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Readers' Front

Dear readers,

We invite comments and suggestions on improvements to the Kaowao newsletter. With your help, we hope that Kaowao News will continue to grow to better serve 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.

As Kaowao has shifted our focus to reach out to grass root populations who can read only Mon and Burmese, we are producing more Mon and Burmese versions than English. Please also listen to our Rehmonya Radio program at http://www.kaowaoaudio.org.

Regards,

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Mon Youth Community to Hold Annual General Meeting

Kaowao: September 8, 2009

The Mon Youth Community of Thailand is planning for its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on Saturday, September 12, 2009.

According to an organizer for the AGM, invitation cards were sent to the Mon community, urging Mon people to join the AGM at a Mon temple in Ladkabang, Bangkok. The AGM will offer cultural performances and Mon traditional food.

There are two main Mon community associations registered in Thailand: the Thai-Raman (Thai Mon) Association and the Mon Youth Community (Bangkok). Dr. Su-Ed Gajaseni, a sixth generation ancestor of the great Mon Commander Banyae Join, who died in 2007, founded the Thai-Raman Association. With more than 1,700 members from Thai Mon communities, the TRA is the strongest Mon social organization. However, the TRA is criticized by younger generations, especially the Mon Youth Community of Bangkok, for a lack of political will and motivation.

It is estimated that 30 provinces around Thailand have Mon communities. The majority of Thai Mons live in Samut Prakan, Nonthaburi, Ratchburi, Kanchanaburi and Samut Sakhon Province.

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Owners Worry as Rubber Demand Rises

Kaowao: September 9, 2009

Ye-- Even though the price of rubber has increased, rubber plantation owners in Mon State are worried about their businesses.

According to a Mon businessman in Moulmein, local farmers are watching the relationship between the SPDC and cease-fired groups very closely.

“People are listening to radios every day to see if fighting has broken out between the Burmese Army and ethnic armed forces on the China-Burma border. China is the main exporter of rubber, and political instability makes things difficult for rubber farmers,” said Nai Myo Lwin, plantation owner and businessman from Ye. “If the cease-fire breaks in southern Burma, we cannot cultivate our plantations in the border region,” he added.

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) started the Border Development Project to develop rubber plantations in rural areas. Many acres of land along the World War Two Japanese railway have been turned into rubber plantations. Farmers have been waiting for better prices despite the slow economy. The political situation is yet another factor to worry about.

Mon State has approximately 200,000 acres of rubber plantations. Rubber trees are also grown in Tenasserim (Tanintharyi) Division, Karen, Arakan, Shan, and Kachin States. In Ye township, rubber serves as a replacement for betel nut on many farms because traditional betel nut growers face difficulties due to dry weather.

The rubber compounding factories in Mon State produce exports for China and other neighboring countries.

According to the Myanmar Rubber Planters and Producers Association, the price of RSS-5 rubber, which was US$ 1,000 in June, is now US$ 1600. Myanmar exports between 40,000 and 50,000 tons of rubber to China annually. Myanmar has more than 1 million acres of rubber plantations and produces about 80,000 tons a year.

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Interview with Zoya Phan

Kaowao Newsgroup recently interviewed a young Karen activist named Zoya Phan. Zoya is an International Coordinator for the Burma Campaign UK and co-founder of the Phan Foundation. She is also a Coordinator for the European Karen Network, a board member of the Austria Burma Center and Secretary of the Karen Community Association UK. Her autobiography, “Little Daughter,” was published by Simon and Schuster in April 2009.

Both Zoya Phan’s mother and father were involved in the Karen resistance movement. Her father, Padoh Mahn Sha Lah Phan was Secretary General of Karen National Union. He was assassinated by agents of the Burmese military dictatorship in February 2008 at his home in Maesot, Thailand.

KW: Can you tell us how you came to the border and about your life there?

ZP: I grew up in a small village in Manerplaw, Karen State. Although my family didn’t have much, we lived in a community where people helped each other and shared what they had with other people. Life was very natural, as we didn’t have electricity or running water. When I was 14, Burmese soldiers attacked my village, forcing my family and I to flee for our lives. We hid in the jungle and eventually ended up in a Thai refugee camp.

KW: Can you talk about the campaign work that you do?

ZP: I joined the Burma Campaign UK in 2005. Working with other organizations, we successfully campaigned for the UK government to double its aid to Burma, including increased British aid to the refugee camps where I once lived, and Dr. Cynthia Maung’s health clinic, which saved my life many times.

