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Cover Photo: Saw Eh Na
No one wants to serve as the village headman in the rural area of Karenni State where both the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the State Peace and Development Council’s (SPDC) troops and its proxy-armies are active. Villages have started to practice a compulsory rotating system, among villagers, to serve as headman, when no one volunteers for the position. Being a village headman is not about governing the community, it is to share the torture.

Villagers must take turns and serve as village headman. The term of headman is different from one village to another; some villages practice three months per term, others four months or six months and the longest term is one year. People who take their turn, according to compulsory rotating system, and serve as village headman are called “bad-lucked persons”, as they have to encounter many risks during his/her term. On the day he/she accepts his/her term as headman, their purse rate jumps, their hairs stand on end and they feel constantly uneasy.

Daily duties of headman are that he/she must send one of their villagers to the SPDC army camp, of which some villages are about a 12 hours walk from (round trip), and report about the situation, in particular whether KNPP troops have been around their village or not. The headman is responsible for the accuracy of this daily report. Then, every Friday, all villages’ headmen themselves must go to the army camp for a meeting and report on the situation.

A member of the KNPP was shocked when he arriving at a village in April this year. He explained that when he told the villagers he wanted to see village headman and about 15 minutes later a 14 year old boy came up to them. He said he thought that village headman had sent the boy to them, but when he asked the boy “where is the village headman?” the boy replied that he was the village headman. The official said he was surprised and looked strangely at the boy headman.

Throughout history Karenni society villagers had to be over the age of 18 before they could become the village headman of their community. In the past, almost all headmen were elderly persons and very few headmen are aged 30 or below; but, today even a 14 year old boy serves as a headman.

According to the boy headman, he explained that all households have to take turn and serve as headman for three months in their village by compulsory rotation. Widows must take turn also. The boy headman explained that he is staying with his widowed mother and it is their turn. So he serves as the headman on behalf of his mother since his mother is old.

When KNPP soldiers are near or pass by villages the headman becomes the scapegoat, often being sentenced under the SPDC national security law, article no 17/1, by the Burmese army. The Burmese troops accuse the village headmen of contacting rebel and punish them without any proof or reason. This is normal behaviour for the Burmese army. Being threatened or tortured is not strange for people living in the war zone of Karenni State. Many village headmen express that being headman is the same as if one of your leg has stepped into the grave and only one leg remains alive.

The Burmese army punishes village headmen by making them do strange things. In the last few years, they made old headmen fight one another like as if they were buffalos fighting while the soldiers sat around laughing at them. Another case that happened was the military made a headman touch his son in-law’s genitals and made his son in-law play with his in
return. The troops were sitting around laughing at them as if it was entertainment. It is silently happening in the war zone of Karenni State, which is not published in any media.

Some days when the situation is normal and when there are no armed groups near by their village, probably the village headman is happy, as much as when your first lover says that she loves you. Similarly, during the days when Karenni armed group is around and offensives are taking place, probably headman is sad, more than when your true love has left you and is now together with another man.

Since the anti-SPDC KNPP is born from the Karenni people the Burmese military targets Karenni civilians in order to defeat the group. In an interview with a former headman he explained that if Karenni soldiers do not come they are not harmed. But he explained that some Karenni soldiers do not understand their troubles and ignore their demands that they do not carry out fighting near their villages. He said “we beg the Karenni soldiers not to shoot the Burmese soldiers near our village, but some did fight and we were harmed”.

In interview with a spokesperson of the KNPP he said that the KNPP is fighting for the existence of Karenni State and democratic rule. He continued that the SPDC oppressed and used violence against the civilian population in order to defeat the SPDC. However, he pointed out that the KNPP military activities do not target Burmese civilians. He also explained that he truly sympathize for people who are harmed but that they will not surrender just because the SPDC targets Karenni civilians.

Before the SPDC and their predecessors, village headmen were traditionally elected from the village elders by villagers. Headmen were elected because of their credibility and people respected the village headman. Today, electing village headman is not for the purpose of governing, it is to share torture in rotation among villagers. Some lucky headmen are able served their term without any harm, but the majority are harmed - at least being spoiled, and some lost forever.

A former headman who had been imprisoned during this time as village leader retold the reason of his arrest. He said it was because of fighting between Burmese soldiers and Karenni soldiers three miles from his village. When the Burmese soldiers got hurt, they accused him of showing the rebels the way and giving them rice and information. The headman explained that the army started to threaten the villagers, whom had nothing to do this, saying that if it were to happen again in the future your village would be burnt and the population removed.

