



Report from the field

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Forced recruitment, child soldiers and abuse in the army: Interviews with SPDC deserters

This report includes interviews with two deserters who fled the Burma Army in 2008 and spoke to KHRG about their experiences in February 2009. The interviews cover issues of forced recruitment, child soldiers, corruption and theft within the army, low moral and desertion, and the brutal treatment of both civilians and fellow soldiers by armed forces personnel.

In February 2009, KHRG interviewed two former Burma Army soldiers who had deserted from their units in 2008 while operating in Karen State, eastern Burma. These two interviews provide yet more supporting evidence of the deteriorating conditions and low morale within the Burma Army that have been increasingly documented by KHRG and others.¹ The apparent efforts by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) leadership to maintain an estimated 350,000 to 400,000-strong military in the face of ongoing desertion – largely fuelled by corruption, theft, discrimination, poor remuneration and mistreatment within the ranks – are unrealistic. Indeed, one report has estimated that Burma's Armed Forces currently sustain an average monthly desertion rate of 1,600 troops.² As a consequence, recruitment officers and other military personnel (often in collusion with the police) rely on threats and enticements to ensure the regular enlistment of new (often underage) recruits.

The first interviewee, 25-year-old Ko Ht---, is ethnic-Karen from the Irrawaddy Delta. He was forced to join the Burma Army in late 2000 at the age of 14 after police in Rangoon arbitrarily detained him one evening while he was waiting to catch a bus. After being taken to Mingaladon Recruitment Centre on the outskirts of Rangoon, Ko Ht--- was sent to a military training facility in Magwe Division where he undertook basic training for six months. After completing basic training in May 2001, Ko Ht--- was sent to join an army battalion under Military Operations Command (MOC) #19, based in southern Mon State. He became increasingly dissatisfied with life in the Burma Army due to pervasive discrimination by more senior military personnel against soldiers and low-level officers on the basis of rank and position. Ko Ht--- furthermore complained that army officers regularly made arbitrary deductions from the salaries of those under their command. He remained active with the Burma Army in Mon and Karen states until late 2008 and then deserted from his unit and made contact with members of the opposition Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Ko Ht--- said that most of the new recruits with which he undertook basic training were under the age of 18 and those who attempted to escape risked severe punishment – as is shown, for example, in the following quote.

¹ For recent KHRG reports on SPDC deserters, see *Life inside the Burma Army: SPDC deserter testimonies*, May 2008 and *Interview with an SPDC deserter*, July 2008. Other recent accounts of the low morale in the Burma Army include Andrew Selth, "Burma's armed forces: How loyal?," *The Interpreter*, June 2008 (<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/06/Burma%27s-armed-forces-How-loyal.aspx>) and Mary Callahan, "Of kyay-zu and kyet-su: the military in 2006," pp. 36-53 in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds.), *Myanmar – The State, Community and the Environment*. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press.

² Min Lwin, "Burmese Armed Forces Day Celebrated in Naypyidaw," *The Irrawaddy*, March 27th 2009. Accessed at http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15389 on April 1st 2009.

“During my time, two of the trainees ran away, but they [army authorities] were able to catch one of them. We had 250 trainees. They [army authorities] asked the trainees to beat³ [the escapee who was caught] once each. By the time it got to the 250th beating, the guy had died. That guy’s name was Aung Ko Lin. He was 15 years old. He was the oldest in our platoon.”

The second interviewee, 31-years-old, Ko L---, initially opted to enlist in the Burma Army in 1994 at the age of 17 after being enticed to do so by his brothers-in-law who were soldiers themselves. Ko L--- undertook basic military training at the Mandalay Recruitment Centre. Some trainees reportedly died during the training period due to disease, malnourishment and poor medical treatment. Ko L--- also told KHRG that many of the new recruits were under the age of 18 and those who attempted to flee were put in stocks and beaten. Despite such risks, Ko L--- reported that desertion from the Burma Army - by soldiers, trainers and even some officers - was persistent. Ko L--- cited the mistreatment and extortion of villagers by Burma Army personnel as his reasons for deserting but also cited army officers’ regular deductions from the wages of soldiers under their command as an issue of dissatisfaction.

