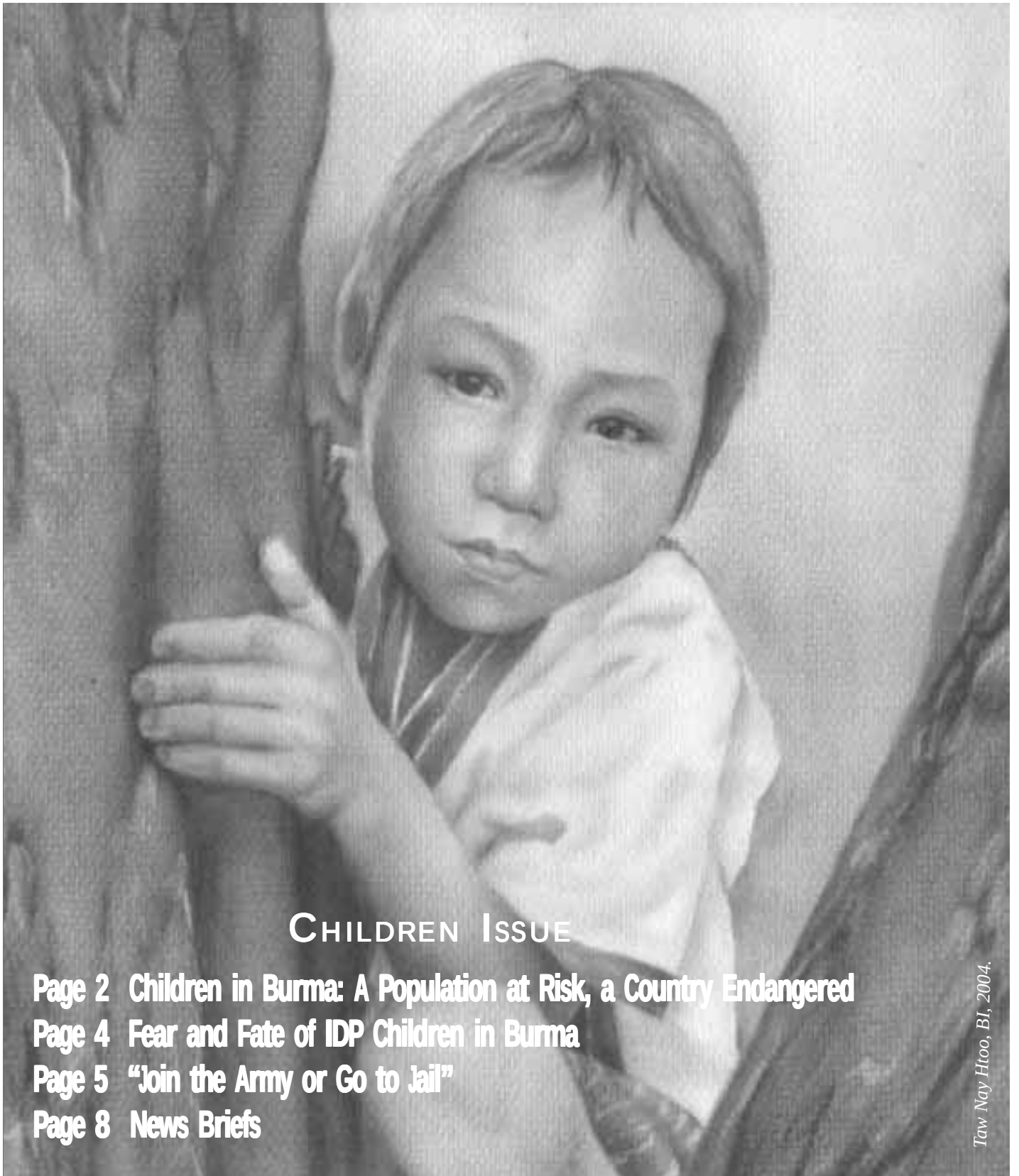




Burma Issues

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Taw Nay Htoo, BI, 2004.

CHILDREN IN BURMA: A POPULATION AT RISK, A COUNTRY ENDANGERED

by C. Guinard

“**M**yanmar is one of the developed countries which is the most preoccupied by the well being of its children.” This citation is from the second report that Burmese authorities will present to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child later in May.

The Burmese government is again trying to fool the international community with pompous declaration, pompous and outrageous...

Let's remind us of some stories and figures.

