

Commentary

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“We have never liked this government because they don’t have good behaviour like our parents. They are the high leaders but they oppress the grassroots people, so we can’t agree with this government. We don’t like their policies also because they do what they want to do. They think they have power and weapons and they will do what they want and demand from the people what they want, beat as they want and kill as they like. They have this policy of no sympathy for other people, and we can’t agree with the policy.” - Convict porter from Mandalay prison who escaped at the frontline (“*Convict Porters*”, Interview #2)

The Talks that Everyone is Talking About

It seems the whole world is now talking about the ongoing talks between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military junta and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, general secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD). A European Union delegation says it’s the most significant development in over a decade, the newly-appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on Burma lauds all the ‘progress’ being made, articles are written everywhere speculating on what is being discussed, while some journalists jump the gun and simply make up stories about what is being discussed. Unanimously, they all proclaim that ‘national reconciliation’ is in the air.

But in all this hopeful euphoria, does anyone really know what is happening? In their desperate need to proclaim that things are improving so that nothing need be done, trade and aid can resume, and money and careers can be made, it seems that very few people are stopping to examine this properly and soberly, and the few who do so are being ignored. Even so, at the risk of being ignored like the rest, we will try to look at this issue here.

One thing common to all the international pronouncements lauding the talks is that none of them contain any reference to what ordinary people in Burma think; but then, for a long time the international community has assumed that there is no need to talk to ordinary people when the NLD, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in particular, speaks for them. They were elected by a landslide in an election that covered, if not the whole country, at least more than half of it (the millions of people in regions which were not allowed to take part in that election are always forgotten, but we will not take up that issue here). Similarly, we could say that Thaksin Shinawatra speaks for all Thais, Tony Blair for all Britons, Hun Sen for all Cambodians, John Howard for all Australians, and George W. Bush and Al Gore speak in tandem for all Americans. Joseph Estrada, elected President of the Philippines by a landslide, must have spoken for all Filipinos - until the world suddenly learned in January that he didn’t. Look at your own democratically elected leaders, and ask yourself if they fully understand your problems and speak for you.

This is not to say that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are not sincere. They are very sincere, but they are still politicians, and one should also talk to the ordinary people who have to live under a much harsher reality. And a common comment among ordinary people in Burma is that these talks are nothing new. The SPDC has held talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi before, in 1995 and previously, and there were stronger grounds for optimism at that time than there are now. She had just been released from house arrest, repression, systematic destruction of rural villages, and militarisation were not as bad as they are now, resistance groups still controlled significant territories, the economy was in better shape, and the SLORC (former name of the SPDC) had just gone through a period of pretending to be more open to ethnic autonomy. Yet those talks amounted to nothing, and everyone admitted they had just been held to curry international favour and to 'feel out' Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to see if she could be broken. Whereas now, the regime has for the past 4 years shown its most hardline stance ever, systematically trying to destroy the NLD, heavily militarising all ethnic regions, destroying thousands of villages, and committing human rights abuses nationwide at levels never before seen. Just a few meetings with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and people appear willing to ignore all this. But the fact is, all of these abuses are continuing right now: the forced labour, the village destructions, the military offensives in Karen, Karenni and Shan States, the torture and killings. The sincerity of the SPDC in these talks can be gauged by the fact that there has been no reduction whatever in human rights abuses and political repression nationwide since the talks began - except a reduction in media attacks and restrictions on the NLD itself. These talks may be helping the NLD, but they don't seem to be gaining much for the ordinary people.

