



News Bulletin

July 29th 2008 / KHRG #2008-B6

**Update on the KNU/KNLA-PC:
Statements by a deserter and a 'retiree'**

As the KNU/KNLA-PC approaches the year and a half mark since its founding in early 2007, this news bulletin provides an update on developments of this little-reported-on armed group. Having been founded with an initial troop strength of well under 100 soldiers, current estimates suggest that the group has expanded to about 800 soldiers now divided between seven battalions operating in central and southeastern Pa'an District. While the assassination in January 2008 of Ler Moo, widely seen as the KNU/KNLA-PC's major source of funding, has challenged the group's ongoing expansion, the interviews presented here suggest that it continues to primarily engage in SPDC-sanctioned logging and timber trading. This bulletin presents the full text of two interviews conducted by KHRG field researchers in June and July 2008 with a former soldier and a former officer of the KNU/KNLA-PC.

In June and July 2008, Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) interviewed two former members of the Karen National Union / Karen National Liberation Army – Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC). As KHRG reported in 2007, this armed group formed under the leadership of ex-KNLA 7th Brigade commander Htain Maung with the support of his son-in-law Ler Moo, Colonel Saw Htawt Lay and Pastor Timothy Laklem. The new group, which initially comprised former KNLA soldiers, had recently split from the KNU/KNLA following Htain Maung's dismissal from the KNLA on January 30th 2007 for entering into negotiations with State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) officials without the consent of the KNU Central Executive Committee. Initial estimates on the troop strength of the KNU/KNLA-PC varied between about 15 to 50 soldiers with accompanying family members. Subsequent to its formation, KHRG (and subsequently Human Rights Watch) reported that the KNU/KNLA-PC had been recruiting children under the age of 18 to increase its numbers.¹

On February 11th 2007, the newly formed KNU/KNLA-PC conducted a ceremony at Htoh Gkaw Gkoh in Pa'an District to mark the conclusion of an unwritten peace agreement with SPDC authorities. While technically not a 'ceasefire' – since the KNU/KNLA-PC, as such, was never at war with the SPDC – the new agreement allowed the group limited freedom to maintain firearms, recruit new soldiers and conduct business operations. The group was also provided with a plot of land 2 by 20 kilometres in area alongside the Thailand border adjacent to Mae La refugee camp and a base of operations at Htoh Gkaw Gkoh; both of which lie inside Pa'an District of central Karen State.²

¹ *Child soldiers recruited to support expansion of the KNU-KNLA Peace Council*, KHRG, May 2007; *Sold to Be Soldiers: The recruitment and use of child soldiers in Burma*, Human Rights Watch, October 2007.

² Ashley South, 2008. *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*. New York: Routledge. p.67.

Having survived an assassination attempt in April 2007, Htain Maung's son-in-law, Ler Moo, was eventually assassinated in a bomb blast in January 2008.³ Ler Moo, who had been heavily involved with black-market logging in Pa'an District, was widely seen as a crucial source of funding for the KNU/KNLA-PC and his death has hampered the group's subsequent expansion. Nevertheless, according to the interviews included in this bulletin, the KNU/KNLA-PC has expanded to about 800 soldiers divided between seven (formerly eight) battalions operating around their headquarters at Htoh Gkaw Gkoh and in the surrounding area in central and southeastern Pa'an District. According to the interviews presented below, the group is not at present 'disturbing' the villagers in its area of operations, but rather focusing on logging, timber processing and trade. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), however, is reportedly recruiting new soldiers from each village in the area. While interviewee #1 reported that KNU/KNLA-PC commanders had initially planned on attacking Mae La refugee camp in a joint operation with DKBA forces, this idea appears to have been abandoned.

The following table presents the current organisation of the KNU/KNLA-PC with its eight battalions (two of which have now been amalgamated), their base locations and commanders-in-charge. The information in this table has been taken from the two interviews included in this report.