The remainder of this report includes the text of these two interviews quoted at length. While the outlines of each of the deserters’ interviews have been presented above, the testimonies below provide illuminating firsthand accounts of recruitment into, and life inside, the Burma Army. Although these two interviewees have deserted, their names, battalion numbers and individuals with whom they served have been censored in order to protect their families (who remain in Burma) from retaliation by SPDC authorities.

Interview #1 | Ko Ht--- (male, 25)

What is your education level?

My education level is grade four and the year that I left grade four, I was forcibly recruited as a soldier.⁴

Where are your parents now?

I left the village when I was 14 years old and I think they’re still living in Z--- village. Since the time I left the house until the time I deserted, I never returned to my village. But in 2004, when I was based at camp #---, I was able to contact them. They’re still living in Z---.

What was your battalion designation?

My battalion was IB [Infantry Battalion] #--- of MOC [Military Operations Command] #19 based in K--- village, Ye Town, Mon State...

How did you enlist in the military?

When I left school, I went to work in Rangoon. One evening, I was waiting for a bus on the way home. At about 7:30 pm, the police came and checked my ID. They didn’t say anything [didn’t ask any questions]. They just said ‘We have suspicions about you, so you’ll have to come with us to the police station at Mingaladon.’ I had to sleep one night in the police station. The next morning at 7 o’clock, a lance corporal came in and asked, ‘Do you know the crimes that you’ve been charged with?’ I told him that I didn’t know. He continued, ‘We’re charging you with many crimes because we found you beside the road at night time.’

³ Usually, this type of beating involves the use of a hard rattan stick.

⁴ Due to poverty and family labour requirements, many students in Burma are older than the expected age for their grade level. The standard age of grade four students is 10 to 12.

They said the crime was 'being suspicious'.⁵ He listed many crimes but I don't know what they were. At about 8 o'clock, he left and at 12 o'clock noon, he came in and said, 'There's only one way I can help you. You'll have to join the army.' Then I replied, saying, 'I don't want to because now I'm working and I have to send money back for my parents at home.' I asked, 'Can I avoid joining the army?' And he said, 'You can't. If you don't join the army, you'll be imprisoned.' At that time I was still young and when he said that I'd be imprisoned, I was afraid and I asked him what I could do to avoid being imprisoned. He said, 'The only way open to you is to join the army.' When he told me that, I thought of my father who had worked in the army. And so I knew something about the army. I refused to enter but I couldn't do anything apart from enlisting in the army.

How long did it take when they were questioning you?

It didn't take so long. I slept one night and the next morning at 7 o'clock they came and sent me to Mingaladon Recruitment Centre and then in the evening, they sent me to Training Centre #7 at Taung Twin Gyi in Magwe Division.

How many people did they arrest together with you and how many of them came?

I was alone that evening. There were five police officers who came and arrested me. I can't remember their names. At that time I was 14 years old.

Were there children your age at the training centre?

Most of them were close to my age. Even the old ones were only a few years older than me. There were some who were old. There were some who were over 20 years old, some who were 20 and some who were 14 to 15.

How many soldiers do you think were under age 18 at the training centre?

There were many soldiers under the age of 18. When they sent us to the training centre, people told me that there were four trucks and that one truck carried 30 to 40 soldiers. I finished training in May 2001. The duration of the training was six months.

During the training period did any trainees try to escape?

During my time, two of the trainees ran away but they [army authorities] were able to catch one of them. We had 250 trainees. They [army authorities] asked the trainees to beat [the escapee who was caught] once each. By the time it got to the 250th beating, the guy had died. That guy's name was Aung Ko Lin. He was 15 years old. He was the oldest in our platoon. The other one escaped.

Where did you go after the training?

After the training, I was sent to IB #---, MOC #19 based at Ye Town. When I first arrived, the camp was being newly built and hadn't yet finished. There were 60 graduates and when we got into the battalion we had to build our own place to stay and dig out the place to build the barracks by ourselves. To finish the camp we had to do [the construction work] for two years. When we left that place, the area was not yet peaceful. In the past, along the car road, they were planting landmines. The New Mon State Party and many armed groups operated in that area. At that time, I was still young and I had no chance to go the frontline. It was only when I was 19 years old that I had to go to the frontline. Before that I had to take security duty at camp. I wasn't able to carry a backpack.