But as long as the international community's attention is riveted on the NLD alone, that appears to be enough, and the SPDC knows it. In fact, it is usually when they are in the most trouble internationally that they pull out the 'talks with the NLD' card. It is probably no coincidence that these talks began shortly after they faced focused international attention on forced labour for the first time due to the sanctions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which began in November 2000. The timing may also be connected to the advent of new administrations in both Thailand and the USA, both of which occurred in January; particularly as both Thaksin Shinawatra's and George W. Bush's administrations are expected to be more right-wing than their predecessors. Talks with the NLD give the new US administration the excuse it probably wants to cancel the US economic sanctions, and the new Thai administration the excuse it probably wants to establish more cosy business and military relations and crack down on refugees from Burma. It is even possible that the NLD members detained in September-October 2000 would have been released much earlier if the SPDC had not been waiting for these events to maximise the political benefit of releasing them. The NLD talks have not yet borne the expected fruit in Thailand and the US, partly because the SPDC was so stupid as to launch a military attack on Thailand just as the new prime minister was preparing to make new deals with them, and partly because the Bush administration is going slowly in the face of public opinion. But it can be expected that the talks will continue for as long as it takes for the SPDC to get the international concessions it wants - and perhaps no longer. However, the talks have already accomplished one thing for the SPDC: you see very little mention of the ILO and the forced labour problem in Burma in the international mainstream anymore.

The 'talks with the NLD' card is very easy to play, because the SPDC controls all the rules of the game. The NLD is always open to talks, and appears to be willing to keep the contents of the talks secret as well. As a result, none of us know what they are even talking about. The SPDC may just be passing time by exchanging pleasantries with them, but there is also speculation that they are already discussing a transitional government and a blanket amnesty for the military exonerating them for all of their crimes. This raises the very serious question of whether a small

group of NLD leaders has the mandate to negotiate such things, particularly in secret. Can anyone have the right to negotiate away justice in return for power? Most of Burma's people have suffered more than the NLD leaders under the SPDC and its predecessors, and their voices should be heard before any deal is struck - whether through consultations, a referendum, or an electoral process. If the NLD strikes a secret deal with the SPDC and then springs it on the population as a *fait accompli*, this would not be a step towards democracy but away from it.

'National Reconciliation'

"I am a soldier. I am a Burmese soldier. When he scolded the Burman soldiers, he called their names and scolded them. But for me, he called my nationality and reviled my people. I began thinking that when I was staying in my village, I was staying with Karen, with Pwo Karen. I couldn't tolerate it when the Burmese tormented the Karen. I don't have any belongings or education. I get knowledge from other people by watching them. That is why when I arrived in the Karen area I behaved as a Burmese soldier. Now I was the one who was bad. When [Sergeant Major] Aung Gyi spoke to me, it was as though to the whole Karen nationality, including my parents, my friends and siblings. I was thinking to myself, I am working for this and one day when the fighting is finished, there will be no name for me. If they achieve victory and call the country a name, they will call it Burmese country, and there will be no name for me..." - a Karen who was in the SPDC Army ("Abuse Under Orders", Interview #3)

One thing that everyone talking about the talks seems to agree upon is that the talks are accomplishing 'national reconciliation'; in fact, this term occurs in almost every single reference to the talks. But what is 'national reconciliation', particularly in the Burmese context? Firstly, in Burma the term 'national' is never used to mean 'country-wide' as in some other countries; in Burma, 'national' always refers to matters of 'nationalities'. Your 'nationality' in Burma means your ethnicity; even the SPDC refers to different ethnic groups as 'the national races'. The term 'national reconciliation' first came into prominent use in 1993, when the SLORC was giving signs of softening its stance toward both the NLD and the non-Burman ethnic groups. Fearful that they would be excluded from political agreements just as they were when General Aung San negotiated with Britain after World War 2, the non-Burman ethnic organisations began stating that what were needed were not only talks between the SLORC and the NLD, but tripartite talks to achieve national reconciliation between Burmans and other ethnic groups; in other words, the term 'national reconciliation' was used to emphasise that the non-Burman groups must be included in the process. The SLORC started using the term briefly as well because they were trying to woo ethnic resistance groups into ceasefire deals, but later replaced it with 'national reconsolidation', their term for racial and cultural assimilation, which they still print in their media and on billboards as part of their list of 'Political Objectives'.

In 1994 or 1995, the term 'national reconciliation' appeared in an open letter to the SLORC from some old-guard Burman politicians; the letter urged the regime and the NLD to open bilateral talks for 'national reconciliation', a clear misuse of the term. However, the overseas Burman activist movement later latched onto this letter and began using the term 'national reconciliation' to mean talks between the SPDC and the NLD. Eventually, the NLD itself began using the same language. It is hard to understand why the international community has so eagerly grabbed onto this term in recent months, but it now appears in almost every reference to talks between a Burman junta and the Burman leaders of a very strongly Burman political party. As a result, a term first used by non-Burman ethnic groups to push for their inclusion is now being used to exclude them from the process once again.

