choose to return in order to ensure their safety and protection. The CBO's visited three districts, which were potential IDP return sites and provided information about those sites to the IDP community for decision-making. At the end of 2016, there were some changes based upon the information provided to the community and their own assessment. Most of the people in ETT chose not to go back to the available return sites, because they do not feel safe or they see no opportunity to support themselves.

### **Current Political Overview:**

The KNU, which administers control over areas in Karen and Mon States, and portions of Pegu and Tenasserim Regions of Southeastern Burma, started peace talks in 2012 with the Burma Government and signed state and Union level ceasefire agreements. These talks and temporary ceasefire agreements immediately resulted in rumors being spread about the possible return of IDPs and refugees. As these rumors and related news stories spread, the IDP and refugee communities became increasingly nervous and confused since there was little factual information about a return and little consultation with IDPs and refugees themselves.

The peace process, since 2012, has been very slow and now seems to have stalled. Under the previous Burma Government, a major peace conference was held and a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed with eight of the approximately twenty ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). Thus, the NCA was not really a "nationwide" ceasefire agreement. Moreover, there is increasing divisions among those EAOs which have signed the NCA and those who have not.

The new NLD government of Aung San Suu Kyi has conducted two important Union Peace Conferences, the most recent in May 2017. Many EAO stakeholders were effectively excluded and debate and dialogue were strictly controlled. The Conference ended with no tangible political discussions or agreements about political, economic, resource, and security sectors power sharing. The important issue of control over the Burma military was not a topic permitted for discussion at the Conference despite the Burma military actions, beginning in 1962, to be one of the underlying causes for fighting in the country. Also, the long held political aspirations of the ethnic people for a large degree of political, administrative, and fiscal self-autonomy promised by Aung San Sui Kyi's father and the inducement for the ethnic people to form a union with the Burmans in 1947 were not acknowledged or recognized within the Conference.

Thus, the peace conferences appear not to offer any near term hope for a sustainable solution to long standing ethnic issue which has given rise to seventy years of ethnic conflict. Peace, with a security sector reform (SSR) of the Burma military and the disarmament, demobilizations, and reintegration of the EAOs, is still year away. Until then, it will not be safe for the IDPs and refugees to be repatriated back into communities inside Burma. The IDPs and refugees know this, but are afraid that that the INGOs do not know this, are confusing ceasefire agreement and peace conferences with peace, and thus, cutting humanitarian assistance to both IDPs and refugees.

### **Burma Government and Military Situation:**

The 2008 Constitution, created by the former Burma military regime, places the Burma military above a civilian government. Consequently, the current NLD government does not control the Burma military soldiers. The Burma military has aggressively pursued offensive military operations against those EAOs who have not been permitted to be actively engaged in the peace process. Other EAOs, which have not signed the NCA, signed Union level ceasefire agreements, attended the peace conferences, are attacked by the Burma military or otherwise harassed to force them to sign the NCA – all in violation of the Union level ceasefire agreements. Some of the EAOs, which did sign the NCA, see the NCA broken when it serves the



strategic and tactical needs of the Burma military. The Burma military has refused to allow any international ceasefire mechanisms to monitor compliance with the ceasefire agreements. They have also used the various ceasefire agreements to expand and reinforce their military camps in ethnic areas affected by the conflicts.

All of this not only creates more IDPs, but provides great concern, fear, and tension among existing IDPs and refugees as to their safety and security inside Burma. With real cause, they justifiably feel that this is not the right time to return to places inside Burma from their IDP and refugee camps as the end to fighting is not near.

**Urgent need for short term and rehabilitation self reliance programs:**

***Food:***

There is an urgent need to continue food assistance to ETT. There are currently 2,670 lives that depend upon it. There is a longstanding internationally-recognized convention that people will not be forcibly returned as refugees or IDPs. Many of these people do not feel safe or there is nothing for them to return to. Food is needed until these underlying issues can be dealt with.

***Education:***

Most villages in the Karen areas of Burma do not have a formal education system in place for various reasons. Some villages have nursery schools and some not; others have primary schools and some not. Most schools use the Karen Education Department curriculum, while others use the Burma Education Department curriculum with the Karen language added as a subject. Due to financial problems, villagers send their children to the district high school to further their education. Others send their children to the closest towns for access to education.

One of the issues with refugee return is the lack of an education system in the towns. As a result, there are 160 students in ETT who are living in dormitories. Those dormitories need funding to feed, clothe, and provide materials for those students. We also need funding for teacher stipends and school buildings. Children should not suffer while adults work out basic programs and safety.

***Health:***

Most of the villages do not have a nearby village clinic or hospital. Some villages have community health workers who can assist with basic treatment for minor illness and provide health prevention awareness. Villagers, who cannot afford care, usually use the KNU health care services since it is free. Most villagers depend on the KNU's Karen Department for Health and Welfare clinics at district and township levels close to them. Those villagers have to travel from three to eight hours to reach the nearest clinic and/or hospital. These are real problems for vulnerable populations returning to their homes.

In the meantime at ETT, the Mother and Child Vaccination Program and clinic have both lost all funding. This will certainly result in more disease and the spread of illness. Additionally, the IDP camp hospital is critically underfunded and will not be able to take care of the resulting problems.

***Security:***

Overall, according to villagers, there is more freedom of movement in their areas. However, for villages located close to the Burma military camps, there is a great deal of worry that the ceasefire will not last, despite their hope for a sustainable peace. Villagers want the Burma military camps removed and for them to stay away from the villages and the places where there are villagers livelihoods - farms and orchards.



**Land:**

Villagers, village heads, and community leaders, who have been interviewed, mention that they will only allow people who are from their place of origin to resettle back into their villages due to the limitations of space, land, and natural resources which villagers share and depend upon. They clearly and repeatedly said no strangers or outsiders will be accepted into their villages. These issues must get dealt with in order to avoid a humanitarian crisis and increased conflict in villages.

**Livelihood:**

Most of the villagers in the Taw Oo District, especially the villages that we visited, depend upon rice cultivation to support themselves and their families along with selling betel nut, betel nut leaves, dog-fruit, and mar aye fruit. Livelihoods in those villages depend upon selling what people cultivate on their farms, orchards, or collect from the forest. All of the villagers wanted to have good roads so they can sell their products in nearby towns and larger villages near the main road. The returning IDP's do not have access to land in most cases; others have taken the land, the land has been destroyed by landmines, there are other problems with titles, and related issues. There is little or no other available work. These issues also have to be dealt with in order for people to realistically return.

**Water and Sanitation:**

Most of the villages have enough water throughout the year. However, there are some who have difficulty carrying water from a river, stream, and spring to the villages. The Karen Office of Relief and Development and church groups have built large water transport systems in some villages, but the villagers still need to carry water some distance. The water carrying distance is anywhere from fifteen minutes to one hour.

**Conclusion:**

We, the undersigned organizations, are asking for your help. We have attached a budget for those basic services which are needed for people to survive. We are in a desperate situation and cannot move forward without your help. We are asking you to continue to support these IDPs in EiHtuHta Camp in Mu Traw District in Karen State of Burma in a way that you can. This is very critical so that they and their children will have a better life guarantee to return home when there is genuine peace and political stability reinstates.

Sincerely,

*Mahn Mahn*  
04.09.2017

Mahn Mahn  
Chair person

EiHtuHta IDPs Supporting Committee

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