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Songkran New Year Greeting from Kaoawo

Dear Reader,

We must sincerely thank the many people who have donated in the last couple of years to Kaowao on reporting news from Burma. Your financial support allowed for expansion at the Kaowao offices, kept our staff fed and ensured regular communication with our reporters inside Burma.

You have made a real difference in supporting our struggle for peace, justice, and democracy in Burma. Your funding directly affects the number of articles we can publish and therefore the amount of awareness of the many issues regarding Mon State and southern Burma. Thanks to the Open Society Institute (OSI), Internews (Thailand), the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy and many individuals who have contributed funds the running of Rehmony Radio, Rehmony Video, Kaowao E-news and the four versions of the Kaowao Website.

We are a team of committed journalists however our task is becoming increasingly difficult, especially for the volunteers at Sangkhlaburi Office to continue these works without basic financial needs. Even with minimum financial and human resources Kaowao has remained determined to walk on and achieve our goals.
Your additional support will make a huge difference in these critical times - what you might consider a small donation will be very welcome, and will go a long way!

Thank you for your generosity and continued support.

Kind Regards,

Editor

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Kaowao Newsgroup

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Two more Burmese soldiers die after another KNU attack

Kaowao: April 8, 2009

Sangkhlaburi – The Karen National Union (KNU) attacked a Burma Army column, Infantry Battalion No. 24 yesterday morning.

The vehicle drivers who passed by the Burma Army troops reported that KNU guerrillas from battalion No. 16 attacked the Burmese troops on the Three Pagodas Pass – Anangwin motor road. Two Burmese soldiers were killed and three were injured in the ambush between Aplon and Myaing Thayar villages.

Infantry Battalion No. 24, led by provisional battalion commander Major Kyaw Htin, was coming from the Three Pagodas Pass border after replacing the position with the Infantry Battalion No. 32.

Last week, the KNU Battalion No.16 ambushed a Burma Army Infantry column from Battalion No. 32 on the Three Pagodas Pass and Thanbyuzayat (Zobbu) motor road. One Burma Army soldier was killed and another was seriously injured during the two skirmishes between Pa-Pya and Paya and between Pa-Pya and Kyon-Khun villages on the same day, March 28, 2009.

This area is active with KNU Battalion No.16 and other armed groups; Karen Peace Force (KPF), DKBA and the NMSP have also set up their checkpoints.

The KNU has changed its military tactics from a war of position to a war of movement with 3000 guerrillas who focus on ambush attacks in its defensive war against the Burma Army.

Prior to this new attack on April 6, three members of the KNU Central Executive Committee comprised of Vice-President Saw David Tharckabaw and Secretary General Naw Zipporah Sein met with the Thai Foreign Minister to hold peace talks with the Burmese junta.

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KNU Leaders Meet Thai Officials

By Asan, Kaowao: April 07, 2009

A delegation from the Karen National Union (KNU) met with Thai officials in Bangkok yesterday according to a source from the KNU.

Three members of the KNU Central Executive Committee led by Vice-President Saw David Tharckabaw met the Thai Foreign Ministry officials to hold peace talks with the Burmese junta.

Phado David Htaw, a member of the KNU Central Executive Committee told Kaowao today that the Thai Foreign Ministry invited the Karen to discuss national reconciliation in Burma with the Burmese junta. No details were released on who else attended the meeting from the Thai counterparts.

The Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya has been asked by the Burma’s ruling junta to facilitate the peace talks between the government and the Karen rebels during his two day visit to Burma in March 2008.

Aung Thu Nyein, a Burma researcher on Thailand, said that from an economic perspective, Thailand wants peace in Burma because they can build dams and improve border trade. However, Thailand should not only pressure the KNU but work with other Burmese groups to create more stability in the region as a whole.

Thai army officials recently asked Karen leaders living in the Thai border town of Mae Sot to return to the KNU controlled areas inside Burma.

Since the present regime took power in 1988, the KNU has engaged in peace talks with the Burmese regime on four previous occasions. The late chairman of the KNU, Gen. Saw Bo Mya, held peace talks with the regime in Rangoon in 2005, two years before his death. Contacts have been at a standstill since then.

Mr. David Htaw said, “We don’t want to talk in Burma this time because we have already been through this before and no results came out of the talks.”

