

# **KAOWAO NEWS NO. 130**

Newsletter for social justice and freedom in Burma

June 24 – July 19, 2007

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## **Readers' Front**

Dear readers,

We invite comments and suggestions on improvements to the Kaowao newsletter. With your help, we hope that Kaowao News will continue to grow to serve better the needs of those seeking social justice in Burma. Additionally, we hope that it will become an important forum for discussion and debate and help readers to keep abreast of issues and news. We reserve the right to edit and reject articles without prior notification. You can use a pseudonym but we encourage you to include your full name and address.

Regards,

Editor

Kaowao News

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Dr. Kanbawza Win's analysis of the Burmese situation and the US foreign policy/China policy towards Burma is brilliant and US policy makers and ASEAN policy makers seem left dumb as to how to make it work to influence the Burmese situation. They seem to be prescribing laws by the book.

Sincerely,  
Julien Moe (USA)

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*On Uthai's "The Real Democracy"*

After reading "The Real Democracy" (Kaowao's Thai version), I would like to add some words about America.

America has begun changing some basic foreign policies and approaches over countries they view as enemies. America began talking with North Korea, Iran and more recently Burma. The result of talks with North Korea was the shut down of the nuclear reactor, with the help of the Chinese government. Since then, America has better understood the power of China, which is why America also believes that China has some influence over Burma too. That's one reason why talks between Burma and the U.S took place in Beijing.

**"My boys will not die for you"**; this is the main policy that many western countries have adopted. They will not die for the benefits of Burmese people, but they will allow their people to die for good reasons such as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Looking around at our neighbours, the Thai government does the same. They will act when there are benefits for them. Thailand cares about business only, not about humanitarians and human rights. If the Thai government supports democratic progress in Burma by granting permission to opposition movements in their soil, the Burmese people may have been free a free long time ago. The Thai government believes that the Thai economy would grow faster by blocking democratic progress in neighbouring countries such as Burma, yet they still cannot achieve their economic goals until today.

We have to act for ourselves if we want to achieve something. Both Thais and Burmans are

trying to eat up all Mons. You can make a cozy chat with them, but don't forget to look at their eyes when you do so.

Regards,

Banya Htaw Weang  
(New York, USA)

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Dear Kaowao,

As a regular reader of Kaowao news, I appreciate your reports and other information. Especially the extension of Burmese and Thai languages are very useful for more readers and I have no doubt that not only the Mon but also Thai and Burmese people will take advantage of this to know the situation of the Mon people, because the situation of the Mon is not informed to others. However, I am also concerned that some of your valuable reports in the original Mon language are not translated in a timely manner or posted in the other versions. It would be great if Kaowao can translate some of the articles and news from the Mon into Burmese and Thai language as well.

Thank you.

Mon Deepa  
Penang, Malaysia

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**Thai Ramarn changes attitude toward migrant workers**

Kaowao: July 19, 2007

Thai Ramarn Association, or TRA, will support the migrant workers project for adult education, a change from its previous attitude.

Mr. Sunthorn Srippanger, the President of Mon Unity League, said the TRA will reform its

work plan and will support the Adult Education Project for migrant workers. The project was self-supported from the Mon community by collecting donation money and other classroom supplies from Mon patriots. Most of the teachers are volunteers, young Mons who graduated from Burma and some are studying at Thai universities in Bangkok.

The Thai-Raman Association elected 25 members of the Central Committee in June. Those elected included retired Lt. Col Nai Sanarn Sean as the President and Ms. Maneewan Pongbangkadee as a Vice-President. Ms. Maneewan is a famous and influential businesswoman from Sangkhalaburi border town. The election was held to replace Dr. Su-Ed Gajaseni.

“The activity will be stronger because the new president from Maharchai community is very influential and the committee members are more active than the past,” said Nai Suthorn, the Registration Officer of TRA.

With more than 1,700 members from Thai Mon communities, the TRA is the strongest Mon social organization; however, the TRA is criticized by younger generations, especially the Mon Youth Community of Bangkok, for a lack of political will and motivation. The TRA was founded over 50 years ago by Dr. Su-Ed Gajaseni, the sixth generation of the great Mon Commander Banyae Join who died on April 27, 2007. Dr. Su-Ed worked for the preservation of Mon literature and culture for several years.

