

Karen Human Rights Group

Report from the Field

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group
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Reports from the Field are drawn from situation reports submitted by KHRG researchers in the field. They are regularly published by KHRG to provide timely reporting of developments in particular regions or regarding thematic topics of concern, particularly when urgent action may be required. Reports from the Field are intended primarily for quick release via Internet, though hard copies are also available. Topics covered will generally be reported in more detail, with supporting testimonies, documents, and photos, in upcoming KHRG reports.

Interview with an SPDC Child Soldier

In March 2001 the Karen Human Rights Group released the report *Abuse Under Orders* documenting the recruitment and lives of soldiers in the SPDC and DKBA armies. The interviews, mostly with escaped soldiers, revealed the SPDC's systematic forced recruitment, particularly of children, and the Army's brutal treatment of its own soldiers while the officers exploit their positions and their soldiers for personal profit. This was followed in 2002 by the Human Rights Watch report *"My Gun Was as Tall as Me": Child Soldiers in Burma*, which estimated 70,000 child soldiers (under age 18) in the Burma Army, making Burma by far the largest abuser of child soldiers in the world. Growing acknowledgement of this problem led the UN Secretary-General to include Burma among 'situations of concern' for use of child soldiers in his subsequent reports on the issue to the UN Security Council.

Though the Security Council has yet to take any action, growing international attention on the issue led the SPDC first to deny that there are any child soldiers in its army, and then to appoint a 'Committee for Prevention of the Recruitment of Minors in Armed Forces' to address the issue. At the Committee's fourth meeting in Rangoon on February 3rd 2005, shown on Myanmar Television, the actual purpose of the committee became clear when SPDC Lt. Gen. Thein Sein stated its task as being to "refute" the "baseless allegations" that there are child soldiers, saying these were "false statements" made by "unscrupulous people"; he stated that "to make the international community understand our country, it is necessary for us to always refute the accusations systematically." Committee members then reported on measures already taken to "reject the allegations of destructive elements" internationally, in other words to cover up the issue rather than address it.¹

The interview below with a 15 year old SPDC deserter, conducted by KHRG in February 2006 in Nyaunglebin District, suggests that little or nothing has changed in the SPDC's recruitment and abuse of child soldiers in the past five years. Children as young as 10 or 11 are still targeted by recruiters in public places, and they still use the same trick of threatening boys with jail for failing to hold an official identity card. Though no such law actually exists, this threat is often enough to frighten boys into joining, and if not they are beaten into

¹ MRTV (Myanmar TV), February 3rd 2005, as reported on BBC World Service.

submission. They are rounded up into recruit camps called ('gathering places'), and held there until the *Su Saun Yay*'s non-commissioned officers literally sell them to battalions needing soldiers. Once 'bought' by a battalion they are sent to four months of training, where they are further brutalised, starved and fed substandard rations. Those who try to escape are beaten so brutally they sometimes die as a result. If they survive training they are sent to operational battalions, where both child and adult soldiers are used to control the local civilians and round up forced labourers for their officers. Meanwhile the officers steal their salaries and rations, then order them to loot food from the villagers to survive. None of these things have improved in recent years, and are only likely to worsen as the Army continues to expand.

Some soldiers manage to escape, but if they attempt to return home they face arrest, imprisonment and re-conscription into the Army, even if children. To avoid this, some flee to neighbouring countries, where they become illegal workers. They must hide their background, because if identified they are handed back across the border to the Burma Army and arrested. No programmes exist to help them, other than the informal assistance they receive from Burma's armed opposition groups.

The story below is presented as it was told by 15 year old Ko Z---. Further background and information can be found in the reports mentioned above.

NAME: Ko Z--- **SEX:** M **AGE:** 15 Burman, Buddhist
ADDRESS: M--- township, Mandalay Division
OCCUPATION: Student (5th Standard/Grade 5); also helps his parents in the ricefields

While I was going to sit for my [5th Standard] examinations I met NCO² Tin Soe from *Su Saun Yay [recruit camp] #3* in Meiktila. He asked me, "Do you have an I.D. card?" I answered that I didn't. He told me, "Then you must join the army, for you have no I.D. card and you cannot come to town without an I.D. card." I refused to join the army but he threatened me that he would send me to court. That made me afraid, so I told him I would join the army. The SPDC is using many tricks to recruit their soldiers. One of my friends named Ko P--- is about 30 years old, and one time while we were waiting for a car we were sitting drinking tea in a teashop. Some SPDC soldiers started calling people to jump on their truck and they would send them for free to their villages without payment. Many people were happy and jumped on the truck. But the soldiers drove their truck to the Army camp. Then they demanded money to let the women go, and forced the men to become soldiers.

My mother has passed away. I was her only child. I was staying with my aunts, not with my father. My father took another wife and got two more children, and his wife was pregnant again when the soldier arrested me. When I informed my father I'd been arrested he told me I could join the army. He was staying with his second wife.

I was arrested on May 1st 2005 and they kept me in the *Su Saun Yay [recruit camp]* for 15 days. There were many recruits under 16 years old in the recruiting camp. The NCOs at the recruiting camp sold recruits for money to Battalion companies³

² Non-commissioned officer, i.e. Lance Corporal, Corporal or Sergeant.

³ A full strength SPDC Army battalion is supposed to have over 500 soldiers, but most operate with only 200-400 soldiers. Each battalion is divided into four to five companies.

who needed more soldiers. If a soldier runs away from his company, the Company Commander can go and buy a soldier from recruiting camp to replace him. The Battalions paid 50,000 Kyat⁴ for a fully aged recruit or 30,000 Kyat for an underage recruit. Underage recruits at the recruiting camp who wanted to attend training also had to give a bribe to the recruiting camp NCO. So the NCO was paid 30,000 Kyat *[by a Battalion]* for each new underage recruit, and if you are underage you must also pay the NCO another 2,000 Kyat and you can attend training.