The KNU has been in conflict with the Burmese army for more than 50 years. One of the longest civil wars in the world, some KNU members are growing more frustrated with the armed struggle.

The KNU army has become weaker since 1994, when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army split from the KNU. After General Saw Bo Mya passed away in 2007, another splinter group led by Htaing Maung defected to the Burmese government. Recently, the youngest son of General Bo Mya, Saw Nay Soe Mya defected to the Burmese military along with his family members on March 30.

Aung Thu Nyein said, “The Burmese government is trying to split up the KNU members group by group. They (government) don’t want to bring all together as a whole group, but whittle away our will for self-determination.”

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Mon Community Opens Bilingual Class in Australia

By Banya Hongsar, Kaowao: April 7, 2009

Canberra – The Australia Mon Association has opened a weekly Mon Community Bilingual class in Canberra, the capital city of Australia. The Mon office, with funding from an Adult Community Grant by the local government, initiated the class to improve English language skills for the community, especially women who had limited English language skills prior to their settlement.
“This is the best opportunity for all Mon people in Canberra to be able to use their valuable time and energy with the Mon volunteer tutors. We should be proud of ourselves that we were selected by the ACT Government to receive the grant to start this program,” Nai Pe Thein Zar, a senior advisor of the Mon community in Australia addressed at the opening day on March 29.

The Australia Mon Association leaders Nai Din Pla Hongsa, Nai Siri Mon Chan and Nai Kwae Mon are devoted volunteer tutors and Mehm Cheak Gakao is coordinating the project with the support of the Mon Office staff who proposed the project to the Department of Education under the Adult Community Education Program.

The program benefits 16 adult students from intermediate to upper intermediate and will run for 100 hours every Sunday at the Mon office building, Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre, Canberra City.

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KNU Launches Ambush Attacks

Kaowao: April 2, 2009

Sangkhlaburi -- Karen National Union (KNU) has launched guerrilla offensive to counter the Burma Army’s military offensive during the dry season.

According to a KNU source, about 15 guerrillas from the KNU Brigade No. 4 attacked the Burma Army Infantry Battalion No. 557 led by Major Aung Myo Than near Amoe Village of Metta Sub-township, Tavoy District on March 27, 2009 seriously injuring 11 BA soldiers.

Among those injured; Lt. Thet Aung (Ka/36927), Sergeant Soe Win, Sgt. Than Zin Aung and Corporal Soe Thant died at Sinpyudaing Village on the way to Tavoy Hospital, the source from the KNU confirmed.

Infantry Battalion No. 557 is under the command of Tactical Operation Command 1, Sakakha 13 (Military Operation Command 13).

Meanwhile, the KNU Battalion No.16 attacked a column of Burma Army Infantry Battalion No. 32 along the Three Pagodas Pass and Thanbyuzayat (Zobbu) motor road. One Burma Army soldier was killed and another was seriously injured during the two skirmishes between Pa-Pya and Paya at 5:40 and between Pa-Pya and Kyon-Khun at 14:20 local time on the same day, March 28, 2009.

Infantry Battalion No. 32 is on the way to the Three Pagodas Pass border town to replace the position with Infantry Battalion No. 24. I.B 32, under the command of Southeast Command, is based at the KyaIn-Seik-Kyi town in Karen State

According to a MNLA retired officer, the KNU has changed its military tactics from a war of position to a war of movement in which approximately 3000 soldiers focus on ambush attacks in its defensive war against the Burma Army. The KNU has grown weaker since the breakaway of DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) and the fall of Marnerplaw in 1995.
During a recent interview with the Irrawaddy, Phado David Htaw, a member of the KNU Central Executive Committee, said many Karen people have fled as refugees and cannot support the movement, the KNU is trying to cope with assistance from international organizations.

Mon eagerly await news on global markets
Kaowao: March 30, 2009

Sangkhlaburi -- The Mon community is eager to hear news on the global financial meltdown and its effect on their local business community, Kaowao has learned.

Kaowao reporters are asked by many local people to publish more on business news and the current exchange rate rather than the current political situation. “I was in the village festival in Ye Township and many restaurant owners say the people are hanging on to their money and not spending like last year. The villagers are keen to learn about the global market and its effect on the price of rubber and rice. They want us to report on news about the money exchange rate and consumer prices,” reported a field reporter inside Mon State.