Naw Moo Day Wah, a 10-year-old Karen girl was shot by the Burma Army on October 30, 2002. During the attack her uncle was killed and four members of her family wounded. Those people were simply harvesting their field near their home located in Muthraw District in Karen State. She was shot in the stomach and stayed in a coma for 8 days. Thanks to the intervention of the Free Burma Rangers, a mobile medical team which paces up and down ethnic areas to provide emergency medical care, Naw Moo Day Wah received treatment quickly and was later brought to the Thai-Burma border to be examined by doctors. Today, the bullet is still lodged in her liver. It seems that her body had begun to wall off the bullet and that it is better to let the natural healing process continue¹.

We can hope that the healing process will be successful and that this young girl will never suffer further complications, but what about the psychological trauma of being shot at 10 years old! What about her hope for a brighter future in a country where its government shoots civilians?

What is the reality of children in Burma?

The Burmese population is a young one: at least 42% is under 18 years old. However, the ruling military dictatorship does not regard children's development and welfare as a priority:

Burma's military government spends an estimated 49% of the country's national budget on Defence and according to UNICEF report in 2001 only 7% on Education and 2.6% on Health.

Because of such budget policy, the Burmese education system is the least efficient of all Southeast Asia. Following the democratic

uprising in 1988, led mostly by students, all universities have been repeatedly closed. Between September 1988 and July 2000, universities were only open for 36 months. This gives an idea of the low level of expertise the coming generation will have to offer in many professional sectors.

However, Burmese place education as a real priority. Most of the families are convinced that sending their children to school is crucial for a better future. Officially, public primary school is free but family spend a lot of money on an initial 3000 Kyats enrolment fee and also uniform, books and private lessons. Meeting education costs is a struggle for most of Burmese families who often have to sacrifice one child's education for another.

Even when a family succeeds in paying school fees and send their children to school, the level of education is inferior. The lack of infrastructure also makes it even more difficult to get an education. There are 39,000 public-run primary schools throughout Burma, giving an average of one school for every two villages in Burmese dominated regions. In ethnic border areas, one school may be shared by 25 different villages. Just 46% of them are equipped with sanitation, and 17% received drinking water². Only one third of Burmese children can endure all these difficulties and succeed to complete primary education. Then, if they want to pursue their education, they have to be lucky enough to live near one of the 3,000 secondary schools the government is offering for the entire country. The drop out rate from secondary schools is the highest in Burma. Only 2% of students will succeed to finally graduate high school.

After decades of dictatorial policies, the catastrophic economic situation of today's Burma also impacts families dramatically. One example is that parents expect children to work and depend on everyone helps to feed the family. In Burma, 70% of the population live in rural area and all hands are needed. Many children help their parents in the field, take care of the herd of cows, or fish.

However, working in the field is one option. Lots of children who are not able to attend school are forced to enter the work market at the age of ten. The worst forms of child labour are present in Burma. Children maybe found

working in gem mines or textile industry, construction, domestic work, restaurant and sex sectors. Knowing that a teacher in public school earns between 3000 and 5000 Kyats, and that one kilo of chicken can cost 1250 Kyats, children have to contribute to family expenses. It is a question of survival.

The Burmese government has made no real efforts to combat child labour. Burma has, moreover, not ratified either ILO (International Labour Organisation) Convention 138 concerning the minimum age, or Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour. It did, however, ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1991) but government policies are far from implementing all the legal obligations arising from this international instrument.



Children working in the field, Karen State, 2003.

In addition, Burmese children by the hundreds of thousands are also frequently requested by Burmese authorities to do forced labour. Usually unpaid, men, women and children are conscripted as manual labourers on road and railway construction, or in government fields. Children are often recruited to do such work when the number of adults requested by Burmese authorities is not reached which indeed happens frequently especially during harvest time.

To be used as a porter during Burmese military operations is the most feared form of forced labour in Burma from which children and especially teenagers are not exempted. This consists of in carrying heavy load of military equipment such as shells, ammunition or landmines, during days of hard walks throughout the mountainous jungle in ethnic regions. Porters are frequently forced to follow the military battalion until it reaches the battle front line. Weakened, beaten, tortured and often killed on the way if they try to escape, porters are

also used by soldiers as human mines sweepers.

