

News BulletinAugust 25th 2009 / KHRG #2009-B9**Forced recruitment of child soldiers:
An interview with two DKBA deserters**

Over the past year, forced recruitment by the DKBA has seen a marked increase as the group has intensified attacks on the KNU/KNLA while also preparing to become a "Border Guard Force" under at least partial command by the SPDC army. Struggling to find sufficient numbers of volunteer soldiers, the DKBA has been ordering villages to provide recruits or pay large sums to hire substitutes. Villagers have also been arrested and forced to enlist, or pay to avoid conscription. The following report includes testimony from two teenage boys, aged 17 and 19, who were detained while working on a farm near their village in Pa'an District, forcibly recruited into the DKBA and taken to a military training camp in Shwe Gko Gkoh, southeastern Pa'an District. On July 20th 2009, just one month after they were initially seized, the boys deserted. Three days later they were interviewed by KHRG.

On July 23rd 2009, KHRG interviewed two ethnic Karen teenagers who had deserted from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) on July 20th, one month after being forcibly recruited as soldiers. Their testimonies provide yet more evidence of forced recruitment by the DKBA, which has been undertaking a consistent push for new recruits since August 2008. This new round of forced recruitment has generally coincided with an escalating series of DKBA and joint DKBA/State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) attacks on Karen National Union (KNU)/ Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) positions in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts of Karen State that began in the second half of 2008, yet which have greatly intensified since the start of 2009. Over the past few months, the DKBA has again increased recruitment as it prepares to transform itself into a "Border Guard Force," at least partially under the control of the Burma Army.



This picture shows two teenagers from Pa'an District who escaped a DKBA training camp. Saw P---, 19, stands at left. Saw K---, at right, is 17 years old. The two boys were seized as they worked together on a farm near their village. [Photo: KHRG]

The DKBA's most recent recruitment drive coincides with SPDC efforts to have all cease-fire groups in Burma disarm or transform themselves into Border Guard Forces in preparation for the country's planned elections in 2010. Prior to this latest round of recruitment in mid-May, the SPDC issued a directive dated April 28th to ethnic ceasefire groups instructing them to transform into Border Guard Forces.¹ These instructions were reportedly followed by a high level meeting of DKBA commanders at the group's headquarters in Myaing Gyi Ngu, Pa'an District, on May 7th 2009. According to meeting minutes obtained by KHRG, DKBA

¹ *Myanmar: Towards the elections*, International Crisis Group, August 20th 2009, p 14.

Chairman U Tha Htoo Kyaw and other senior leaders acknowledged the DKBA's transformation into a Border Guard Force,² outlined the conditions for the transformation and identified a need to conscript an additional 3,000 soldiers in order to reach a total stated troops strength of 9,000.³ The dissemination of this information was then followed by a May 15th meeting at the DKBA base at Shwe Gko Gkoh, T'Nay Hsah Township, Pa'an District, in which Maung Chit Thu, Operations Commander of DKBA Brigade #999, instructed DKBA officers under his command to increase recruitment. Maung Chit Thu explained that SPDC authorities would provide salaries of 25,000 kyat (approx. US \$27.73) per soldier per month as well as guns for the new recruits.⁴ Also on May 15th, Brigadier Pah Nwee, commander of DKBA Brigade #999, informed village heads in Dta Gre and Lu Pleh townships of northern Pa'an District that the DKBA required 605 new soldiers drawn from 15 village tracts in the two townships. Then on May 16th in T'Nay Hsah Township, Maung Chit Thoo issued an order directing village and village tract heads to provide villagers as DKBA recruits. Soon after disseminating this order, at least 119 villagers fled to avoid recruitment, finding brief shelter at Ler Per Her camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) located along the Moei River bordering Thailand in Dta Greh Township, eastern Pa'an District.⁵ On May 18th 2009, DKBA Brigade #333 held a meeting at its headquarters at Oh Daw in Thaton District, west of Myaing Gyi Ngu. In the meeting, Brigade #333 commander Maung Gyi explained to 180 village leaders in attendance that they would each have to provide villagers to serve as DKBA soldiers in numbers proportionate to the size of their respective villages.⁶