The soaring Burmese Kyat has hit the local and migrant communities in the pocket book from the unstable rate of exchange. In Bangkok, the Kyat in the market is valued at 28 to one Thai Baht. Last year one Baht was valued at 38 Kyat and has fluctuated down to 25 before bouncing back up to 28.9 with some predicting it may stay that way for awhile.

In the Three Pagodas Pass border area, many rubber plantation workers are facing job losses as rubber plantation owners begin retrenching by cutting costs and stopping production due to the fluctuating price in the rubber market and dwindling sales. “We need to keep up-to-date on what is happening in the global market. The owners are not making a profit and are reluctant to produce and grow rubber. At the opening season last year, the rubber price started between 60-65 Baht per Kilo and went up to 95-100 Baht. But this year the market started at 41 Baht per Kilo where it has stayed,” said Nai Bein Hnok from the border town.

The owner normally pays out 45 percent of earning to production workers who make the rubber sheets. The remaining 65 percent for the owner includes production and transportation costs. The expense for growing rubber is also costly as the owner spends about 6000 Baht for 1000 plants at the beginning of its growing cycle.

Meanwhile, people in Ye township see some hope in the future market because the high price of gasoline and gold brings in a profit from their garden products. The price of gold is at 520,000 Kyat from 500,000 per Kyat-Tha weight. Dried betel nut has gone up from 1000 to 1200 per Viss.

However, a local businessman warns that the wild fluctuation in prices is due to the upcoming traditional New Year Songrant Festival. At this time, people spend more money and the market is active and likely will go down after the festival. Poverty and inflation brings out more thieves and only the community will suffer in the long run.
Mon villagers forced to provide wood for brick factory

Kaowao: March 19, 2009

Residents near military run brick making factories are forced to provide wood for its operation according to a village headman from Ye, Mon State.

The commander of Burma Army Light Infantry No. 586, under Sakakha 19 (Military Operation Command 19) ordered villagers to collect two pieces of wood from every household around their village tract. Sonathar (Jomsai) Tu-Myaung (Brong), Pot-Htow, Blit, Aplaing, Krein Pok Mon villagers are located near the military owned brick factory, and have to follow military orders and provide business to the Burma Army for its self-reliance scheme.

A Mon community leader from Ye said the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) confiscated the land five years ago for the construction of factories to make bricks for battalions. The source quoted that the Commander of Light Infantry No. 586 also forces the local people to buy the bricks to support their military business.

The brick pits are as big as soccer pitches and are about 10 to 30 meters deep. The factory takes up about two hectares of land which had been used previously for farming, but the factory will render it useless for crop production in the future, locals claim. The firewood is then hauled to the factories and dumped into huge pits for firing and shaping the clay for bricks. The villagers are sometimes forced into making the bricks, a labor intensive operation which requires villagers to work long hours in molding the clay by hand day and night.

The residents of Khaw Zar Sub Township were also forced by the SPDC Army to provide timber for a local military brick factory.

Military Operation Command 19 confiscated several acres of land from the villagers for Burma Army’s self-reliance scheme.

The local farmers received no compensation from the Burmese junta. There have been over 10 battalions built in southern Mon State after the New Mon State Party reached a ceasefire with the Burmese government. The land is confiscated by the military not only to build military camps but also to exploit civilian property to support the military and its operations in the area.
Opinion/Analysis

Washington is likely to ask Jakarta to either mediate talks between the military junta and the opposition or Washington may engage the military junta through Jakarta.

Obama likely to lean toward Indonesia for Burma

Nehginpao Kipgen

In less than one hundred days in the White House, President Barack Obama's foreign policies have either been spelled out or are in the reviewing process. One of which in review is Burma. The administration is looking at ways to engage the Burmese military junta.

Reaching out to Indonesia is one option Washington is likely to consider. Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian country the secretary of state Hillary Clinton visited during her first overseas trip in February.

During their telephone conversation on March 13, President Barack Obama and Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono discussed how to make progress on democracy and human rights in Burma. This conversation happened just a couple of days before the Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein's maiden visit to Jakarta since taking office in 2007.