⁵ A common charge in Burma when more plausible crimes are untenable is something which translates as 'hiding in the dark'. Under this law, the police can arrest and detain anyone who happens to be out late at night, or simply loitering during broad daylight.

When you first entered the military what kind of gun did you have to carry?

I had to carry a G3 [7.62 mm automatic] rifle – which is a heavy gun. The fighting often occurred during the night time. They [armed opposition groups] came and shelled [the army camp] with mortars. At that time I was young and when fighting occurred I was scared and I took my gun and hid. The Mon⁶ came and shelled [the camp] and the KNU [KNLA] also came and shelled [the camp] with mortars.

How many of soldiers at the training centre do you think were under the age of 18?

Most of the soldiers were the same age as me [about 14 years old]. There were only 30 to 40 soldiers who were older than us per company⁷.

What were your responsibilities when you were in the army?

When I was at the training school, I was only 14 years old. After the training, I stayed for six months. At that time, I couldn't go to the frontline yet and I just took security detail for the camp. If there was no need to take security detail, I attended organisational training. That training took one month and 16 days. Then I attended training on how to avoid landmines. The training centre is in Pyin Oo Lwin [May Myo]. They put many landmines in the training field, and then they taught us how to go through the mined area. I didn't understand this very well because I was still young. Some of the mines exploded. But the mines didn't contain anything harmful. They just put gun powder inside the mines...

When did you desert and how many people came with you?

I can't remember the exact date. I left when I was in Papun [area] at Hill #---. It was close to Kaw Bpoo⁸. I left when I went out on patrol. We patrolled during the day and during night time when we stayed at the camp. When I left, one of my pupils⁹ followed me. His name was S---. When I left, it was at the end of the month and I was able to get my [monthly] salary of 21,095 kyat [approx. US \$20.68]. I came across many Karen villages. I don't know their names, but I defected to [Battalion] #102 of KNU's 5th Brigade [Papun District]¹⁰. I remember the name of the last village. Beyond that village there are many refugee camps [in Thailand]. The name of the village is Th---. People brought me from place to place during the night time only.

When you were in the military, how much weight did you have to carry when you went to the frontline?

We had to carry our gun with 240 bullets at both the frontline and the rear as well as two extra magazines with bullets in them. In those two magazines there were 40 bullets. So altogether there were 280 bullets that we had to carry. If we patrolled for one week, we had to carry four mess tins of rice. As for condensed milk, if we had to go [on patrol] for two weeks, we would carry two tins of condensed milk and if [the patrol was] for one month, we

⁶ Although Ko Ht--- referred to the New Mon State Party (NMSP) above, it is unlikely that the Mon National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the NMSP) would have shelled a Burma Army camp at the time he describes, since the group had already been under a ceasefire agreement with the SPDC since 1995. The Mon group to which Ko Ht--- refers may have instead been the non-ceasefire Hongswatoi Restoration Party (later renamed the Monland Restoration Party).

⁷ An Burma Army company is comprised of 100+ soldiers divided between three platoons of 30+ soldiers each.

⁸ In his interview, Ko Ht--- uses some Karen language place names instead of their Burmese equivalent (such as Kaw Bpoo instead of Kaw Boke). While he would have most likely used the Burmese language name while in the Burma Army, he probably picked up the Karen language names after deserting to the KNU.

⁹ This 'pupil' would have been a lower ranking soldier who served in the same unit as Ko Ht---.

¹⁰ By the time Ko Ht--- was interviewed by KHRG, he had adopted the KNU's Karen State district names, such as 5th Brigade in reference to Papun District.

would carry four tins of condensed milk. If we weighed everything, including the gun, it would have been around twenty viss [32 kg./72 lb.].

When you fled, did any friends accompany you?

Yes, there was a pupil of mine. On the day I left, it was payday and I still had 5,000 kyat [US \$4.90] in hand and I asked my pupil to go back to Papun [town] to buy dry foods to eat on the way. I let him go at 12 o'clock in the afternoon but by evening time, he hadn't yet come back. I was waiting for him in a farm on a mountainside. Then I thought that soldiers in the camp would start looking for me. At the time, I had two guns with me and I cocked both guns and entered Papun [town] to look for my pupil until 7 or 8 o'clock, but I couldn't find him anywhere. Then I went back to a farm at the base of Hill #--- and waited for him again until 4 o'clock in the morning. But he didn't come back.