We have been campaigning for the release of all of political prisoners in Burma, including democratic leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. We support a global signature campaign led by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

Currently, we are working on a campaign in Eastern Burma. It is so sad that generation after generation is forced to flee their homes. This is never ending. Eastern Burma is one of the largest unreported crises in the world. Attacks on ethnic people, especially the Karen, have been going on since Burma’s independence in 1947. It is in Eastern Burma that the worst human rights abuses are committed. We have been campaigning for the European Union to impose targeted financial sanctions on insurance, financial transactions, banking and investment in Burma.

The human rights violations committed by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in Eastern Burma are both war crimes and crimes against humanity. We have called on the UN to impose a global arms embargo against the regime, and ordered a commission of inquiry to gather evidence leading to prosecutions against the Burmese regime.

KW: Can you describe the abuses in more detail?

ZP: Rape is used as a weapon of war. Hundreds of thousands of people are used as slave labour – often as porters for the military. They are also used as human minesweepers, made to walk in front of
Burmese Army columns, as they do not keep records of where they put landmines. More than a million people have been forced to flee their homes as a result, and more than 3,300 villages have been destroyed. The United Nations has accused the regime of crimes against humanity for its use of forced labour, and of war crimes for breaking the Geneva Convention by deliberately targeting civilians.

KW: What are your thoughts on cross-border aid?

ZP: There are almost half a million internally displaced people in Eastern Burma, and millions more living in extreme poverty. In large parts of this area, the regime allows no aid at all to reach the people. The only way to assist these people is through cross-border aid, but there is not enough funding to help even the 100,000 most vulnerable. We are calling on the international community to provide more cross-border aid to internally displaced people who can be reached only through the border because of the restriction of aid delivery by the Burmese regime.

KW: Have you been successful?

ZP: UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon announced that the release of all political prisoners is a priority. We were excited to see that this was his top priority days before he was due to visit Burma.

I have also met with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and other senior politicians from around the world to urge them to take action on Burma.

KW: What are your thoughts on the upcoming 2010 election and the Border Guard Force (BGP)?

ZP: I see the elections proposed for 2010 by the Burmese regime as a step away from democracy, as they bring in a constitution that legalizes dictatorship, which has been the cause of increasing human rights abuses and instability in Burma.

The recent sentence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to an additional 18 months of house arrest is part of the 2010 agenda. We have seen the number of political prisoners double, and new prisoners have been given prison sentences of up to 65 years or more. It’s clear the generals are sending a message that no dissent will be tolerated in the run up to the elections.

The dictatorship is also forcing some armed groups who have ceasefire agreements to give up their weapons, which many are refusing to do. Some groups have already started fighting again, while others could do so in the near future. Again, this is linked to the 2010 elections. Likewise, the attacks on Ler Per Her camp, the Karen National Union, and the attack in Shan State are also part of the 2010 agenda.

The dictatorship wants to crush the KNU and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South), as they continue to resist the rule of the regime. As a result, we have 6,000 more refugees and IDPs in Karen State, 10,000 more in Shan State, hundreds of people used as slave labor, and women raped and killed, including an 8 month pregnant woman.

KW: Can you talk about your experience living in the jungle of Burma?

ZP: As a child, I wasn’t really aware about what was going on in Karen State until one day my sister, brother and I were playing by the river bank when we saw a dead body in the river – a porter
(slave) killed by the Burmese Army.

I am very lucky that I was born in a Karen resistance area controlled by the Karen National Union. I was able to study the Karen language, learn about my own culture and practice my own traditions freely.

In the SPDC controlled areas, ethnic languages are banned in school, ethnic history is not taught, and ethnic people are discriminated against in employment, sometimes even having to change their names to Burman ones. The dictatorship wants to assimilate or expel ethnic people, to destroy their culture and traditions, and make them like the main Burman ethnic group.

KW: How did you feel when your father was assassinated, and how you handle this tragedy?

ZP: I was very sad and upset, but I also knew that I had to be strong. My father dedicated his life to the struggle for freedom, and always put the welfare of his people and his country before himself.

When the regime’s agents killed my father, they were trying to kill what he stood for, which is human rights, democracy and freedom. We must not let them succeed. We must carry on his work and this political struggle.

I am proud to be his daughter, just as all my siblings are proud of him. As his Daughter, I will continue his dedicated work towards freedom for the Karen people, for all the people of Burma, and for peace in our country.

