



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Child soldiers recruited to support expansion of the KNU-KNLA Peace Council

The recent KNU splinter group, the KNU-KNLA Peace Council, in seeking to expand its military forces, consolidate its presence in Pa'an District and put forth a show of strength, has embarked on an intensive recruitment campaign, including the recruitment of Karen children under the age of 18 from homes in Mae La refugee camp and Thai-Karen villages in Tak Province, Thailand. Tricked into joining and prevented from leaving, some of these children have escaped and returned to their homes whilst the parents of other missing children are trying to secure their sons' release and fear for their safety.

On 30th January 2007 Maj-Gen Htain Maung (formerly a Brigadier-General and the Commander of Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)'s 7th Brigade) was dismissed from the Karen National Union (KNU) for entering into negotiations with the SPDC without the approval of the KNU Central Executive Committee. One day later, he and his supporters (including his son-in-law, Ler Moo, Colonel Saw Htawt Lay and Pastor Timothy Laklem) formed a breakaway faction with Maj-Gen Htain Maung as Chairman, which they named the KNU-KNLA Peace Council (KNU-KNLA PC). On February 11th 2007, the KNU-KNLA PC signed a peace deal in an elaborate ceremony with the SPDC which was attended by foreign guests, filmed and shown on Burmese television. Initially comprised of only about 15 soldiers plus family and friends, the KNU-KNLA PC set about recruiting more soldiers to expand its military. KNU-KNLA PC leaders were also concerned about putting on a display of strength in the peace signing ceremony, so Karen men and boys from inside Burma (including Nyaunglebin District and Irrawaddy Division), Karen villages in Thailand (including Htee Nuh Hta village on the Moei riverbank) and Mae La refugee camp were persuaded to join the group and "*fill in the blanks*" (a phrase the recruiters used meaning to make up the numbers) for the peace signing ceremony, Karen Revolution Day and other later ceremonies. Among these new recruits are child soldiers under the age of 18 who were persuaded to go to the celebrations, deceived into thinking they could leave after fulfilling their duty for two or three days, but subsequently coerced into joining the KNU-KNLA PC and denied permission to leave. DKBA soldiers were also used to bolster the numbers in the peace signing ceremony, although not all of them remembered to change their uniforms and can be spotted among the KNU-KNLA PC ranks in a commemorative video distributed following the event.

This news bulletin looks at the recruitment and treatment of child soldiers in the KNU-KNLA PC through the eyes of the children who have managed to escape and return to their homes in Mae La refugee camp. The interviews in this news bulletin were conducted between May 14th and 23rd 2007 with two escaped child soldiers who returned to the refugee camp, one of the children's fathers and the mother of another boy recruited to be a soldier who has yet to return to his home in the camp. The interviews suggest that at present, children are being coerced into joining the KNU-KNLA PC simply to expand the size of its ranks but are not as yet deployed on military operations. However, as the SPDC increasingly pressures the KNU-KNLA PC to attack KNU camps (the attack on KNLA battalions #101 and 24 on April

8th, 2007, being an example) the child soldiers could very well end up also being trained and deployed. The children mentioned in this report are as follows:

#	Name	Sex	Age	Home address	Status
1	Saw D---	Male	16-17	Mae La refugee camp	Coerced into joining in March 2007, deserted and returned home in April 2007.
2	Saw L---	Male	14	Mae La refugee camp	Coerced into joining on February 21 st 2007, deserted and returned home in April 2007.
3	Saw N---	Male	16-17	Mae La refugee camp	Unclear when recruited, still missing.
4	Saw M---	Male	16-17	Mae La refugee camp	Coerced into joining in January 2007, still missing.
5	Saw E---	Male	13	Mae La refugee camp	Voluntarily joined on February 21 st 2007, returned home in April 2007.
6	P---	Male	Unknown	Karen village in Tak Province, Thailand	Unknown when recruited. Deserted and returned home in April 2007.
7	G---	Male	Unknown	Karen village in Tak Province, Thailand	Unknown when recruited. Deserted and returned home in April 2007.
8	G---	Male	Unknown	Karen village in Tak Province, Thailand	Unknown when recruited. Deserted and returned home in April 2007.
9	T---	Male	Unknown	Karen village in Tak Province, Thailand	Unknown when recruited. Deserted and returned home in April 2007.