Battalion #	Base camp/area	Commander	Notes
701	N/A	Pah Wee	
703	N/A	Kyaw Ay (dead)	Now merged with Battalion #701
704	Lay Gaw	Pah Deh	
705	Ra Ma Tee and Kawkareik	Maung Shwe Kyaw	
706	Htoh Gkaw Gkoh, Thuh Ka Dee and Bpee Tar Kha	Pah Htaw	
707	Naw Tar Yah town in Htoh Gkaw Gkoh area	Maung Nay Htun	
708	Hta Law	Gka Ma Nee	
709	Thay Ga Yah	Poh Htoo	"Special Battalion"

Presented below are two interviews conducted with former members of the KNU/KNLA-PC. The first interviewee is a 29-year-old former soldier from the KNU/KNLA-PC's Battalion #703 who defected to the KNLA in April 2008 and was interviewed by KHRG in July 2008. The second interviewee is a 68-year-old former three star officer with the KNU/KNLA-PC who left his position as head of signals intelligence at KNU/KNLA-PC headquarters and plans on resettling to a third country. KHRG conducted the second interview in June 2008. The KHRG interviewer and both interviewees refer to the KNU/KNLA-PC below as the 'Peace Group' (*Nyein Chan Yay* in Burmese). This should not be confused with either of the two other 'Peace Groups' which operate in Karen State (one of which is based in Doolaya District and the other in Toungoo District).

Interview #1:

Do you have any family?

Yes, I had a child but the child has now died.

When did you enlist in the Peace Group?

In November 2007, at Mae La camp, Tar Kaw Bee Gkwee area. My battalion was #703, Company #2. My battalion commander was named Kyaw Ay. But as for my company

³ "KNU Breakaway Group's Son-in-law Assassinated," *The Irrawaddy*, January 31st 2008. Accessed at http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10106 on July 15th 2008.

commander, I never saw him nor did I ever hear his name. I usually stayed with the deputy commander. There were more than 30 people in a company. There were three companies in my battalion.

Have you ever been to Htoh Gkaw Gkoh?

Yes, I've been there twice. I saw that the soldiers' families' houses were nice. The roofs of their houses were made of tin. As for me, my family didn't live there. The individual families of the soldiers got a small package of sweet powder [monosodium glutamate (MSG)] per month. It wasn't comfortable for the families of the soldiers. Our battalion commander usually stayed at his house. He rarely came to stay at the army camp. His house is located at Shwe Koh Ko.⁴

Do you know the name of your deputy company commander?

Yes, we usually called him Pah Na Luh, but here [at the KNLA camp] people call him Luh Luh. There was only one sergeant at our army camp. His name is Naing Oo. There were only nine soldiers in Company #2.

Is it correct that if people work as Peace Group soldiers, they are paid in Thai Baht?

No, that's not correct. I was never paid in Thai Baht. As for the Peace Group soldiers, they never get any salary. But for the people who work in saw mills, they can get money.

Can you tell me about the relationship between the SPDC and the Peace Group?

I don't know about it, but my battalion commander and company commander would know about it. I've never seen Htain Maung. I've never talked with him. My company was based between Htain Maung's place and an SPDC Army camp. In the past, our commander had planned to attack Mae La [refugee] camp. Our group [KNU/KNLA-PC] and the DKBA were going to combine and attack it. If the upper [KNU/KNLA-PC] leaders ordered us to go [to attack Mae La], we would not have dared to refuse them.

Why did you leave the Peace Group Army?

Because of the issue of the death of battalion [#703] commander Kyaw Ay. We realised that he was killed by a faction within the Peace Group, but we didn't know who killed him. Another reason is that we were also his [Kyaw Ay's] soldiers. We were afraid that we would be targeted [by the same KNU/KNLA-PC faction]. So, we left from the company. But some of the soldiers from the company didn't leave. The commander [Kyaw Ay] was killed for no reason. He didn't do anything bad. I wasn't happy to leave the company, but it was important for my life.

How did you come here [to the KNLA camp]?