Then I went up to the mountain and crossed the forest and some villages. I kept one of the guns slung and one gun I carried in a ready position. Then I arrived in one village but I couldn't speak Karen language. I asked for rice because I was very hungry. When I entered the village, the villagers who saw me ran away and then everybody else ran as well because they saw me with the gun. Then I continue on but I felt very weak because of a fever. Then I arrived at another village and I asked for rice but they gave me uncooked rice. I told them that I needed cooked rice. Then I went inside a house and looked for a rice cooking pot and I brought it to the house owner and then he seemed to understand and brought me other things which I ate. Then I asked for the students' group [the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), an armed opposition group composed mostly of former students], they didn't understand what I meant and then they left without saying anything. I waited for them for about an hour and then they brought me to a school teacher. The school teacher said to me, 'Brother what happened to you? You can talk openly with me.' I told him that I'd been staying at Hill #--- camp but had a disagreement with them and deserted. He then continued, saying, 'What are you going to do now?' And I told him, 'If the students group [ABSDF] is here, I'd like to cooperate with them or if the KNU is here, I'd like to cooperate with them. Then he asked me to follow him. I followed him and arrived in a village and he asked for both of the guns. I gave them to him and he handed me over to Thra P---. Then Thra brought me to the place in 5th Brigade where they [KNU] keep [SPDC] deserters.

When you were in the SPDC Army how much did you get for salary and rations?

I got four mess tins of rice but we didn't get any cheroots or Monosodium Glutamate [MSG]. Also, we got salt, fish paste, condensed milk, sugar and cooking oil. We knew that we would get milk but we didn't know how many tins of condensed milk [would be given each month]. We sold off what we got...

How many years were you in the military and in which areas were you most active?

I was in the military starting from 2001. So until now it's already been eight years. I was based at [camp] #--- and also patrolled in the Shwe Gkoh Ko area at Meh P'Leh, Htee Gkya Rah and Shwe Gkoh Ko [town]. Mostly, I patrolled in Mon State and Karen State.

What is the salary for a soldier?

When I first started after my training, they had a set salary that we should have got, but the officer made deductions and after that we could get only 3,000 kyat [US \$2.94 per month]. Later, people who went to the training centre could get 6,000 [US \$5.88 per month]. And after the training, they got 21,000 kyat [US \$20.59 per month].

What was your reason for deserting?

When I first deserted, I thought that I'd cooperate with the KNU and then I'd fight back against the SPDC. Now, if I had a gun, I'd fight back against the SPDC. Even though I told the KNU that I'd fight back against the SPDC, they haven't said anything [in response]. They said that I had to come here for a while and until now I haven't yet been able to go back.

How long have you been here already?

I've been here for five months already. If I count the time when I stayed in the forest, it's been about six months already.

What is your hope for the future?

I deserted in order to join the revolution and as of now I'd still like to do revolutionary work. Some people who have arrived here have talked about how they'll apply for third country [resettlement] or do business. But for me, I don't want to do that. I left because of their [SPDC] oppression. I left not just for myself. I left for everybody. I didn't join the military out of my own desire. [By the time] I had stayed for two years, I didn't yet know much about the military. My father had been a soldier in the past and I know about soldiers in the past. When I joined it was very different from what my father had told me. When it got to three or four years, I decided to desert. I decided this many times, not just once.

When I was in 1st Brigade [Thaton District], I planned to desert with the whole section.¹¹ We pretended to go out on patrol during the night time. It was also the time when they were sending out rations. It [the plan to desert] wasn't successful because the deputy battalion commander knew that we were trying to go. In my section we had six soldiers. Then they split us soldiers up into different companies and as for me, I was sent to Company #2.

This [most recent] time, I asked my officer to be able go to Papun to do shopping with one soldier accompanying me. Then he let us go and I called my pupil who asked to follow me during night. Before I called he came to me and said, 'Teacher if you go somewhere, call me and I'll go wherever you go. I don't want to stay here.' Then I told him 'If you're loyal to me, I'll bring you.' When he acted like this, I felt unhappy. When I got to KNU [KNLA Battalion] #102, I asked [the KNLA] to look into what had happened with my follower and they said that they'd killed him. If people desert with weapons, they're killed.

