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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.

Regards,

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More Migrant Workers Heading Home

Layeh Rot, Kaowao: March 15, 2010

Three Pagodas Pass -- Several migrant workers are heading home from Thailand to southern Burma according to local sources at the crossing point of Three Pagodas Pass Thai Burma border town.

Many returnees are from southern Thailand of Panga, Phuket and Surathani Provinces who work in the rubber plantation owned by Thai local farmers.

A resident at the border pass told Kaowao that about 500 to 600 migrant workers are crossing from Thailand to Burma from the Three Pagodas Pass every day. “Someday, starting from the New Year to this month, about 1000 from different area in southern Burma from older age to children are passing this border and the majority are Mon people,” said a local businessman.

Bo Layeh, an NGO worker based in Maharchai told to Kaowao that the main reason of leaving Thailand is their safety in the southern provinces and the crackdown of government to tighten the new policy that replace work permit with Burmese Temporary Passport. They fear the arrest by the Thai authorities because many workers failed to file for national verification papers by the March 2 deadline. The crackdown on migrant workers has begun where alien immigrants are employed.

“Many workers don’t want to apply the temporary Burmese passports even it allow more freedom for them because they don’t have enough information and afraid that they can be charged at home or pay more bribes to the local authorities by their families,” he added.

Migrant workers pay varying fees depending on their destination. Those who come from far south Phuket and Surat pay about 4500 Baht while those from Maharchai pay 2500 Baht. “They also have to pay for their bags and bargains the cost with the driver,” said a car driver from the border town.

Chan Ong, who works with the migrant community in Bangkok, said his money exchange business is deteriorating because of slow economy in the kingdom and he is focusing on picking up retuning migrant workers this year. The return trips were arranged by service agents who issue permit letters and immigration authorities.

Last year, many migrant workers were heading home due to the global financial crisis that hit Thailand. From 50 to 100 migrant workers were crossing over from the Three Pagodas Pass border check point every day during this time in 2009.

“We (rubber plantation workers) are often attacked by local gang and robbers. They come with masks and ask for money and gold. If we cannot pay them, we are torture or killed. That is why we have to leave from the rubber farms,” says a migrant worker from Kawdut village, Ye.

Most Mon workers from Burma work in the fishing, construction and rubber plantation industries.
If Attacked, Mon will Wage Guerrilla War

By Lawi Weng, Irrawaddy: March 12, 2010

If war breaks out between the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Burmese regime, the small cease-fire army will wage a guerrilla war, according to Mon leaders.

Since the Mon rejected the regime's order to transform its army into a border guard force, tension has increased in recent months between the NMSP and the Burmese military.

Party leaders said that they have trained their soldiers to wage a guerrilla war, if they are attacked.

Nai Hang Thar, the secretary of the NMSP, told The Irrawaddy, “If there is war in the future, we will not fight like we did in the past, and we will fight not only in the jungle. Our Mon people are everywhere. We will take a clandestine, guerrilla war to the enemy.

“We have traveled through the country for years now, and we now know where their important sites are,” he said.

Nai Zay Ya, the commander of the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), said “Before we didn't know how to make bombs. We tried for many years. But, today we know how to make powerful bombs.”

The NMSP now has an army of about 700 soldiers, according to a retired NMLA colonel, a much smaller force than before it signed a cease-fire with the regime in 1995. The Burmese military has about 400,000 troops.

Nai Hang Thar said his commanders understand Burmese military strategy and direct confrontations with a larger force would be avoided.

Nai Kao Rot, a former MNLA deputy army chief, said that after 14 years of cease-fire, the junta’s troops now have about 30 battalions in Mon State. Before the cease-fire, there were about 10 battalions.

Recently, two Burmese battalions were ordered into areas under the control of the NMSP, despite a long-standing agreement between both sides that Burmese troops would not enter 12 areas under NMSP control while the cease-fire agreement was enforce.

This is the first time in 15 years that the Burmese military has entered its area, Mon sources said.

The junta reportedly intends to declare that ethnic armed cease-fire groups are illegal organizations, if the groups continue to resist the regime's border guard force plan, which would place ethnic armies under the control of junta commanders.

Meanwhile, the NMSP has scheduled a month-long meeting at its headquarters to discuss recent developments, attended by all local army officials, according to the sources.
According to a source close to the party, the NMSP is drawing up targeting maps from fixed positions to be used if the regime's military launches an offensive in the mountains.

Nai Thu Rein, a party member, said that the military has been purchasing arms since 2002. He would not say what type of weapons the Mon have acquired.

The party has a shortage of bullets for AK47 rifles, according to one source. He said the army has acquired M16 assault rifles, and that ammunition is easily available in Thailand.