Burma government has admitted that forced labour exists in Burma. Following international pressure and ILO presence in the country, Burmese authorities have to be more discreet in using forced labour. However, the government has always denied the use of forced porters during military operations and especially as human mines sweepers. In response to a US Labour Department report on forced labour, the Burmese government replied, "The allegation that children are used as human mines sweepers and shields is too absurd and ridiculous to dignify a response".³

The most dramatic situation, which may occur in this context, is when porters are teenagers and the ones who are terrorizing them are too. Thousands of children are serving in the Burma's army: children who are forced to kill other ones, children also terrorized by what they are forced to do.

Burma is a country where children are not able to pursue a normal education, where children are forced to work to enable their family to survive and not starve, where they are forced to flee zone of conflict risking at any time to be injured, where they are indoctrinated and terrorized by adult officers who force them to threaten, torture, and kill other children.

Children are direct victims of the acts of violence committed by the military dictatorship and its deplorable management of the country. Without a fundamental and radical change of the way Burma is governed, it is hard to believe that children will one day receive proper education and health care, or will stop working and being able to at least imagine a brighter future.

Burma government should remember that as for any country in the world, the children of Burma are its future.



Endtnotes:

1 Field trip report, *Free Burma Rangers*, 25 February 2004.

2 Growing up under the Burmese dictatorship, *International Confederation of Trade Unions*, August 2003.

3 "Rangoon Castigates US over report," *Bangkok Post*, 15 March 2000.

FEAR AND FATE OF IDP CHILDREN IN BURMA:

A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE IN HIDING

BY SAW EHNA

In the middle of the night in Burma's jungle the only person to comfort her from the fear of the soldiers' brutality was her dead father.

As the night came she laid her head on her father's arm and slept next to him. The whole night she did not hear anything except a dog that sniffed at her father's body.

When daylight came, her father's chest was cold and smelt foul. She went back to the big tree where she had hidden the day before. That tree had saved her from the Burmese soldiers who had murdered her family.

At the age of eight, a Karen girl Naw Paw Aye's life became a nightmare when her family was attacked by the Burmese troops who hunted for them and took their lives.

In her little eyes her horrified story begins.

She was with her parents and cooking dinner at their little bamboo hut in the jungle beside a stream. The place where they were hiding was on the Tenasserim riverbank in the southern part of Burma. They had fled there after escaping from Burmese soldiers two years before.

Her little sister was playing beside her mother when the gunshots started.

"People screamed, 'Pa Yaw, Pa Yaw (Burman! Burman!)'." The name refers to Burmese soldiers. It is a word of fear that describes the killers of the people.

"People were fleeing. Suddenly soldiers were running down the road beside people's houses and shooting their guns. My father jumped up and ran away and my mother followed him carrying my little sister. I ran out of the house only for a short distance and hid under a big tree. I looked for my parents but could not see them." The soldiers were still running around and shooting their guns said Paw Aye.

After a long time she saw her mother.

"I heard my mother crying out. I saw one of the Burmese soldiers dragging her. In her hands, she was holding my little sister. I saw my father go to try and help my mother. The soldier shot him, and he fell down. I heard my mother cry

out about two more times and then I never saw her again."

The shooting continued for a while. The Burmese soldiers drove a herd of buffalo away with them. Then there was nothing left until in the evening.

"I was hungry and thirsty but didn't dare to venture out. I do not know where the other people had gone. I was afraid to go anywhere else."

As the night came there was only her father's body left by the Burmese soldiers. Her mother, little sister and grandmother were also killed along with three other villagers.

After spending almost two days and one night with her dead father, she was picked up by a group of Karen soldiers. Now she stays in Ban Donya, a refugee camp in Thailand.

This happened in March 1999.

Paw Aye's story is one of thousands of ethnic people and children who are forced to flee their homes by the ruling military State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) tactic of forced relocation programs and their scorched earth operation to crush the rebel groups. These operations are especially common in the resistance active areas in the east of the county; Shan, Karenni, Karen Sate and Tenasserim Division.

Today, this is still happening. These people are hiding in the jungle and living in constant fear of Burmese troops who are hunting for their lives. The Burma Army accuses them of being rebel supporters and recognizes them as the "enemy", at the age of eight...

Source: Committee for Internally Displaced Karen Persons (CIDKP)



Note

IDP: Internally Displaced Person

Child Labour World Figures

- ~ In the world, 1 in 6 children work to the detriment of his education.
- ~ Among the 246 million of children aged between 5 and 17 years-old who are working, 179 million are exposed to the worst form of labour.
- ~ Among those 179 million, 10 million are sex workers or work to reimburse a debt contracted by their parents.
- ~ In a recent report released in February 2004, the ILO approached the problem of eliminating child labour in terms of cost in developed countries. If all children attended school and received an education instead of working, the advantages for the country in terms of capacity building would generate an estimable benefit seven times higher than that arising from child labour.