Recruitment

On February 21st 2007, Saw E--- and Saw L--- left Mae La refugee camp and crossed the Moei river, which forms part of the Thai-Burma border between Thailand's Tak Province and Pa'an and Dooطلا Districts of Karen State. The two boys then arrived at Maj-Gen Htain Maung's base camp in T'Nay Hsah township, Pa'an District, across the river from Htee Nuh Hta village in Thailand. Saw E---, who was aged 12 at the time, volunteered to join the KNU-KNLA PC and then persuaded his friend, Saw L--- to join him. Once they had joined they were given uniforms, put on sentry duty and prevented from leaving. They were also threatened that if they went back to the refugee camp the other residents would kill them.

"Saw E---, he is 12 years old. He is my friend and neighbour and he persuaded me to go with him to get his bicycle from Htee Klo Hnee [Htain Maung's base on the Moei riverbank in Pa'an District]. At first I only thought to take the bicycle but after I arrived at Htee Klo Hnee, the people caught me because he [Saw E---] kept the bicycle at the army camp [Saw E--- goes back and forth between his home in Mae La camp and Htee Klo Hnee] ... Saw Eh Hser, who is a [military] official, threatened me that, 'if any soldiers go back to camp, the people in camp will kill you.' I told him that I was not a soldier and that my parents stay in the camp. He replied, 'You are not allowed to go back, if you go back and we catch you again, you will have to stay in jail'."

- Saw L--- (male, 14) Mae La refugee camp (May 23rd 2007)

Other children were directly recruited from Mae La refugee camp by section leaders, soldiers and KNU-KNLA PC officials who live in the camp. Prior to his surrender to the SPDC, Htain Maung had been the commander of the KNLA's 7th Brigade (Pa-an District), which is situated directly across the border from Mae La refugee camp. Inevitably, he and the other KNU-KNLA PC members have friends and family in the area, including among the residents of Mae La camp, and can still exert some influence drawing on their previous positions as

Karen leaders. In some cases, the children and their parents were not aware that the group they were joining was the KNU-KNLA PC and that they had signed a peace deal with the SPDC; they assumed that as they were the same Karen leaders that they were familiar with in the past, they were still KNU officials. Saw D--- and Saw M--- were persuaded by Mae La camp section leaders and soldiers from the KNU-KNLA PC to go to make up the numbers for a celebration in March 2007. In the following interviews, Saw K--- and his son, Saw D---, explain the recruitment process from Mae La camp:

They took our child...

"Pah Bp'Nah [a section leader in Mae La camp zone C] and one other man came and called my son [to join the KNU-KNLA PC]. When they first came they told him to '*fill in the blanks*' [enhance the soldiers' numbers] and after the celebration he could come back. They came and called him two times. I told the ones that came to call my son that, '*He, my son, is just a civilian so he won't know how to do the marching. It's not a job for civilians to do. You are the real soldiers so you, yourselves, go back. Don't come and call my son, he is not in good health.*' Then he said, '*Oh uncle, it doesn't matter, go, you can go, there will be a lot of people going.*' They said that foreigners would come to take pictures and that there were not enough people so just help '*filling in the blanks*' and after that he could come back. They came and said that any child that wanted to go could go. At first, I didn't allow my son to go and I told him not to go. But the next morning, he, Pah Bp' Nah came to my house again. Then I thought we were all Karen, so it might not be any problem. They were our own leaders and parents, so it wouldn't be any problem.

When my son was leaving, I summoned him and told him, '*My son, when the celebration finishes come back and stay at home*', because we have to rebuild the house and cut wood and bamboo. But [after the celebration] they took our son [further] into Burma and we knew nothing about it. I was not happy with it because they came and lied to our child. They took our child to another place so for example if something bad happened to our child, these people would not be able to help us. The only thing they will do is, if our child died, they, these people, would throw him into the bush. For me, I think it has no meaning.

One boy from there [pointing to a nearby house] was also persuaded and he also went. That boy's name is Saw N---. When you go and talk to his mother about her child she starts to cry. She says she wants to see her child. It was her youngest child. He had never been separated from his mother for a long time before. He hasn't got a father anymore, he has only a mother. His mother is quite old, about over 40 to 50. She came from the same village, K-- village, as me. Most of the people [children] that went were persuaded."

- Saw K--- (male, 38), father of Saw D---, Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)

"I myself wasn't willing to go [across the border to Htain Maung's base], but Pah Bp' Nah, who is a soldier but not a commander, and his friend persuaded me to go. He told me to '*fill in the blanks*' [make up the soldiers' numbers]. He didn't tell me anything else. He came and called me twice to go with him. The first time I refused and told him that I didn't want to go. Then after two or three days, he came and called me again and then this time I went with him. At first, they took me to Thoo Mweh Nee [Htain Maung's base on the Moei riverbank in Pa'an district]. When they first called me I didn't know that I might become a soldier. I thought I had to only fill in the blanks. They asked me only to practice marching and after that we had to do marching in the large ground in front of the audience."