Mon activists have previously supervised classes for migrant workers as a basic educational program at Thai Raman Association in Bangkok. However, the Thai Raman Association (TRA) has decided not to provide the venue for the classes. Some Thai Mons and many migrant workers were disappointed with the TRA and Dr. Su-Ed since they lost their temporary class at the TRA building in Bangkok Mon village, near Bangkok.

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### **NMSP: Cautiously Waiting for National Convention**

Kaowao: July 17, 2007

New Mon State Party is cautiously waiting for its participating status at the final section of the government-sponsored National Convention.

“We will consider our position if they invite us for full participation; otherwise, we will send

our delegates as observers,” Colonel Layeh Gakow, a Central Committee and Military Commission member of the cease-fire party told a Kaowao reporter over the phone.

Even though the junta will apply pressure during or after the NC, the NMSP will firmly stand to maintain its four principles; not to dissolve the NMSP, not to disband its military wing, Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), not to separate the party from its army, and not to give up the 14 territorial positions that were agreed during the cease-fire deal in 1995.

“It’s a difficult situation for the Party because we cannot rely on support from others and the might is within us. The SPDC has cut off business contracts and financial support after we withdrew from the NC,” Colonel Layeh added.

It has not been confirmed if the SPDC will invite the NMSP for full participation instead of observer status to Nyaungnabin. Meanwhile, the Mon civilians from both homeland and in exile are concerned about pressure by the SPDC during or after the National Convention. The Mon population has grown disillusioned with the so-called ‘Road Map’ and its objective to disarm the cease-fire groups outright without reciprocal concessions.

Lt-Gen Thein Sein, Burma’s acting premier and the chairman of the National Convention gave no timetable for when the constitution would be complete or when a referendum would be held.

The NMSP is one of the strongest ethnic ceasefire groups and occasionally speaks out in support of an open dialogue with the military regime. The NMSP is headed by nine CEC (Central Executive Committee) comprised of Nai Htaw Mon, Nai Rotsa, Nai Hongsar and Nai Chan Toi.

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### **Claims of Media Control at Three Pagodas Pass**

Kaowao: July 13, 2007

Three Pagoda Pass town residents have been ordered to cut off their daily entertainment, foreign television stations, according to local sources.

“We don’t know what the reason is for banning foreign TV by the SPDC. They ordered the service provider to cut off the foreign television lines and only two Myanmar channels are

allowed. These MRTV and Myawaddy channels are the junta mouth-piece and have no entertainment but only propaganda”, said Kyaw Than from the small border town.

Previously, the town residents paid 200 Baht per month to watch Thai television and other foreign channels connected by cable from a Thai service. Soccer games, Truemove, Thai drama and foreign movies are popular among the border residents, while Myanmar channels have small viewer numbers.

Although it’s daily business as usual for businesses, the Three Pagodas Pass border has not officially re-opened. Business on the Thai-Burma border has been frequently affected due to unstable relations between the Thai and Burmese governments. The border closure and extra taxation by the border checkpoint have contributed to higher consumer prices for local residents.

“It’s bad that I can’t watch my favorite Thai drama any more. I have been watching this for years and I can’t stand viewing the routine of the General’s propaganda,” said a town woman who watched Thai movies regularly.

The power lines for the Three Pagodas Pass in Burma were provided from the Thai side and electricity in the town is very often out of service after the Thai removed their services.

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### Obituary

#### **President of Australian Mon Association Nai Manoit Sak passed away**

The passing away of Australian Mon community leader Nai Manoit Sak shocked his friends and Mon nationalists worldwide.

Nai Sak (56 years old) passed away on 17 June 2007 at 1:50 PM local time in ACT, Australia. His funeral service was held at Norwood Park Crematorium, Michell at 3pm on Friday, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2007 and was attended by over 100 people from the Australian Mon Association, friends and the Australian community. The sorrowful funeral service included Eulogy speeches, contributions and a photographic display to celebrate Nai Manoit Sak's life and honour his unselfish deeds for the Mon people.