Do you think that there are more people who have joined the military out of their own desire than there are people who have been forcibly recruited?

There are no people who join out of their own desire, because I myself didn't join out of my own desire. They forcibly recruit the people who they see. Nowadays it's worse than in the past. I asked the soldiers who arrived [in the military] after me, whether or not they entered out of their own desire. They all said no. They were always planning to desert.

How do you feel about the SPDC military government?

I have a lot of feelings. The main issue is that they discriminate between soldiers according to the rank or position that they have. Even the old soldiers don't treat the new soldiers very well. We can't get the full amount of our rations and salary. When we get it, there are lots of deductions. There are lots of soldiers who would like to come [to desert to the border area], but they don't dare take the risk.

¹¹ A section is the smallest military unit in the Burma Army. Three sections comprise a platoon. While a full strength section should include 10 – 11 soldiers, Ko Ht--- explained that in his section there were only 6 soldiers.

Interview #2 | Ko L--- (male, 31)**When did you enlist in the military and how were you recruited to be a soldier?**

I've enlisted in the military twice already. The first time I enlisted was in 1994. I can't remember the date very well, but I finished training on October 7th and at that time I was about 17 years old. At that time, I was staying with my elder sisters. My parents had already died. While I was staying with my sisters, all my sisters' husbands were soldiers. They persuaded me to enlist in the military and then I enlisted in the military. Even though I had been staying in the military compound, I didn't understand about the military and my brothers-in-law were good to me and at that time I was still young.

How long was your training?

The duration of my training was four and half months. I started training during the time of the water festival [mid April].

Which recruitment centre were you in?

I was kept at the Mandalay Recruitment Centre. I remember one of the teachers' names at the recruitment centre. His name was Saya Gyi Tin Mar. After the training, I was sent to LIB [Light Infantry Brigade] #--- of LID #99.

Did the recruits try to escape during the training period?

Yes, we had trainees who fled. They [army authorities] beat the [escaping] trainees whom they could catch. If I have to say, only soldiers understand the life of soldiers. They beat the people whom they could catch. And I tell you the truth, they put them in stocks with both feet shackled and their face on the ground. It [the stocks] holds the person's two hands in front so that they're unable to move. The whole platoon had to beat that person and there were 62 or 63 people in the platoon. We had 250 people in one company. The training centre was called Training Centre #2 at May Myo [Pyin Oo Lwin] and it's now been moved to The Bay Kyay in Mandalay [Division].

Were their children under the age of 18 involved in the training?

Yes, there were a lot of children that age. At that time, I myself was still very young. There were many children my age. There were between 20 and 25 children.

How many days did you have to stay in the recruitment centre?

I stayed in the recruitment centre for about 15 to 20 days and the recruitment centre was a big building and there were thousands of people who hadn't done the [military] training who were staying in the building. They [SPDC authorities] gathered the people [the new recruits] for the training centres – like Centre #5 at Yay Nee and the training centre at Ye Meh Thein, the May Myo training centre and the Shwe Bo training centre. And then they came and collected the people to go for training.

How long were you in the military the first time?

I'll tell you. The frontline [camps] where I was active in Karen State were Meh Lah, Maw Poh Gkay and Naw T'Yah – which is called K'Lah Ma Mountain [in Burmese]. I was still young at that time. I attended operations training in Pathein [Bassein, Irrawaddy Division] with all three groups of the armed forces – Army, Navy and Air Force – as shown on TV. It took two or three months. I was in Heavy Weapons Company #5 and I had to dig a trench by myself.

There was a tree that was near to the target which was being used for mortar fire [practice]. We had to chop it down [in order to have a clear view of the target] and when the big tree fell down, it landed on one of the soldiers. Also, some soldiers got sick with malaria and died. The training field was close to Chaw Tha. The soldiers were very tired. They [SPDC authorities] looked after the sick soldiers, but I don't know how they looked after them – most of the soldiers who were sick died. The food wasn't sufficient and we stayed in the forest.

