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FACTIONALISM AND THE ETHNIC INSURGENT ORGANISATIONS

Desmond Ball and Hazel Lang



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the various ethnic factions that have been operating in Burma over the past two decades or so.

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FACTIONALISM AND THE ETHNIC INSURGENT ORGANISATIONS*

Desmond Ball and Hazel Lang

Factionalism has been endemic to the opposition groups in Burma. It has been a major factor in the failure of the ethnic insurgent groups to achieve their political or military objectives, whether it be greater political autonomy, the ejection of Burmese military forces (the *Tatmadaw*) from their homelands, or more democratic government in Rangoon. It has nullified whatever victories have been won on the battlefield. And it has contributed greatly to some of the most critical defeats suffered by these groups, such as the capture by the Tatmadaw of the Karen National Union (KNU)/Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) headquarters at Manerplaw in January 1995 - by which time it had become the command centre for almost the entire non-Communist ethnic insurgent groups in Burma, and the loss of which was irreparably damaging.

There are currently more than three dozen armed ethnic organisations in Burma. There are 14 organisations with which the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) was able to reach ceasefire agreements in 1989-95, including the Kokang Chinese Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Pa-o National Organisation (PNO), the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), and the New Mon State Party (NMSF). There are a further nine main organisations which, while not having formal ceasefire agreements with the Government, have nevertheless reached working accommodations, whereby some of them even serve as proxy armies for the Tatmadaw - such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the Karen Peace Force (KPF), and the Karenni National Democratic Army (KNDA). Then there are at least 16 organisations which continue to fight the Rangoon government - including the Wa National Organisation (WNO), the Shan State Army (SSA), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and the Monland Restoration Army (MRA).

This paper has four principal sections. The first provides a brief discussion of the main factors involved in the factionalised ethnic insurgent situation along the Burma-Thailand border. Second, there is a brief description of the factionalism within various ethnic groups, particularly the Karenni and Mon peoples. Third, there is a more detailed examination of the disastrous factionalism which has befallen the Karen, involving the formation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and its alliance with the SPDC in Rangoon. Finally, there is some consideration of the requirements and possibilities for greater cooperation among the insurgent groups.

*This paper was originally prepared for Carl Grundy-Warr (ed), *Danger Line: People, Sovereignty and Security Along the Burma-Thailand Border* (Silk-worm, Chiang Mai, 2001).

Table 1: Armed Ethnic Opposition Organisations in Burma

Main Ceasefire Organisations (in order of agreement)	Leader	Year
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (Kokang)	Pheung Kya-shin	1989
United Wa State Party (or Myanmar National Solidarity Party)	Pauk Yo Chang	1989
National Democratic Alliance Army (eastern Shan State)	Lin Ming Xian	1989
Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party	Sai Nawng	1989
New Democratic Army (in north-east Kachin state)	Ting Ying	1989
Kachin Defence Army (KIO 4 th Brigade)	Mahtu naw	1991
Pa-o National Organisation	Aung Kham Hti	1991
Palaung State Liberation Party	Aik Mone	1991
Kayan National Guard (breakaway group from KNPLF)	Htay Ko	1992
Kachin Independence Organisation	Zau mai	1994
Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF)	San Tha/Tun Kyaw	1994
Kayan New Land Party	Shwe Aye	1994
Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organisation	Tha Kalei	1994
New Mon State Party	Nai Shwe Kyin	1995
Other Ceasefire Forces (not always announced or listed by government)		
Democratic Karen Buddhist Army	U Thuzana/ Kyaw Than	1995
Mongko Region Defence Army (splinter group from Kokang)	Mong Hsala	1995
Shan State National Army (front-line status often unclear)	Gun Yawd	1995
Mong Tai Army	Khun Sa	1996
Karenni National Defence Army (splinter group from KNPP)	Zaw Hla/Lee Reh	1996
Karen Peace Force (ex-KNU 16 th Battalion)	Tha Mu Hei	1997
Communist Party of Burma (Arakan Province)	Saw Tun Oo	1997
Mon Mergui Army (splinter faction from NMSP)	Ong Suik Heang	1997
KNU Special Regional Group (Toungoo)	Farrey Moe	1997
Non-Ceasefire Forces		
Arakan Liberation Party	Khine Ye Khine	
Chin National Front	Thomas Thangnon	
Karen National Union (1995-6 talks broke down)	Bo Mya	
Kaser Doh (God's Army)	Johnny & Luther Htoo	
Karenni National Progressive Party (1995 ceasefire broke down)	Hte Bupheh	
Lahu National Organisation	Paya Ja Oo	
Mergui-Tavoy United Front (ex-CPB, mainly Tavoyans)	Saw Han	
National Socialist Council of Nagaland		
- NSCN (East)	Khapleng	
- NSCN (Main faction)	Isaac/Muivah	
National Unity Party of Arakan (ex-National Unity Front of Arakan)	Shwe Tha	
Rohingya National Alliance		
- Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front	Nurul Islam	
-Rohingya Solidarity Organisation	Dr Yunus	
Shan State Army (formed as SURA in 1996 after MTA surrender)	Yawd Serk	
Wa National Organisation (1997 talks broke down)	Maha San	
Monland Restoration Army (MRA)		
All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)		