After initiating this latest round of recruitment in May, soldiers from DKBA Brigade #999 backed by SPDC Light Infantry Battalions #202 and 205 and Infantry Battalion #81 advanced towards and then began an attack on KNLA positions near to Ler Per Her IDP camp, Dta Greh Township, Pa'an District. Amongst those DKBA soldiers involved in the fighting were villagers who had only recently been forcibly recruited into the DKBA.⁷ By June 7th, over 3,000 villagers, including the Ler Per Her camp population of just over 1,200 people as well as nearly 2,000 residents from other villages in the area, had fled to neighbouring Thailand to avoid fighting as well as forced conscription into work as porters and human minesweepers for DKBA and SPDC forces.⁸ Amongst those fleeing were the 119 villagers who had only recently taken refuge at the camp in an attempt to avoid being forcibly recruited into the DKBA.

² Aside from the DKBA, at least one other ethnic Karen cease-fire group is confirmed to be re-forming into SPDC Border Guard Forces. The Karen Peace Force, which was formed when KNLA Colonel Thuh Muh Heh agreed to a ceasefire in 1997, is reported to be planning to make the transformation. See, for instance, "KPF must attend training and remove its gate," *Kwekalu*, May 10th 2009 or "The KPF prepares to become Border Guard Force in Three Pagodas Pass," *The Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA)*, May 20th 2009. The KNU/KNLA-Peace Council, formed in 2007 when Major-General Htain Maung (formerly a Brigadier-General and the Commander of KNLA's 7th Brigade) agreed to a ceasefire with the SPDC, has also been rumored to be transforming into a Border Guard Force. See, "Htain Maung Agrees to Border Deal with Junta," *The Irrawaddy*, February 11th 2009. No other source has confirmed the story by *the Irrawaddy*, though *IMNA* did report that the group had opened a new office in Three Pagodas Pass and appeared to be preparing to operate an "economic zone" along the border. See, "Ethnic Karen armed group announces new, official presence in Three Pagodas Pass," *IMNA*, March 30th 2009.

³ Minutes to this meeting, dated May 7th 2009, are on file with KHRG.

⁴ See, *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts*, KHRG, May 2009 and Brian McCarten, "Shoot first, talk later in Myanmar," *Asia Times Online*, June 25th 2009.

⁵ See *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts*, KHRG, May 2009.

⁶ See, *Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance*, KHRG, July 2009.

⁷ For a photo and testimony from a 17-year-old soldier forcibly conscripted by the DKBA and subsequently wounded by a landmine near Ler Per Her, see "Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District," KHRG report from the field, June 29th 2009.

⁸ See, *Update on SPDC/DKBA attacks at Ler Per Her and new refugees in Thailand*, KHRG, June 2009.

In interviews with KHRG, villagers living in both Pa'an and Thaton Districts have explicitly condemned the DKBA's renewed recruitment drive and the threat it poses to their lives and livelihoods. Saw P1---⁹, for instance, a DKBA officer who recently deserted along with two of his soldiers, complained of the penalties imposed on families of deserters in an interview with a KHRG researcher received on May 4th 2009:

"A few days after I escaped... my 19-year-old son, Saw P2---, was arrested to replace me. He was sent to a DKBA military camp based between Th--- and R---. My son was arrested because I had fled from the military. Since I wasn't going to go back, he had to replace me to serve as a soldier. Had he not wanted to be a soldier in place of me, my wife would have had to hire another person in place of him and it would have cost 50,000 kyat [approx. US \$45.45]. [When I deserted] I was accompanied by soldiers of mine. One is called Saw P3---. He is 32 years old and the other one is Saw P4---, 27 years old. Both of them are married and have their own families. Their families have also had to face difficulties because they fled with me. Saw P3---'s wife is insane [sic] so she wasn't arrested, but one of her sons named M--- was arrested and was sent to the DKBA military camp. For Saw P4---, even though his wife had a small baby, she was also sent to the DKBA military camp. The aim of arresting people is that if these people don't want to be DKBA soldiers as replacements for family members who have escaped from the army, they have to hire other people for 50,000 kyat [approx. US \$45.45] instead."