On the other hand, those Karenni who living in the villages which are close to the cities, the town people compete with each other in order to gain the position of villages headman and position such as sectional authorities. People who gain these positions in the towns are seen as opportunist; because power is an opportunity to secure income sources on the back of the people.

It is true that both sides, the Karenni soldiers and the Burmese soldiers, come to village and eat people’s food the same. Villagers have no authority to stop either side from coming to their village. You eat civilian’s food and torture them while you’re opponent eats the same you do. It is not the nature of civilized human. We want the SPDC to keep their promise and not harm civilians, and we also want the KNPP to respect the requests of villagers especially when their activities compromise the safety and security of civilians.

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**Child Soldiers: Victims and Oppressors**

*By Santipap*

“Children are our greatest natural resource,” anonymous

Sadly this ideal, that children are our greatest natural resource, is taken a little too seriously by actors that see children as a tool for their armed conflicts. As military technology has developed and weapons have become lighter and simple to use, arming a child has never been easier. Armed actors prey on vulnerable children, often giving them no viable alternative than joining the military. In the world today there is an estimated 300,000 child soldiers, fighting in some of the most protracted and deadly conflicts around the globe. The poster image of a child soldier is a kid from Africa holding a semi-automatic weapon. While this image is both accurate and tragic, it is important to remember that child soldiers are everywhere.
Burma has more child soldiers than any country in the world. Just under one quarter of the world’s child soldiers are in the Burmese army. The Burmese army, which is used to rule the country with an iron fist, is believed to have 70,000 children among their recruits. Scarily, approximately 20 per cent of Burma’s military personnel are children. Armed opposition groups have between 6,000 and 7,000 child soldiers among their soldiers 1.

A child soldier by international standards as defined in the 1977 Additional Protocols to the four Geneva Conventions is a person under the age of 15 years who is recruited to, and participates in, hostilities. Furthermore, the Additional Protocol II, which is applicable to non-international armed conflicts, specifically states “children who have not attained the age of 15 years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities”. While Burma is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention it is accepted as customary international law.

The same definition is used by the Convention on the Rights of the Child to define a child soldier. Burma ratified this convention in August 1991 and is bound to comply with all articles of the convention.

Similarly, under Burma’s national Myanmar Defense Services Act (1947) the recruitment of child soldiers is prohibited. In May 2002 the Permanent Mission of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations said “the government prohibits the enlisting of recruits under the lawful age (of 18 years). The under age are not allowed to apply for recruitment. Action is taken on any infringement of the Regulation under the Defense Services Act” 2.

In addition to this statement, the SPDC established the Committee for the Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children in January 2004. This committee was established to enforce Burma’s child laws and ensure that underage people (children) are not recruited into the military. However, this committee has done little, if anything to protect the children of Burma. Rather it has been used as a forum to attack the credibility and truthfulness of allegations from the international community relating to child soldiers in the Tatmadaw, the Burmese army, instead of addressing the problem. Complaints from family members regarding missing children that are serving in the armed forces are virtually ignored, and there has been no real move to demobilize child combatants. Furthermore there is no evidence of any case where an officer has been held accountable for illegal recruitment practices 3.

Despite the claims by the SPDC that there are no underage persons in the armed forces, children are frequently recruited into the Burmese army. Some volunteer so that their families are, to some degree, protected from human right abuses, such as forced labour and arbitrary taxation that are regularly perpetrated by the military. Furthermore, the salaries promised by recruiters will significantly contribute to the family’s income, making the burden of living under the Burmese junta slightly lighter. However the vast majority are forced to join. Recruiters for the military regularly approach boys, as young as 8, at bus and train stations, market and other public places. Most of the time the boys are given a choice: join the army or go to jail.

Army recruiters are rewarded for new soldiers they conscript. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, recruiters receive between 5,000 or 10,000 kyat per recruit they send 4. Additionally, there are claims that soldiers can be discharged from the armed services if they fulfill a quota of new recruits.

Once recruited the children are sent to one of the country’s holding camp, Su Saun Yay in Burma. The army processes their new recruits in these holding camps and sends them to military training schools. While being held at a Su Saun Yay the recruits receive bad quality food and were forced to work, either maintaining the camps or on money-making ventures such as brick baking and fish farming.

According to Human Rights Watch there are at least 22 military training camps in Burma. Training generally lasts between four and half and five months. Topics covered include small and large weapons, military tactic and deployment and military parades. Political indoctrination occurs informally, usually at night time in the form of repeating propaganda. Mistakes during training are punished with brutal beatings and sometimes not just for the recruit who made the error, but for the whole group. Following the completion of training, the soldiers are deployed into the Burmese army and they begin active duty.