Source: Adapted from Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (Zed Books Ltd, London, Second edition, 1999), pp.xvi-xvii.

Factors Conducing Factionalism

The general causes of factionalism within political parties, such as ideological and religious disputes, strong and incompatible personalities, and disparate material interests, abound in Burma. However, they are greatly compounded and complicated by factors which are exceptional to Burma, especially the extraordinary ethnic diversity and the continuation of armed insurgency since the achievement of independence half a century ago. In the northeast of Burma, drug trafficking of enormous proportions has affected the allegiances and the political and military activities of many groups, particularly among the Kokang Chinese, the Shan and the Wa.

Ethnicity and Contested Identity

The most fundamental factor is the extraordinary ethnic diversity and contested identity. As Martin Smith has shown, Burma has 'one of the most complex ethnic mixes in the world'.¹ About 60 per cent of the population is Burman, but the rest are separated by more than a hundred different languages. The principal ethnic groups in the Burma-Thailand borderlands are the Chinese, Wa, Shan, Karenni, Pa-o (Taungthu), Karen and Mon, but these are collective names for many ethnic sub-groups. There are, for example, more than 20 Karen sub-groups, of which the two largest are the Sgaw and the Pwo (Plong), whose languages are mutually unintelligible.² The Karenni, themselves a sub-group of the Karen, include the Kayah, Kayaw, Kayan (Padaung), Yeinbaw and Paku.³ There are eight branches of ethnic Wa, and 16 Wa dialects.⁴

Factionalism is especially virulent where identity is contested. At the level of the state, this relates to the question of how states accommodate a complex, multinational mix of peoples within the body-politic. States seek to manage diverse identities in various ways, with policies of assimilation and restraint often provoking the mobilisation of excluded groups by armed force. In Burma, a pattern of suppression, predominantly by authoritarian and military means, has been used to restrain minority ethnonationalism. And successive governments have adopted an ethnocentric and assimilationist approach to managing diversity, with 'national culture' represented as that of the numerically dominant Burmans. In a complex multinational state such as Burma, this has compounded the problem of ethnopolitical conflict. Not only has there been a failure to accommodate ethnic diversity in state structures, but the extraordinary complexity of contested identities - not only between groups but within groups - has not been addressed in political terms. In this context, the complexities within groups are going to be more difficult to negotiate or may be open to mobilisation, or manipulation by 'political entrepreneurs seeking power on ethnic appeals',⁵ also conducing factionalism.

Perpetual War

Factionalism breeds on conflict. In some regions, Burma has been plagued by civil conflict for over a half century. This has engendered a 'culture of violence' in which the underlying problems and grievances of

the conflict are reproduced rather than resolved or meaningfully addressed. This presents major obstacles for the creation of sustainable conditions and the framework needed to end hostilities and secure a political transformation.

Instead, war becomes the norm. It forces people to take sides. Civil conflict is often the most bitter form of socio-political violence. Internal war frequently features protracted, low-intensity guerilla war and counterinsurgency that embroils whole communities. This kind of conflict can serve to reinforce the convictions of the belligerents and mistrust in the absence of alternative means for resolution. In Burma, ethnic identity has been heavily entrenched in a process of militarization in the context of perpetual war.

However, another aspect of perpetual war is eventual exhaustion. Accommodation, sometimes amounting effectively to surrender, becomes palatable. Different forms of accommodation take place, with some groups in a stronger position concerning their terms of surrender than others. This may not provide the answer to a sustainable resolution of the underlying grievances in the conflict, however, and dissatisfaction may only generate new splinter factions determined to fight on for their cause.