In the midst of this, the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), which includes both Burman democracy groups and the non-Burman resistance groups of the National Democratic Front (NDF), held a meeting on 6-7 March 2001 and issued a joint statement expressing full support for the talks and supporting the position of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in them - despite not having access to the full details of the talks themselves. In other words, they are handing the ball to the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, at least partly authorising her to negotiate on their behalf. This is unexpected coming from the NDF groups, considering what her father Aung San did in a similar situation when negotiating with the British, and considering that members of non-Burman resistance groups, when speaking privately, are usually skeptical about the NLD because it has never come out in support of federalism or regional autonomy, most of its positions on ethnic issues are very vague, and its attitudes toward non-Burman groups are often very condescending and patronising. When it comes to making public statements, however, these same ethnic resistance groups subdue their skepticism and seem to make a point of saying what they think the world wants to hear - full support for the NLD - feeling that if they fail to do so the international community will turn away from them. This time, though, it may be a serious mistake on their part, because it could result in their effective exclusion from the talks until after all of the key issues have already been decided. Those who keep quiet and trust others to negotiate for them end up getting railroaded.

History shows that when two parties are negotiating the future and excluding all others, often the only way that the marginalised parties can have their concerns heard is to act as the spoiler; criticising the talks, boycotting the elections, or upsetting the process in such a way that there is no choice but to listen to their concerns. This type of scenario is common in transition situations: it happened when the Zulus and all other groups were being marginalised while the South African apartheid government negotiated only with the ANC; it happened when the Muslims in British India agitated against a Hindu-dominated India, resulting in the Partition; and closest to home, when the British betrayed the Karens, Karenni, Kachins and their other allies to negotiate exclusively with General Aung San, which eventually led to the civil war which is still ongoing in Burma. If the present talks develop into a deal which threatens to exclude the concerns of the non-Burman groups, they may feel no option but to act as a spoiler. And as many of them are resistance military men, they may not consider options other than the military option. Such scenarios almost always end up with bloodshed on a large scale, and most of it is the blood of the innocent. This would be a terrible end to a process which should be one of hope. It is an end which can still be avoided if the contents of the talks are immediately opened up and broadened to include the concerns of non-Burman groups. No one wants a continuing civil war, particularly not the ethnic resistance groups who have already suffered so long from one, and who would be cast by the world as the evil spoilers attacking the democratic process and would lose all of their international sympathy and support. But the best way to avoid this and ensure democracy for the future is to make this process democratic now, by putting an end to these secret backroom dealings. Many would say these talks are still at a delicate stage, that any step is a step forward - but history shows that if something is to be open, there is no reason it shouldn't be (and in fact it must be) open from the beginning. No matter how sincere you are, you cannot unify a people by excluding half of them. Otherwise, life may become better for the politicians, but the ordinary people will once again be left behind.

“To get peace in our country, together with our civilians, we will ask to stop the fighting if we can. I think that it will be good if we can live in Burma together with our people, in our towns and with our jobs.” - a Lance Corporal who deserted from the Burmese Army (*“Abuse Under Orders”*, Interview #2)

Forced Labour and Convict Labour

“I have seen them force the civilians to build roads, bridges and do everything for the battalion camp and do Pa Take [soldiers’ term meaning forced labour at the Army camp]. I even had to force the mothers [in Burmese, older women are referred to as mothers]. When the mothers were tired and if I gave them a chance to rest, the officers asked me why they had to rest. I told them, ‘Bo Gyi [captain], it is like this; they are tired so I asked them to rest.’ He asked me, ‘Don’t you want to force the civilians? Why don’t you want to force them?’ I told him, ‘Bo Gyi, they work and are tired so I asked them to rest.’ I told them [the officers], but they didn’t excuse me at all. They didn’t say anything to the villagers. They called me away and slapped my face. I felt distressed that time also.” - former SPDC soldier in Pa’an District, aged 17 (“Abuse Under Orders”, Interview #1)