Did they bury the dead soldiers?

They buried them, but the graves weren't very deep and they covered them with leaves and tree branches.

How long were you in Battalion #---?

I joined LIB #--- in '94 and in 1997 I deserted to Thailand and then in 2000 I surrendered [to the SPDC] and was then imprisoned in Moulmien Prison. I was then sent to the [prison] labour camp at B'wa #17, near Pa'an close to K'Law Noh and La K'Baw villages. At that time, we had to do hard labour. They had tractors, but they didn't use them. They had the prisoners do the work instead. We had to push a truck that was full of rice. The area of the field [at the labour camp] was 900 acres. For those people who died and for those who were caught [after attempting to escape] and beaten to death, they buried the corpses at Mount Zweh K'Bay. If we could pay money, we could stay comfortably. But if we couldn't pay any money, we had to do hard labour. When I was about to be released, the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] came and gave us nutritious food and presented a video. In the past, we couldn't get enough food. They provided one plate of fish paste, but we had to eat it between three prisoners. We had one small stick and with that stick we had to try to scoop the fish paste on to the rice. They [prison authorities] didn't care whether or not we got any. We couldn't go and ask for more. For the soup, they provided a small cup. When the ICRC came, they [ICRC personnel] treated us very well and said that if we wanted to contact our homes, they'd make contact for us. For me, the French [ICRC] delegate went to my house and met with my family but my family couldn't come [to meet him at the prison].

When I was working alongside a road, my older brother saw me and gave me some money and I was able to stay in a better situation in the prison. In the prison we had to pay money. Otherwise, they [prison authorities] wouldn't have sympathy for us. I was sentenced to one year but I had to stay in prison for just over ten months. And in the year 2000, I was released and then returned to work in Thailand again.

I went back [to Burma] again in 2005 and my family asked me to ordain as a monk. During the protests of August - September 2007, I was staying in M--- Temple at Th--- Village. After I left the monkhood, I got into a dispute and became angry with my family and left the house. I then went down to K---, Phyu Township and continued on to M---. When I arrived in Karen State, in the area of Toungoo... they [local SPDC officials] were suspicious of me and asked me, 'Are you a student [meaning a soldier in the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF); an armed opposition group] or a spy or a rebel?' Then they [SPDC personnel] beat me and injured my head and my waist.

Before the SPDC sent me to Thay Cha Sait [Army] camp, they sent me to Leh Bpa [Army] camp. They said 'We don't believe you [i.e. believe that he is not an insurgent soldier], because this area is a black area¹².' I told them, 'If you don't believe me, you can phone my brothers.' But they put me in jail. 'If you don't enter the military, you'll be imprisoned – this is a black zone' [they said]. I thought for a while that if I was imprisoned, I'd die in the prison. As I'd already experienced prison, I was afraid of it.

¹² The SPDC designates certain regions of Karen State and elsewhere in Burma that are under the control of insurgent groups (or at least have a heavy insurgent presence) as 'black areas'.

[Therefore,] I then entered the military for a second time. During the night they [Burma Army authorities] sent me to Thay Cha Sait camp. In October 2007, I was sent to LIB #---, of the Toungoo-based Southern Command Headquarters, which is based at K---, next to Phyu. I was then sent to Yay Nee Training Centre #5 for four and a half months.

When you were in the training for a second time, were there children under 18 years old?

Yes, there were. One died. The boy had a heart attack. He couldn't endure the fatigue. He was in the air force. LIB #--- sent four soldiers for training. After the training, I returned to LIB #---. I had to take responsibility for the barricade at Sit Taw River. In that area, the other side of the river is designated as a black zone and this side of the river is a white zone. I had to take security to prevent explosive weapons from coming in. At the rear, some soldiers and trainers desert—even some military officers desert one by one.

Did any fighting occur?

No, but they [Burma Army personnel] oppressed the civilians. They have one sentry [post] in each village and at each sentry [post] four villagers have to sit for sentry duty. If the villagers don't go for sentry duty, they must give two viss [3.2 kg./ 7.2 lb.] of chicken. For four [villagers], they must give ½ viss [0.8 kg./1.8 lb.] each. They [local Burma Army personnel] said [to the villagers], 'This is an order from the military government, if you don't give [what's demanded], you'll be [detained] in the [army camp] office.' They called the village chairperson to sign [i.e. provide written acceptance of the demand] and frighten them. Then the villagers had to give beer to the officers.