The Burmese army is an incredibly hierarchical mechanism. Where each level is abused by those above them and in turn, abuses those below them. Child soldiers are at the bottom of this system. They are physically abused by their commanders, their wages withheld, denied leave and food rations stolen. They are given the most menial and degrading tasks, and are often forced to perpetrate atrocities against villagers in order to survive.

The impact on the children of being forced to serve as soldiers is devastating. As child soldiers often lack proper training and experience and have limited life skills, they are more likely to make mistakes in battle – and these mistakes are either fatal or they haunt them forever. Child soldiers have been shot, stabbed, and injured by grenades.
Furthermore the frontline areas where child soldiers are sent are severely contaminated with landmines, and injuries and death from stepping on one are common.

However, the affects of being a child soldier are not just physical. The psychological impact on the children is just as devastating, if not more so. The coping mechanisms used by child soldiers to deal with the adult situation they find themselves in are those of a child. Some run away, others attempt to commit suicide and some successfully take their own lives, but most find a way to rationalize what is happening – distorting the fundamental sentiments of right and wrong, affecting their future behaviours, relationships and lifestyles. As child soldiers have been desensitized to violence, they themselves often become the perpetrators of abuse.

Non-state actors also have child soldiers in their armed forces. A Karen human rights activist said “when we were children we wanted to join the army to fight the SPDC to avenge all the atrocities that happened to our village”. Due to the lack of educational and employment opportunities available to young people in the villages, joining the opposition forces is one of the few options available. In the past opposition groups have sent volunteers under the age of 18 to school, or have employed them in non-combatant roles, such as clerks. Sadly, due to the loss of territory and lack of resources, the implementation of this policy is becoming increasingly rare.

Child soldiers in the opposition forces are spared some of the brutality of their counter-parts in the Burmese army. Those in the opposition forces are not subjected to the same physical and mental abuse by their commanders and they are not forced to perpetrate human rights abuses against the civilian populations.

Regardless of whether children are serving in the state and non-state armed forces there is a need to initiate a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program (See Box). An effective DDR program is necessary, if child soldiers are to have some semblance of a normal life and become productive members of society. In order to implement an effective DDR program, children need to be removed from the conflict and placed in a peaceful environment.

No singular group is responsible for the implementation of a DDR program. Groups from all sectors of society should be involved, such as national and local government authorities, UN agencies, international non-government organizations and grassroots and community based organisations. DDR programs can help child soldiers’ deal with the traumatic experiences they faced, learn new skills and regain some of their lost childhoods. This is not just important for the current generation of child soldiers, but for all children who lost their childhoods to the army to undergo some elements of a DDR program.

It is a tragic Catch 22 situation - the SPDC, who is actively recruiting child soldiers and rewarding people for doing so, is one of the key actors needed to implement an effective DDR program. Despite the overwhelming evidence that there are child soldiers in the Tatmadaw the SPDC still claims that it does not forcibly conscript or employ anyone under the age of 18 in their armed forces. Until the SPDC faces up to the truth that it systematically recruits children to be soldiers, what hope do the current and future child soldiers of Burma have?

Endnotes:
1 “My Gun was as Tall as me: Child Soldiers in Burma”, Human Rights Watch, 2002
2 Letter to HRW from the Permanent Mission of the Union of Myanmar to the UN, May 8, 2002
4 “Growing Up Under the Burma Dictatorship”, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, August, 2003
5 Ibid
6 BI Interview, January 2006

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**What is DDR?**

**Disarmament**: The collection of small arms and light and heavy weapons within a conflict zone. It frequently entails weapons collection, assembly of combatants and development of arms management programs, including their safe storage and sometimes their destruction. Because many child soldiers do not carry their own weapons, disarmament should not be a prerequisite for the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers.

**Demobilization**: The formal and controlled discharge of soldiers from the army or from an armed group. In demobilizing children the objectives should be to verify the children’s participation in armed conflict, to collect basic information to establish the child’s identity for family tracing, to assess priority needs and to provide the child with information about what is likely to happen next.

**Reintegration**: A long-term process which aims to give children a viable alternative to their involvement in armed conflict and help them resume life in a peaceful civilian environment. Elements of reintegration include family reunification (or finding alternative care if reunification is impossible), providing education and training, devising appropriate strategies for economic and livelihood support and in some cases providing psycho-social support.

