

News BulletinJune 3rd 2009 / KHRG #2009-B4**Mistreatment and child soldiers in the Burma Army:
Interviews with SPDC deserters**

This news bulletin provides the transcripts of two interviews conducted with soldiers who recently deserted from the Burma Army. A third deserter, who was aged 16 when he spoke with KHRG, provides a single statement. The testimonies of these former soldiers provide insight into the current dynamics within the Burma Army. Amongst other things, the deserters described the high number of child soldiers within the Burma Army, low moral, poor remuneration, theft of salaries and mistreatment of rank-and-file soldiers.

In February 2009, KHRG spoke with six former Burma Army soldiers who had recently deserted during operations in northern Karen State. Subsequently, in April, KHRG spoke with a seventh deserter from the Burma Army. The testimonies of these individuals substantiate previous accounts by other deserters interviewed by KHRG about the large numbers of child soldiers within the Burma Army, the mistreatment and exploitation of rank-and-file soldiers by commanding officers and the overall low morale within the ranks.¹ The statements of three of these individuals are included here.

The first deserter, 16-year-old Maung Ht---, a former child soldier in the Burma Army provided a single short statement about his experiences, as included below:

"In the past, when I was staying in the SPDC Association [Burma Army] I suffered many troubles. I was exploited with an insufficient salary of rations. And furthermore, as I didn't have a high level of education, I had to remain at a low-rank. They [Burma Army authorities] ordered [the soldiers] as they wanted. I had to meet all of their needs. Because I couldn't endure this treatment, I fled when I got in contact with the KNU. After escaping, when I was staying with the KNU, there were no divisions between enemies and friends. I was treated fairly, fed and cared for by them. I was able to have full rights, so I could do as I wanted. Therefore, I'm so happy. I can't thank the KNU enough. In the same way as me, I pray that the child soldiers who remain with the SPDC Army will be quickly released from oppression and torture."



16-year-old Maung Ht---, a deserter from the Burma Army is shown here in April 2009. [Photo: KHRG]

¹ For other recent accounts by Burma Army deserters see, for example, *Forced recruitment, child soldiers and abuse in the army: Interviews with SPDC deserters*, KHRG, April 2009 and *Interview with an SPDC deserter*, KHRG, July 2008.

The second individual, 18-year-old Maung Z---, is of mixed South Asian and Burman ethnicity (as show in the photo to the right). He came from a town in Pegu Division and spoke to KHRG on February 27th 2009. Amongst other things, Maung Z--- explained that while he was involved in the military training, *“There were many people under 18 years old. There were also 13-year-olds and 16-year-olds attending the military training.”* Maung Z---’s interview with KHRG is included in full below.



18-year-old Maung Z--- who deserted from the Burma Army is shown here in February 2009. [Photo: KHRG]



18-year-old Maung C--- who deserted from the Burma Army is shown here in February 2009. [Photo: KHRG]

The third testimony included here is that of 18-year-old Maung C--- (as shown in the photo to the left), who spoke to KHRG on February 26th 2009. Maung C--- was grabbed by a Burma Army soldier at the Sule Pagoda in Rangoon after returning from his grandmother’s shop. The soldier then sold Maung C--- to a Burma Army officer for the equivalent of US \$18.80. Maung C--- was then enlisted in the Burma Army and began military training in June 2008. As he described it, *“My parents didn’t know that I was grabbed and sent to the military. Up until now they still don’t know where I am.”* The transcript of Maung C---’s interview is included following that of Maung Z---’s below.

Transcript #1 | Maung Z--- (male, 18), Pegu Division (Feb 2009)

How long did you stay at the military recruitment centre?

I didn’t have to stay there. I was immediately sent to a military training centre. It was Training Centre #10 located at Ah Yah Taw.

Did you know the name of the military trainer in-charge?

Yes, his name is Captain Hla Htun.

What did you learn from the military training course?

I had to learn how to assemble and disassemble a rifle and they also taught us how to fire the rifle. And another thing I had to learn was how to throw grenades and how to play checkers. On Saturday and Sunday we had to run for exercise and we also had to go for short excursions.

How many people fled during the military training period?

There were five or six people who fled during the training period. Two people were caught and their hands were put in handcuffs and their legs were put in stocks. They had to carry six bricks in their backpack and were then beaten with sticks. Luckily they weren't put in prison.

How many people under the age of 18 were attending the military training?