Ideological and Religious Differences

All of the main ethnic groups have been beset by ideological disputes, and many have suffered from religious differences as well. Most of the ideological splits have been over the question of communism, and more specifically, of the appropriate working relationship with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). The CPB initiated the civil war in April 1948, just three months after Burma had obtained independence, and by the beginning of 1949 it looked like the CPB and its ethnic allies could defeat the Rangoon government. But the Party was split even at this stage. The Stalinist Red Flag faction had separated and gone underground in the Irrawaddy Delta in March 1946; it collapsed in 1970. The White Flag CPB was from 1968, when its headquarters and main area of operations moved to the northeast (where military assistance from Communist China was readily obtained), to 1989, when it collapsed, the best organised, best armed, and most successful insurgent organisation in Burma. By the end of 1989, the CPB had broken up into several smaller groups, mostly 'more inclined towards business than politics'.⁶

Both the Karen and the Karenni insurgencies were severely hurt by Communist factions. In the case of the Karen, a Communist-inspired vanguard party, the Karen National United Party (KNUP) was established in 1953, but stayed within the KNU organisation, causing an 'ideological split which cost the KNU movement two decades'.⁷ In the case of the Karenni, the Karenni National People's Liberation Force (KNPLF), formed in 1978 on Communist grounds, is about half the size of its parent, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and has spent more time over the past two decades fighting the KNPP than the Tatmadaw.

Religion has also seriously divided the Karen peoples. About half the Karen are Animists, about 30 per cent are Buddhists, and about 20 per cent are Christian (mainly Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist), but the KNU/KNLA leadership has been predominantly Christian while the rank-and-file are Buddhist/Animist – a difference which was basic to the breakaway of the DKBA in December 1994.

Millenarianism

Oppression, ignorance and despair have favoured the development of millenarian sects, especially among the Karen, whose political, economic and religious persecution by the Burmans has included denial of education.⁸ The two best-known groups, the *Leke* and the *Telakhon*, both of which were founded in the 19th century, incorporate Buddhist practices and precepts, demand strict morality, but reject political passivity while awaiting the return of the Buddha. The *Telakhon*, which had several thousand followers in the 1960s, has sometimes fought the KNU as well as the Tatmadaw.⁹

The most noteworthy recent sect is the Kaser Doh or God's Army, which was formed around twin nine-year old brothers, Luther and Johnny Htoo, in 1997, when the KNLA's 4th Brigade abandoned Karen villagers during a Tatmadaw offensive in Tenasserim Division. In mid-1998, it claimed to have about 500 soldiers. It emphasises strict moral behaviour, forbidding lying, bad language and sexual misconduct, but has high morale and fights fiercely. It reckoned in May 1998 that it had organised some 70 operations against the Tatmadaw in the previous year. It has received some assistance from the KNU, but has also criticised corruption and immorality in the KNU.¹⁰ The Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW), which claimed responsibility for the take-over of the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok in October 1999,¹¹ is connected with the God's Army.¹² Following the Embassy siege, the VBSW went into hiding in the Burmese border area, opposite Thailand's Ratchaburi province, controlled by the God's Army.

Some months later, in January 2000, the hitherto little-known God's Army faction made a dramatic reappearance in the Thai and international headlines, this time when ten heavily armed hostage-takers seized the Ratchaburi provincial hospital in Thailand. The ten gunmen were immediately labelled as the God's Army, although they were apparently led in this action by the VBSW.¹³ The siege of the hospital was ill-conceived with a large Burma Army offensive against their Kamaplaw base area as well as reported shelling by the Thai Army.¹⁴ The God's Army faction, which was also sheltering the radical VBSW splinter group, was now a particular target. In contrast to the Thai authorities' approach to the earlier embassy drama in October (where the VBSW's demand for a safe passage to the border by helicopter was met), this time the hostage-takers were treated as serious terrorists and shot dead by Thai security forces.

Ceasefires

The ceasefire agreements which the SLORC reached in 1989-95, which have proven to be an extremely adroit mechanism for managing the ethnic

groups, have directly produced most of the factionalism afflicting them through the 1990s. The process has been directed by Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, the head of the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI), Secretary (1) of the SPDC, and third-ranking officer in the junta in Rangoon. These agreements require that the former insurgent groups cease hostilities against government forces, and acknowledge the sovereignty of the State and authority of the SPDC, in return for the promise of infrastructure development programs and limited autonomy within defined territorial jurisdiction (including the right to retain arms until the new SPDC-directed constitution takes effect). But for nearly every group, which made a truce with the SLORC, another broke off to continue the fight. Some of those which agreed to cease fighting were soon organised by the SLORC/SPDC into new groups, and directed to fight their former comrades, as with the Karenni National Democratic Army (KNDA).

