



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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Cross-border DKBA attack displaces households in Thailand

On April 21st 2010 DKBA soldiers from Battalion #7 of Brigade #999 crossed into Thailand and burned three huts in the Thai village of Hsoe Hta in Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province. The raid was ordered by Battalion #7 Column Commander Bpweh Kih, who believed that the villagers had been in contact with the KNLA and were withholding information about four DKBA soldiers who had recently deserted from a DKBA camp at Bpaw Bpah Hta, Pa'an District. The incident falls into a broader recent pattern of cross-border violence and killings by the DKBA, often against suspected KNLA supporters; it also gives substance to statements made by deserters during interviews with KHRG that indicate they would be summarily executed if recaptured by the DKBA.

At the end of March 2010, four soldiers of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Brigade #999, Battalion #7 led by Battalion Commander Hlaing Thaeh deserted and escaped to Thailand, and began cooperating with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 7th Brigade. Recently, units from DKBA Battalion #7 have been active around Bpaw Bpah Hta and Hsoe Kin in Lu Pleh Township, Pa'an District, both of which are near Hsoe Hta village in Tha Song Yang District, on the Thai side of the Moei River. The soldiers who deserted had been based at the army camp at Bpaw Bpah Hta, under the command of Column Commander Bpweh Kih. Upon hearing that four of his troops had escaped into Thailand, Bpweh Kih complained that the villagers from Hsoe Hta had persuaded the men to defect, and ordered other soldiers from his unit to search for them. Soldiers from Battalion #7 crossed into Thailand several times to visit Hsoe Hta and question the residents about the deserters; on each occasion the villagers told them that they had no information about, and had not seen any deserters.

Despite, or perhaps due to, the failure of these visits to yield any information, on April 21st 2010 Bpweh Kih ordered Officer Moe Aung and soldiers from Battalion #7 to again go to the Thai side of the river and burn down the huts of three Hsoe Hta villagers whom the commander



This photo, taken April 25th 2010, shows a DKBA army camp located on the Burma side of the Moei River, north of Mae Ta Ree village in Tha Song Yang District. [Photo: KHRG]

suspected were connected to the KNLA and responsible for the defection of his troops. Obeying the order, Moe Aung and his soldiers crossed into Thailand and burned three huts belonging to Saw M---, 45, Saw D---, 48, and Saw T---, 44. Saw T---'s hut was made out of teak and could have been sold for over 20,000 Thai baht (US \$620); he also had belongings and seeds for his plantation in his hut, all of which were destroyed in the fire. Villagers in contact with the men told KHRG that the men said their huts had been burnt down because DKBA members had accused them of having contact with the KNLA, and of convincing the four DKBA soldiers to defect. All three continue to remain in hiding with their families and don't dare to return to Hsoe Hta because Bpweh Kih has ordered that they be arrested and killed if caught by DKBA troops.

These villagers have lived in Hsoe Hta for over five years; they left their homes in T'ree Poe Kwee in Lu Pleh Township, Pa'an District, due to the difficulty of pursuing their livelihoods and providing for their families inside Pa'an District. That they have not been able to escape abuse by the DKBA even after relocating to Thailand reflects a broader pattern of cross-border violence perpetrated by DKBA forces against individuals residing in parts of Thailand adjacent to DKBA-controlled areas of Burma. When carried out, such violence is often extra-judicial and perpetrated against individuals accused of having contact with or supporting the KNLA. In the past, the DKBA has interpreted the very act of fleeing to Thailand to escape human rights abuse or economic hardship as an act of support for the KNLA. Officer Pu Bp'Neh Wah from DKBA Brigade #999, based in Kyaw Gkay Hta, Dta Greh Township, in fact articulated this suspicion in a threat made at a meeting with a group of village leaders at Kyaw Gkay military camp, Dta Greh Township at the end of August 2009;¹ in the same month, on August 27th 2009 the headman of Wah Gka village, T'nay Hsah Township was accused of having contact with the KNLA, detained, beaten and executed just one day after visiting Thailand to procure agricultural products.²

The incident in Hsoe Hta described above is only the most recent in a history of cross-border attacks by the DKBA against villages, refugee camps and individuals in Thailand.³ Since June 2009, a particular area of concern has been Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province, to which more than 3,000 refugees fled after increased conflict

¹ "Unsafe return: Threats to human rights and security for refugees leaving Tha Song Yang District," KHRG, January 2010. Note that, by the first week of April 2010, the majority of these refugees had returned to Burma or gone into hiding in villages in Thailand. Interviews by KHRG as well as other independent organisations indicated that a chief reason causing refugees to abandon the camps was coercion by soldiers from the Royal Thai Army harassing refugees and pressuring them to leave. For a summary of events leading up to the departure of the Tha Song Yang refugees, and interviews describing harassment and pressure, see: "Functionally Refoulement: Camps in Tha Song Yang District abandoned as refugees bow to pressure," KHRG, April 2010.