There are still some people in the world who have not forgotten about forced labour in Burma, particularly the millions of villagers who still suffer under it. Hundreds of written SPDC order documents obtained by KHRG in recent months, as well as the continuing testimony of villagers, show that forced labour is not only thriving in Burma since the ILO sanctions were imposed in November 2000, but new forced labour projects such as roads, plantations and dams are also beginning. This is not to say that the SPDC is completely immune to the ILO pressure; in fact, the regime has shown signs of reacting. Through its actions and statements, the SPDC has shown clearly that it prefers the world to think that ‘human rights abuses in Burma’ refers only to its mistreatment of the NLD, and gets very nervous when the world starts talking about the real human rights abuses like forced labour. First there were the violent denunciations of the ILO and foreign countries in the SPDC’s statements and media; then, as mentioned above, it is likely that part of the motivation for the commencement of talks with the NLD was to push the forced labour issue out of the international spotlight.

“I saw it and I also did it myself. When the porters said that the load was too much and heavy, we said, ‘We called you to porter. After you fulfil your time, we will release you.’ Then we ordered them to carry. The porters couldn’t follow. When they couldn’t carry, the soldiers said that they were slow and beat and kicked them. ... They forced the porters to go between the soldiers and also to go in front. Now they force them to go in front because of the many landmines planted on this side. If someone stepped on a landmine, it would be a villager who stepped on it. ... The soldiers ordered the [other] villagers to carry them to the hospital, but they bled to death on the way. I have seen that.” - former SPDC soldier aged 19 (“Abuse Under Orders”, Interview #2)

At the same time, the SPDC has been issuing some orders through its hierarchy which appear to be intended to do some ‘window dressing’ on the issue. For example, one order document issued by SPDC authorities in Pa’an District in October 2000 stated, *“Except for operations and security affairs which require operations servants, civilian servants/carts are not allowed to be used for administrative affairs.”* This is consistent with reports of other SPDC orders, which appear to have been issued in some areas telling the authorities not to use civilians for forced labour for their own personal gain, but that they are still to be used for military operations and state projects. Of course, this goes directly against the spirit of the ILO’s recommendations, which are particularly concerned with the use of forced labour by the military and for state projects. Such orders to local SPDC authorities may be intended simply as ‘window dressing’ to try to convince the ILO that something is being done, but they are not succeeding. In some areas, the local authorities have interpreted these orders to mean that people must no longer be allowed to pay to avoid forced labour, resulting in even more actual forced labour than before.

In interviews with KHRG, former SPDC soldiers also mentioned that they had heard of orders from higher up to stop using forced labour, but in every case they said that the content of such orders was never made clear to them and that their units continued to use forced labour as before. Even the SPDC admits that not a single military officer, soldier or civilian official has yet been charged with using the forced labour of civilians, even though they claim to have made this practice illegal and criminally punishable.

“The SPDC said they won’t call wontan [servants, meaning porters] after November, but it isn’t true. ... I heard that the senior leaders ordered it. But they didn’t stop it. They still call people to go. ... They call wontan [porters] and Loh Ah Pay [other forms of civilian forced labour]. They forced the civilians to dig toilets. They forced them to dig the earth, to build the road and forced them to weave baskets for the porters. They force them to do everything.” - former SPDC soldier aged 19 (*“Abuse Under Orders”*, Interview #2)

The SPDC is trying by every means possible to cover up forced labour and continue using it, because the power and personal profit gained through forced labour, and the impunity to commit such abuses in the field, are the main sources of loyalty among the officer corps - making forced labour a central pillar of the regime’s power (for a deeper discussion on this question see *KHRG Commentary #2000-C2 [17/10/2000]*). But this does not mean that the ILO pressure is having no effect. It is clear that the SPDC is at least trying to figure out ways to elude this pressure, and in the end the regime will hopefully see no choice but to implement real reforms to cut down on the practice. KHRG has already begun receiving reports that in some villages of Papun District villagers are no longer being called for forced labour as porters because the SPDC is bringing in convicts for this purpose. They will never be able to find enough convicts, though, to take the place of all the villagers presently doing forced labour.