On Saturday, 23 June 2007 Mon traditional and spiritual blessing services were held at Mon temple, the Buddhist Society of ACT from 10am to 1pm. Again the Mon community in Australia, friends of Nai Manoit Sak from Burma, Thailand and Australia attended the spiritual and merit making ceremony.

Condolence letters from the overseas Mon community including the New Mon State Party, Mon Unity League, MRC and MYPO were sent to the AMA and Nai Manoit Sak's family.

“On behalf of Mon Unity League (MUL) and Mon people in Thailand, we would like to express our sincere condolences in memory of our beloved friend Nai Manoit Sak, late president of Australia Mon Association Inc. He was our inspiration for the struggle for the rights of our Mon communities. His inspiration will never die and will carry us through the difficult days which still lie ahead. May the soul and the spirit of Nai Manoit Sak always be with the Lord in Heaven,” said his old friend Nai Sunthorn Sripanngern, the President of the MUL.

In March Nai Sak visited Thailand to attend the MUL conference, the funeral service of Rev. Uttama and to meet his old friends.

The eulogy speech for Nai Manoit Sak by Siri Mon Chan, the AMA leader, filled the memories of his beloved friends on the sad day of the gathering.

“We all gather here today not only to mourn for the untimely passing away of you, but also to celebrate your life and for what you had done for our people and our community. Manoit, you had lived a very meaningful and worthwhile life although it was too short. You had lived your life beyond your narrow self-interest. You had lived your life for our people and our Mon community. ... You had lived a very worthwhile life for the benefit of our people. Sadly you have fallen so early on the way. Nevertheless, we will unwaveringly keep marching towards the goals that you had set for our community and our people,” read Nai Mon Chan.

Nai Sak is so named by his friends because of his native village, named Kwan Sak (Sak Village) near Thanbyu Zayat, Mon State. Ba Htwe (aka) Nai Sak left his native village to join the Mon armed struggle in the early 70s and serve as a Mon guerrilla under the command of Nai Kyaw Ein (Monland Restoration Army) that later merged with the New Mon State Party.

Due to difficulties in the jungle he later came to Thailand. His national spirit grew and he actively worked for the Mon community and migrant workers. He was one of founding members of the Overseas Mon National Students Organization (OMNS) in Bangkok. He arrived in Australia in 1996. He was elected as the AMA president in 2004. Under his

leadership, the Australian Mon community became more cohesive, and was able to achieve many worthwhile objectives because of good leadership and his strategic thinking.

The memory of meeting with Nai Sak is deeply rooted in many friends' and Mon nationalists' minds, both for his sacrifices and candid criticism among the organizations. His final participation at the MUL conference showed his talent for jovial and witty public speeches.

Kaowao: July 7, 2007

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### **University students closely monitored**

Kaowao: July 3, 2007

Mawlamyine University students are being closely monitored by SPDC's intelligence, according to sources from the campus in the capital of Mon State, southern Burma.

“There are many new faces and strangers since the University opened in June. If they are our (university) students from the previous semester in 2006, we should know their faces,” said Ko Lin (not his real name), a final year student from the Mawlamyine University.

These strangers or informers are everywhere. They are sitting at the teashops, pretending to be students and watching the situation on campus, according to another student from the same major.

The owners of private hostels and teashops were advised by the SPDC to inform the authorities of any ‘suspicious’ activities including public gatherings and political talks. An owner of a teashop near the campus said the SPDC had given notice that they will take action on those who failed to inform them if any unrest or demonstration began in their business.

There are about 50 teashops and 70 private hostels near the Mawlamyine University campus.

The SPDC has placed regulations on local residents including closing teashops near the campus by 10 p.m and ensuring the women's hostels are locked after 8 p.m.

One University student, whose father works for the SPDC's intelligence, said there are about

200 informers who watch the activities of University students in Mawlamyine.

However, the Literature and Culture Clubs (Associations) belonging to ethnic minorities are not given any warning by the SPDC. As is normal when there is a gathering the SPDC asks to be informed and closely watches the event, said a teacher from the Mon Literature and Culture Club.

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### **Sex industry booming near campus**

Kaowao, June 22, 2007

Massage Parlors and illegal brothel houses are operating near the campus of Mawlamyine University, the capital of Mon State according to local residents.