On May 17th 2005 they sent me to #7 Army Training Camp at Taung Dwin Gyi, and I was in training there for four months. The NCO *[at the Su Saun Yay]* assigned me to Light Infantry Battalion #378 but when I arrived *[at training]* they assigned me to LIB #349. My weight wasn't enough, but I put some mud in my uniform pockets when they weighed me. The minimum weight is 80 pounds but I weigh under 70 pounds.

There were 250 recruits attending the training, including 10 child soldiers. The recruits were divided into four companies at the Army Training Camp. I saw three child soldiers in other companies who were younger than I am. They were about 13 years old. During my training time I heard that General Kyaw Win was coming to visit our training camp, and my Sergeant Kyaw Oo asked me, "How old are you?" I answered that I am 15 years old and he slapped my face. He told me I must answer 18 years old, because if General Kyaw Win asks me I must answer that I am 18 years old.

During my training we had to run in the morning, and we practiced parade drill, ploughed and harvested paddy, and studied about small arms. To plant the paddy we had to pull a plough through the flat field like bullocks. We also had to pull a tractor with rope *[to turn the soil]*, with some recruits pushing and others pulling it *[so the officers didn't even have to spend for fuel]*. We worked hard and got tired but did not get enough food. We got one egg and one handful of rice in the morning, bean soup in the afternoon, and in the evening we got two pieces of meat with a little rice. The paddy that we grew was sold and all the money went to the Light Infantry Division Commander, so he became richer and richer.

During training I also learned the *kyin wut chao seh* *["sixty rules of conduct"]*. There are 20 rules for soldiers, ten about how to deal with civilians, five about dealing with enemies, and I don't remember exactly how many about dealing with fellow soldiers, maybe 5 or 10.

During training ten recruits tried to escape, but only four of them got away and six were recaptured. They were tortured seriously, nearly to death. They were kept locked in leg stocks, handcuffed, tied with chains, and beaten again and again every time the NCOs got drunk. The NCOs ordered them to lie down on their faces and then beat their backs in front of all the recruits. I was afraid of that so I didn't dare to run away.

Seven of us were sent to LIB #349 as soldiers: Ko Z---, M---, Z---, Z---, W---, T---, and A---. Of the seven, Z---, W--- and I have already run away.

⁴ US\$1 equals 6 Kyat at official SPDC rate, or approximately 1,300 Kyat at current black market rate.

There were over a hundred soldiers in LIB #349. My Captain was Soe Win, the Battalion Commander was Soe Tint, and the 1st Lieutenant was Thet Khaing. The Battalion Commander liked to choose soldiers who could speak Karen language and who were skilled in defense. This was the first time for me to come to the front line. We started by travelling from Ma Ta Ba to Shwegyin. We came by boat on the Sittaung River from Shwegyin to Shan village. From Shan village we walked for three days to Win Maw. The Battalion Commander demanded six porters from every village along the way. He took six villagers, then when we arrived at the next village he demanded six more villagers and released the previous six villagers. LIB #349 controls the area around Per Lah Daw, Myeik Way, Kya In Gone and Win Maw. LIB #349 arrived about two and half months ago to replace LIB #587. The LIB #349 Commander is Soe Tint, the 1st Lieutenant is Thet Khaing, Company #1 Commander Bee Tah [*transliteration of 'Peter'*], Company #2 Commander Yeh Htun, Company #3 Commander Zin Oo and Company #4 Commander Kyaw Zin Htaik.

The salaries for ordinary soldiers are 8,000 Kyat to 9,500 Kyat [*per month*]⁵. The Battalion Commander cut out 200 Kyat of that for himself and also took money for festivals, for example K'Htain fees [*the festival of giving new robes to the monks, which occurs around October-November*], of 2,000 or 3,000 Kyat from our salaries many times. We received only 6,000 or 7,500 Kyat for one month. The Lance Corporal received 11,000 Kyat, Corporals got 12,000 Kyat, and Sergeants got 13,000 Kyat. The Warrant Officer Class 2 got 15,000 Kyat.

When we were based at Win Boe village, the soldiers shot two of the villagers' pigs and brought them into our camp. Then they ordered their owners to come to meet with them to pay double the value of those pigs if they wanted them back, but the villagers didn't dare come. The soldiers accused those pigs of destroying their plantations, but the soldiers hadn't planted anything near their camp. They just want to eat pork, so they do silly things to the villagers. The soldiers did not follow their moral duties [*as specified in the 'sixty rules of conduct'*] toward the civilians.

The NCOs bullied and forced the ordinary soldiers to do work all the time. They were so cruel to us. We never had time to rest, whether in the back lines or at the front line. I am angry at the SPDC's NCO soldiers and I want to kill them.

The reason I ran away from the SPDC Army is that one day when I was cooking [*for his unit*] Corporal Kyaw Thu called me and ordered me to carry water. I replied that if I went my rice would go soft [*from overcooking*] and asked someone else to carry the water. The Corporal said I was disobeying him and he punched me. I reported it to Company Commander Bee Tah, and he punched me too. The other reason I fled is that I never wanted to join the army, but if I had run away when I was still in the back lines I surely would not have escaped. When I arrived at the front line I decided to run away. I ran away on February 4th 2006. Now I hope I can continue to carry arms, but if that's not possible I will attend school again.

Thank you.

⁵ US\$1 equals 6 Kyat at official SPDC rate, or approximately 1,300 Kyat at current black market rate.