“JOIN THE ARMY OR GO TO JAIL!”

BY SAW EHNA

As the 12 year-old stood at the bus stop his young heart heavy with the fight he had just had with his mother, he was confronted by a group of Burmese soldiers.

Aung Tin had decided to visit his aunt, in a town called Letpadan, from his own home, a small village called Moo oh Bin, in the Bago Division, north of Rangoon, the capital of Burma.

His father had died and he was not getting on with his mother so he ran away from her.

It was while waiting at the bus stop, that he was forced into a situation that changed his life forever.

Over the next few years he would come face to face with death, rape and the destruction of people who were defenseless against The State Peace and Development Council, (SPDC) soldiers from the Burma's brutal military government, who now stood before him.

They asked him for his ID card and when he told them he didn't have one they gave him a choice — “Join the army or go to jail”.

This huge decision to be made by one so young left him wishing that he was back home with his mother. Instead, Aung Tin was forced

to sign a piece of paper that stated that he had now voluntarily joined the army.

For the next five years he became another child soldier, conscripted into an army that rules Burma with an iron fist.

An overwhelming number of children are “recruited” by SPDC soldiers at bus stops, railway stations, marketplaces, festivals and on the streets of Burma's cities, towns and villages. Today, there are 300.000 child soldiers in the world, Burma is the biggest user with 70.000 of them serving in its army ranks.¹

Burma's Army forms part of one of the largest armies in Southeast Asia ruled by the generals of the SPDC. Children are also present in the opposition groups who have fought against this regime for 54 years.

This is Aung Tin's story as told to Aung Kaw and Ler Wah who are documenting the abuse of Burma's oppressed people. At the meeting held on November 6, 2003 he spoke openly about how he finally escaped from the death and the destruction that had destroyed his youth.

He was sent to Mingaladon, a main military base, half-hour drive from Rangoon to undergo training. As a child amongst men he endured

four and a half months of extreme physical suffering, often with very little food in his stomach.

After training he was posted to a battalion in Thaton, 145 miles east of Rangoon. For three months he was treated violently by his commanding officers and older soldiers.

The gun he carried was as tall as he was and he wore the smallest uniform the soldiers could find for him.

"As a new soldier, I had to do everything. When the platoon commander got drunk he would make me do things for him. If I told him I did not have the time to help him he would beat me up or put me in the camp jail."

"The sergeants always forced the new soldiers to work for them and they told us they would give us coffee or tea but we never got it. They fed us good rice, but never curries. We had to work everyday. If we were not patrolling we had to grow vegetables for the battalions."

After completing his three months at Thaton, he was sent into battle in the jungle to fight against the Karen resistance stronghold in Mae Tha Waw, in eastern Burma bordering Thailand.

One of the many ethnic opposition groups, the Karen National Union (KNU) have been fighting Burma's military regime since 1949.

They want their own homeland and equal rights in their country that has been ravaged by the longest civil war in the history of the world since World War II.

"We had no permanent base. We just roamed around the jungle passing through many villages, sometimes, patrolling, looking for Karen rebels. One day our column came under attack from the rebels. Bullets were flying in all directions."

"I was very afraid and did not know how to fight. We did not know who was shooting

whom. After the clash, four soldiers were dead. When the battle ended my commander beat me up until I bled because I had fought so badly."

This was not to be his last fight with the rebels and often when the soldiers could not find their enemy they went from village to village murdering the people who they accused of being the spies for Karen soldiers.

"We patrolled in this area for two months. One day our platoon ran out of food. The commander ordered me to go to a village headman to get rice and chicken. The headman came with food but only enough for the higher-ranked soldiers so we had to steal from the villagers to feed ourselves."

Soon the starving Aung Tin, with other young soldiers learnt the taste of power through their guns and preyed on the defenseless communities taking food whenever.

"When the villagers refused to give us food, we beat them up. One time a villager was killed when we met him on a path in the jungle while we were on patrol. Some of us did not want to kill him. But others said that he might

inform the Karen soldiers where we were and that we would get into trouble from our commander so it was better to kill him." Later the headman told Aung Tin that the dead man had no connection to the KNU soldiers.

As weeks went by he witnessed many deeds of torture and rape of the local people.