² "Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang," KHRG, September 2009.

³ This history began virtually from the moment the DKBA was formed, after separating from the KNLA in 1994. See, "DKBA / SLORC Cross-Border Attacks," KHRG, August 1996; "Attacks on Karen Refugee Camps: 1998," KHRG, May 1998.

and exploitative abuse in Pa'an District.⁴ On June 23rd 2009, for example, in The Bay Hta village in Tha Song Yang, 36-year-old Saw Mah Kloh and 28-year-old Saw Er Khlay were summarily executed by three DKBA soldiers after being interrogated about, and claiming to have no knowledge of KNLA activities in the area.⁵ On February 17th 2010 around 1 p.m., five DKBA soldiers entered Nong Bua village in Thailand; three of the men approached 38-year-old Kyaw Dah Poe (aka Padoh Ayah Singkhon), a Thai citizen and community worker who was walking near the village, and murdered him, shooting him once in the body and once in the head. This shooting marked the second time in 2010 that DKBA soldiers had attempted to murder a Thai citizen on Thai soil: further south from Tha Song Yang in Umphang District, on January 16th 2010 the chief of Eu Pu Hta village, who had been cooperating with the KNLA, survived after being shot in the thigh and bladder by two DKBA soldiers in a dispute over a tractor.⁶ The outcomes of these incidents help to explain that the fear held by Saw M---, Saw D---, and Saw T--- that they will be killed as KNLA sympathisers if captured by DKBA soldiers is both credible and realistic, even though they no longer reside in DKBA-controlled Pa'an District.

The attack on the three households in Hsoe Hta village is also consistent with previous threats of violent reprisals against individuals who defect from DKBA ranks. In an interview with KHRG in October 2009 Pah G---, a former DKBA Brigade #555 soldier who had been forcibly recruited at age 13, recalled how his commanding officer had explicitly stated that deserters would be executed if recaptured:

If we couldn't escape successfully, when they recaptured us we would be killed because the commander gave an order that if escaping soldiers were recaptured they would be punished with death.

-Pah G--- (male, 14), Y--- village, Nyaunglebin District (October 2009)⁷

Treatment of deserters is particularly alarming given increased forced recruitment of soldiers and porters by the DKBA since August 2008,⁸ which was accelerated in May 2009 after it was decided that the DKBA needed to recruit an additional 3,000 troops to participate in the SPDC programme for cease-fire groups across the country to transform into Border Guard Forces (BGF) under at least partial SPDC control prior to

⁴ For background and context on the initial flight of refugees to Tha Song Yang, see: "Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang," KHRG, September 2009.

⁵ "Cross-border DKBA attack leaves two Karen dead," Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), June 25th 2009. [<http://www.dvb.no/news/cross-border-dkba-attack-leaves-two-karen-dead/2699>]

⁶ "Thai village chief shot by DKBA troops," DVB, January 21st 2010 [<http://www.dvb.no/news/thai-village-chief-shot-by-dkba-troops/2897>]

⁷ This quote is taken from a longer interview previously published by KHRG in: "Forced recruitment, forced labour: interviews with DKBA deserters and escaped porters," KHRG, November 2009.

⁸ See: "Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment, and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts," KHRG, May 2009

elections scheduled for 2010.⁹ Deserters' accounts of their experiences in the DKBA indicate that troops serving in the rank and file do not receive adequate rations and are poorly treated; this includes physical abuse, which interviewees have cited in their reasons for desertion.¹⁰ In the quote below, taken from an interview with KHRG in May 2009, 19-year-old Saw K---, describes frequent physical abuse experienced during five years serving in the DKBA. Saw K--- was originally conscripted involuntarily after his village was ordered to provide soldiers to DKBA Battalion #901, and he was chosen through a 'secret-ballot' process similar to drawing lots.¹¹

Yes, the [commander] beat me and it wasn't enough for him only beating me, he also punched me. These cases happened more than 10 times, I couldn't count them because I stayed with him for many years, I couldn't remember them all. If they caught us with guns when we tried to flee, we'd be killed.

