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THE BORDER GUARD FORCE

The Need to Reassess the Policy

OVERVIEW

The implementation of the Border Guard Force (BGF) program in 2009 was an attempt to neutralise armed ethnic ceasefire groups and consolidate the Burma Army's control over all military units in the country. The programme was instituted after the 2008 constitution which stated that 'All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services'. As a result the government decided to transform all ethnic ceasefire groups into what became known as Border Guard Forces (BGF). Consequently, this was used to pressure armed ethnic groups that had reached a ceasefire with the government to either allow direct Burma Army control of their military or face an offensive.

The BGF and, where there was no border, the Home Guard Force (HGF), had been seen as an easy alternative to fighting armed ceasefire groups. While a number of ceasefire groups including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) refused to take part in the program, other groups accepted the offer including the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), National Democratic Army – Kachin (NDA-K), Kachin Defence Army (KDA), Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) and the Lahu Democratic Front (LDF).

Many of these BGF units, especially in Karen State, have carved out small fiefdoms for themselves and along with a variety of local militias continue to place a great burden on the local population. There are consistent reports of human rights abuses by BGF units and a number have been involved in the narcotics trade. While the BGF battalion program had originally been designed to solve the ceasefire group issue its failure, and subsequent attempts by the Government to negotiate peace with non-ceasefire groups, suggests that the role of the BGF units and their continued existence, like that of the NaSaKa,[1] needs to be rethought.

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THE BORDER GUARD FORCE PROGRAM

The Border Guard Force program entailed transforming the ceasefire group's armed wing into battalions comprised of 326 soldiers. It was envisioned that there would be 18 officers and three commanders with the rank of major. Among the three commanders, two would be from the ethnic armed groups and one from the Burma Army who would be responsible for the day-to-day administration.

Other keys positions such as general staff officer and quartermaster officer would also be from the Burma Army. In addition, there would be twenty-seven other ranking non-commissioned officers from the Burma Army.[2]

The BGF units that were created from smaller groups in Shan, Kachin and Karenni States are:

Date	Group	BGF Unit No.
08/11/2009	NDA-K	1001
	NDA-K	1002
	NDA-K	1003
	KNPLF	1004
	KNPLF	1005
04/12/2009	MNDA	1006
30/01/2010	LDF	1007
	PSLF	1008
	KDA	1009
	KDA	1010

Groups in Karen State that were formed from members of the DKBA and KPF were:

Date	Number	Location
18/08/2010	1011	Hlaingbwe
	1012	Hlaingbwe
	1013	Kamamaung (Papun)
	1014	Kamamaung (Papun)
20/08/2010	1015	Paing Kyone (Hlaingbwe)
	1016	Hlaingbwe
	1017	Myawaddy
	1018	Myawaddy
	1019	Myawaddy
	1020	Myawaddy
21/08/2010	1021	Kawkareik
	1022	Myawaddy
22/08/2010	1023	Kya-in-seik-gyi

Soldiers in the Border Guard Force battalions were offered salaries of between 25,000 to 35,000 Kyat for a new recruit and up to 180,000 Kyat for a major, rations and uniforms would be provided, they and their family members would also be given free accommodation, access to health care, education public transportation and each soldier would receive a pension.

Despite such assurances, a number of problems soon emerged. In 2010, over a hundred border guard force (BGF) recruits attending military training in Shan State East's Kengtung, where BGF No. 1007, 1008, 1009 were trained, fled after such promises of support failed to materialise.

According to one of the deserters:

> We were informed by our family that they needed money to survive because they did not get anything from the junta authorities. Likewise we also did not get full salary as promised. This is why we decided to leave because there is no benefit in being there if our families are struggling to survive.[3]

Government leaflet promising to take care of BGF troops and their families – The caption at the top-right says: Strong Army, Strong Nation (SHAN)

Further problems occurred when many of the Border Guard Force units were unable to find the number of recruits necessary to fulfil the required quota. In addition, a number of recruits fled to join either armed resistance groups or across the border into Thailand.

According to Karen sources many of the Karen BGF units refused to cooperate with their Burma Army commanders. This resulted in former 999 Special Battalion Commander Maung Chit Htoo being recalled from his advisory position and asked to personally intervene in the Karen BGF units affairs.[4] Despite this, however, general discontent within the units remained high.