My sister, brothers and I also created the Phan Foundation in memory of our father and mother. We will fund education projects and fight poverty in Karen state. We will have a special focus on youth, helping the next generation of young people who will work to help the Karen. Our father always encouraged young people to be active in helping their community. Donations can be made online from any country at www.phanfoundation.org

The Phan Foundation provides aid for the Karen people, protects Karen culture, and promotes human rights.

** To be continued in Part Two

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** Junta Pressures Mon Party Leaders

By Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy: September 3, 2009

The Burmese junta has ordered New Mon State Party (NMSP) leaders not to sell private or party property, according to a source close to party members.

A NMSP member in Moulmein said special police appeared after party leader Tun Ya sold his land and house.
“They arrived suddenly after he had sold his property, but fortunately he had left before they arrived,” said the source.

The order not to sell private or party property comes amid growing tension and distrust following the party’s refusal to transform its army into a border guard force, as ordered by the state, and a split among the party leadership on ending its ceasefire agreement with the regime.

In previous years, party leaders were allowed to sell property. There was no explanation as to why the sale of property was banned, sources said, but they speculated it was intended to prevent party leaders from returning to the jungle to take up arms against the military junta.

Meanwhile, party leaders are split about whether to end the ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government, sources said. The majority of the leaders who own property don’t want to cancel the ceasefire agreement, said sources.

Nai Hang Tha, a secretary of the party, and a few other top leaders want to cancel the ceasefire, said the source.

Many Mon have voiced concern about the split among the party’s leaders, fearing it could be exploited by the Burmese government in a “divide-and-rule” tactic.

The party’s leaders met with officers of the southeast command in Moulmein to discuss the border guard force proposal on August 28, said the source, but the meeting failed to achieve any consensus.

There are fears the party will be targeted by regime troops as part of a campaign to realign ethnic group leadership to support the Burmese government’s policies, and particularly the 2010 election.

The NMSP is a small armed ethnic group with an estimated 700 soldiers. The party has strongly criticized the planned election.

Nai Ngwe Thein, the chairman of Mon National Democratic Front, said he believed the junta will target Nai Hang Tha, the most active hardliner in the party.

Recently, unknown sources accused Nai Hang Tha of requesting donations from Mon living in exile to create dissent against the military government. An anonymous, printed accusation was distributed in Karen State.

Nai Hang Tha has said that the party faces a financial crisis since the junta withdrew its budget to the party following its refusal to join the national convention in 2008. Its contribution in 2008 was about 4 million kyat (US $3,636) a month.

The NMSP signed a ceasefire agreement with the military government in 1995. Party officials said there have been no political advancements in over a decade and the regime has continued a campaign of human rights abuses in Mon State.

In 2003, the party attended a national constitutional convention held by the regime, but left after a proposal to form a federal system was rejected. Later, the party sent observers to the convention.
Last year, the party released a statement opposing the junta’s new constitution, citing fears that it would strengthen the regime by giving it the veneer of democracy without resulting in any actual changes.

Burmese Army recruit escapes with injury

Kaowao: August 28, 2009

Sankhlaburi -- The Burmese Army’s Infantry Battalion 32 recruited five young people from the Thai-Burma border town of 'Three Pagoda" last week. Among the five young people, one young recruit escaped with injuries and reached the border. Kaowao news agency interviewed him yesterday.

The youth, who escaped is Maung Kyaw Soe (15) and lived with his parents in 'Three Pagodas Pass town. The Burmese Army took away five young people including Maung Kyaw Soe without knowledge of their parents on August 17.

"When I was playing, a soldier called me. So I went with him and was not allowed to go back. The other boys are also there. Two boys are older than me while two boys are younger than me. I don't know their names. We stayed with soldiers at a temple for a night; then the military column left 'Three Pagodas' the next day. The five of us were separated and we had to carry army equipment like a porter," said Maung Kyaw Soe.

According to Maung Kyaw Soe, his parents are under a misconception that he is working in a garden belonging to a person. At first he thought that he was being detained for use as porter for a day “but they persuaded me to become a soldier. In two or three days, a sergeant persuaded me to become a soldier offering money but I refused," Maung Kyaw Soe added.

When he was traveling with IB 32 column, he was injured on his right arm during a gun battle between the KNU and the IB 32 column on August 23. He escaped when the column stayed in Lay Pho village beyond Mae Zali village. However, the other four boys travelled with the column. Even though the injury is not serious, he needs to take treatment for two weeks because of his five day long traumatic escape, said a Mon medic.

