THE KAREN STRUGGLE IN BURMA

Burmese army closes in

At a critical stage in Asia’s least reported but long-running separatist war, Martin Smith assesses the most recent offensive of Burmese government troops against the Karen rebels, and speculates on a possible outcome and on the implications for other ethnic minority rebel forces in Burma.

In the remote jungles of south east Burma, one of Asia’s longest running but most forgotten wars is entering a decisive stage. Along a 500 km front in the rugged mountains of the Dawna Range, Burmese government forces are gearing up to launch a new offensive in an attempt to end the 37-year rebellion of the separatist Karen National Union. But while hit-and-run dry season offensives into KNU-held strongholds are an almost annual feature of this long struggle, there can be little doubting the determination this time of Burma’s ruler, General Ne Win, to strike the Karen rebels a fatal blow.

In a major counter-insurgency campaign begun in January last year several thousand government troops, backed up by air support, have crossed the Dawna Range at a number of key points and have dug in close to the Thai border. Behind them, road construction teams have followed to speed the flow of arms and supplies to the front. At the same time army units are sweeping continuously through Karen villages along the Range. According to refugees in Thailand, many villages have been burnt and their crops destroyed. The villagers are being told to move to ‘protected’ villages in the plains to the west. Those who move deeper into the mountains run the risk of being shot on sight.

To date over 10,000 refugees have fled into neighbouring Thailand but Karen leaders estimate that, in a concerted offensive, as many as 100,000 ethnic Karen and Mon could follow—a prospect the Thai government, already beset by considerable refugee problems on its Lao and Kampuchean borders, views with alarm. Thai officials are well
At Wangkha, Karen officers confer beneath pictures of Jesus and dead leader Saw Ba U Gyi.

Aware of the powerful ‘puli’ pressures the establishment of regular refugee camps could induce. For the moment, a consortium of Christian charities is supplying the refugees with food and some clothing, but the Thai government has stated that the refugees must return as soon as circumstances allow. Already, at Three Pagodas Pass, where a Burmese offensive is imminent, 1,500 refugees were turned back over the border at the end of January.

**Trading posts**

Having now achieved a foothold in Karen territory, the Burmese army is undoubtedly aiming at the KNU’s lucrative trading posts along the Moei River, which marks the border with Thailand. The KNU has been able to finance its activities and its well-equipped armed forces—the Karen National Liberation Army—largely out of taxes raised on goods passing backwards and forwards to feed Burma’s thriving blackmarket. With a stagnant Burmese economy this trade is substantial.

According to some estimates, as much as 75% of all consumer goods entering Burma do so illegally, and it is through KNU toll-gates that much of this trade passes. Levies of 5% on a constant flow of goods ranging from teak and cattle to medicine, radios and bicycles, form the bulk of Karen revenue, which KNU ‘Finance Minister’ Pu Ler Wah last year estimated at some 500 million kyat (£50 million at official exchange rates).

Today, however, the KNU’s major trading post at Wangkha is a blackened shell. The once flourishing border settlements at Three Pagodas Pass stand nearly deserted. And in the KNLA’s strongest area—that of its 7th Brigade—troops from the Burmese army’s 44th Division have pushed right up to the key strongholds at Mae La and Maw Po Kay, effectively cutting off all movement. At Maw Po Kay the front lines have stood just 100 metres apart for nearly a year.

Yet for all these initial successes there are increasing signs that the Burmese campaign is running into serious difficulties. Despite far superior numbers and resources—the KNLA has only 81mm mortars to counter Burmese army 105 howitzers and 120mm mortars—only one important KNU base, Mae Tha Waw, has been captured, and that was in a surprise assault at the very outset of the campaign. Moreover, with prices on the black market skyrocketing due to the disruption caused by the fighting, the Burmese government has been forced to stave off growing discontent by swallowing its principles and taking a more tolerant view of this trade. At Myawaddy, one of the few towns on the entire border under Rangoon’s control, a steady flow of smugglers—who would once have courted instant arrest—wade daily across the swirling Moei River under the averted eyes of the Burmese garrison.

**Simmering insurgencies**

And now, with the Burmese army supply lines becoming increasingly stretched, the KNLA has been able to hit back with constant guerilla actions. Casualties have been high,
especially in fierce hand-to-hand fighting at Maw Po Kay, but mines and malaria take the heaviest toll of all. Sources in Rangoon estimate that as many as 1,800 Burmese troops died in the campaign last year alone, and this does not include casualties sustained elsewhere in Burma's other simmering insurgencies. This compares with around 2,500 Karen insurgents that the usually reticent official press in Rangoon claim have been killed over a similar period. While this figure is probably an exaggeration, it is undoubtedly civilians caught in the crossfire who make up most of these casualties. KNLA commanders themselves privately concede losing some 500 troops from their 4,000-strong regular force, their places being taken by younger and younger recruits.