U Nyi Nyi, a resident of Thamain Baran Block near the campus said over 20 KTV Massage Parlors regularly entertain clients along the streets of Bogyoke Aung San, Thamain Baran, Shin Saw Pu and Kyike Mayaw Road in Mawlamyine; 15 of these Parlors opened in 2007.

“It is out of control and the government doesn’t care unless they (students) are involved in politics.” He also added that the owners paid the license fee of over 3 million Kyats for a one year permit and the money goes to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

“Nowadays many students have their own motorbikes and they live outside of the campus, so they have more freedom to hang around. It is bad that the owners are luring the students by opening the KTV near the campus,” said Min Nay Naing Win, a Geology student from Than Phu Za Yat. The streets of Myine Thar Yar, Shin Saw Pu and northern Kyike Ma Yaw have become a red light district with over five brothels.

Mya Than Lwin, a new Karaoke bar has just opened in front of the university, in Bojoke Aung San street. Not only the town residents but also university students are enjoying their time at the newly opened ‘Shwe Pye Zone’ in front of No (1) high school on the Thamain Baran street. Other Massage Parlors such as ‘In Kyin Sein’, ‘Kyaw’, ‘Htat Kail’ and many more new establishments and KTV shops are thriving on entertaining young people.

Town men and visitors can easily enjoy the night life and spend their money in several bars and KTV. Among them, three Massage Parlors, near the circle of Kyike Ma Yaw street namely

‘Myat Suu Mon(2)’, ‘Danaryi’, ‘599’ and a small shop as well as ‘Happy Points’, ‘Blue Sky’, and ‘Kaung Kin Bone’ near the Ngantay generator regularly welcome customers. Bogon quarter ‘Do Bi Tan’ near the old railway station ‘Than Lan’, Shwe Myine Thi Ri, Sar Yai Kyi Kon 5 street and Myinetharyar of Shin Saw Pu street are popular places for sex in the city.

In front of the New Mon State Party building is ‘Shwe Myintta’ and ‘Lawon’ where the area is full of Massage Parlors and KTV shops.

Besides the parlors, three places were running soccer gambling dens between the hostel and residence of the civil servant area by cooperating with the local authorities. A local business man said a Massage Parlor near ‘Let Ywe Zin’ restaurant was run by No 5 Military Intelligence but was closed in 2003.

A medical doctor who works for UNICEF said the capital city of Mon State hosts over 60 bars and Massage Parlors that entertain with female waiters, in addition to over 35 brothels. Massage Parlors and Beer Gardens have become popular hangouts for men in Mon State, southern Burma.

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## **HIDDEN SURVIVORS**

*The plight of migrant workers is going from bad to worse, with more restrictions placed on their movements and cultural activities*

## **SANITSUDA EKACHAI**

As Thailand tightens its grip on migrant workers in the belief that they are potential criminals, Soe Moe's story reveals the appalling slave-like conditions migrant workers face in a society indifferent to their needs. In 2004, Soe Moe, 27, an ethnic Mon from Burma, was among 110 crew aboard the Praphasavee fleet of six deep-sea trawlers headed for Indonesian waters.

When the fleet returned to Samut Sakhon in July last year, 39 of them had died at sea from severe malnutrition.

According to the survivors, after toiling on the trawlers with only a few hours sleep each day, they were ordered to anchor in the open sea for more than three months in 2006, because the fleet's fishing permit with Indonesia had expired.

During the wait for paperwork, the fleet owner did not supply them with food or fresh water. By the time the crew were ordered to return, a large number of them were already suffering from fatigue, breathing problems, swollen bodies and vomiting - all symptoms of severe malnutrition.

Two were buried on an island. The other 37 died on the way back to Thailand; their bodies were simply dumped at sea.

Back ashore, the haggard survivors faced another rude awakening.

The fleet owner refused to pay them, and the authorities refused to investigate the deaths. Even the alleged negligence of the fleet's owners, and the false registration of the migrant crew as Thai nationals, was not questioned.

Labour officials refused to accept the crew's complaints about back wages and compensation for the families of the dead. The excuse: The law does not protect crews on trawlers that operate outside the country for more than one year.