About 120 soldiers of IB 32 have been on duty for four months guarding the town. During the four months, one lieutenant and 30 of other ranks deserted the army. The South Eastern military command ordered Lt. Col. Khin Zaw, commander of IB 32, to find substitutes for the deserters.
Mon Community Launches Mon Language Course in the US
Kaowao: August 24, 2009

The Mon community in Akron, Ohio launched a Mon language course at the beginning of this month in an attempt to preserve their unique language and culture. According to one of the organizers, Nai Myint Soe, over 30 Mon students attended the first class. The community has been struggling for years to find a good location for the class – Mon students have not had an opportunity to study Mon since 2005.

The Mon people, who are Buddhist, lost their kingdom in 1757. Taing Taw, a teacher who resettled in the United States earlier this year, noted that preserving the Mon language (one of the last distinct languages in the world) is a chief concern of the Mon community. Taw was previously an editor for a monthly Mon language newspaper, and is currently a reporter for Kaowao Newsgroup, based in Thailand.

According to Taw, Mon spread from what is now India to Mon State several hundred years ago. The old Mon kingdom or lower Burma was under British colonial rule from 1826 to 1948. Since independence, Burma’s government, one of the most notorious regimes in the world, has not permitted the teaching of Mon and other ethnic languages in school. The regime’s policy of Burmanization, or assimilation, has created a myriad of problems for the ethnic people.

“I am so glad my children have a chance to learn the Mon language, and I want to pray that this Mon language course operates for a long, long time,” the mother of a college student who is attending the course said. She wants her children and other Mon children to learn their own ethnic language in addition to being educated at colleges and universities in the US.

As young students cannot speak Mon, teachers sometimes have to explain things to them in English, Taw said. “The trend is changing so quickly, I still don’t know how to follow. Eventually, I want to focus on politics in my country, but I know what I can do now is be a Mon teacher. I want my students to study Burmese one day, but it’s not so easy.” People in Burma communicate in Burmese even though some of them don’t want to study it. “I want my students to work for change in our country one day,” Taw added.

Nai Parla, another organizer of the course, said he worries about Mon children who do not want to study Mon or even speak it in their own homes. The parents of these students worry as well.

The Mon community in Akron has been trying to acquire a community center to ensure that their language and culture are preserved. Mon Buddhist monks who lead the community have been working hard to find a good venue, as they want Mon children to speak and study Mon. Until now, the children have had no opportunity to study their language because of poor community organization, Taw said. Most Mon community leaders look for an ideal location, such as a church or Buddhist temple, to serve the entire Mon community.

Many Mon people have bought houses this year in cash. The US economic crisis paved the way for the Mon community in Akron to own property because of the cheap price. There are over a thousand Mon people in the US, mostly living in Fort Wayne, Indiana and Akron, Ohio.
The first wave of Mon refugees resettled in the United States and other host countries after a major democratic uprising led by university students left thousands of demonstrators dead in 1988. Most of the surviving student leaders and demonstrators fled to the neighboring country of Thailand, where refugees must stay temporarily before resettling to a third country.

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**NMSP put on SPDC Watch List**

Kaowao: August 23, 2009

Sangkhlaburi -- While political relations sour between the cease-fire groups and the Burmese military in the north, the movements of New Mon State Party are coming under closer scrutiny in the south.

According to a liaison officer of the NMSP, the SPDC authorities called on village headmen in Mon State warning them of an impending attack by Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF), Karen National Union (KNU) and New Mon State Party. The local headmen were instructed to monitor and report on the activities of the armed groups.

Leaflets were distributed in Mon and Karen States accusing the NMSP Secretary General Nai Hongsar of planning an attack with the KNU. He was accused of drumming up support in his travels to overseas communities. In the past, the pro-SPDC’s blog Tharkinwe has played up the financial support the NMSP receives from the overseas Mon community accusing the party of stirring up unrest to a break the cease-fire deal with the regime.

To counter the junta’s claims, Chief of NMSP’s External Affairs Nai Aung Min told Kaowao and IMNA reporters that the junta’s accusations are groundless but are only made to defame the NMSP over its stance against the 2010 election and Border Guard Force.

A District Officer of the NMSP said, “The SPDC targets Nai Hongsar to create misunderstanding among the party members. Our members have come under closer scrutiny, passengers from our area face more thorough check than before at the check-points these days.”

