



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News bulletin

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Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa'an District

The DKBA has begun a campaign of conscripting civilians from village tracts in T'Nay Hsah township, Pa'an District, into military service in order to supplement a joint SPDC-DKBA offensive against the KNLA in Dooplaya District. Villagers who do not want or cannot become soldiers for the DKBA are required to hire others to serve in their stead – paying this fee has in many cases required villagers to sell their land and livestock or find work in other villages. Desertion from the DKBA is common and, in an effort to dissuade soldiers from fleeing, the DKBA has begun to harass and fine the families of soldiers that desert. Finally, this current campaign raises questions about the credibility of the SPDC's reported intention to have all ceasefire groups disarm in order to contest the 2010 elections as political parties. This report describes events in Pa'an from June to September 2008.

Forces from the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) have established a strong presence in T'Nay Hsah township in southeastern Pa'an District, Karen State. Together, these armies exert control over local villagers in the area, constantly subjecting civilians to forced labour and extortion. These abuses have only exacerbated hardships in Pa'an, where residents already struggle to find sustainable ways to survive. To make matters worse, villagers have told KHRG that DKBA Brigade #999, led by Muang Chit Thoo, has recently begun a new campaign of forcibly recruiting villagers into the army.



An automatic rifle Saw K--- took with him when he deserted the DKBA. Saw K--- told KHRG on August 8th 2008 that he deserted because he was “not happy with his leaders because they work for personal profit.” [Photo: KHRG]

The main impetus behind the recruitment drive is strengthening the DKBA and SPDC's joint attacks against Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forces in Dooplaya District, southern Karen State. Saw Gk---, a 38-year-old male from M--- village, T'Nay Hsah township, told KHRG that “*Their [the DKBA's] aim is [to send the] new soldiers to Dooplaya District. I heard [this] from a village head. The DKBA has signed an agreement with the SPDC that this year they will attack Dooplaya District until they win.*”

In August 2008, DKBA Brigade #999 Special Battalion officers Poe Gkay and Boh Gk'Doh ordered village tract leaders from T'Nay Hsah township to provide recruits. The DKBA has instituted a lottery system to determine who will serve: villagers are required to pick small pieces of paper from a box, some of which are marked with a checkmark. Villagers who pick a checked piece have to report for military training and are required to serve for a year

and a half. The number of soldiers taken from each village tract is proportional to the population of the tract. So, while most village tracts are required to send 15 citizens, more populous tracts like Htee Wa Blaw are required to send 25 villagers. Children are also being conscripted by the DKBA, including 13-year-old Saw Y--- from Noh Gkay village tract.

“They [the DKBA] didn’t make exceptions for widows and old unmarried women. If unmarried women pick the marked sheets, they have to hire people to replace them. They count the number of households so that households with only a widow or unmarried women also have to participate.”

- Saw P--- (male, 20), DKBA # 999 Battalion deserter (Aug 2008)

The village tracts affected and numbers of villagers conscripted by the DKBA’s recruitment campaign are listed below:

#	Name of the village tracts	# of villagers	Remarks
1	Htee Wah Blaw	25	Conscripted soldiers from these village tracts joined the DKBA on August 5 th .
2	Hway Sghah	15	
3	Htee Sa Rah	15	
4	Gker Ghaw	15	
5	Saw Koh	15	
6	Thih Wah Bpoo	15	
7	Meh Bpleh Wah Kee	15	
8	Noh Gkay	15	Conscripted soldiers from these village tracts joined the DKBA on September 5 th .
9	Htee Poe Gkyaw	15	
10	Htee Gklay	15	
11	Yaw Kkuh	15	
Total		175	

Although the DKBA has limited conscription to ethnic Karen, it has still extorted money from other ethnic groups in Pa’an in connection with the recruitment process. For example, fifteen ethnic Shan villagers from Hway Sghah village tract were required to pay 60,000 Thai baht (approx. US \$1,765) in lieu of providing recruits.

Due to low wages and poor living conditions, many soldiers conscripted into DKBA #999 have deserted. In response, the DKBA has implemented measures meant to dissuade recruits contemplating desertion, including harassing and fining conscripts’ families. Villagers unwilling or unable to join the army do have the option of hiring another person to take their place – this process is not only expensive (often forcing villagers to sell their livestock and land), but also requires the person hiring another to guarantee that his replacement will not desert. Again, if the replacement runs away, then the villager who hired him and his family can expect to be harassed and fined by the DKBA. Ultimately, if the villagers are unable to raise enough money to hire a replacement or pay DKBA fines, they will have their property expropriated and will be exiled from the village.

“They [new DKBA soldiers] dare not escape because, if they do, the DKBA will come and [harass] their younger brothers or parents. They will ask the parents to look for the son [who has deserted] and, if the parents can’t find out where their son is, they will be fined ... I knew some soldiers who escaped and the DKBA fined the parents three million kyat [approx. US \$2,352].”

- Saw Gk--- (male, 38), M--- village, T’Nay Hsah Township (Sept 2008)

Conscription creates problems not only for those who pick a marked sheet, but for the remaining villagers as well. According to villagers, each village tract is also required to

financially support each conscripted villager by collectively contributing upwards of 300,000 to 400,000 kyat (approx. US \$235 to \$313) to the DKBA.

The DKBA's military expansion directly contradicts the SPDC's reported intention to have all ceasefire groups disarm in order to contest the 2010 elections as political parties.¹ This raises several questions. If the Burma Army has sanctioned or supported the DKBA's recruitment drive (which would be in keeping with the history of collaboration between the two groups), then the current campaign in Pa'an seems to undermine the credibility of the SPDC's mandate for disarmament. If, on the other hand, the DKBA's forcible recruitment is occurring unbeknownst to the SPDC (or at least without official approval), then the questions arise of whether the SPDC will still try to enforce the disarmament of the DKBA (and other ceasefire groups), and, if not, whether it will disqualify the DKBA from competing in the 2010 elections if the group continues to conscript villagers in Pa'an. Furthermore, if the DKBA is intent on expanding its troops strength and the SPDC intent on disarmament, will these conflicting goals come to a head before the 2010 elections and lead to an outbreak of violence between the two sides, a conflict which could have repercussions for the human rights situation of the local civilian population?

For more information on the situation in Pa'an District, see the following KHRG reports:

- *Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (September 2008)
- *DKBA soldiers burn down Ler Bpoo village, Pa'an District* (August 2008)
- *Forced labour and extortion in Pa'an District* (August 2008)
- *Update on the KNU/KNLA-PC: Statements by a deserter and a 'retiree'* (July 2008)
- *Child soldiers recruited to support expansion of the KNU-KNLA Peace Council* (May 2007)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>

¹ See "Shan Rebels Sound Warning Bell For All Ceasefire Armed Groups," *Mizzima*, March 25th 2008. Accessed at <http://www.mizzima.com/component/content/article/4-inside-burma/278-shan-rebels-sound-warning-bell-for-all-ceasefire-armed-groups.html> on September 24th 2008.



Karen Districts



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