Such State apathy to the horrific exploitation of migrant workers is the norm, rather than the exception, said human rights activist and researcher Adisorn Kerdmongkol. It was no surprise, therefore, that the provincial authorities in Phuket, Ranong, Phangnga and Surat Thani did not view new measures, barring migrant workers from using mobile phones, motorcycles and from leaving their shelters at night, as gross violations of human rights.

"These regulations are the latest in a string of worrying signs that the situation for migrant workers in Thailand is going from bad to worse," Adisorn noted.

Last year saw several crackdowns on migrant workers' cultural gatherings that show the authorities' lack of religious and cultural sensitivity. A New Year celebration for the ethnic Karen community in Nakhon Pathom was raided; participants arrested and deported. The police said such a big gathering of migrant workers posed a threat to national security.

The same reason was cited for the crackdown on a religious ceremony held by a group of ethnic Shan migrant workers in Chiang Mai, to mark the end of Buddhist Lent. Even private wedding ceremonies were raided, causing fear and frustration in migrant worker communities, who are simply told that the law bars gatherings of more than five people.

"All this ugliness stems from the prevailing view in our society that migrant workers are potential criminals and are a threat to national security," explained Adisorn.

Mounting violence in the predominantly Muslim deep South has also increased suspicion of Muslim migrant workers. The ethnic Muslim Rohingyas who fled persecution in Burma, for example, are viewed as potential instigators of violence and are treated as such.

"Many of us were deported to face torture and death back home," lamented Jakhir Hassain, a Rohingya and a pro-democracy student activist.

This tightening of control occurs while the horrific exploitation of migrant workers continues unabated.

"Workers from Burma, Laos and Cambodia still suffer from slave-like conditions," said Adisorn.

Apart from being overworked and underpaid, many are often cheated by employers, who eventually fire or even kill them to avoid paying wages.

According to the law, registered workers immediately become illegal aliens subject to deportation once they lose their jobs unless they find a new employer within a week, and with the previous employer's consent.

Such a law puts migrant workers under the total subjugation of their employers, who still routinely confiscate their registration cards, making them easy targets for police extortion.

The fear of being fired and deported also makes workers hesitant to demand minimum wages, better working conditions or the return of their registration cards, Adisorn said.

Furthermore, the law does not allow migrant workers to set up labour unions. Those who dare to protest are immediately fired, arrested or deported.

Female migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape. "There are no indications that their situation is improving," said Adisorn.

It is estimated that there are close to two or three million migrant workers in Thailand. The majority are from ethnic groups who have fled harsh poverty and persecution in Burma. The remainder are from Laos and Cambodia.

From the 1.2 million migrant workers seeking registration in 2004, the number dropped to a mere 660,000 last year.

Lack of benefits is believed to be the reason why most migrant workers remain underground.

While migrant workers must pay 3,800 baht for registration, this does not protect them from police extortion because the cards are confiscated by their employers.

The legal status does not allow them to travel freely out of their restricted zones, either. They also benefit little from state health services because of language problems and the lack of interpreters at hospitals.

Meanwhile, the routine health examination for female migrant workers when applying for registration often costs them their jobs if they are found to be pregnant.

There have also been complaints of cheating, said human rights activist Nassir Achwarin. Many workers pay the registration fees in instalments to their employers, who keep the money for themselves, and give the workers false cards.

Taking cheating or abusive employers to court is almost impossible. The police generally ignore the workers' complaints, even in criminal cases, thus encouraging employers to treat migrant workers as they please.

The lack of interpreters, lengthy judicial procedures and treating migrant workers in employment disputes as illegal aliens who must be deported, have also discouraged them from demanding their rights, explained Adisorn.

The recent orders barring migrant workers from using mobile phones, motorcycles and leaving their homes at night "is treating them like prisoners", charged right activist Supatra Nakapiew.

Consequently, many sick workers are too scared to visit doctors at night. Without mobile phones, domestic workers cannot get help if they are physically abused or raped. "The order is impractical and it simply increases police extortion. It must be revoked," Supatra added.