Under terms of the cease-fire agreement, the Mon could not resupply their army or conduct military training exercises. However, a source said that since the cease-fire agreement, the Mon have conducted twice yearly military exercises involving 150 soldiers each time. The latest exercise ended in January.

In 2004, the party formed a unit of commando troops, numbering about 50 people, and conducted training exercises, including laying mines.

Party leaders said that they could enlist new recruits and former soldiers if they are attacked. Last year, the party began organizing former soldiers in townships in Mon State.

Nai Ba Ya Aein, a former member of the MNLA, said, “When we had tension with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in 2007 after we killed a DKBA soldier in Palanjapan village, at least a hundred of people in the village enlisted with us to fight.”

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**HURFOM documents 200 villagers fleeing from Yebyu Township**

Kaowao: March 11, 2010

According to local reports, villagers from Komile, Kyauk-Katin and Yaphu in Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Division fled to Tavoy District - an area controlled under NMSP – following pressure from the local Burmese military authorities to form a militia.

According to information collected by Nai Aua Mon from HURFOM, the exodus occurred in the first week of March that Aua Mon estimates resulted in 95 and 110 family households, with a total of 200 people, fleeing from the area.

Running parallel to the forced militias, another major reason for the village displacement are the military activities carried out by the SPDC regiment columns, 282, 273 and 31, who are preparing operations against the armed Mon splinter groups and KNU Brigade 4.

Initially, the villagers left for safety after the local authorities began forcing the local people into military training which they refused to do. Some villagers fled temporarily for refuge; but others have decided not to return to their homes, according Nai Aua Mon’s interviews.

A local health worker says that Ahlae Skhan villagers were fearful when their village leader joined the local Burmese army to suppress any opposition. They have been resettled by NMSP, but their safety and food security are not assured.
The health worker added that many who arrived in the safe area do not want to return, and they have neither the money to buy property nor space to grow food, however, the NMSP is going to build a new village for them.

Between Ahlae Skhan and Marout Chai there are many fields – in Mon “waey-hanoot” – which have been used for resettlement, but the situation there is not secure according to those who moved there.

The villagers from Yebyu Township had been under NMSP and KNU control, but since 1995 when the NMSP signed the ceasefire agreement with the SPDC, the areas have increasingly fallen under the Burma’s army control. HURFOM says that these villagers were often forced into working the railway and gas pipeline construction projects.

War of nerves continues as deadline expires
S.H.A.N: 11 MARCH 2010

10 March went by without reports of either side, the Burma Army or the anti-Border Guard Force ceasefire armies, resuming peaceful overtures to each other, according to sources from Shan State.

10 March was the 4th and latest deadline set by Naypyitaw. According to Chinese officials, another negative response to the Border Guard Force (BGF) plan would lead to open war and declaration of the ceasefire groups as illegal organizations by 15 March.

“The situation is grim,” said the source close to the Wa leadership in Panghsang, opposite China’s Menglien.

On the Burma Army side, one more light infantry division (LID), the 77th based in Pegu, since last week has been moving into Shan State North. There are already 3 LIDs around the United Wa State Army (UWSA) controlled territory on the Sino-Burma border: 33rd (Sagaing), 55th (Kalaw) and 99th (Meikhtila).

In Mongkhark and Mongyang, facing UWSA troops in Mongpawk, south of Panghsang, Burmese officers have also been busy giving pep talks to their troops. “Nothing can stop us from restoring Mongpawk (to Mongyang township),” one officer in Mongyang was reported as saying.

The Burma Army cannot be faulted for its morale-boosting activities. In Mongpawk, where the UWSA’s 468th Division is located, officers are reportedly exhorting the people to be prepared for the worst. “We are ready to repel the enemies, whether they are coming by land or by air,” one officer said to the villagers in Mongphen, a sub-township of Mongpawk.

Since 2 March, all units have been placed on the highest alert. “Before 2 March, we were told not to fire unless attacked,” said the source. “But now we are to shoot once the enemy moves across the ceasefire boundary.”

The Wa’s southern ally, the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), for the last two weeks, has been busy switching its 369th Brigade in Hsaleu, near the UWSA’s Mongpawk,
with the 896th from Mongla. An NDAA officer told SHAN the change was according to its “long laid” plans.

Both Wa and Mongla sources confirmed they had no further meetings with the Burma Army’s representatives since 25 February.

Only the UWSA’s western ally the Shan State Army (SSA) North’s boss Loimao had held the latest meeting with Lashio-based Northeastern Region commander Maj Gen Aung Than Tut on 9 March. He was accompanied by Kherh Tai, Sai Awn, Hla Myint and LernZeun. No details of the meeting was disclosed by the media shy group however. But a source close to the group assured SHAN, “Diplomacy will continue.”