“When I was walking in the night time, there was no light and I fell down. He [one of the soldiers] didn’t lift me, he kicked me. He pulled the basket and it fell out of my hands. He told me, ‘Your body is very big, but you are not useful.’ I told him, ‘No, Saya, I came out of the hospital not so long ago.’ He then hit me three times on the back and my back hurt. I still have the wound [he then showed his wound]. When I carried the basket, it was very painful. I had to suffer and carry it in the night.” - Convict porter from Moulmein Prison (*“Convict Porters”*, Interview #1)

“The soldiers also left some people along the way because they couldn’t go on anymore, such as the people they had beaten and their arms were broken. We don’t know the people whose arms were broken, but there were two of them and they were from Meiktila Prison. The soldiers had beaten them with the butts of their guns. If people collapsed on the mountain, they beat them. ... We carried medicine for the soldiers who got sick. One of their Saya Gyi [Sergeants] told us, ‘This is not for you, if you want to die, you die. We already see you as dead people.’” - Convict porter from Mandalay prison (*“Convict Porters”*, Interview #2)

The SPDC’s attempt to avoid censure for the use of civilian forced labour by using convicts in place of some of the civilians raises another area of concern, because the convict forced labourers are treated extremely brutally and many of them die. KHRG has documented this situation in the report *“Convict Porters: The Brutal Abuse of Prisoners on Burma’s Frontlines”* (KHRG #2000-06, 20/12/2000). Through interviews with convict porters who have escaped, the report shows how the SPDC has increasingly systematised its system of using convicts for military purposes. Hundreds of convicts at a time are taken from prisons throughout the country and held in ‘Won Saung’ (‘carrying service’) holding camps where Army units can

collect them at will to take as porters to the frontlines. They are treated twice as brutally as civilian porters and on some operations as many as half of them die without being released. Convicts are also being used more and more for forced labour on roadbuilding and other infrastructure projects, usually under brutal conditions. The convicts themselves seldom have any choice in the matter; they are sometimes told their sentences will be reduced or that they will be paid, but these promises are never kept. The prisons are given quotas of convicts to send for projects, and if convicts are not willing to go they are forced. Many of those sent are in prison for such minor offenses as curfew violations; one of the convicts interviewed for the report was in prison for eloping with his girlfriend. Some of the convicts interviewed were sentenced on false charges with no evidence and were only in prison a few days before being sent to the *Won Saung* camps and the frontline, making them wonder whether the SPDC has ordered the police to arrest more people just to get more labourers. In the end, many of them are kept at forced labour even after the expiration of their prison sentences; once they are taken as porters, the norm is to keep them until they either die or escape.

“I heard the other prisoners talking to each other and say they would give us 100 Kyat per person. When we arrived into the soldiers’ hands, I asked the soldiers and they said, ‘Who will give it to you?’ They said they were going to reduce our sentences. Mostly we were going to die while portering.” - Convict porter from Lashio prison (“*Convict Porters*”, Interview #7)

“They said they would release us as soon as they arrived at their Army camp, but when they arrived there, they said, ‘If we have to stay for 6 or 8 months, you also have to stay with us and you can go back when we go back.’ I just had two months left before completing my punishment but now I’d have to stay for 6 or 8 months there, it would be extra. As for the extra time, it would be better to run and escape because staying there I was starving and had nothing to eat or drink and my wounds on my back were very painful.” - Convict porter from Mandalay prison (“*Convict Porters*”, Interview #2)

A Crumbling Army

“When I first joined, I thought they were good. Later, slowly, we knew that it is no good. They were forcing the villagers and demanding things from them. We saw them beat the villagers and we had to do it ourselves. We didn’t want to do it. If we complained to them, they slapped our cheeks. We couldn’t suffer that so we fled.” - 19-year-old SPDC Lance Corporal who joined at age 14 (“*Abuse Under Orders*”, Interview #2)