But judging from a senior labour official's response at a recent seminar on policies on migrant labour, there is little chance such a demand will be heard.

"Our policy is no different than other countries," said Wasant Sathorn, director of the Bureau of Alien Workers, Labour Ministry, saying Thai migrant workers also face problems overseas.

"We have to accept that some individual rights must be sacrificed for the common good," he said, explaining why he does not think it is discriminatory to bar illegal aliens from using mobile phones or staying in restricted areas.

A recent interview by the Immigration Bureau Chief Lt Pol Gen Boonruang Polpanich echoes

the race-based ultra-nationalism found in mainstream Thai society, which explains why migrant workers get a raw deal.

"The Burmese have already occupied several communities in Samut Sakhon," he said, likening the situation to a war.

"In Sangkhla Buri, Kanchanaburi province, a community near Wat Wangwiwekkaram used to be a Thai village of some 200 households. Now, it is occupied by 20,000 Mons," he fumed.

Some 5,000 have already received Thai citizenship, he said. "Had the Burmese sent its people to stand in elections, they would surely win. Everyone is afraid of openly saying that we are going to lose our sovereignty."

The rising number of migrant workers in Thailand is a national security threat, he stressed.

"And the most dangerous are those who have grouped together to demand all sorts of rights."

Such deep prejudice has been nurtured by the teaching of national history that makes Thais view neighbouring countries, particularly the Burmese, as enemies.

Although it is only right to give migrant workers legal rights and to reduce labour abuse by focusing on human traffickers and abusive employers, rights advocates admit the chances are slim when mainstream society still treats migrant workers as sub-human, if not job thieves and carriers of contagious diseases.

"The problem can ease if we accept the fact that migrant workers are an important part of our economy, and that they are as human as we are," said Sawit Kaewwan of the Confederation of State Enterprise Unions. "But this is not happening because of our prejudices."

## **Bangkok Post**

Thursday, 05 July 2007

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### Opinion

## **Burma's Genocide Military Junta in Naypyidaw**

The Burmese population has been oppressed by the Burmese military junta since 1962. Burmese people are suffering daily, but the ethnic and religious minorities are the worst effected by the SPDC regime.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, 2004, the 'hard-line' faction of the army took power through an internal coup, leading to the greatest decline in conditions within Burma to date. Worst affected were the Seven ethnic minority states, where the SPDC has dramatically increased their occupying forces. In the Karen State there are approximately 55 army battalions committing large-scale Ethnic Cleansing operations. SPDC forces hunt the oppressed IDP's in their hiding places in the jungle.

The Burma army systematically shoots unarmed Karen civilians with mortars and heavy machineguns; this constitutes Genocide and is punishable under several international laws.

This current situation reminds me of the Serbian forces' genocide operations in the Balkans, the only difference being that in that instance the international community took strong action enough against the Serbian regime in Belgrade.

In May this year the SPDC and Russia's atomic energy agency signed an agreement to build a 10 - megawatt Nuclear reactor. Shall the world believe that the SPDC's nuclear program is only for research? It will be a nightmarish picture for the future if the Burmese military junta should be in possession of Nuclear Arms.

Unfortunately there are countries who provide Burma with arms and military technology. For example in 2003 the Ukraine sold 50 main battle tanks, the T72, to the Burma army, while in Meiktila the Ukraine state-owned arms producer 'Kharkiv Morozow' has a factory where engineers led the production of 1000 Armored Personnel Carriers, the BTR3-U.

Since the US led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the SPDC junta fully expects a US invasion in the future. That's why the SPDC relocated the capital, from Rangoon to the newly constructed city of Naypyidaw. In addition, the SPDC has purchased large quantities of arms and military technology over the past 5 years; more arms than the SPDC forces need to fight the armed resistance.

In ethnic minority states such as the Shan, Karenni and Karen States brave freedom fighters defend their mother country and their oppressed countrymen. On May the 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007, on Shan State Army Day, Colonel Yawd Serk, president of the Restoration Council of Shan State, said in his speech, "To gain back our country and have fully the right of self-governance Shan State people have to unify and continue with the armed struggle as other options have failed". I agree completely with Yawd Serks statement.