One day, I received news from the office manager's walkie-talkie that they [KNU/KNLA-PC authorities] wouldn't keep Battalion #703 active. They were going to come and arrest the soldiers in Battalion #703 during the daytime. So we started fleeing at noon. We brought our weapons along. If they had followed us, we would have shot at them. We had to cross a river. The water was up to our chest. We saw soldiers from Battalion #701. They were taking a bath. They didn't do anything to us. They just looked at us while we were crossing the river to the Thailand-side of the border. We didn't cover our weapons with anything while we were on the way. We met two men and they arranged for us to enter Mae La camp. When we arrived at the top of Section #1, it was getting a little dark. It was about seven o'clock at night. We came with our families. As for our children and wives, we let them come by motorcycle, so they arrived at the camp before us. There were more than 20 people, including the children. We didn't bring our weapons into the camp. We left them on a hill. A leader from Mae La camp ordered us to hide the weapons there. We didn't sleep

⁴ *Shwe Koh Ko*; a Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)-controlled town on the Thoo Mweh (Moei) river which borders Thailand.

there. During the night time, the 7th Brigade [KNLA] commander ordered people to come and pick us up to go and sleep at his place. We slept there for one night. We didn't see the brigade commander. We just saw other people.

How are [the KNLA camp in] 7th Brigade and the Peace Group camp different?

When we arrived here [at the KNLA camp in 7th Brigade], we could travel freely and find our food freely. When we stayed at the Peace Group place, we didn't have a good opportunity to go and find our food freely. We stayed at the [KNLA] 7th Brigade commander's place for three or four days and, after we had conducted a welcome ceremony, we departed from his place. He gave us 2,000 [Thai] Baht and let us relax for a month. So, we went to visit Mae La camp for 20 days and then came back here [to the KNLA camp].

When did you arrive at [the KNLA] camp?

I arrived here almost over 3 months ago. Staying here is comfortable for me, for example, in regards to traveling. We don't need to worry about our food.

Do you have any plans for your future?

I plan to never return to my village. Everyone in our village already knows that we've surrendered to the KNU. So we dare not to go back to our village. When the [KNLA] 7th brigade commander orders us to return to his army unit, we will go.

Interview #2:

How many battalions are there?

For Battalion #701, the company commander's name is Pah Wee. Battalion #703 has combined together with Battalion #701. The battalion commander's name is Kyaw Ay, but he's already dead. I don't know who killed him. For Battalion #704, they're based at Lay Gaw. The battalion commander is Pah Deh. For Battalion #705, the battalion commander is Maung Shwe Kyaw. They are based at Ra Ma Tee and Kawkareik. For Battalion #706, the commander's name is Pah Htaw. He has to take the responsibility for Htoh Gkaw Gkoh, Thuh Ka Dee and Bpee Tar Kha. For Battalion #707, the commander is Maung Nay Htun. He's based in Htoh Gkaw Gkoh [area] at Naw Tar Yah town. For Battalion #708, the commander's name is Gka Ma Nee. He's based at Hta Law. For Battalion #709, it's also called 'Special Battalion' and it's led by Poh Htoo and he's based at Thay Ga Yah. Now there are more new army soldiers than old [previously recruited] soldiers. As an estimate, there are more new soldiers than old. Combined, there are over 800 soldiers [total] in all [combined] battalions. The headquarters office manager is currently Lay Naing. In the past, the operation commander was Dah Bpay, but now I don't know about this. Puh Tatmadaw is a general. The second general is Muh Gka Muh, and for military intelligence it's Thein Zaw. He has to serve alongside Puh Tatmadaw. His position is company commander. For the signals unit, the leader's name is Tin Maung Ngeh. His position is a colonel. As for RT [not clear], it's me [who served in this position].

What are their aims?

They will work for the people and also work for peace.

What about you? Are you retiring now?

Yes, I told them that, now that I'm getting old, I want to stop working. I'm 68 years old and I can't walk well because I've been paralyzed [by a stroke] and my children will send me to resettle...

Can you estimate how many guns the Peace Group currently possesses?

I think that there are more than 200 guns which they still have.

Does the SPDC allow them to do business?

At present, they're allowed to trade wood and other things.

In regards to the DKBA and the Peace Group, do they have a good relationship with each other?

Yes, but there are more DKBA soldiers than there are in the Peace Group.

What was your responsibility?

I was in charge of the signals unit at headquarters. When I retired, I transferred my position to another person. Now the SPDC and the Peace Group do not disturb the villagers doing their [livelihoods] work. But I heard that in regards to the DKBA, they are recruiting new soldiers from each village.

Further background on the KNU/KNLA-PC can be found in the following report by KHRG:

- *Child soldiers recruited to support expansion of the KNU-KNLA Peace Council*, KHRG, May 2008

Karen Districts



©Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005

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