There were many people under 18 years old. There were also 13-year-olds and 16-year-olds attending the military training. There would have been around 50 old people [those aged 18 and above] and the other people were only the people who hadn't yet reached 18 years of age. As for the people who were under age 18, they had been forcibly recruited. After the military training, most of them fled.

After the military training where were you sent?

I was sent to join [SPDC] LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #---. And the Battalion Commander's name is G---. There were 3 or 4 sections in the battalion [he likely means platoons] and there were 5 or 6 people in a section.² To estimate, there were 4 companies in the battalion. As for me, I had to serve in Column #1. As for the battalion commander, he usually stayed in the military camp. I was only active in Column #1 for a week and then, when I came back to the military camp, I heard that some people would escape. So, I said that I'd also join them. I had to attend military training for six months and my personnel number was ---.

Why did you flee from the military?

I had to join the military through forced recruitment. But I didn't like it, so I fled. In the military camp we had to go on patrol during both daytime and night-time. We had to start patrolling from 6 o'clock until 1 o'clock [it is not clear whether he means am or pm].

Can you describe how you escaped?

I escaped when we were delivering patients. I heard that my friends would start to escape, so I ran back to the military camp to get a gun. I took one of my friend's guns and fled from the army [camp] through a hole in the army fence. I ran and climbed up a tree and hid myself in the tree. The soldiers were searching for us. If they had seen us, we would have been killed. I stayed in the tree until dark. I then ran away from the tree and continued to escape.

Did you take a gun and some bullets?

Yes, I took an MA1 [assault rifle] along with 110 bullets.

² A section is the smallest military unit in the Burma Army. Conventionally, three sections comprise a platoon, three platoons comprise a company and three companies comprise battalion. A column is a collection of companies. A full strength battalion can have over 300 soldiers. However, Burma Army battalions are almost always under strength. While a full strength section should include 10 - 11 soldiers, Maung Z--- explained that there were only 5 or 6 people per section in his battalion.

How much salary can a soldier get in the military?

We could get just 15,000 kyat [approx. US \$14 per month], but we didn't get it all. They [commanding officers] plundered our salary and gave us just 500 kyat [approx US \$0.47]. For the soldiers who died, they [commanding officers] took all of their salary. Up until now they haven't returned our salary – there's 35,000 kyat [approx. US \$33] of my salary remaining with them.

How do they [Burma Army authorities] support soldiers' families?

They provided them with rice, fish paste and salt.

Did the commanders give you a chance to listen to the radio?

They gave us a chance to listen to the radio when we were patrolling. As for them, they always listened to the radio.

What is your opinion of the SPDC?

They attack people's [civilian] areas. But for them, they say that the KNU soldiers have a lack of education; that they [KNU] don't have any knowledge and that's why they're against us [SPDC]. They [SPDC] also release women from their side to detonate bombs in some places and then they accuse the KNU of having done it. Recently a woman was killed by the students before she detonated a bomb. They [the students] skewered her head on the top of a stick and then put it beside a road.

Do you dare to go back to [central] Burma? [The deserter was in Karen State at the time of the interview]

No, I don't dare to go back to [central] Burma. The KNU said that if we [the interviewee and his fellow deserters] wanted to go back, they would send us. But we've refused to go back.

How did the SPDC punish people who they caught escaping?

They killed them. For example, they injected them with poison or shot them with a gun. It [execution] was especially for the soldiers who escaped with a gun.

How many people fled with you?

I fled with one of my friends. His name is M---.

What is your future plan?

I will find a job somewhere to get money.

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Transcript #2 | Maung C--- (male, 18), Rangoon Division (Feb 2009)**Can you explain how you got into the military?**

When I returned from my grandmother's shop [in Rangoon], I went to Sule Pagoda and a soldier who was there from Taw Boke army camp grabbed me. He told me that he would give me pocket money. Then that soldier sold me for 20,000 kyat [approx US \$18.80] to a military officer who was sitting in a tea shop.

When did you enter the military?

I can't remember the date I was grabbed, but the training started on June 3rd 2008. My parents didn't know that I was grabbed and sent to the military. Up until now they still don't know where I am.

To which recruitment centre did they send you?

I was sent to Recruitment Centre #4 at Shwebo. I had to stay at the recruitment centre for about 20 days and then I was sent to Ah Yah Daw Training School Sa Ka Hta³ #10. The training class was ---/2008. We had 250 trainees. I don't know who the training school headmaster was. I know that one company commander's name was Captain Ht---.

What did they teach in the training?