Without a doubt economic and political sanctions against SPDC are not effective. The international community should be ashamed that to date no actions strong enough have been taken against the world's most brutal military dictatorship regime in modern times.

**Mats Henriksson**

(The views express here are solely the opinion of the author. Kaowao Editor)

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## **The Flourishing Business**

**Kanbwza Win**

It was rather paradoxical to hear the news that that **Radhika Coomaraswamy**, special representative for children and armed conflict will be going to Burma to deal with "*the issues of children associated with armed groups and humanitarian access.*" Charles Petrie, the U.N. humanitarian chief in Burma told reporters at the United Nations on Wednesday that since 2003, the U.N. has been able "*to start addressing some very difficult issues*" with the Burmese Military Junta, including the problem of child soldiers. Human Rights groups around the world have long accused the Burmese Junta and opposition groups for recruiting large numbers of child soldiers, some as young as 11. The Military Junta seems to be proud of carrying on its gregarious human rights abuses, including summary executions, torture and forced labor as they always justify that this was the historical task carried on since the days of Burmese monarchs.

A spokesman at *Coomaraswamy's* office stressed that the trip was not a fact-finding mission but a routine, visit to coordinate U.N. programs to protect children in the country. *Coomaraswamy* plans to meet with the government, U.N. workers, members of civil society and children affected by conflict. But we are quite positive that the top brass will show only the positive side.

However, if *Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy* cared to have a cup of tea in any of the Burmese teashops in Burma she would noticed that the persons serving her are just 9 to 11 years old boys. One can argue this cannot be categorized as child labor because it was done voluntarily by the children to supplement their parent's income to make ends meet. No teashop or any restaurant dared to hire the boys of age 12 and above because they were forcibly kidnapped by

the gangs and sold to the army recruiters who in turn sent them to the Training centre between Kalé and Tamu way up in the north of Burma where very few people can reach them. In fact it was something like a boys company, but kept 'hush hush'!

The Burmese Junta aims to have half a million men second only to China and has been turning out the junior army officers from Maymyo Defense Service Academy. Hundreds of them graduate every year to be assigned to the army. But they have no soldiers. The Burmese army has more captains than soldiers. Hence they assigned these new graduate army officers to recruit young soldiers promising them promotions if they can recruit a record number of young boys.

Most of these graduates who hailed from well-to-do parents simply go to this centre and buy of the boys. The price for these boys ranges from 300,000 to 1,200,000 Kyats depending on their physique. The boys are paraded and each captain goes around choosing them; they look at their mouth, eyes and physical structure as if they were choosing slaves of the olden days. Once they brought these boys to their company, they were ear marked for promotion. Hence, this business of kidnapping boys has become the most flourishing business in Burma. It has surpassed the narcotic trade as most of the Narco barons have now become the "*Gentleman of Rangoon*" and are quite smug in their lives of luxury.

The kidnapers usually ply for new boys at night, especially at Railway stations and cinemas where the boys used to solicit, and if they happen to meet any boy between 12 and 16 they are just carted off to be sold at the *Hush Hush Military Training Centre*. Sometimes they lay in wait for the school children returning home from school and pounce on them.

Recruiters for Burma's army frequently apprehend boys at train and bus stations, markets and other public places, threatening them with jail if they refuse to join the army. The boys are given no opportunity to contact their families, and are sent to camps where they undergo weapons training, are routinely beaten, and brutally punished, if they try to escape. Human Rights Watch received several accounts of boys who were beaten to death after trying to run away. These children were given a choice, to choose whether they want to die or to serve in the army. Hence, they were taken to that recruiting centre and sold for quite a high price. More than 20 percent on active duty at the Burma army are children under the age of 18. Hence, in Burma, there are lots of parents who have lost their boys. These poor parents approached the police stations and other security personnel for help, but to no avail.

Nobody knows this flourishing business and of course the Junta and its cronies always suppress this kind of news, claiming instead that destructive elements were out to tarnish the image of the Army and the fair name of the country. Until the cat was let out of the bag one day.