By June 2011 divisions in Karen State within the BGF units came to the forefront. On 24 May 2011, Lt-Col Po Bi from Karen BGF Battalion 1012, based in Myaing Gyi Ngu, told his Government advisors to leave and his troops to replace their BGF patches with their old DKBA insignia.[5] He was later joined by another two BGF battalions 1013 and 1014 and fighting between the remaining BGF units ensued.[6] Eventually the three BGF units would join the Klo Htoo Baw Battalion (formerly DKBA 5 Brigade which had refused to take part in the BGF program).

Since their creation the remaining BGF units have continued to profit from and abuse the local villagers. BGF 1014, under the command of Maung Chit Htoo, and based along the border with Papun and Thaton, has confiscated land and forced villagers to clear plantation for them so that to local companies could use the land for teak and rubber plantations. As a result villagers did not have sufficient land to graze their livestock and thus faced food shortages. BGF 1014 has also forcibly recruited villagers into local militia units known as 'Thaung Kyan Thu Sant Kyin Yay A Hpwe'. However, villagers could avoid having to do the military service if they paid the BGF 50,000 Kyat.[7]

In addition to Human Rights abuses the BGF units have also been heavily implicated in the drugs trade. In July 2012, undercover Thai police officers and anti-narcotic officials in Mae Sot recovered 8 million baht worth, or 19,850 Yaba pills, from Shwe Kokko village during a sting operation apparently on the Burmese side of the border. One of those arrested, Naing Win, admitted to being a member of the Kokko based BGF battalion. Shwe Kokko is under the control of Maung Chit Htoo and was formerly the 999 Special Battalion Headquarters.[8]

In addition to BGF 1014, other units have been implicated in the yaba trade. According to the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) BGF unit 1016 openly produces and sell the drug to local teenagers and students. BGF 1016, under Commander Mya Khaing, packages the product like candy and as a result addiction rates, and debt, have risen dramatically in the areas where the BGF 1016 units operate.[9]

Similar reports appear in other areas of the country where BGF units operate. According to SHAN opium cultivation continues to thrive in areas under BGF control (see chart below)

State	township	BGF#
Kachin	Gangwin-Chihpwe	1001
	Lupi-Chihpwe-Pangwa	1002
	Sinkyaing-Kambaiti	1003
Kayah	Loikaw	1005
	Dimawso	1005
Shan	Kunggyan	1006
	Mongton	1007
	Markmang *(Metman)*	1010

According to Kachin media sources local BGF units have asked the Burma Army to send more troops into its areas of operation to protect its opium crops. Reports also suggest that the BGF units have major concerns in relation to the Kachin Independence Organisation's Drug Eradication Program and as a result, in the absence of support from the Burma Army, feel their livelihoods threatened.[10]

It is quite clear that despite the original reasons for their creation that the BGF units are now a major problem, not only for the local population but also for the Government's peace process. The numerous reports of abuse, land confiscation, forced labour, drug trafficking, and extortion are common from all BGF units. As a result it is a necessity that the Burma Army reign in or, like the NaSaKa, demobilise the BGF units as a priority. There continued existence, alongside that of local miltias, is a further threat to peace and stability in the country.

Notes

[1] The Border Area Immigration Control was responsible for security in Arakan State and the Bangladesh border. According to the ICG it was '. . . the most corrupt and abusive government agency in the area' it was abolished by Presidential order No.59/2013 on 12 July 2013.
[2] 'Border Guard Force Plan Leads to End of Ceasefire', Wai Moe, The Irrawaddy, 31 August 2009
[3] 'BGF men fleeing due to junta's broken promise', Hseng Khio Fah, SHAN, 11 August 2010
[4] Personal Conversation with KNU Central Committee Member
[5] 'Karen BGF Troops Begin Returning to the DKBA', Saw Yan Naing, The Irrawaddy, 3 June 2011
[6] 'BGF Commander Killed in All-Karen Clash', The Irrawaddy, 1 July 2011
[7] 'BGF Battalion #1014 forced labour and forced recruitment, April to May 2012', KHRG News Bulletin May 31, 2013 / KHRG #2013-B29
[8] 'Border Guard Force member arrested in drug bust', Ko Thet, DVB, 18 July 2012
[9] Hpa-an Photo Set: BGF production and sale of yaba in T'Nay Hsah and Ta Kreh townships, 4 July 2013
[10] 'BGF calls for more Burmese troops to protect opium fields', Kachin News, 25 February 2011

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