- Saw D--- (male, 17), Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)

Naw M--- was persuaded to allow her son, Saw M--- to go and make up the soldiers' numbers for the KNU-KNLA PC peace signing ceremony with the SPDC. Her son was not willing to go, but she was persuaded and felt obliged to help the former KNU leaders, mistakenly believing that it was they who provided her with the camp food rations, so he went on January 9th 2007 and, despite being promised that it would only be for two or three days, has still not come back to his home in the refugee camp yet.

"The section leader and two section assistants came to me and asked if my child was free. That day, he was free so I had told them that he was free. Then they told me to ask him to go and fill in the numbers of the soldiers for one to two days to do marching, if he had free time. Then I asked how long it would take, but they told me it would only take two or three days and after three days he would come back. So I told him not to do it for many days otherwise he would get into trouble. He, the section leader, thought it was good so he said to me that it is no problem and if any problem occurred he would solve it himself, so I agreed. Then when the [appointed] day arrived, they came to take my child, but my child didn't want to go. He told me, 'Mom, I don't want to go.' 'We can't do anything, my son,' I told him, 'We are in the camp so we have to help. We stay in the camp and we eat their food so we have to help them do the work.' I thought like this. My child obeyed me so he went, but my child was not willing to go. After he went, I didn't hear any information from him. Thinking only about my child, I am getting sick. My brain is not working anymore and I am feeling unconscious. Sometimes, people questioned or talked to me, but I knew or realised nothing. Maybe he doesn't dare to come back, maybe he doesn't know the way back home, I can't think about it. Every night, when I go to sleep I see only this child."

Naw M--- (female, 42) Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)

KHRG contacted Bah Soh Gay, a commander from the KNU-KNLA PC on May 28th, 2007 and he confirmed that Naw M---'s son, Saw M---, was at Hto Gkaw Gkoh and had joined the KNU-KNLA PC. When KHRG contacted Ler Moo on May 28th, 2007 to ask for KNU-KNLA PC policies on recruitment and use of soldiers under age 18, he refused to comment. UNHCR in Mae Sot, Thailand, are also aware of the recruitment of children from Mae La camp and are investigating information from three sources about children taken to be soldiers in the KNU-KNLA PC. The Karen Refugee Committee, which administers the refugee camps, was also contacted by KHRG on May 28th, 2007 and stated that they know that recruitment from Mae La camp is going on but they don't have any exact information.

Lives of the KNU-KNLA PC child soldiers

Children who join the KNU-KNLA PC initially stay in Htain Maung's base camp [across the Moei river from Mae La refugee camp] then some are moved to Hto Gkaw Gkoh (Pa'an District, T'Nay Hsah township, Hto Gkaw Gkoh village tract), where Htain Maung received land from the SPDC under the peace deal. In the quotes below two boys, Saw D--- and Saw L--- explain the situation of the new recruits.

"When I reached there [Htain Maung's base camp] there were a lot of new soldiers and the ground was full with them. The old soldiers were kept separately. I stayed there for over ten days and after that I was sent to Hto Gkaw Gkoh. They didn't tell us anything, they just told us that people from 6th Brigade [Dooطلا District] summoned us. For me, I thought we would have to go to fight. There were a lot of people. We went with ten big machine boats. There were real soldiers and soldiers who had been persuaded. We got into the boats from Thoo Mweh Nee [the riverbank at Htain Maung's base camp] at night time, around 8:00 pm and we arrived at [Shwe]

Gkoh Gkoh around 1:00 am. We rested there for about one hour then at 2:00 am they told us to get into the trucks and there were about 20 trucks. I was shocked and afraid when I saw the DKBA soldiers so I asked them what was happening. Then they told me, 'Don't be afraid. We are just doing peace.' So I had to stay quiet. At 3:00 am or 4:00 am we reached Kawkareik and stayed overnight there. Then the next morning, at 8:00 am we arrived at Hto Gkaw Gkoh. When we reached Hto Gkaw Gkoh, people had already arranged the place for us so we had to stay at our place and the leaders went with the SPDC, but I didn't understand what the SPDC told them.