It happened so: when the 11 year-old nephew of U Win Sein, the former minister of culture, was kidnapped by one of these gangs at Monywa station and sold to the “*Hush Hush Military Training Centre*” at Kalé thinking that he was like any other boy. His parents had sent him to Fine Arts School in Mandalay, and on enquiry discovered that their son had never reach the school, that he was lost on the way. A fact finding group was set up to discover what had happened and whether there was any fatal accident. There was no trace of him. So naturally the parents approached the Minister of Culture who alerted the military intelligence. After some investigation it was discovered that the boy was already training in the “*Hush Hush, Military Training Centre*”. Even then the parents had to pay a large sum of money to get their son back. This is but one case of trafficking of children in Burma.

Obviously the Junta’s propagating machine and its media would loudly deny this episode as a crack up story claiming as usual that destructive elements were at play. If *Ms Tadhika Coomaraswamy* would care and dare to visit this “*Hush Hush Military Training Centre*” the world will know who the destructive elements of Burma really are. Or if the Junta is brave enough to set up an independent team with the help of the UN, the truth will come out.

What will be the result of the 15-member Security Council expressing its ‘grave concern’ at the suffering of civilians and children if these kinds of things are going on under our noses and we pretend that everything is alright? Addressing the Council, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes said that, “*If there is one thing we need to do above all; it is to end the culture of impunity which underlies so many abuses.*” And this culture of impunity is exactly what the Burmese Junta is doing.

The Junta continues to recruit large numbers of children into its army, many by force, despite its promises to stop this internationally-condemned practice. Most of the children said they were coerced and deceived to join the army and suffer its horrible conditions in training camps and dangers of injury and death on the battlefield. Other children said they joined the military because of economic hardships and social pressures, conditions that make children in Burma easy targets for government recruiters.

In January 2004 after the U.N. Secretary-General reported to the U.N. Security Council that Burma was violating international laws, the Burmese army rather than trying to resolve the problem focused instead on public relations exercises, contesting allegations from the U.N. and from international human rights groups about the use of child soldiers. With new weapons that are lightweight and easy to fire, children are more easily armed, with less training than ever before. Often recruited or abducted to join armies, many of these children have witnessed or taken part in acts of unbelievable violence. Such children are exposed to the worst kinds of danger and the most horrible suffering, both psychological and physical. What’s more, they are easily manipulated and encouraged to commit grievous acts, which they are often unable to comprehend. When schools are closed, children are left with few alternatives and may be more easily swayed to join the army.

When a conflict is prolonged as in Burma, armed forces and groups are more likely to use children to replenish their ranks. Children who are used as soldiers are robbed of their childhood and are often subjected to extreme brutality. Stories abound of children who are drugged before being sent out to fight and forced to commit atrocities. *"Burma's record on child soldiers is the worst in the world,"* said Jo Becker, advocacy director of the Children's Rights Division at Human Rights Watch. The 220-page report, *"My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma,"* is the most comprehensive study of child soldiers in Burma to date. Drawing on interviews with more than three dozen current and former child soldiers, the report examines child recruitment by 19 different armed opposition groups in addition to Burmese *Tatmadaw*.

Once deployed by the Burmese army, boys as young as 12 engage in combat against opposition groups, and are forced to commit human rights abuses against civilians, including rounding up villagers for forced labor, burning villages, and carrying out executions. Human Rights Watch interviewed two boys, ages 13 and 15 at the time, who belonged to units that massacred a group of 15 women and children in Shan State in early 2001.

The Burmese army often used threats, intimidation and violence to force young boys to become soldiers. "To be a boy in Burma today means facing the constant risk of being picked up off the street, forced to commit atrocities against villagers, and never seeing your family again." Human Rights Watch noted that the Burmese army has as many as 70,000 soldiers under the age of 18 are proven beyond doubt. *Whether Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy will try to discover the truth or fall prey to the Burmese Junta like Mr. Gambari is still yet to be seen.*

### ***Mae Sot, Thai-Burma border***

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## ABOUT US

Kaowao Newsgroup is committed to social justice, peace, and democracy in Burma. We hope to be able to provide more of an in-depth analysis that will help to promote lasting peace and change within Burma. Editors, reporters, writers, and overseas volunteers are dedicated members of the Mon activist community based in Thailand.

*Our motto is working together for change and lasting peace.*