Drug Trafficking

The largest armed ethnic organisations in Burma are now mostly concerned with drug trafficking, although they may pretend to represent the welfare of their ethnic brethren. Burma produces between half and two thirds of the world's opium and heroin, and an increasing proportion of the world's supply of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), especially metamphetamines and designer drugs such as 'ecstasy'. With the immense volume and value of the traffic, and the illegality and violence, there have been innumerable warlords and drug gangs, frequently joining and separating from each other, forming new groups with new (but often resurrected) names. Most of the drug activity is in the Shan States in the northeast, but it is also extensive in Kayah and Karen States down the Thai border. It initially involved Chinese immigrants in northern Burma, and especially remnants of the Nationalist Chinese or Kuomintang (KMT), who in the 1950s and 1960s transformed the Shan States 'from a relatively minor poppy-cultivating area into the largest opium-growing region in the world'.¹⁵ Following the collapse of the CPB in March 1989, its military leadership splintered along ethnic lines - Kokang Chinese, Wa and Shan. Ceasefire agreements between the SLORC and these groups later that year allowed them to produce opium/heroin and, more recently, amphetamines, in the areas under their control.¹⁶

The top drug trafficking groups in northeastern Burma are now the Eastern Shan State Army (ESSA), led by Lin Min-shing (Lin Mingxian), a former Chinese Red Guard, with its HQ at Mong La on the Chinese border; the Kokang-Chinese Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), led by Yang Mao-ling, Peng Chia-sheng and Liu Go-shi; and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), which is itself very divided - with its HQ at Panghsang, under Pau Yu-chang; the Southern Command, with the 361st Brigade, headed by Wei Xai-tang, at Mong Yawn, opposite Mai Ai, in Chiang Mai province; and the 46th Brigade, commanded by Wei Hsueh-kang, which has recently moved to Mong Mai village, opposite Ban Hin Taek (Ban Therdthai) in Thailand's Chiang Rai province.¹⁷

Other Shan and Wa factions have specifically proclaimed their opposition to drug trafficking. For example, the oldest Wa party, the Wa National Organisation (WNO)/Wa National Army (WNA), has recently enacted a 'fundamental law to resolutely oppose illicit drugs', which includes crop eradication and substitution programs, and penalties for drug abuse in its areas.¹⁸ The United Wa State Anti-Narcotics and Development Organisation actively campaigns against the drug trade.

Pre-modern Non-rational Modes of Thought

At another level of explanation, the prevalence of factionalism throughout the ethnic minority groups is symptomatic of what Ananda Rajah has called 'pre-modern non-rational' modes of thought and political approach.¹⁹ All of the ethnic minorities share a hatred for the repressive and exploitative government in Rangoon, and a desire for some form of political autonomy or independence, but they can never agree about means-ends relations, and, indeed, generally lack the formal rationality to comprehend the relationship between ends and means. They generally have a multi-stranded, non-referential and conceptually decentralised view of the world,²⁰ allowing contradictory and inconsistent approaches to political activity, of which factionalism is an unfortunate manifestation.

Shan Factionalism

The Shan (including the mixed Chinese-Shan) peoples have experienced the most factionalism. Amounting to around four million, they inhabit some of the most inaccessible mountainous jungle territory in Burma. They have been plagued by numerous local and regional warlords, of whom the most famous was probably Khun Sa, a mixed Chinese-Shan from the Loi Maw area north of Tangyan; the invasion of the Kuomintang Chinese in 1949-50, and their subsequent utilisation by US and Taiwanese intelligence agencies; the activities of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which from 1968 to 1989 had its main area of operations in the Shan States; and the corrupting influences of the ubiquitous drug trade.²¹