One day at a village his battalion arrested a boy, accusing him of being a spy for the KNU. They tied him up. His mother begged for his life. The boy's sister came and pleaded to the commanders for her brother. After he raped the girl, he gave her to his soldiers. They raped her and then the boy was released after he was savagely tortured, Aung Tin said.



After that he was sent to Mae Tha Lit, opposite the Than Song Yang a small border town in Thailand, where they had to patrol around another KNU military base. This part of the jungle was heavily mined. He saw seven men killed and 11 injured after they stepped on landmines.

He carried the images of the inhuman treatment he had witnessed like a dark shadow on his mind. The weight and pain his battalion had inflicted on the local people felt even heavier than the supplies villagers had to haul along with the troops. Not fed enough they were often killed, beaten or left behind exhausted in the jungle.

"A man who no longer could carry his load asked the soldiers if he could go home. They shouted at him to keep moving. After climbing another mountain he became even more exhausted. In desperation he tried to run away but they just shot him dead."

Another porter confronted the soldiers and asked; "We are one, we come from the same country, is it fair to treat us like this?" Within seconds he too was shot dead by a lance corporal.

The battalion he was with then moved to the infamous Kawmoora – a KNU stronghold that the SPDC have been unable to destroy for 11 years. Many thousands of men from both the government's military and the KNU have lost their lives during numerous attacks on this base. Allegations that the SPDC have used a barrage of weapons containing chemicals, phosphorus and conventional munitions have surfaced over the years. It was here that the young boy came face to face with the reality of war that still rages between the KNU and the military Junta in Burma. "Everyday we had to dig bunkers as shells rained on us. Two or three of SPDC soldiers were killed daily. For three months we fought like this then eventually I was injured. I was sent back to the base for treatment."

Once his wounds had healed he was sent back to the frontline to face the bloodshed and torture once again.

Finally the day came – five years after he had been arrested at the bus stop – he could return to his village.

"I visited my family. My mother urged me to leave the army because my father, when he was alive, hated it. "

Once again he did not listen to his mother

and the child soldier returned to the SPDC military base.

"I went back to my battalion where I had a fight with my Commander's nephew and he put me into a cell for three months. But I was released after one and half months."

"Then I started to think about what my mother had said. I knew that I now had to listen to her and somehow get home."

In 1996 he deserted the military base and went to his mother. For six years he has lived in constant fear of being arrested and thrown into jail.

Many names and places have been left out to protect the lives of the people involved.

Endnote:

1 "My gun was as tall as me", *Human Rights Watch*, October 2002.



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news briefs

NLD members under persistent arrests

Burma's military junta continues to jail members of the main opposition group while preparing to head down the path to national reconciliation. Early February, military intelligence officers arrested two NLD members, said a senior NLD youth member in Kyee Myin Daing Township, Rangoon. Myint Aye, chairman of the township's NLD office, and Tin Maung Kyi, a senior member, were arrested. According to the Thai-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPP), 15 NLD members were arrested throughout Burma in December and January.

Army to recruit more ethnic minority youths

The SPDC has ordered its officers in regional military units to pay special attention to organizing and recruiting ethnic youths. It was stated in a directive issued by the Military Headquarters in Rangoon

last month. The directive said a recruiting officer would be rewarded 20,000 kyat about 3,196 US dollars for recruiting an ethnic youth. Earlier, the reward was 5,000 kyat for recruiting a soldier.

NLD Vice Chairman brought back to his home, Rangoon

U Tin Oo, Vice Chairman of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), was brought from Kalay prison in northwestern Burma to his home in Rangoon on February 14. He has lost weight but is in good health. U Tin Oo had been detained in Kalay prison since May 30 last year. He is now under house arrest.

Peace talks "successful": KNU

The KNU has described as "successful" three days of peace talks with junta officials that ended on February 25. The KNU and Burma officials used the peace talks to discuss demarcation of territory, troop positions and resettlement of

ethnic Karen displaced by fighting, David Htaw, the deputy leader of the KNU delegation, told The Associated Press. The talks were held in the Burma border town of Moulmein.

Norway to join Bangkok process

Norway has agreed to participate in the second round of the Bangkok Process on Burma's road map to democracy by the middle of this year, Foreign Ministry spokesman said on February 24. "Thailand is looking forward to the country taking part in the next round of the Bangkok Process. We want to see Norway at the meeting because it has played an important role in other peace processes as well," The Bangkok Process meeting could be held before the middle of the year, and that Thailand believed the national convention in Burma would take place right after.

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