When I arrived at Hto Gkaw Gkoh, the SPDC took us around to the towns. I went with them only one time. The leaders were traveling around for fun and people told us to go around to see the places. They called us to go with them so we had to follow them. There were a lot of people, they were all soldiers. There were DKBA soldiers, SPDC soldiers and Nyien Chan Yay [KNU-KNLA PC] soldiers as well. We were the servants so we knew nothing. We had to stay under the coconut trees and bamboo [to do sentry duty]. If people [the leaders] called us to go around with them [among the SPDC] we had to go and if we were killed there, there is nothing we could do."

- Saw D--- (male, 17), Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)

"They gave me a gun and a uniform and I stayed there about one month. They didn't order me to do anything but they didn't allow us to go outside. In the evening from 7:30 pm to 10:00 pm, I had to do sentry duty with a partner. I had to do sentry duty every night. They gave us only chili with rice and vegetables. When I was there, they didn't feed us curry, not even yellow bean curry. For their soldiers, they fed them yellow bean curry but for us, only chili. They divided the old and new soldiers. I saw about five or six new soldiers under 18 years and I saw two of the child soldiers who were the same age as me. I don't know their names, they are new soldiers and not from the camp. They are from Htee Nuh Hta [a Karen village in Thailand, just across the river from Htain Maung's base camp]. When I was there, I saw Burmese officials and [SPDC] soldiers come with an aeroplane. Some children liked being soldiers there because their parents had lived there in the past. Some soldiers didn't like to be there but didn't have any choice. When I was there [in Htain Maung's area], I didn't see any strange things but I heard one of the officials say, 'We have to go back and attack Mae La camp.' We would have to cooperate with DKBA and SPDC, but they didn't say the exact date. When I heard this I worried about my family so I decided to run away and inform my family about this"

- Saw L--- (male, 14) Mae La refugee camp (May 23rd 2007)



14-year-old Saw L---, shown at home in Mae La refugee camp after having fled the KNU-KNLA PC. [Photo: KHRG]

Escape

Bah Soh Gay, a commander from the KNU-KNLA PC, told KHRG on May 21st 2007 that children under the age of 18 were free to join the army if they were willing and that anyone who wanted to go back to the camp to study was free to leave. However, the children's own testimonies refute this and claim that instead they were coerced into joining and then denied

permission to leave. They were also scared by threats from DKBA soldiers that they would be attacked, tortured and killed if they returned to the refugee camp. Those children who decided to return home anyway had to desert secretly. Saw D---'s father explains how his son escaped as follows:

"On the way his [DKBA] friends told him 'Don't go back to Beh Klore [Mae La refugee camp]. You are already among us. If you go back people [there] will trouble you, torture you and kill you.' My son was threatened like this so he didn't dare to come back anymore. He just came back to the big house [Htain Maung's house] at Thoo Mweh Nee [the riverbank area where Htain Maung's base camp is located] and listened to [this] information. When I asked him, 'Why didn't you dare to come back? It's your own house.' He said 'The DKBA leaders threatened us that people would beat us, kill us and torture us.' Then the villagers of Htee Nee Htah [a Thai village which is on the other side of the river from Thoo Mweh Nee] told him, 'Go back... Don't worry. Go back to your parents.' My son also has some aunts and uncles there, in Htee Nuh Hta, so he came back secretly with one young child [Saw L---]."

- Saw K--- (male, 38), father of Saw D---, Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)

His son explained that he deserted with five friends when they reached Pa'an town because he was afraid and he missed his parents.

"I was not happy staying there because they were not our own nationality [they stayed with the Burman SPDC soldiers]. We were also afraid, we were afraid they would do something to us so we had to come back quickly. We wanted to see our parents so we escaped back. There were five boys who escaped with me. Their names are; P---, G---, G---, T--- and L---. My other friends are about 16, 17, 18 years old. We left at around 8:00 or 9:00 pm. We walked all the night in the valley and mountains. The next morning, we asked people where the way was. People showed us and then we came back. We reached Thoo Mweh Nee [Htain Maung's base camp] around 2:00 pm. The soldiers there asked us if we had asked permission before we left. Then I told [lied to] them, 'I already asked for permission, I am sick and I will go back to the hospital.' Then on the waning moon of the 4th month [the second half of April] at 5:00 or 6:00 pm, I crossed the river and came back directly to Beh Klore [Mae La camp]. When I came back to here, to Mae La camp, there was only one friend with me. The other four went back to their parents in other places. They were mountain people [not people from the camp]. The other children also really wanted to come back, but they were not allowed. They were told to wait for the next one or two months and then they could come back. It was always 'the next one or two months' all the time so you can never come back. One of my friends, Saw M-- was also persuaded to go back [to join the KNU-KNLA PC]. He still isn't back [in Mae La camp] yet."