In the north the four cease-fired groups namely, Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), United Wa State Army (UWSA), Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) have pledged to stand together if any of their group members are attacked by the Burmese Army.

A veteran of the NMSP Nai Ong from Maharchai said, “There are many veterans who will join the cause if the cease-fire agreement breaks. The old and the younger generation do not want to see their party treated unfairly.”

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Karen Guerrillas Ambush Burmese Army Joint Offensive

Kaowao: August 20, 2009

Sangkhlaburi – Karen guerrillas ambushed a military convoy of the Burmese Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Kaowao has learned.

According to a liaison officer from the Karen National Liberation Army, a military wing of the KNU, troops from Light Infantry Battalion No. 356 led by Lt. Col Zeya Win was attacked by the Karen near Zee Hnapin village on August 11, 2009. Two Burmese Army soldiers were killed and another was seriously injured. LIB No. 356 is active along the motor road of Thanbyu Zayat in Mon State and the Three Pagodas Pass Thai-Burma border town.

Another troop battalion LIB No. 283 was also attacked by the KNLA guerrillas. The ambush on August 10 occurred near Lut Shan village located between Thanbyu Zayat and Anan Kwin. The troops were on route to replace LIB No. 356’s position.

The Burmese Army and DKBA joint forces have been launching a military offensive against the Karen National Union (KNU) along the border area capturing some bases under the control of the KNLA Battalion No.201.

A check-point officer from the New Mon State Party said: “It would be difficult to launch an offensive against the KNU during the rainy season. The roads are bogged down and it is difficult to find enough food for the men because the local villagers do not have enough food for themselves.”

About seventy soldiers and thirty porters led by Saw Naw-Taya of DKBA Battalion No. 907, who have just arrived at the Three Pagodas Pass, have ordered local village headmen to provide their troops with rice.

Meanwhile, many villagers have fled from their village to avoid being press-ganged into portering for the BA. A Karen villager who recently arrived at Three Pagodas Pass said the BA is asking every villager on their way for one basket of rice or 10000 Kyats.

The KNU has changed its military tactics from a war of position to a war of movement launching guerrilla offensives to counter the Burmese Army into their areas. The Burmese Army offensive is targeting several camps of the KNU which has been waging the world's longest running civil war. The Karen have been fighting for autonomy since Burma gained independence in 1948 and is rarely reported in the international media.

Monks and Headmen Oppose DKBA Recruitment

Kaowao: August 18, 2009

Three Pagodas Pass -- Buddhist monks and local village headmen met recently in Kya-In Seik-Kyi Township and reached consensus in their opposition of recruitment activities being carried out by the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DKBA).
An official of the Karen National Union (KNU) said, “The village headmen and senior monks held a meeting in Kya-In Seik-Kyi Township where a decision to oppose the DKBA recruitment was made. They aren’t against the recruitment of KNU soldiers because the KNU’s aim is to fight the Burmese Army. But the aim of DKBA’s recruitment is to fight against each other. Therefore they oppose this action.”

The source said that the Abbot of Pa-Pya Village, the Reverend Pinnya-Sara and the Abbot of Khalai Takhon Taing, the Reverend Thuzarta will convey their decision to the senior monk of the DKBA, Reverend Thuzana. The two Abbots, Reverend Thuzarta and Reverend Thuzana studied together at Jone-Jone Ja Temple in Mudon, Mon State in the past.

The DKBA has ordered local village headmen to send between 10 and 30 new soldiers from their villages in Anan Kwin, Kya-In Seik-Kyi and Three Pagodas Pass.

Local youth from Kawkareik and Pa-an townships have been forced to join the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. These youth are being sent to the front lines to fight the KNU.

On August 1, 2009, about 500 individuals from Taundee village gathered at the office of DKBA Battalion No. 906 where they met Lt. Col. Mahn Nyan Min. As requested by the DKBA, they gave 75 sacks of rice and 1.5 million Kyat instead of twenty five new soldiers for the recruitment.

The SPDC has told the Karen Peace Force (KPF) and the DKBA leaders to transform their organizations to the Border Guard Force. DKBA leaders are aggressively recruiting local people in response. Since many Karen are reluctant to join the soldiers, they have deserted the DKBA and surrendered to the KNU. A KNU source reported that 76 soldiers from the DKBA and KPF surrendered to the KNU Brigade No. 6 in July and August.

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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 an in-depth analysis that will help to promote lasting change and peace within Burma. Editors, reporters, writers, and overseas volunteers are dedicated members of the Mon activist community based in Thailand.