Since 1959, when the Shan insurgency began, there has been a bewildering array of armed groups claiming to represent Shan nationalism. The Noom Suk Harn (Young Brave Warriors) was set up in 1958, after the Burmese Army had entered the Shan States to suppress the KMT; the Shan State Independence Army (SSIA) was set up in 1960 by Shan students who had broken away from the Noom Suk Harn; the Shan National United Front (SNUF) was formed in 1961 to unite various Shan armed groups; the Shan National Army (SNA), which lasted from 1961 to 1964, when some of its members formed the Shan State Army (Eastern); the Shan State Army (SSA) and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), set up in 1964 and 1971 respectively, which had an armed strength of 5,000-6,000 men during its heyday in the 1970s, and which made peace with the SLORC in September 1989; the Shan National Independence Army (SNIA), established by an ousted founding leader of the Noom Suk Harn in 1966; the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA), set up in 1969 as a proxy army for the KMT's 3rd Army, by

then based at Tam Ngop in Thailand; the Shan United Army (SUA), set up at Ban Hin Taek in Thailand by Khun Sa's forces in 1972, and re-established at Ho Mong, opposite Mae Hong Son Province, in 1984; the Shan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), formed in 1974 by remnants of the SNA, but later absorbed by Lin Min-shing's Eastern Shan State Army (ESSA); the Tai Revolutionary Council (TRC), formed in 1984 by the merger of the SURA with the SSA's 2nd Brigade, and joined by Khun Sa's SUA in 1985; and the Mong Tai Army (MTA), set up by Khun Sa at Ho Mong in 1987.²² The Shan State National Army (SSNA) headed by Gun Yawd, was set up in 1995 by former MTA troops willing to work with the SLORC. When Khun Sa surrendered to the SLORC in January 1996, his 20,000-man MTA split into four groups, two of which immediately declared their commitment to Shan nationalism and their intention to continue fighting the SLORC.²³

The most active group is now a new Shan State Army (SSA), commanded by Colonel Yawd Serk, which has about 5,000 troops (mostly from Ho Mong), and which has adopted an anti-drug policy in addition to its fight for Shan independence.²⁴ In June 1999, the SSA achieved a major military victory when a battalion of 1,500 troops attacked a Tatmadaw unit and captured 'a significant portion of land' near Ho Mong, which Khun Sa had conceded in 1996.²⁵ Although there were reports in early 2000 that Yawd Serk was seeking a truce with the SPDC,²⁶ the SSA has continued to fight both the Tatmadaw and the UWSA.

Many attempts have been made to unify the Shan insurgent groups, but, as has been noted elsewhere, 'these efforts were remarkable for their failures rather than successes'.²⁷ According to Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, who commanded the 1st Military Region of the SSA (1969-72) and who endeavoured to rationalise the SSA and 'build Shan unity', his efforts were doomed from the outset: 'Even before the first shots were fired (Battle of Tangyan in 1959), there was already entrenched on Shan soil an invisible opium and trade-oriented empire controlled by former KMT merchant-warlords and armies', to whom profits and personal power were much more important than Shan independence.²⁸ The most successful pan-Shan organisation was the TRC/MTA, which was held together for more than a decade by drug money.

Karenni Factions

The Karenni have been called 'a troubled people', who number perhaps only 250,000, but who have been one of the most persistent minority groups in terms of armed resistance against the Rangoon government, and who have suffered grievously as a result.²⁹ (They are also called 'the forgotten people' because of the general unawareness of their plight.)³⁰ They are a branch of the Karen people, although many Karenni refuse to admit to Karen ancestry. They are located in Kayah State (formerly known as Karenni State), and consist of about 150,000 Kayah and about 100,000 other ethnically-related tribal sub-groups, such as the Kayaw, Kayan (Padaung), Pa-O and Paku. They did in fact have a form of independence, from the beginning of the 19th century until 1942, although there was incessant fighting between the several princes (*Sawphyas*). There are now four armed Karenni

nationality factions: the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), the Karenni National Defence Army (KNDA), and the Kayan National Guard (KNG), a small group which broke away from the KNPLF and signed a ceasefire agreement with the SLORC in 1992. Another group, the pro-Communist Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), which signed a ceasefire in 1994, has been very active since the 1960s in the Shan/Kayah border area.

The KNPP

The KNPP has led the armed resistance against the Rangoon government since 1948 (as the Karenni National Organisation until 1957), while for many years also maintaining 'control over the black market and smuggling trade in the jungle which borders the Thai frontier [opposite Mae Hong Son Province]'.³¹ The KNPP signed a truce with the SLORC in March 1995, but peace lasted only three months and hostilities have continued unabated ever since. Its Karenni Army had at least 1,500 troops at this time, but the Tatmadaw was on the offensive.³² The Army lost its last strategic mountain-top stronghold (Rambo Hill) in March 1996, but KNPP leaders vowed that 'SLORC will never win this war'.³³

The KNPP maintains a Karenni Government, with a President (vacant since the death of Khu Plyar Reh in 1998); Prime Minister, Khu Hte Bupeh, who is also the Defence Minister; and Foreign Minister, the highly esteemed Abel Tweed, who was Commander of the KA in the early 1980s. The Chief of Staff of the KA is General Bee Htoo and the Second Chief of Staff is General Aung Myant.

