



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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Demands for soldier salaries in Hpa-an District, October 2012

On October 17th 2012, three Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions held a meeting for 1,000 villagers from five village tracts in T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, in order to announce their new soldiers retention plan for 22 inactive soldiers, and demanded that villagers pay for the plan. Each household was required to provide at least 50,000 kyat, despite villagers’ efforts to negotiate with the battalion commanders, and villagers in three villages in T’Nay Hsah were informed they will have to support 13 soldiers throughout 2013, but no payments for this request have been paid yet. This news bulletin is based on information submitted to KHRG in November and December 2012 by a community member in Hpa-an District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions.

On October 19th 2012, a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions met with Saw W---, who is 48 years old and from D--- village; Saw L---, who is 51 years old and from M--- village; Saw K---, who is 41 years old and from H--- village; Saw D---, who is 54 years old and from G--- village; and Saw P---, who is 42 years old and from E--- village. All of these individuals are village heads and leaders from T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District.¹ These villagers joined together to discuss the activity of the Border Guard in their areas.

One event they discussed occurred on October 17th 2012, where three Border Guard Battalions that are stationed in T’Nay Hsah Township held a meeting for villagers from five village tracts. The meeting was conducted by Commander Mya Thein from Battalion #1016, Commander Mya Khaing from Battalion #1019, and Commander Lah Thay from Battalion #1018. The meeting was conducted from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. Villagers from Htee Hpoh Kyaw, Noh Kay, Yaw Koo, Htee Klay, Mya P’Keh village tracts were required to attend. In total, 1,000 villagers were present at the meeting, where the subject of ‘soldier recruitment’ was discussed.

¹As of January 2013, KHRG began to use the common spelling for “Hpa-an” District to reflect the standardized transliteration developed in 2012; past KHRG reports used “Pa’an.”

According to the community member who spoke with villagers in attendance at the meeting, Border Guard Battalions #1016, #1018 and #1019 are instituting a new soldier retention policy in order to curb recent losses in active duty members, where 22 local soldiers, who have completed their year-and-a-half service, will no longer go on reserve status. Instead, these soldiers will be required to extend their service tenure. The attending villagers are required to provide money to the battalions, in order to cover the cost of the new salaries. For each of these soldiers, villagers have to provide them with three million kyat (US \$3,525.26).² The community member who provided this information could not confirm the actual amount that each household is required to pay, but reported that all households will have to pay at least 50,000 kyat (US \$58.75), irrespective of ability to pay.

These soldiers were recruited when the Border Guard battalions were still the Development Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).³ Out of the 22 soldiers, some currently work in the Karen Peace Force (KPF),⁴ some joined the KNU-KLNA Peace Council,⁵ some remained in the DKBA, some deserted and went to Bangkok, and others joined the Border Guard after the 2010 transformation.

² As of November 23rd 2012, all conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the official market rate of 851 kyat to the US \$1. This reflects new measures taken by Burma's central bank on April 2nd 2012 to initiate a managed float of the kyat, thus replacing the previous fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1.

³ The DKBA was formed in December 1994, led by monk U Thuzana with the help and support of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which was the name of the military government in Burma at that time. For more information on the formation of the DKBA, see "Inside the DKBA," KHRG, 1996. Border Guard battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalized ceasefire agreements with the Burmese government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. Border Guard battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry or light infantry battalions are identified by two or three digit battalion numbers. For more information, see "DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force" *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 2010, and, "Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District," KHRG, June 2009.

⁴ The Karen Peace Force (KPF) was formed in February 1997 after splitting from the KNU/KNLA, and surrendering to and signing a ceasefire with the Burmese military government. The KPF controls some administrative areas in Three Pagodas Pass and operates a number of road and river checkpoints in the area of Three Pagodas Pass. After repeated rejections of Burmese government proposals to reform KPF into the Tatmadaw Border Guard, substantial elements reformed into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions in 2010. See Mizzima Election 2010 Factsheet: KPF. However, follow-up information provided in March 2012 by the same villager who wrote this report confirmed that the branch of the KPF referred to in this report did not transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard and remains independent.