When was the second time that you entered the military?

I entered in 2007 and on November 26th 2007, I passed the medical check. The training finished in April 2008. On April 6th I arrived back at LIB #---. I started training in December 2007. Then on April 9th 2008, they sent us [to work] at the barricade on the Sit Taw River. And I deserted on June 29th 2008. I deserted with one of my friend's named W---. And his personal number is ---. He's my junior. I was in the senior group. He's [now] in Thailand but I haven't been able to contact him. We were in the same battalion and when we fled he was on sentry duty. We fled at 9:00 pm. Our battalion commander's name is Lt.Col Z---. After the training, I stayed for about two months and then fled. For me, dying would have been better than living [in the Burma Army].

What did you take with you when you deserted?

I carried my gun with over 100 bullets and my friend also carry one gun with over 100 bullets. First, I carried two guns, but when I knew they [Burma Army personnel] were following, I hid one gun on the way. Then we gave [the guns] to the KNU and they welcomed us very well. The KNU said to us, 'The SPDC is following you and they've been injured by a landmine.' It took us one night and next day at 1 o'clock we met with the KNU. Then we gave them the guns and they welcomed us very well and took security for us. Then they sent us here. They [KNU] are the benefactors of our lives.

How much did you get as salary when you were in the military?

I got 21,000 kyat [US \$20.59 per month] but they deducted 10,000 [kyat per month] as 'bank savings'. But I only got a salary for one month. I didn't get a salary the month when I finished training. They said, 'We requested it, but it hasn't been granted for you yet.' We could never get the full amount of salary. They always made some deduction along the way. There are lots of deductions. For the month of May my salary was 15,000 kyat [US \$14.71].

But after all of the deductions, I got over 4,000 kyat [US \$3.92]. I bought a longyi¹³ and I only had 1,500 kyat [US \$1.47] left.

How did they oppress the civilians?

I saw one of the military officers kick a ten-year-old kid in his chest. The kid's parents were living hand to mouth. For their turn to do sentry duty, the parents couldn't go. So they let their 10-year-old son go. When the soldiers came and checked what this boy could do, they kicked him and frightened him with a gun. In the past, the Japanese committed the worst oppression in Burma, but [now] the SPDC is laughing [i.e. the SPDC is even crueller than the Japanese]. They're looting villagers' ducks or chickens and demanding things from the villagers. The villagers had to give altogether 40 baskets of paddy seed to that battalion. So that's 4 baskets from each villager. The SPDC [the local army unit] was cultivating a farm field. Even women [from the village] had to do farming [on the army's farm]. When they get [the harvested crop], they save it to raise money for their battalion. They fine villagers if the villagers don't go for sentry duty and hit the villagers in the head with pistol butts.

Why did you desert from the SPDC military?

I had a bad feeling from the beginning. They tortured civilians and they ordered soldiers to do [such torturing]. But for me, I couldn't do that, so dying would have been better than living. And then I deserted. There is much torturing of civilians.

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Further background on the situation of soldiers in the Burma Army can be found in the following reports by KHRG and other organisations:

- *Interview with an SPDC deserter*, KHRG, July 2008
- *Life inside the Burma Army: SPDC deserter testimonies*, KHRG, May 2008
- *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State*, KHRG, April 2008
- *Sold to Be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma*, Human Rights Watch, October 2007. (Available at <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/burma1007/>)
- *Interview with an SPDC child soldier*, KHRG, April 2006
- *My Gun Was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, Human Rights Watch, October 2002. (Available at www.hrw.org/reports/2002/burma/)
- *Abuse Under Orders: The SPDC and DKBA Armies through the Eyes of their Soldiers*, KHRG, March 2001
- *No Childhood at All*, Images Asia, 1997
- *Interviews with SLORC Army Deserters*, KHRG, May 1996

Photos of Burma Army soldiers are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* (June 2008), *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* (updated November 2007) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (updated March 2007). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

¹³ A traditional male sarong commonly worn in Burma.

Burma



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Scale: 1 to 800,000