The KA currently has about 1,000 troops, organised into two regular battalions and three guerilla companies. The guerillas are soon to be integrated into the regular structure, producing a third battalion, one of which will operate in each of the three districts in Karenni State. There is also a militia in each village; as Bee Htoo has said, 'everybody knows how to fight'.

Since 1996, the SLORC/SPDC has been carrying out a forced relocation program of Karenni people which amounts essentially to 'ethnic cleansing'. Some 80,000 people have now been relocated in Karenni State, or a third of the ethnic population, with another 18,000 refugees in Thailand.³⁴ However, the resistance has remained undaunted. Indeed, the KA has been especially active in the last couple of years, regularly attacking and harrasing Tatmadaw units. In 1998, there were reportedly 121 firefights, in which 89 Tatmadaw troops were killed, 107 wounded, and 14 captured or surrendered. There were more than 60 clashes in the first half of 1999, in which 64 Tatmadaw troops were killed.³⁵ Some of the KA operations in 1999 were larger than any undertaken since 1995-96. Some involved joint operations, with either Yawd Serk's SSA to the north or the KNLA to the south. For example, the KNPP contributed 300 troops to the joint KNPP-SSA force which attacked the Tatmadaw near Ho Mong in June 1999.³⁶ For the first time since 1995, some of the KA operations have scored substantial victories.³⁷

The KNPLF

The largest and most important splinter group is the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), sometimes also called the Karen Red Star Army. It was formed in 1978, when several dozen soldiers from the Karenni Army defected to work with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), and has been engaged in intermittent fighting with the KNPP since 1982.³⁸ It has been headed since 1992 by San Tha, who agreed to a ceasefire with the Government in February 1994, at which time its strength was estimated to be 400-500.³⁹

A serious split in the KNPLF emerged in the late 1990s. The accommodation with the Tatmadaw has not always been happy. Some of the former communists had difficulty working with the SLORC/SPDC. Others have become disillusioned with the failure of the regime to grant them any effective political and economic rights. KNPLF members are allowed to engage in commercial activities, but these are controlled by the SPDC, and profits are taken for recruitment and support of rebel soldiers. There are racial problems between the Padaung (Kayan) and Shan elements. There is disunity among the leadership.

San Tha and his group, who are mostly of Shan extraction, have evidently benefitted less from the ceasefire than the Padaung group, headed by Tun Kyaw, the Vice Chairman of the Front and Chief of Staff of its army, and which operates mainly in the area around the headquarters at Loi Kaw and westwards in Lobakho. San Tha's group is based mainly around the border areas (opposite Border Posts 14 and 15 in Mae Hong Son province), and are involved with logging and cattle trading. (All logs have to be sold to the SPDC rather than directly to Thai businessmen).

The number of KNPLF troops is now estimated to be about 300, including many disinclined towards fighting. Recent activities by KNPLF troops have included the theft in April 1999 of a long-tailed boat belonging to Thai villagers, and the laying of land-mines along borderland roads.⁴⁰ On 1 May 1999, KNPLF troops collaborated with soldiers from the Tatmadaw's 531 Light Infantry Battalion (LIB), which operates under the Regional Operation Command (ROC 7) at Loi Kaw, in an attack on the police station at Ban Nam Piang Din, near Border Post 14, in Mae Hong Son province. This attack occurred because the Tatmadaw troops and their KNPLF lackeys had been involved in an illegal logging business with the Thai police and a local village headman, who had failed to pay for the Burmese timber.⁴¹

The KNDP/KNDA

The most aggressive splinter group is the Karenni National Democratic Party (KNDP)/Karenni National Democratic Army (KNDA), which was established under the auspices of the SLORC following the ceasefire with the KNPP/Karenni Army in 1995, and many of its soldiers formerly served in the Karenni Army. The KNDP/KNDA has expressed no political objec-

tives, but serves essentially as a proxy army for the Tatmadaw. It has 70-80 troops, and operates mainly in the area between Loi Kaw and Deemawoe, and maintains its HQ at Dawlahlee village.