- Saw D--- (male, 17), Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)



Saw K--- and his son, Saw D---, one of the boys persuaded to join the KNU/KNLA PC, at home in Mae La refugee camp on May 14th 2007. [Photo: KHRG]

Saw L---, who fled with Saw D--- (quoted above) explains their escape in detail as follows:

"D--- told me that he wanted to come back to the [refugee] camp and then I told him I wanted to come back as well. We left the guns and uniforms. Before we came back, we told the soldiers there that I would go to Htee Nuh Hta but they didn't allow me."

However, when they were not aware, Saw D-- and I ran away. We arrived at Htee Nuh Hta and crossed the river and arrived at the fields and went up the mountain way. I came back by foot along the mountain way. When I arrived at camp, I went to sleep at Saw D---'s house. When we came back, no one saw us. The new soldiers there want to come back but they don't dare to come back. They worry that people will catch them again. For me, if I thought of that, I would be afraid as well, I had never been a soldier before. When I was lost [missing from the refugee camp], my mother searched for me. Since I have arrived at the camp, I have had to work for daily wages with my brothers until now. Actually, I want to study but my mother doesn't have any money [and his father is deceased] and school fees are 150 baht per year. The money which I get from daily wages is 60 baht, I take half and the other half I give to my mother. If I have money, I want to study and for the future I want to be a teacher."

- Saw L--- (male, 14) Mae La refugee camp (May 23rd 2007)

The father of Saw M--- saw his son in a video of the peace signing ceremony, filmed and distributed by the KNU-KNLA PC, wearing a uniform and appearing to be guarding Htain Maung's daughter. He has not yet returned home to Mae La camp and the child's mother is sick with worry about her son.

"He was not among the escaped people. He won't know how to escape. He is a very quiet person. If people tell him to do him something, he does it and if people told him go, he would go. He is a very good child. Whenever I think about him I feel sick. It has become a kind of madness that sometimes I know myself, but sometimes not. The rice that I eat is sometimes tasty, sometimes sweet and sometimes bland. If he comes back, I am not sure if I will die or I will stay alive."

- Naw M--- (female, 42), Mae La refugee camp (May 14th 2007)

Conclusion

KHRG has received information regarding five boys who were recruited by the KNU-KNLA PC from Mae La refugee camp and four boys who were recruited from Thai-Karen villages along the border. The interviews in this report suggest that there are additional numbers of child soldiers in the KNU-KNLA PC from Thailand and Burma who either volunteered or were coerced into joining and subsequently prevented from leaving. Children and their parents in refugee camps have the right to expect a certain level of protection from the Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI), however, they have told KHRG that presently they don't know who to trust among their Karen leaders and they fear for their security. Recruitment from ethnic Karen villages in Thailand should also be a cause for concern for Thailand.

Child soldiers are regularly recruited into the SPDC and DKBA armies (and occasionally into the KNLA) and KHRG has reported on their mistreatment in previous reports (see *Interview with an SPDC child soldier*, KHRG, April 2006 and *Abuse Under Orders: The SPDC and DKBA Armies Through the Eyes of their Soldiers*, KHRG, March 2001). The interviews in this report show that the recently formed KNU-KNLA PC is following the SPDC and DKBA pattern of recruiting child soldiers when there are not enough adults willing to enlist. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (which was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000), prohibits the forcible recruitment or conscription of children under the age of 18. Under Burma's own national laws, children may not be enlisted into the Burma Army until they reach age 18 (although this law is systematically violated by the SPDC) but there are no laws or conventions directly applicable to the KNU-KNLA PC. The KNU-KNLA PC leaders may wish to consider, however, how their recruitment and treatment of child soldiers affects their credibility as a