A Border Without Medicine: A Looming Health Crisis in Southern Mon State

By S Platts

The Halockhani resettlement site is an area in southern Mon State close to the Thai-Burma border that contains over 10,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) forced from their homes by the Burmese military junta. Beginning in 1992, the French medical agency Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) provided medical care and supplies to the area. In December 2005 they withdrew their support after their permission to cross the border was revoked by the Thai authorities. The six-month supply of medication they left behind is gone and many local health workers fear a health crisis is imminent.

History of Halockhani

The first Mon refugees fled Burma to Thailand in December 1984 and by the time the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) overran the Three Pagoda Pass area in 1989-90, there were 12,000 Mon refugees living in camps in Thailand. When the Thai authorities began their ‘constructive engagement’ with SLORC in 1992 they began the forced repatriation of refugees back to Burma. They succeeded in this by first relocating all refugees to a single camp known as Loh Loe on the Thai side of the border. They stayed there for one year before being forced back over the border at the beginning of 1994. By April 1994 all the refugees from Loh Loe were back inside Burma; in the main Halockhani site and in a smaller site named Plat Don Pai, which is further inside Burmese territory (1).

This relocation did not last long though. Following an incident in which a SLORC soldier was shot by a Mon farmer, around 300 SLORC troops attacked Plat Don Pai on July 21 1994. The SLORC troops were returning to Ye township, Mon State, after serving at the Three Pagoda Pass border area. After beating and torturing some of the men in Plat Don Pai, they took 50 men for use as a human shield and headed for Halockhani. On the way, a battle broke out between the troops and a group of Mon soldiers, causing the SLORC troops to retreat. During the retreat, they forced people from their homes, which they then looted and burned. They also took men to use as porters for the march back to Ye(2). Realising they were not safe, the Mon IDPs fled once again into Thailand, setting up camp in the area around the Thai Border Patrol Police checkpoint just inside Thailand, on the road to Sangkhlaburi.

The Thai authorities immediately began demanding repatriation to Halockhani and set a deadline of August 10th. When the deadline passed, they blocked the road to the new site, preventing aid workers and UN officials from entering(3). It was noted in a report by Human Rights Watch that the fleeing of the refugees back to Thailand coincided with the agreement signed by Thailand, Burma and Total and Unocal Gas Companies to build the Yadana gas pipeline through Mon State to Kanchanaburi Province in Thailand(2). Under the terms of the agreement, Thailand receives compensation from the suppliers (Total, Unocal and Myanmar Oil and Gas enterprise) if for any reason the gas is not supplied. Returning all the refugees to Halockhani meant that they could be controlled by the SLORC troops at the nearby Three Pagoda Pass base, thus negating the possibility of attacks on the pipeline by Mon rebels.

Keen to exploit the investment potential from the gas pipeline, the Thai government began pressuring the New Mon State Party (NMSP) into signing a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese junta, telling Mon leaders that repatriated refugees would be offered jobs on the gas pipeline project(3). This, combined with worsening conditions in Mon state (including increased forced labour and IDP harassment) and the offer of business concessions from the SLORC (these were withdrawn in 1998), led to a verbal ceasefire between the NMSP and the SLORC in June 1995. The agreement mandated that all Mon refugees be once again repatriated to Burma. This happened in 1996. However, understandably scared of returning home, and with the threat of forced labour and relocation from the soon to be constructed Yadana gas pipeline, most refugees opted to remain in the Halockhani border area. According to Thai-Burma Border Consortium figures at the end of June 2006, the site now holds around 12,000 people spread over five camps collectively known as Halockhani.

International aid

International aid agencies arrived in Sangkhlaburi shortly after the SLORC took control of the Three Pagoda Pass area in 1990. These agencies included Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF), who began working in Mon
State in 1992. MSF provided training, medical care and supplies for diseases and illnesses such as Malaria, Tuberculosis and Diarrhoea. By 2004, they were providing assistance to 10 different clinics in the Halockhani area.

For the Mon however this vital assistance ended late last year following a decision by the Ministry of Interior of Thailand to refuse permission for MSF staff to cross the border from Thailand. The decision is thought to be a result of pressure from the Burmese junta on the Thai authorities not to allow foreigners to cross the border into Mon State. Always keen to appease their neighbours as investment potential in the country grows, the Thai authorities responded positively to the SPDC’s request. This was not the first time MSF had faced this problem, in 2003 they almost withdrew for the same reason but were persuaded to continue their work by the NMSP\(^{(3)}\). In fact, in the 1995 ceasefire agreement, the NMSP agreed not to seek help from any NGOs, something which may give the SPDC an excuse to heap further misery on the Mon people as they seek a replacement organisation for MSF. The Ministry of Interior’s decision was the final straw for MSF as they were now in a situation where they could no longer carry out their work sufficiently. In December 2005, they ended their work in Halockhani leaving behind six months worth of medical supplies for administration by Mon health workers.