Yet despite the intensity of the government campaign, morale amongst the KNU's predominantly Christian leadership remains surprisingly high. Many have spent a lifetime in the jungles, having joined the Karen rebellion virtually at Burma's independence in January 1948, straight from service in the British army. As Sgaw Ler Taw, a member of the KNU's 35-person central committee and a veteran of Britain's wartime underground Force 136, laughingly put it, 'We have been though much worse times than this.' They claim to have built up financial reserves in the good years to hold out for a long time yet and optimistically point out that even at Wangkha there are still traders prepared to run the gauntlet of Burmese troops. One key base, Phalu, in the KNLAs 6th Brigade area, still remains untouched. Here the daily market is full of shrimps and lobsters brought up from Moulmein and destined for Bangkok.

But the KNU President, 58-year old Seventh Day Adventist Bo Mya, has no doubts about Burmese government intentions. This time they want to annihilate, to wipe out our revolution. In one way or another the Burmese government intends to step up its operations. It will be hard but we can stand it.' However, few observers expect the hard-pressed KNLA forces to hold out much longer without a major change in tactics. Indeed, some observers contend that it is precisely the KNU's over-reliance on border trading, and its determina- tion to maintain a quasi-government in exile in the remote jungles, which have led the KNU to its present difficulties. The majority of Burma's estimated three million Karen today live to the west of the Dawna Range, largely under central government control, from where a steady stream of volunteers still make the perilous journey across the mountains to join the KNU. Since the destruction of Karen guerrilla bases in the Pegu Yoma Highlands of central Burma in the mid-1970s, KNU operations in the area have steadily declined. The only serious attempt to re-enter the region in strength ended in disaster in February 1983, when a KNLA column was ambushed by government forces 30 km west of Nyaunglebin. According to one recent arrival from the delta, 'There are many who want to join us but we have no weapons for them. All we need to do is arm just 1% of our people and this war could be settled very quickly.'

Political successes

The cruel irony for the KNU is that, having in the past been criticized for a lack of political direction, it may well now be paying the penalty for political rather than military successes in recent years. In particular the KNU has been the moving force behind the revitalization of the National Democratic Front—a loose alliance of some nine ethnic rebel armies seeking greater autonomy from Rangoon—something which has caused the Burmese army to change the focus of its attentions from the insurgent Communist Party of Burma in Shan State to the north. While ever-changing coalitions of Burma's myriad insurgent armies, usually under KNU or CPB auspices, have existed at least on paper since the early 1950s, they have rarely proven effective. However, in the past five years there has been a growing awareness amongst leaders of the rebellious ethnic minorities that their only real hope of achieving a genuine federal union depends on forging the NDF into a viable political force. Units of the New Mon State Army and the Arakan Liberation Army have taken part in some of the heaviest recent fighting at Maw Po Kay, while Karenemi and Pao troops are currently undergoing training at the KNU's northern command. Most worrying of all, though, for the Rangoon government are the closing lines between the KNU and the Kachin Independence Army, which holds sway over much of the mountainous Kachin State in the far north of Burma. The KIA, which like the CPB receives a measure of sympathetic aid from across the Chinese border, rejoined the NDF in 1983 after abortive peace talks with the Burmese government, and is today probably the best armed and equipped of all the ethnic rebel armies. It is an indication of how seriously the Burmese government regards the KIA threat that peace talks took place at all. The last talks with any of the insurgent forces occurred back in 1963, shortly after Ne Win seized power.

Throughout the current campaign the KIA has stepped up its military operations to take the pressure off its Karen allies. Since June of last year heavy fighting has taken place in the KIA's 2nd Brigade area close to the important jade mines at Moguang, and according to Kachin sources the Burmese army at one stage diverted 24 battalions to the Kachin front. More recently, the Burmese air force has been carrying out bombing raids on KIA military bases in an attempt to disrupt their movements. Last year the KIA was able to demonstrate its strength by capturing and holding the towns of Hkamti and Sumprabum for a few days, and in January this year it carried out a number of raids around the strategic town of Bhamo. According to some reports, even the state capital, Myitkyina, could now be at risk.

The question many observers are asking now is, faced with fighting on such a scale, how much longer can the Burmese government sustain its campaign? With a congress of the Burma Socialist Programme Party due to take place in August, Ne Win wants to have a decisive victory to report, but there have been continuing rumours that the government is running out of money. Military spending is generally estimated to account for at least 30% of the national budget. In the past, the deeply isolationist Burmese leaders have been reluctant to place much reliance on foreign investment, but over the last few months a number of prominent government officials, including Ne Win, have been making unpublicized trips abroad in what many observers believe are quests for new funds. With the launching of the new offensive still delayed, rumours continue to persist. During March the KNLA was even able to recapture several important positions near Wangkha and Mae La. It is likely that this was due not so much to any slackening of will, but more to the growing reluctance of Burmese army commanders to commit themselves to costly frontal assaults. With KNLA troops largely hemmed in against the border and cut off from the majority of their supporters, the Burmese army consider many of their objectives achieved. Time is now on their side and a war of attrition something they feel they can ultimately win.

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