With the 2010 elections upcoming, there is a possibility that areas under the control of the armed ceasefire groups that have refused to accept the BGF plan unconditionally as demanded by Naypyitaw may be excluded “for security reasons,” reported Mizzima News, quoting the law on Election Commission, “enacted” by Naypyitaw on 8 March.

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**SPDC pressures KPF to form Border Guard Force**

Kaowao: February 21, 2010

An emergency meeting was held by the Karen Peace Force in the capital of Mon state this week to discuss the appointment of a new party leader and the transformation of its soldiers into a Border Guard Force, a source close to the KPF said to Kaowao requesting anonymity.

The KPF Chairman Saw Thamu Hel, Vice-Chairman Colonel Daw Daw, Secretary Man Aung Tin Myint and Lt Col. Saw Awbar were at the emergency meeting on February 17 in Moulmein following the return of the party’s ailing chairman from Bangkok who is suffering from cancer.

An SPDC Military Affairs Security Unit officer also attended the meeting. Under pressure by the SPDC, the KPF will also form their Border Guard Force.

“At this moment, Saw Thamu Hel is on the brink of death and lies seriously ill in bed after returning from Bangkok for medical treatment, we are now counting his last days,” the source said. Though his death is a sad thing, the members of the Karen ceasefire group back their vice-chairman, Daw Daw to be chosen as the party’s new leader.

The top leaders of the KPF will meet on February 21 with the Southeast Military Commander General Thet Naing Win in Mon state to discuss the Border Guard Force transformation, which will be comprised of over 1,000 men. One border guard battalion includes 326 troops and 18 officers.

An interview in May 2009 with a key figure from the KPF said that many are not happy with the arrangement but have no option to agree the SPDC’s demands, for example the ‘K’ (for Karen) has been removed from the KPF.
The Burmese Army is stepping up plans to enforce state security by controlling all the ethnic armed ceasefire groups in the border areas who being pressured to provide security along Burma’s border ahead of the general elections which are to be held later this year.

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Forced militias ordered to battle in southern Burma

Kaowao: February 18, 2010

Sangkhlaburi –Burmese Army is stepping up its strategy to replenish its forces by forcing the local people into militia units (Pyi-Thu-Sit) to fight against the armed insurgent groups in southern Mon State and northern Tenasserim Division.

According to a source from the local community, Light Infantry Battalion No. 282 is pressuring the village headmen to keep people under control and to ensure that they will not flee when fighting occurs between the BA’s militia units and the Mon insurgent groups.

Yar Pu, Kyauk Kadin, Kywe Talin and Aleh Sakhan are the key villages, situated along Ye Tavoy motor road near the Yadana gas pipeline, have been ordered to form into local militias that require at least twenty people from every village.

Since October 2009, the Burmese Army (BA) has ordered the village headmen to form militias in their villages for the Ye Tavoy motor road. The headmen are responsible for sending the villagers to the Burmese government's militia training division centres.

“This is how the BA’s fights against their enemies by forcing the local people to fight against each other. The Burmese militia force is formed to root out the insurgents and weaken the morale of the ethnic armed groups,” said a retired Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) Colonel Kao Rot, who lives in Thailand, adding that even in areas where no fighting occurs such as in the Kyaik-Maraw area, the Burmese Army is setting up their militia forces to “wipe out the NMSP if the ceasefire crumbles.”

According to a Mon political observer, “the BA is implementing a ‘four-cut strategy’ that cuts off the food, funds, intelligence, and recruits of the insurgent groups in order to neutralize their movements in southern Ye and Yebyu area.

Following the ceasefire between the Burmese Army and the New Mon State Party in 1995, Mon soldiers who disagreed with it broke away and formed their own armed groups. These different groups have now joined forces and are active in the area. The Mon National Defense Army (MNDA) is led by Major Jalon Taw, a 42 year-old self-educated NMSP member who broke away from the party last year. Taw is well-known for his strategic thinking and can speak 3 languages, not an unusual feat in which many Mon are trilingual or even quadrilingual in Mon, Thai, Burmese and English.

The NMSP and SPDC reached a ceasefire agreement in 1995 which allowed the NMSP a certain degree of autonomy, while the Burmese military was given some rights to occupy certain areas agreed to in the ceasefire. However, civilians in the remote areas risk death and
have suffered from human rights’ violations especially extortion, extrajudicial killing, as well as being used for forced portering and human shields.

Karen Youths Fearful of Joining DKBA Border Guard Force

Kaowao: February 16, 2010

Sangkhlaburi -- The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army says that the relations with the SPDC are to maintain a close working relationship that “bears fruit”; however, things are not rosy as the SPDC and the DKBA would want them to be.

“It is fruitful for us to accept the agreement of the Border Guard Force; otherwise, it is not practical for us,” said Lt Maung Win, a spokesperson for Colonel Saw Lel Pwa of DKBA No.5 Brigade. “The relationship between the two sides is smooth like in previous time and we are implementing the plans according to the government policies on the BGF,” he added.