In the training they taught tactics, military parades, small arms, landmines, 18 military chants and there were three-day 'mile trips' [wilderness survival trainings]. We had to run for 'PT' and go for target practice. We had to do a lot of [general manual] labour. The training finished on October 1st 2008. The duration of the training was four and half months.

Were there any trainees who fled during training period?

Yes, there were six trainees who fled. Four were recaptured and two escaped. They put the trainees [who were recaptured] into stocks and didn't let them attend classes. They put bricks into the backpack [of the recaptured trainees] and ordered them to carry [the backpack filled with bricks] and run and forced them to walk on their knees on the gravel road.

How many people under the age of 18 were included in your [training] group?

There were many. The one who slept beside me was under 18.

Where did you go after the training?

After the training I went to LIB #--- of MOC [Military Operations Command] #3 which was based at H--- Town in Kachin State. Five of the new soldiers [from the training centre] were sent to that battalion. Their names are C---, M---, D--- (who was ethnic Chin), N--- (he's from Kachin State and stepped on landmine here [in Karen State]) and myself.

³ The interviewee may have meant *Sa Ka Ka*; the Burmese language acronym for Military Operation Command (MOC). Thus: MOC #10.

What was your battalion commander's name?

My battalion commander's name was Ky---. We only had a temporary battalion commander. We didn't have a permanent battalion commander or deputy battalion commander. We had five companies. I can't remember the name of the Company #1 commander. Company #2's commander was Captain My---, Company #3's commander was Captain T---, Company #4's commander was Captain Th--- and Company #5's [commander] was battalion commander Ky---. I was in Company #4 and we had over 40 soldiers and for the whole battalion we had 233 soldiers including soldiers who were disabled [due to injuries].

How long were you in the military?

It was about six months and if the training period is included, it would be almost one year.

What is your personnel number?

My personnel number is ---.

Did you also have to attend other military training apart from the basic military training?

For that, it's only if we stay in the army for a long time.

How many times have you gone on military operations?

This was my first time.

Why did you flee?

I was fed up staying in the army because the captains kicked me and beat me. One day I was sick and a military officer in my company named M--- came and said to me, "*If you're sick, go and cut bamboo in the forest and the aching will disappear.*" Then in the forest, he asked me to carry bamboo. But I couldn't carry it and he took my gun away and kicked me in the back two times. After that, he slapped me two times. I then [later] fled for these reasons.

Tell us how you escaped?

When I fled, I had been appointed to take sentry duty for a storage shed. I was told to go and get rice [to eat]. Then me, C--- and M--- fled but Mo--- dared not follow us and he stayed behind. I [later] heard that he died. Then we went down along the ravine until we reached the Salween River.

How many days did it take you?

We didn't eat rice for 11 days and on the 12th day we encountered some boat drivers.

Did you take your guns when you fled?

Fighting happened on the way and I lost my gun and utility belt but my friend has it [his gun]. The fighting happened between SPDC Tactical Command and us [the two deserters]. My friend went on to the car road to look for a way to go and then soldiers from Tactical Command shot at us because they had been searching for us. It [the fighting] lasted 5 to 10 minutes. We were carrying MA1 [assault rifles] and 150-160 bullets and one grenade.

In the SPDC army how much does one soldier earn as salary per month?

One soldier gets 21,000 kyat [approx. US \$19.72 per month]. We can't get the full amount of that money. They take 5,000 kyat [approx. US \$4.70] for 'bank savings'. They make other deductions whenever they distribute some toiletries, like shaving kits. For one month we only get 3,000 to 4,000 kyat [US \$2.82 to 3.76].

Do you have to pay for other occasions like funerals or wedding ceremonies and how much do you have to pay?

They said that for donations we could donate however much we'd like. But when we went to give [the money], they noted down that we must give 500 to 1,000 kyat [US \$0.94 to 1.88]. Even if we disagreed with them, they made the deductions.

What is the salary for a battalion commander?

The battalion commander gets over 200,000 kyat [approx. US \$187.80 per month] and they're able to get the full amount.

Do the soldiers with families get full support?

They get full rations. They get dried tea leaves, condensed milk, rice and cooking oil. I'm not sure how much money they get – I think 500 kyat [US \$0.47] per day.

In your group of five soldiers who was the first person to flee?

In my group a soldier named M--- got drunk and was beaten and kicked by an army officer and then he got a lung problem and was sent to the hospital and he fled from the hospital. He was the first one [to flee]. He escaped. His personnel number was ---. The second group was me and C---.