Some good reasons why Obama is likely to lean toward Indonesia are: first, Indonesia is a country that had transitioned from military rule to democracy; second, Indonesia is the largest and an influential member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations where Burma is also a member; third, By working together with the world's Muslim-majority nation, Obama wants to send a message to the Muslim world that America is not their enemy; fourth, Obama has personal connection to Indonesia where he lived for 4 years.

The Obama administration's possible policy shift on Burma was evidenced by the comment Hillary Clinton made in Jakarta when she said, "Clearly, the path we have taken in imposing sanctions hasn't influenced the Burmese junta."

Washington is likely to ask Jakarta to either mediate talks between the military junta and the opposition or Washington may engage the military junta through Jakarta. This initiative could also end up in Indonesia playing a pivotal role in a "six-party talks" model on North-Korean nuclear program.

Like Burma, Indonesia was under military rule for more than three decades (1967 to 1998) under the then president Suharto. With its own experiences of a successful transition to democracy, Jakarta is studying the possibility of a dual-function government in which the Burmese military officers and civilians are each given roles in the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

The Indonesian model of a democratic transition is something the Burmese military junta has considered for quite sometime. In an interview with the Singapore's Straits Times newspaper in 2008, the United Nations special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, said, "I can reveal to you that the junta has been looking for a model closer to Indonesia where there was a transition from military to civilian rule and ultimately to democracy,"

Meanwhile, the leaders of State Peace and Development Council are anticipating a conciliatory tone from Washington. It, indeed, surprised many observers when the junta chief Than Shwe sent
congratulatory messages to Barack Obama on his election and inauguration, which many did not expect.

For over two decades, the American government has punished the Burmese military junta primarily for its human rights violations and for not honoring the mandate of 1990 general election, in which Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy party won in a landslide.

During their meeting on March 16, president Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Sein discussed a number of issues, including Rohingya refugees and the planned 2010 election in Burma. "The president emphasized the importance of a credible, transparent, fair and inclusive election process. He also said Myanmar should not just conduct elections, but most importantly quality elections", said Indonesian presidential spokesman Dino Patti Djalal.

The irony, however, is that even if there is a "transparent and fair" election as suggested by president Yudhoyono, there is already a flaw in the constitution itself. For example, twenty five percent of seats in both houses of the parliament are reserved for the military, and any amendment to the constitution would require more than seventy five percent votes. This means that no amendment will happen without the support of the military.

If the military goes ahead with its roadmap without reviewing the constitution, the country will head for another stage of internal problems with lingering dissenting views. Any attempt to find a long-term solution to the ethno-political problems must include the participation of different ethnic nationalities.

The Obama administration should not consider lifting sanctions immediately before seeing any tangible progress on the ground. Benchmarks, including release of political prisoners and making the democratization process inclusive, should be set for lifting sanctions. "Carrot and stick" diplomacy is necessary; neither one by itself is going to be pragmatic enough.

Obama and Yudhoyono are expected to hold further discussion at the G-20 summit in London on April 2, after which Obama will address the Muslim world from the Turkish parliament on April 6, which he pledged to do in his first hundred days in office.

Interestingly, Obama's family has connection to Burma - president Obama's paternal grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama, served with the British army in Burma during World Ward II. We will have to wait and see if this connection matters to president Obama in his effort to help establish a genuine democratic society in the Union of Burma.

(Nehginpao Kipgen is general secretary of U.S.-based Kuki International Forum www.kukiforum.com and a researcher on the rise of political conflicts in modern Burma. He is also the author of several analytical articles on the politics of Asia published in different leading international newspapers.)
Economic Crisis: Women Will Suffer Most

By Jay Fletcher, Green Left Weekly: 10 April, 2009

Countercurrents.org

As the economic crisis continues to worsen, with capitalism unable to stop the spiral towards a global depression that will plunge millions into poverty, women will experience the negative consequences more rapidly and with more severity.

While the ruling class — owners of banks, corporations and also governments — search for ways to make workers pay rather than pay with their own profits, women are among the oppressed groups who make the easiest, and therefore primary, target for cutbacks.

In Australia, the cutbacks at the expense of women are only just beginning to come to light.

It is now likely that the May federal budget will lack the maternity leave scheme that has been demanded by women and community groups for years. Access to paid maternity leave would mean greater financial independence for women, but is a right that is currently denied to more than half of Australia’s women workers.