However, beneath the surface things are not as smooth and while the senior members of the DKBA say that the party is able to recruit the numbers required for the Border Guard Force, a source close to DKBA says that the party has had to forcefully recruit reluctant villagers.

Every Karen village must send their quota to join the DKBA or local people will be forcefully recruited into the border force from Karen State and Mon state where Karen people reside. Abbot Sumana from the Karen Buddhist Monk Organization in Kyar-inn-seikyi Township sent a request letter to the head of the DKBA asking them not to recruit young Karen people.

“They are recruiting people in all the townships, including Pha-an, Thaton, Kaw-Kareik, and Phar-Pun using the quota system,” said a businessman close to the DKBA, who asked not to be identified. “Young people are not willing to join the DKBA for fear of fighting with the KNU who are from the same ethnic group,” the man explained.

The DKBA is made up of the Karen Buddhists who joined the SPDC after separating from KNU in 1995 claiming religious discrimination by the top leaders of the extreme Christian led army. The DKBA along with the other militarily weak ethnic armed ceasefire groups, the Karenni, Kachin, and Kokang, have agreed to the SPDC’s border guard plans, while the larger groups, the UWSA, NMSP, KIO and SSA, have rejected the plans.

Villager killed after challenging Burmese Militia

Kaowao: February 11, 2010

Yebyu -- Villagers after raising questions on paying illegal taxes at high rates to the militia force in Tenasserim Division have allegedly been tortured with one being killed by the Burmese Army, the families of the victims said.
The three villagers, who hail from Ale Sakhan village in Yebyu Township of Tenasserim Division, had decided to risk repercussions and come forward with their complaints in having to pay six thousand Kyat to the Burmese militia force (Pyi-Thu-Sit). They were immediately arrested by the Light Infantry Battalion No. 282 on February 4. Among the three, Mr. Nai Tun Lein, was killed shortly after he was brought in to the local military detention camp, while Mr. Nai Nyunt and Mr. Nai Ba Mon are reportedly still being held in the detention centre.

A local driver who witnessed the event said “the three had wanted to voice their complaints to the village administrators who were demanding that each household pay high taxes to the militia affairs.”

For many years, the local people had been living in a lot of fear and uncertainty with many poor people bearing the brunt in having to support the local Burmese militia units.

The joint force of Burmese battalion and the local militia has launched the military operation against the Mon National Defense Organization led by Major Jalon Taw who splint from the New Mon State Party (NMSP) last year. Taw later confirmed the villagers’ arrest, via the Thai satellite phone, to a Kaowao reporter from the area.

Southern Ye of Mon State and Yebyu of Tenasserim Division area is designated by the Burma Army as a black zone and villagers have been restricted in visiting their farms since the army started the offensive aimed at wiping out the Mon guerrilla group.

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**SPDC ambushes Mon group, girl and soldier killed**

Kaowao: February 10, 2010

Yebyu -- Fighting broke between the Burmese government’s militia force and a Mon splinter group near the Yadana gas pipeline which resulted in the death of two people.

The two groups exchanged a short round of gunfire in the second week of January near a Mon village in Tenasserim Division which killed a young girl aged 6 and a SPDC soldier, said a Mon village administrator to Kaowao who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal.

The SPDC Light Infantry Battalion No. 282, a special battalion that guards the Yadana Gas Pipeline, and its militia force, surrounded and ambushed the Mon splinter group led by Major Jalon Taw who broke away from the NMSP last year.

The area of the fighting occurred in the east of Moulmein-Tavoy motor road near Kaloin Ong (Kalein Aung in Burmese) of Yebyu Township. There are over five Mon villages situated along the Yadana pipeline that runs along a portion of the road. The villagers are often caught in the crossfire between the government forces who force the villagers to guard the pipeline and the Mon resistance groups who demand their support.
The militia force members which are composed of ordinary villagers were recruited by the SPDC local battalion in 2001 and face an uphill battle in following the orders of both the SPDC and the ethnic armed groups who make numerous demands on them.

The village recruits are told to fight their own people who make up the splinter group; one of the recruited villagers, Yabu (Daik Tao in Mon), said they face continual harassment in the column alongside the SPDC soldiers and often fear of running into their own people while out patrolling the area.

Most of the village militia force speak only Mon and have problems communicating in Burmese to the SPDC’s soldiers. Meanwhile, the strapped for cash SPDC extorts money from the villagers leaving them with little even to feed themselves. Many villagers will decide instead to flee to one of the Mon Internally Displaced Camps situated along the Thai- Burma border, while others will move to a more urban area where no fighting occurs.

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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.

Our motto is “working together for change and lasting peace.”