As part of the recruitment process, the DKBA has in some cases abducted young men, including those below the age of 18, and forced them to become soldiers. The following text is a transcript of a joint interview conducted by a KHRG researcher with two teenagers who were seized together while they worked as laborers on a farm in T'Nay Hseh Township, Pa'an District. The boys, aged 17 and 19, deserted approximately one month after being conscripted. This was before they could be sent from their training camp to active duty, which they were told would have involved attacks against KNLA positions. According to the testimony below, during the training period the boys received no pay, little to no food and beatings as they worked as unpaid laborers on a teak plantation owned by their commander. In the interview both deserters answered together, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes in rotation. Their answers have therefore not been separated in the text.



19-year-old Saw P--- is shown here after deserting from a DKBA training camp in Shwe Gko Gkoh, Pa'an District. He told KHRG that he fled because he did not wish to fight the KNU/KNLA. [Photo: KHRG]



Saw K---, 17 years old, who fled along with Saw P---, did not wish to become a DKBA soldier. After being arrested in Pa'an District and forced to attend military training, he fled. [Photo: KHRG]

⁹ The situation described by Saw P1--- included references to three other men, all with the same or similar names. Typical KHRG practice is to retain the first initial of source names while obscuring the rest with a series of three dashes. In this case, for the purpose of clarity, "Saw P1---," "Saw P2---," etc. have been used rather than four instances of "Saw P---."

Interview | Saw P--- (male, 19) and Saw K--- (male, 17)

How did you join the DKBA?

We were arrested and tied up by DKBA soldiers when we were farming.

Do you know who arrested you?

We only know that they are a group lead by Pu K'Done.

Can you explain some more about where they took you and how you were treated?

They took us to Shwe Gko Gkoh and told us to attend training. During the training, we had to clear underbrush without taking a rest. If they saw us rest, they beat us and hit our heads.

Where were you arrested?

We were arrested at the farm of M--- while we helped them farming.

How many people were arrested along with the two of you?

More than ten people were arrested.

How many people arrested with you were under the age of 18?

Ten people.

How many people arrested with you were under the age of 15?

Five or six people who were included [in the group] with us.

How many days were you in the training?

One month.

What did you do in the training?

We cleared underbrush in the teak field. Our hands and fingers hurt very badly, but if we rested, they kicked or hit us. We could do nothing.

Who owned the plantation?

It belongs to [DKBA Brigade #999 Operations Commander] Maung Chit Thu.

Do you know any of the trainers?

We only know the names of Chaw K'Eh and Kyaw Doh.

Do you know who ordered that you work on the teak plantation?

It was Maung Chit Thu.

How many people were at the training?

Three hundred people were in the training.

Did they tell you anything during the training?

They said they would drive us up to the frontline of [KNLA] Brigade #7 [in Pa'an District].

Were you allowed to use real guns in training?

No. We were only allowed to use models in the training. The training course wasn't finished yet.

How was the food they gave you?

They gave us only small amounts of rice and salt. So, we haven't had enough to eat for some time.

Did they have a hospital for sick people?

Yes, they had a hospital for patients. It had a shortage of medicine.

How do they support soldiers or families of soldiers or ex-soldiers with wounds or injuries?

They provide no support. People have to work on their own.