An OECD study in 2000 showed that many women who take time off work to raise children remain financially disadvantaged for the rest of their lives.

Holding the economic crisis up as a shield, Rudd has swiftly backed away from his statement late last year that the government would implement a universal paid parental leave scheme.

The Australian Trades and Labour Council has also retreated on the issue, hiding behind the economic crisis and suggesting a “compromise” position of phasing in a scheme over a number of years to avoid “sending the budget into deeper deficit”, according to the March 3 Australian.

Ideally, fully funded child care would be an alternative. However, the economic crisis is increasingly being used in government back-pedalling and child care suffered one of the first blows of the crisis. Privately owned super-monopoly, ABC Learning Centres, went into voluntary receivership in November last year, displacing thousands of children.

The option now, women will be told, is to take responsibility for child care within the home, at the expense of their working lives.

Unemployment and increasing conditions of poverty will also come down hard on women. Globally, the International Labour Organisation has projected an unemployment rate between 6.3% and 7.1%. Yet the global unemployment rate for women is expected to reach 7.4% (compared to 7% for men) or 22 million women worldwide.

In Australia, ABN chief economist Amro Kieran Davies expects unemployment to climb to 8% by the end of the year. For women — who comprise the majority of low-wage, casual earners with less social protection — the deteriorating economy will mean the disproportionate effect of unemployment soon becomes a reality.

These trends are running parallel with both covert and explicit attacks on women’s rights in the workplace. Howard’s Work Choices and now Rudd’s Fair Work Act — “Work Choices-lite” — mean that women have even less ability to organise for their rights as workers.
The pay gap between men and women — where, over a lifetime, women will earn 77 cents of the male dollar — will inevitably increase, as wages and conditions are now harder to fight for.

All of these conditions, as they grow worse, will compound into a situation that progressive women and feminists have been fighting against for decades: financial dependency and women becoming trapped in their circumstances.

“Women’s lower employment rates, weaker control over property and resources, concentration in informal and vulnerable forms of employment with lower earnings, and less social protection, all place women in a weaker position than men to weather crises”, ILO Bureau for Gender Equality director Jane Hodges said in March.

The reality, she said, is that “women may cope by engaging in working longer hours or by taking multiple low-income jobs but still having to maintain unpaid care commitments”. This is just what happened throughout the Great Depression.

During the Great Depression, women’s workload actually increased. The continuing mantra of “making ends meet” and also “keeping up the family morale” as hard times hit became a burden that rested mostly on women.

When the depression plunged one-third of Australian men into unemployment, women were called upon to work harder — as homemakers, guardians and protectors of the family.

The result was a profound strengthening in the ideology of the family and suppression of any chance for women to take advantage of the economic turmoil and see the crisis of the system as a chance to make more permanent change.

Now, the same thing is happening. Government leaders and media have already begun to churn through the values and cultural leverage that pressures women into the home.

The same thing can be seen universally across the sections of Australia fearing the effects of the crisis: rather than radicalising and seeking to seriously challenge the system, people are being told to put their heads down and “work through the crisis”, putting the burden largely on women to implement this strategy.

Because the system is sexist, when the system begins to fail it is women who will suffer the most. When capitalism needs to cut back, it first hacks away at the victories and gains of mass progressive movements — the attacks on workers is a key example.

The wins of second-wave feminism are under attack and will be the first to go. If there is no movement against this, it will continue, driving women further backwards than we can afford.

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Readers’ Front

Dear readers,

We invite comments and suggestions on improvements to Kaowao newsletter. With your help, we hope that Kaowao News will continue to grow to serve better the needs of those seeking social justice in Burma. And we hope that it will become an important forum for discussion and debate and help readers
to keep abreast of issues and news. We reserve the right to edit and reject articles without prior notification. You can use a pseudonym but we encourage you to include your full name and address.

Regards,

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ABOUT US

Kaowao Newsgroup is committed to social justice, peace, and democracy in Burma. We hope to be able to provide more of an in-depth analysis that will help to promote lasting peace and change within Burma. Editors, reporters, writers, and overseas volunteers are dedicated members of the Mon activist community based in Thailand.

Our motto is working together for change and lasting peace.