-Saw K--- (male, 19), Gkyaw Gkay Koh village, Pa'an District (May 2009)

Considering the regular use of involuntary conscription by the DKBA as well as reports by deserters of the poor living conditions and even mistreatment faced by new conscripts, it is reasonable to expect that desertion will continue to be a problem for the DKBA for the foreseeable future. Levels of desertion may also increase due to internal disagreements over whether the DKBA should complete its planned transformation into a Border Guard Force. Some soldiers and low-ranking officers have told KHRG that they oppose the plan, while others have said they will desert if the DKBA refuses because such a refusal might mean renewed conflict with the SPDC Army. As of April 29th 2010, the DKBA had not yet officially become a Border Guard Force. Reports from sources within the DKBA, KNLA, Royal Thai Army and villagers in Pa'an District have conflicted, however, about whether crucial DKBA officers based on the Thai-Burma border had agreed to or refused the transformation in a meeting with the SPDC Army on April 28th 2010.

These credible threats to the human rights and security of DKBA deserters – as well as deserters from other non-state armed groups and the SPDC Army – should be taken into account in policy discussions regarding the provision of services to former soldiers. Dangers to DKBA deserters are of particular concern given the presence of minors within the group's ranks. KHRG has repeatedly documented the forced recruitment of children by the DKBA; nearly half of the deserters interviewed by KHRG during 2009, for

⁹ For more background on the use of forced recruitment by the DKBA and the group's proposed transformation into a Border Guard Force, see: "Forced recruitment of child soldiers: An interview with two DKBA deserters," KHRG, August 2009; "Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang," KHRG, September 2009.

¹⁰ Full transcripts of interviews with SPDC deserters are available in: "Forced recruitment, forced labour: interviews with DKBA deserters and escaped porters," KHRG, November 2009; and "Forced recruitment of child soldiers: An interview with two DKBA deserters," KHRG, August 2009

¹¹ In this process of selection, potential recruits from a village must draw pieces of paper from a box or plastic bag. Some pieces of paper have numbers written on them in ascending order (1, 2, 3, etc.), while the other pieces are blank, with the number of numbered pieces corresponding to the number of soldiers required by the conscription order. Villagers who draw the numbered pieces are thus selected by their village to meet the recruitment quota.