The SPDC Army itself is in a desperate state, facing an increasing wave of desertions and suicides among the rank and file. In our latest report, “*Abuse Under Orders: The SPDC and DKBA Armies Through the Eyes of their Soldiers*” (KHRG #2001-01, 27/3/2001), we look at the SPDC Army through interviews with soldiers who have fled, many of them child soldiers. They describe an Army of conscripts and shanghaied youth, as many as 30% of them under age 18, and over half of the rank and file soldiers wanting to desert. They are beaten, humiliated, and robbed by their officers, deprived of salary, not allowed leave or communication with their families, and are not allowed to leave the Army unless they can bring in 5 or 10 new recruits. The officers sell off their rations and order them to rob their food from the villages, then tell them to round up villagers for forced labour or be physically punished themselves. The soldiers and the villagers are forced to work together on personal money-making projects of the officers, but receive none of the profit themselves. Many of them say they did not even know who the enemy was supposed to be; but they are told that if they try to flee to the enemy, they will be

executed and their families will be punished. Even so, many of them try, while those who see no way out resort to suicide.

“They take them forcibly. The children are not interested [in being soldiers]. I also was not interested, but they pointed a gun at me and I was worried that they would shoot me dead. That is why I had to follow them. Then they changed my name and address and I had to attend the training and I was sent to the frontline. They did like that.” - 18-year-old SPDC soldier who was forced into the Army when he was 15 (“Abuse Under Orders”, Interview #4)

“When I was a new soldier, I didn’t know that the KNU are Tha Bone [rebels]. I didn’t know what it was at all. After four years, why don’t they allow us to read the newspapers or listen to the radio? Are they worried that we will understand something? Are they worried that we will be confused? I thought about this and I left the Army camp with my brother and put down my weapon [surrendered].” - 17-year-old SPDC soldier who was forced into the Army at age 13 (“Abuse Under Orders”, Interview #1)

“When I first entered the army, I enjoyed the work. However, after 1 or 2 years, I was not enjoying it anymore. I saw soldiers flee and escape before me. Some committed suicide by shooting themselves. Some shot themselves to get an injury like a broken leg. I saw these events. That is why I didn’t enjoy staying there. ... Then a Sergeant Major 2 fled the Army, and I thought, ‘Even the higher officers [actually higher NCO’s] flee, and I am just a [private] soldier, so can I keep suffering this? I also can’t stay any longer.’ Every soldier felt like I did, but they couldn’t escape the control of the Army so most of them are still there.” - 21-year-old SPDC soldier who was shanghaied into the Army at age 17 (“Abuse Under Orders”, Interview #3)

Rather than try to improve the morale of its soldiers, the SPDC focuses all of its efforts on expanding the Army’s size; to fill all of the new battalions being created, recruiters coerce, trick or shanghai boys and young men from markets, festivals and train stations. The Army is now estimated to number well over 400,000, but most of the battalions being created are actually operating at less than half strength, with only 150 or 200 men instead of the prescribed 500-700. While the rank and file soldiers try to survive and desperately want to flee, the officers drain the Army’s resources through their corruption, falsify reports to higher levels about their operations and troop strengths, and gain the hatred of the civilian population for all of their abuses. After talking to several people who have been in the SPDC’s Army it becomes difficult to understand how the whole structure has managed to hold together for so long; regardless of the answer, if it persists in allowing the officers complete impunity in their present levels of corruption, and if the brutal and systematic abuse of the rank and file soldiers continues at its present rate, it is even more difficult to imagine the Army holding together for much longer.

“As I see it, the SPDC can gather together many soldiers, but their soldiers have very low morale. Most of them do not want to be soldiers, and many are fleeing. Many are also dying in battle. When I saw this, I felt that they won’t be able to control their troops for much longer. Only the soldiers who stay beside the highest officers, feeding them, are happy. If they hear people complaining, they report it and the high officers put you in the prison cell and beat you. I’ve seen and experienced that. But in the Battalion I heard Corporals and Sergeants talking, and they said that the officers had told them that if the government leaders change this year, in 2000, that there will be a suicidal battle for the country’s freedom. They said that if this happens, they will join the resistance and fight the Army. They said, ‘You are making us suffer. You don’t allow us to go home and visit our parents. You don’t even tell us

when our parents have died. When the time comes, we will destroy your soldiers and escape.' I hope it will happen, and I believe it. You will ask, why do I believe it? Because the soldiers in the Tatmadaw, under the control of the SPDC, they are not happy. The days and nights go by. I believe what they said because I felt that way myself. One day it will all explode, and the soldiers will resist the Army, and what they are hoping for will come." - a 21-year-old Karen who was shanghaied into the SPDC Army at 17 ("**Abuse Under Orders**", Interview #3)