The KNDP/KNDA is itself seriously fractured. The Chairman of the Party and Commander of the Army is Colonel Zaw Hla, who has had no military experience but was a businessman engaged in mining in Mawchi. Poorly educated, his followers are mainly from the Paku ethnic sub-group. The second group consists primarily of Kayah, led by Colonel Lee Reh, who had previously served as a Captain in the Karenni Army's No.2 Battalion. Like many of his troops, he had hoped to retire after the ceasefire in 1995, but was pressed back into military service by the SLORC.

The KNDA's major military operations are usually conducted in support of the Tatmadaw's counter-insurgency activities, and have in recent years often involved working closely with the Tatmadaw's 428 LIB (also under ROC-7) at Loi Kaw. Sometimes elements of the KNDA act for more private purposes, including personal vendettas. Some of the troops who attacked the Karenni refugee camps 1 and 2 (at Ban Pang Kwai and Ban Pang Tract) in Mae Hong Son province in January and May 1997 had previously lived at these camps.⁴² In August 1998, KNDA troops attacked and burnt the houses of General Aung Myant and the KNPP Interior Minister in Nai Soi village.

In August 1999, KNDA and Tatmadaw troops jointly attacked a KNLA outpost opposite Ban Mae Surin, while on their way to attack refugees at Camp 5.⁴³ Attacks on the Karenni refugee camps are generally intended to intimidate the Thai authorities into sending the refugees back to Burma as well as to frighten the refugees themselves.

Mon Factionalism

While united in its broad ethno-nationalist aspirations and the struggle to control Mon-populated areas in the borderlands, Mon armed insurrection has also not escaped factionalism. A number of political and armed organisations have existed since the inception of the Mon insurgency that began in March 1948.⁴⁴ But the major group has been the New Mon State Party (NMSP), which was formed by Nai Shwe Kyin immediately after the surrender to Rangoon of its predecessor, the Mon People's Front, in July 1958. Prior to the establishment in 1971 of the NMSP's armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), a variety of armed groups (small in numbers) were operating in Mon-populated areas. However, by 1971, with some 1,000 troops, the NMSP/MNLA was the main Mon revolutionary administration and armed force; and from that time, it sought to advance itself as a strong and united movement in the Mon nationalist struggle. Although several small armed groups continued to operate separately in various areas throughout the 1970s, the NMSP was unrivalled in its strength.

The NMSP functioned over the years as the *de facto* authority in a number of rural Mon-populated border regions (predominantly in Mon State), ac-

tively administering, taxing and defending its territory. Fundamental disagreements within the party however led to the split of the NMSP into two factions in 1981, under the respective leaderships of Nai Shwe Kyin and Nai Non La, who maintained separate headquarters and areas of operation. In December 1987, the two groups held reconciliation discussions in Sangkhlaburi and the NMSP was reunited with Nai Shwe Kyin as president. The two parts of the Central Committee came together and the battalions of the MNLA were re-organised into one army.

From September 1988, the ranks of the NMSP were boosted considerably with the arrival in the 'liberated area' of more than 1,000 Mon students and activists ready to join the movement and undertake basic military training in the wake of the crackdown on the pro-democracy uprising of that year. The strength of the NMSP was in ascendancy once again, but this was not sufficient to defend itself against the larger and stronger counterinsurgency campaigns of the Burmese army. In February 1990, the Tatmadaw captured the NMSP/MNLA headquarters south of Three Pagodas Pass, sending over 10,000 people from the area to flee to Thailand.

Then in the early 1990s, the NMSP came under substantial pressure to negotiate a ceasefire with the SLORC. The first meeting was convened in Moulmein in December 1993 and two subsequent attempts at dialogue were held in March and July 1994, each concluding without agreement. Yet by June 1995, the NMSP became the fifteenth ceasefire group to 'return to the (SLORC's) legal fold'. However, the problem with the NMSP-SLORC ceasefire was that - despite the regime's rhetoric which hailed it as 'national reconciliation achieved through sincerity and mutual understanding' - it provided for little more than a military truce in exchange for 'national development' under government auspices and opportunities to engage in business activities. In the absence of a satisfactory and comprehensive political settlement the basis for 'peace' in the post-ceasefire context has therefore remained precarious and problematic. For many, the ceasefire simply represents a 'surrender' to which they are opposed.