In the same month that MSF departed there was an outbreak of Chicken Pox in the camps. Although the Mon health workers were able use MSF supplies to prevent the virus from spreading, they are worried about further outbreaks. “We gave villagers medicine for prevention and every child ate Vitamin A. We also organised health education training so refugees can protect themselves. But we don’t know what will happen in the future,” said Dalai Htaw, a Mon health worker\(^{(4)}\).

**Health crisis**

In June the supplies ran out and, with no alternative source of free medication, the NMSP took the decision to charge all patients half the cost of any medicines issued in hospitals and clinics in the camps. For the majority of IDPs this is not possible, as they have no income to pay the fees. Even for those who can afford to pay, treatment is still difficult because the Mon health workers in the camps are afraid to treat patients without support of MSF doctors. “We are technically weak and we also have inadequate medical supplies. So when we have to do an operation, it is difficult for us,” said Sadaw Nom, a Mon health worker\(^{(4)}\). One further duty MSF carried out was transporting emergency cases across the border to hospitals in Thailand. This is no longer possible due to the Thai authorities, and even if it were there would be no money to pay for treatment when they arrived. “If we are going to send patients to Thai hospitals, nobody would be able to pay the medical treatment fees for them. So, we just keep them here and give them some medicines. If the medicine is gone, we don’t know what we will do,” added Sadaw Nom\(^{(4)}\).

The preventative treatment provided by MSF was vital in halting outbreaks of Malaria, Chicken Pox, TB and other diseases. With so many people living in such close quarters outbreaks of these diseases are going to be common and with no medicine to treat patients a health crisis is imminent. Already, in the first monsoon season after MSF’s withdrawal, it has been reported that 65 per cent of 700 patients in Arrowjan Hospital, Wine and Jaytanar Clinics were suffering from Malaria\(^{(5)}\). A social worker from this area in Mon State was quoted as saying, “when Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) was functioning in this area, treatment for malaria was much better.”

Currently the Mon National Health Committee is searching for an NGO to replace MSF by writing proposals and circulating pleas for assistance. While this goes on the economic links between Thailand and Burma grow stronger and increasingly more men, women and children contract preventable illnesses due to lack of basic medical care. If cross border assistance is not an option for health NGOs, then at the very least an organisation needs to step-up and offer medication and training for the struggling Mon health workers. If this does not happen soon then disease will continue to spread and the men, women and children of the camps will continue to die from diseases that could have been prevented.

**Endnotes:**


Burma’s Top Brass Reportedly Reduce Military Role: Following Burma’s quarterly military meeting in Pyinmana reports have emerged suggesting that the country’s top military leaders, including Than Shwe, have stepped down from their military positions.

Senior General Than Shwe who currently serves as Commander-in-Chief of the Burmese armed forces and his deputy Senior General Maung Aye are said to have been replaced by General Shwe Mann, currently army chief-of-staff, and former military commander Major-General Thura Myint Aung. Several others were also believed to have been repositioned.

The junta is also rumoured to have considered renaming the SPDC with a title that includes the word “democracy”, sources said.

Rights Council to address Suu Kyi’s detention: The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, an organ of the Human Rights Council, will address Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s detention during its next session in December.

A petition is the first such case received by the new Human Rights Council in Geneva. The Working Group then sent an official letter to the Burmese government on July 10 asking for its response, which it received in September.

The junta’s reply on the question of Suu Kyi’s detention is considered confidential and has not been made public.

Divided UN Security Council Agrees to Focus on Situation in Burma: The United Nations Security Council voted by 10 votes to four against with one abstention to focus on the situation in the isolated Southeast Asian nation of Burma.

Ten nations voted in favour of adding Burma to the Council agenda, while China, Russia, Qatar and the Democratic Republic of Congo voted against it. Tanzania abstained.

The move came after lobbying from the US who are concerned about the deteriorating situation in Burma, saying it was likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security.

However China’s Ambassador Wang Guangya told the procedural meeting, in which no member has the right to veto, that neither Burma’s neighbours nor most Asian countries recognize the situation in the country as any threat to regional peace and security.

SPDC won’t bend to UNSC pressure: The SPDC said that there would be no change to its policies earlier this month following a decision by the UN Security Council to put Burma on the agenda.

“Under no circumstances will it change these policies just because of pressure, coercion and sanctions,” a government statement carried in the state-run New Light of Myanmar said.