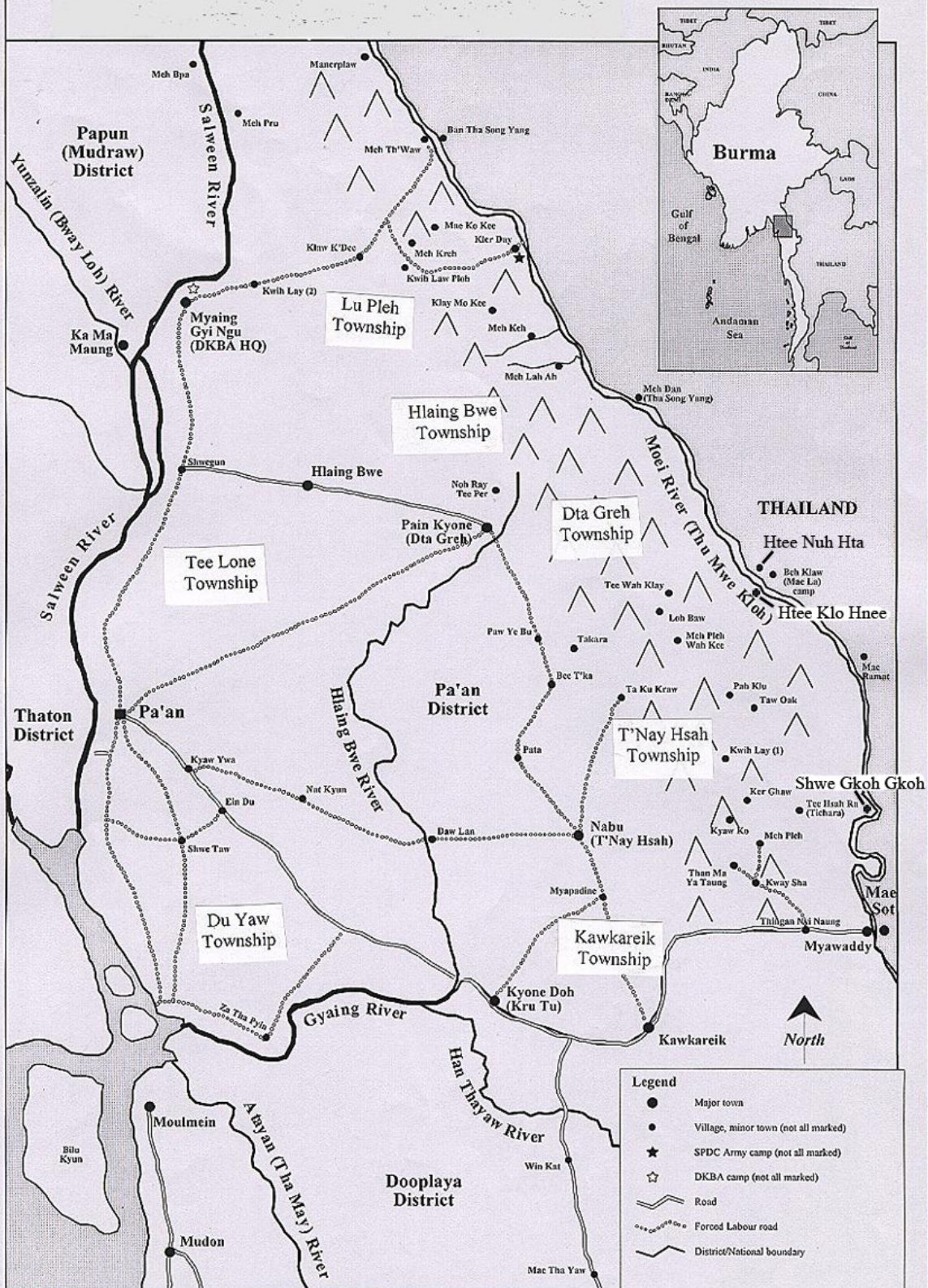
'peace group' and their public image among the Karen people, whom they claim to be serving.

Additional background information regarding child soldier in Burma can be found in the following previously published KHRG reports as well as a related 2002 Human Rights Watch report:

- *Interview with an SPDC child soldier*, Karen Human Rights Group, April 2006 (KHRG #2006-F2)
- *Abuse Under Orders: The SPDC and DKBA Armies Through the Eyes of their Soldiers*, Karen Human Rights Group, March 2001 (KHRG #2001-01)
- *'My Gun Was As Tall As Me': Child Soldiers in Burma*, Human Rights Watch, 2002

Recent photos of child soldiers are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2005: Soldiers* (KHRG #2005-P1, April 2006) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006: Soldiers* (KHRG #2006-P1, November 2006). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG website at <http://www.khrq.org/>.

Pa'an District



Scale: 1:650,000 / 1 cm to 6.5 km / 1 inch to 10.3 miles
 Map by KHRG (Karen Human Rights Group)

A map of Burma and its surrounding regions. Burma is shown in white, with a yellow-shaded area in the south. Neighboring countries include Tibet, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. The Gulf of Bengal and the Andaman Sea are labeled.



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