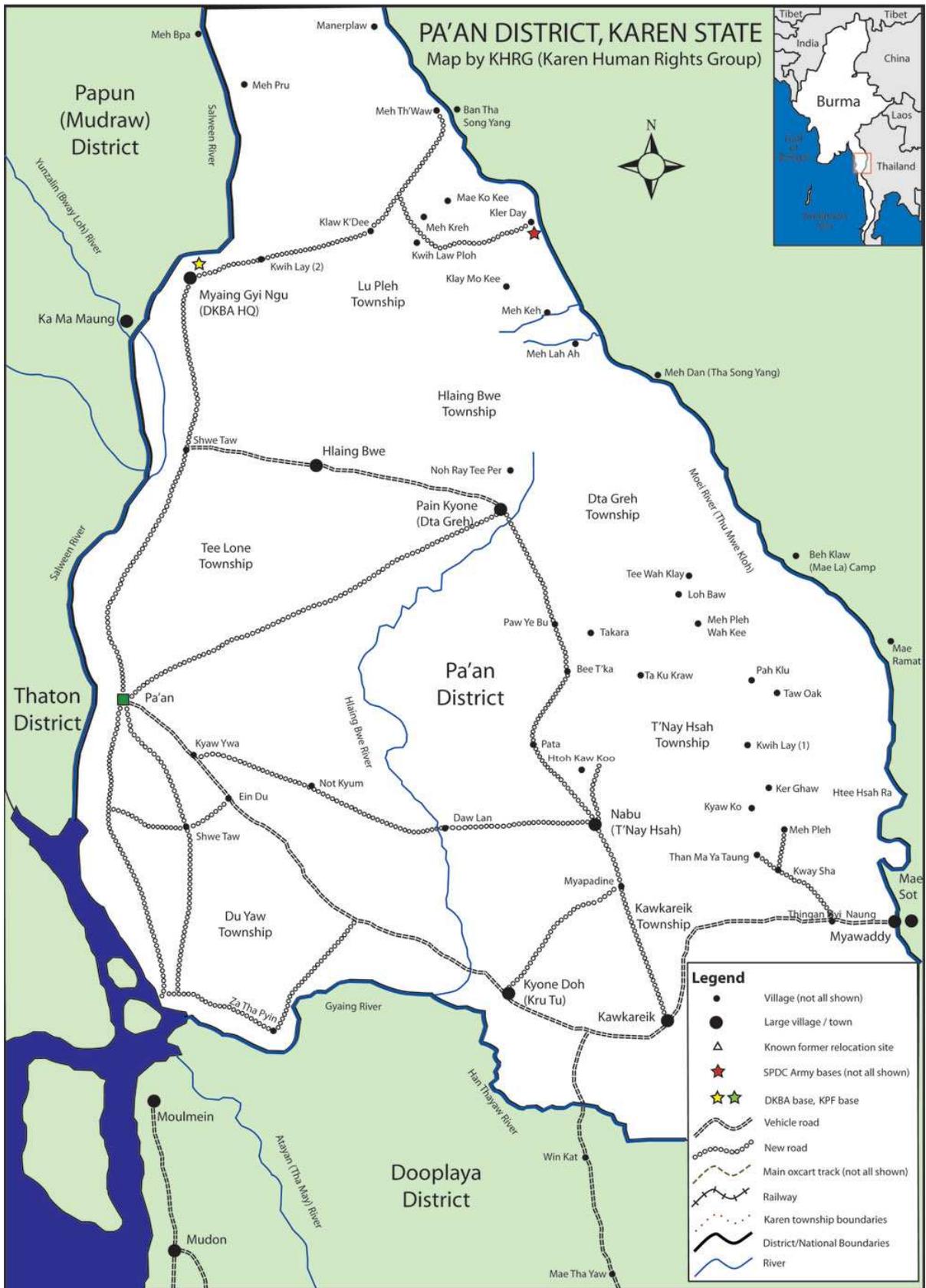
What will you do next? Will you going back home?

We don't want to go back home.

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Further background on forced recruitment by the DKBA and other deserter interviews conducted by KHRG can be found in the following reports:

- *Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District* (KHRG, June 2009)
- *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts* (KHRG, May 2009)
- *Extortion and restrictions under the DKBA in Pa'an District* (KHRG, March 2009)
- *Insecurity amidst the DKBA - KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts* (KHRG, February 2009)
- *Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (KHRG, September 2008)
- *Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (KHRG, September 2008)
- *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)



Karen Districts



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