What did they do to if they were able recapture the soldiers who fled?

If it was at the rear⁴, they'd put [the soldiers] in jail and then send them to the military prison. First, they'd put them in detention for one or two months and then they'd imprison them [for a length of time] according to how the soldiers fled [i.e. with or without their weapon].

In the army are the soldiers allowed to listen to the radio?

Yes, we can listen to the radio. They didn't forbid us to listen.

Can you tell us your experiences starting from the time you first entered the army until you fled?

From the training school to the battalion, first we met with Captain My--- from the battalion. He said to us, "*Younger brothers, don't feel weak in strength. It's easy in the army. There's a show tonight. You can go and see the magic show.*" Then they gave us a place to stay. When I was in the recruitment centre, me and C--- discussed that when we got to the battalion, we would save money and flee. When we got to the battalion, we didn't get a salary so we couldn't run to escape. We could only stay for one month in the rear⁵ and then had to go to the frontline. We were afraid. At the frontline we had to climb up and down mountains. The army officers scolded us. I was depressed. When we arrived at the camp,

⁴ Here, the 'rear' is being used to mean firmly SPDC-controlled areas including larger towns (like Pa'an) in Karen State as well as central Burma more generally as opposed to the contested 'frontline' areas.

⁵ See footnote 5.

Sergeant M--- and I didn't see eye to eye. We were always quarrelling. Later, on another day, when I was sick and [Sergeant M---] asked me to go and cut bamboo, he beat and kicked me and then I fled.

Regarding the army operations, what is your view on how your battalion treated the porters and ethnic people?

Amongst the officers, there are some officers who are good and some who aren't good, but the bad officers are in the majority. For the army operations, they just eat and sleep. They follow their orders but if they are asked to patrol in this area or that area, they don't do it. They show maps and take fake photos. They ask the prisoners [convict porters] to do a lot of hard work. They ask the prisoners to carry water with big plastic containers and [the soldiers] follow them [the convict porters] with guns. I don't have anything to say concerning the ethnic people.

Based on your experience, how do you see the SPDC army?

As people are saying, the SPDC Army even imprisons monks. The army isn't good. In my view, they are possessed by ghosts and demons.

What would the SPDC do if they recaptured soldiers who fled with their gun?

If they recaptured [the deserters] at the frontline, they wouldn't act according to the law. They'd kill them immediately. Whether the soldiers' had taken their guns or not, they'd kill them all. If they are able capture them in the city, they send [the deserters] to court. If the soldiers didn't take their guns, they'd charge them in court with the crime of army desertion and he [the soldier] would be imprisoned.

How do they treat porters during army operation?

At the frontline, when the porters couldn't carry the supplies, the captains from [LIB] #--- and #--- beat them and they even said that they'd shoot them dead with their guns. Regarding the food, they'd [only] give them rice and yellow beans boiled in water. The porters had to do a lot of hard work.

What else do you want to say concerning the SPDC according to your experiences?

I want to say that the officers aren't good and the sergeants are also not good. They are cruel and they have pride because they think, "*I'm a great officer or captain.*"

Are there many people who are interested to join the military?

Yes, there are many people who have entered the military out of their own desire.⁶

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⁶ While some deserters from the Burma Army previously interviewed by KHRG willingly enlisted, many told KHRG that, like many others, they later deserted due to poor conditions and mistreatment. See for example, *Forced recruitment, child soldiers and abuse in the army: Interviews with SPDC deserters*, KHRG, April 2009.

Further background on the situation of soldiers in the Burma Army can be found in the following reports by KHRG and other organisations:

- *Forced recruitment, child soldiers and abuse in the army: Interviews with SPDC deserters*, KHRG, April 2009
- *Interview with an SPDC deserter*, KHRG, July 2008
- *Life inside the Burma Army: SPDC deserter testimonies*, KHRG, May 2008
- *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State*, KHRG, April 2008
- *Sold to Be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma*, Human Rights Watch, October 2007. (Available at <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/burma1007/>)
- *Interview with an SPDC child soldier*, KHRG, April 2006
- *My Gun Was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, Human Rights Watch, October 2002. (Available at www.hrw.org/reports/2002/burma/)
- *Abuse Under Orders: The SPDC and DKBA Armies through the Eyes of their Soldiers*, KHRG, March 2001

Photos of Burma Army soldiers are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* (June 2008), *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* (updated November 2007) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (updated March 2007). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