⁵The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (also called the Karen Peace Council or KPC) is an armed group based in Hto Kaw Ko, T' Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, which split from the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2007 under the command of Htay Maung and subsequently refused to comply with orders from the then-SPDC government to transform its forces into the Tatmadaw Border Guard; see: "KNU/KNLA Peace Council," *Mizzima News*, June 7th2010 and "KPC to be outlawed if it rejects BGF," *Burma News International*, August 30th 2010.

During the October 17th meeting, villagers attempted to negotiate with the commanders in order to not have to provide funding for the Border Guard soldiers retention plan, but they were told that nonpayment was not an option. The villagers attempted to highlight the fact that many had other debt obligations that make this new obligation difficult to satisfy. The villagers were told: “*Now, you have to recruit our new soldiers, [because] DKBA and Kaw Thoo Lei [Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)] soldiers are the same as BGF [Border Guard].*”⁶ To which, some villagers said that: “*Kaw Thoo Lei [KNLA] does not recruit their soldiers. A person who is interested could join. But look at you; the villagers have to hire the soldiers for you. Because you recruit the soldiers, there are many people who could not repay their debt. You will do it again now. Then, we will have more debt.*” Again, the Border Guard soldiers confirmed that nonpayment was not an option for the villagers, by saying: “*Even if you cannot pay, you have to pay.*”

On November 30th 2012, the community member returned and met with two villagers from D--- to ask for updates on the recruitment. The villagers reported that the A--- village and D--- village heads went to “Koh Ko”, the central Border Guard base, where Border Guard soldiers ordered each of them to contribute money for the recruitment plan. Those village heads returned and began collecting money from villagers under a three-tier system: 1,000 baht from households with members that both work and do not face food problems, 800 baht from households with members that work and have some food but do not face shortages, and 500 baht from the remaining households. The villagers reported that the Border Guard distributed paper invoices with names and contribution amounts for the village heads to give to villagers, which they said is different from how collection had occurred in the past.

On December 17th 2012, the community member reported to KHRG that most villagers have refused to pay according to the collection plan requested by the Border Guard. Villagers reported to the community member that the Border Guard soldiers threatened the villagers and the village heads that anyone who refused to pay would be arrested, but villagers told them, that “*It is peaceful [ceasefire is in effect],⁷ so we do not need to pay it [contributions] to you anymore.*” Villagers reported that a village head with a good

⁶ According to the community member who submitted this information, villagers in the area believe that the Border Guard officer was attempting to gain their support for the recruitment effort by falsely stating that other armed groups in the area cooperate with the Border Guard.

⁷ A preliminary ceasefire agreement was reached between representatives of the Government of the Union of Myanmar and the Karen National Union (KNU) in January 2012; See “[Govt, KNU sign ceasefire](#),” Myanmar Times, January 16th-22nd 2012; “[KNU, Govt Reach Historic Agreement](#),” The Irrawaddy, January 12th 2012. Since this initial meeting, negotiators from the two parties have met twice, most recently on September 3rd and 4th, aiming to build trust and progress towards a code of conduct that will set guidelines as to how the armed actors must operate towards each other; See “[KNU Delegations Departs for the Third Round Negotiation of Ceasefire with the Burmese Government](#),” Karen National Union, September 1st 2012.

relationship with Border Guard soldiers attempted to collect the money, but was hesitant to make this request due to opposition from the local community. Additionally, villagers reported that the Border Guard soldiers worry that news of this recruitment and collection effort will spread, and are afraid to use force. While D--- and A--- villagers have been informed they will have to support 13 soldiers throughout 2013, and paper invoices were distributed in September 2012, no payments to the Border Guard have been made yet.

Further background on the current situation in Hpa-an District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Woman raped and killed in Pa’an District, October 2012,” (December 2012)
- “Landmine death and injuries, old mines continue to make travel unsafe in Pa’an District,” (December 2012)
- “Pa’an Situation Update: T’ Nay Hsah Township, September 2011 to April 2012,” (July 2012)
- “Villagers return home four months after DKBA and Border Guard clash, killing one civilian, injuring two in Pa'an,” (June 2012)
- “Photo Set: Villagers register concerns about proposed Hatgyi Dam,” (June 2012)