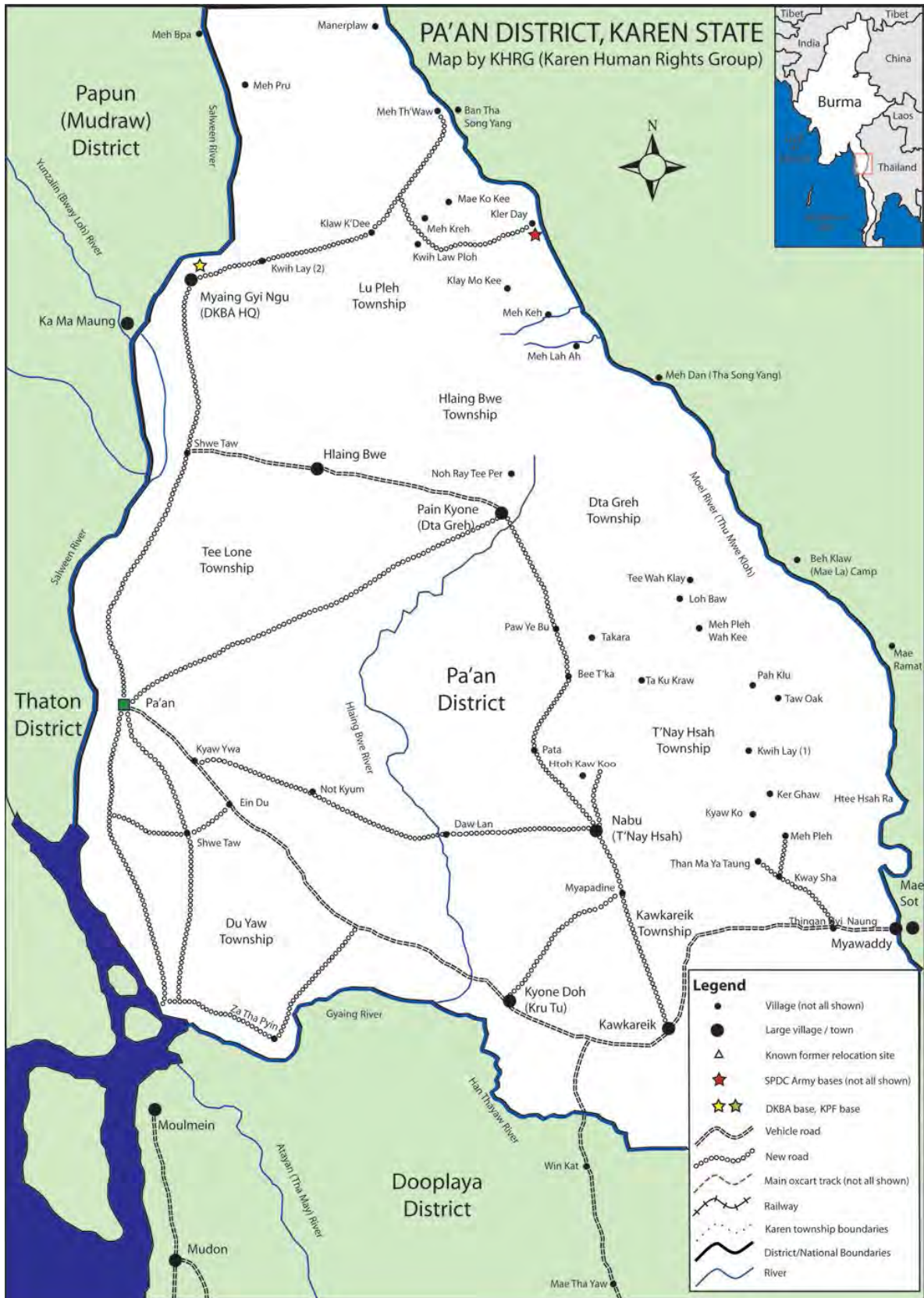
instance, reported that minors were in their former battalions. These deserters confirmed a total of 35 to 41 children under the age of 18 in their former battalions. Importantly, these numbers are not representative of the whole DKBA; they are estimates only for the battalions in which the former DKBA soldiers served in prior to deserting.¹²

The attack on the households in Hsoe Hta on April 28th as well as other incidents described in this report, meanwhile, illustrate that the DKBA remains unhesitant to cross the border to engage in violent activity in Thailand. It also corroborates fears reported by villagers that have fled to Thailand and subsequently continued to feel vulnerable to DKBA abuse, particularly villagers with real or perceived connections to the KNLA. Consequently, incidents like those documented in this report should be taken into account when humanitarian solutions are crafted for hosting villagers seeking refuge in parts of Thailand adjacent to territory controlled by the DKBA.

For further reading on forced recruitment and desertion in the DKBA, the situation in Tha Song Yang as well as the impact of the SPDC and DKBA on villagers in Pa'an District, see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *Functionally Refoulement: Camps in Tha Song Yang District abandoned as refugees bow to pressure* (April 2010)
- *Abuse between borders: Vulnerability for Burmese workers deported from Thailand* (February 2010)
- *Refoulement Deferred: Still no durable solution for hosting refugees in Tha Song Yang District* (February 2010)
- *Threatening refoulement: harassment and pressure on refugees in Tha Song Yang District* (February 2010)
- *Unsafe return: Threats to human rights and security for refugees leaving Tha Song Yang District* (January 2010)
- *Forced recruitment, forced labour: interviews with DKBA deserters and escaped porters* (November 2009)
- *Security concerns for new refugees in Tha Song Yang: Update on increased landmine risks* (September 2009)
- *Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang* (September 2009)
- *Forced recruitment of child soldiers: An Interview with two DKBA deserters* (August 2009)
- *Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District* (June 2009)
- *Update on SPDC/DKBA attacks at Ler Per Her and new refugees in Thailand* (June 2009)
- *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts* (May 2009)

¹² For more information regarding the recruitment of minors by the DKBA, see *Grave Violations: Assessing abuses of child rights in Karen areas during 2009*, KHRG, January 2010.



Karen Districts



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Scale: 1 cm to 22 km
1 in. to 35 miles