The report also looks at the current state of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the armed Karen group which has been allied with the SLORC/SPDC since its formation in December 1994. The DKBA has had almost all of the food and other support it receives from the SPDC cut off bit by bit, to the point where the hundreds of civilian families who form the DKBA's support base at their Myaing Gyi Ngu headquarters have been leaving *en masse*, leaving the headquarters semi-deserted. Most of the DKBA units are operating locally, focusing their energies on supporting themselves through black market logging and cattle trading, extorting money from villages and vehicles on the roads, using villagers for forced labour, and other projects. They still act as a front for SPDC troops in some of their operations and wage war against the Karen National Liberation Army, but without much material support coming from the SPDC any longer, the future of their relations with the regime is difficult to predict.

"When I stayed with the DKBA I thought that it had no meaning for me. That's why I came up here. I saw that in the future it would not be easy for the DKBA. The SPDC is watching them and their situation. If they misstep, it will be difficult for them. A couple of years ago, the SPDC gave them priority [supported them strongly], but now they do not give priority to them. Some [DKBA troops] just have to follow the SPDC wherever they go. They don't feed them. They just call and order them to follow." - soldier who deserted the DKBA ("**Abuse Under Orders**", Interview #7)

KHRG News

In January 2001 KHRG released a new book, "**Suffering in Silence: The Human Rights Nightmare of the Karen People of Burma**", edited by Claudio O. Delang. The book reproduces three of KHRG's 1999 reports to show the human rights situation in 3 Karen regions, each of them under a different degree of SPDC control. Together, they show that while tactics vary in nature and brutality between different regions, the end result in all three areas is the disintegration of village life. The reports are tied together by an introduction and summary background of Burma, and the book also contains many photos from KHRG's archive in black and white. Published in paperback, the book is 311 pages, and is only available online at several online booksellers including **amazon.com**, **barnesandnoble.com**, and **borders.com** (to find the book, search for *Suffering in Silence*). All three of the above mentioned booksellers are now selling it for the cover price of US\$25.95 plus shipping. Any sales royalties received from the publisher over and above the amount of the initial publishing charges will be used to continue KHRG's ongoing work.

Other recent KHRG releases include the reports "**Convict Porters: The Brutal Abuse of Prisoners on Burma's Frontlines**" (KHRG #2000-06, 20/12/00), which details the SPDC's increasingly systematic abuse of prison convicts as forced labour in military situations, and "**Abuse Under Orders: The SPDC and DKBA Armies Through the Eyes of their Soldiers**" (KHRG #2001-01, 27/3/01), which documents the endemic corruption and the physical and psychological abuse of soldiers in the SPDC Army, as well as the forced conscription techniques

used to recruit child soldiers. To provide timely information on ongoing events, we have released ***Information Update #2001-U1 (20/2/01)***, which documents the flight of villagers in northeastern Pa'an District from forced labour building a military access road and demining the hills to make way for new SPDC Army camps near their villages; and ***Information Update #2001-U2 (20/3/01)***, which reports on the use of torture and physical intimidation by SPDC troops in Thaton District as a tactic to eliminate civilian support for Karen resistance forces. We will soon be releasing ***"SPDC and DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A"***, a compendium drawn from close to 700 order documents sent to villages by SPDC military units and authorities and by Democratic Karen Buddhist Army units, demanding forced labour, money, food, and materials, restricting the activities of villagers, and threatening punishments such as arrest and the destruction of villages for any failure to comply. This report adds to our growing archive of several thousand such order documents, which provide signed and sealed documentary evidence of systematic forced labour and other abuses in Burma.