In this regard, a number of small regionally located splinter factions have broken force from the NMSP, vowing to fight on in contravention of the ceasefire. These Mon splinter groups have emerged essentially out of frustration with and opposition to NMSP-SLORC ceasefire itself. An early such splinter faction was the Mon Army Mergui District (MAMD), comprising less than 200 troops, which broke away from the NMSP on 6 November 1996. The MAMD attempted to hold onto former NMSP-territory in Mergui district which was due for release to the Tatmadaw in late 1996 (this was one of the temporary deployment areas under the terms of ceasefire). The activities of this group, however, were met with a sustained government offensive in April 1997 in the Chaung Kyi area (opposite Thailand's Thap Sakae district in Prachuab Khrikhan province), which after heavy fighting ended with the Tatmadaw's occupation of the area and the surrender of the MAMD to the SLORC on 25 May. It is believed that some former elements of the MAMD are located alongside the Tatmadaw at the Chaung Kyi border-crossing point. A new small mobile splinter force was subsequently formed

in the Mergui area in November 1997, but it has encountered difficulties such as insufficient food, medicines and weapons.

Another Mon faction, formed in December 1995, began operating in the Mon-populated region south of Ye (close to the Tenasserim boundary and along the coast) and in Ye Pyu Township (in Tenasserim Division).⁴⁵ This group also began taxing the local villagers and the fisherpeople. Fighting between this splinter group and the Burmese army started in 1997, and the Tatmadaw began imposing restrictions on the local villagers, such as the demand for permission papers and fees to attend to their lands outside the village. The two Mon splinter groups – active in the former NMSP districts of Mergui and Tavoy – then decided in September 1998 to operate their respective armies under the one command, calling themselves the Monland Restoration Army (MRA). (Two leaders of the MRA were arrested in Cambodia in January 2000 when trying to procure arms and support for their group, but were released and sent to Thailand in April.)⁴⁶

The Mon splinter factions operating in the post-ceasefire period highlight a double-edged drama: not only the unsatisfactory nature of the ceasefire settlement itself but also the way in which their activities have further complicated the situation for people living in the affected areas. In other words, all is not well after the ceasefire. Some NMSP officials privately admit that in terms of substantial change or reconciliation, the ceasefire has delivered little for the Mons in Burma today. Some Mon commentators view the existence of the splinter forces and their belligerent opposition to the ceasefire as symptomatic of the frustrations associated with the lack of a real reconciliation and resolution.

At the same time, the subject of the Mon splinter armies is a very sensitive matter. The existence of these armies places the NMSP in an awkward position, since they challenge the ceasefire and provoke the displeasure of the SPDC authorities. Further, their activities not only threaten the ceasefire agreement, but the consequences of their presence have been to bring further suffering to the local people inhabiting these areas. In some cases, those familiar locales targeted by the Tatmadaw for counterinsurgency prior to the ceasefire remain targets for military suppression in view of the continuing activities of the armed rebels. When it comes to discussing the splinter armies, the NMSP is cautious to underplay their strength and points out the lack of a political program accompanying their narrow military pursuits. The NMSP emphasizes their lack of sophistication and strength, as well as their unpopularity among the people. As one official noted, 'These armies have no discipline – their rules are in their mouths, their power in their mouths only'. At the same time, the faction commanders and members (who keep a low profile) express their determination to fight on.

In view of the difficulties facing the beleaguered Mon struggle, and to develop strength, cooperation and unity in the post-ceasefire period, the Mon Unity League (MUL) was established in March 1996. The MUL incorporates 14 various Mon organisations from Burma, Thailand and abroad, including the NMSP. It was formed in recognition of the 'divisive nature' of the ceasefire, as well as to continue Mon advocacy after the SLORC banned

the Mon political party, the Mon National Democratic Front, active in the 1990 elections. The MUL also seeks to work in the context of 'the common struggle for peace, democracy, and human rights in Burma'.

Karen Factionalism

The Karen are the second largest ethnic group in Burma, and probably comprise about 7 per cent of Burma's population, though estimates of their numbers vary widely. Martin Smith reckons it is 3-4 million (with another 200,000 living across the border in Thailand); the government in Rangoon says it is about two million; and the Karen estimate themselves to be about seven million, including the Pa-o, Kayan and Karenni.⁴⁷ The Karen fight for independence began immediately after the Second World War, in which Karen troops remained loyal to the British while most Burmans accepted the Japanese, and in January 1949 the three Karen battalions defected from the new Burma Army and joined the rebellion. Among the ethnic groups, the Karen long maintained the largest and most professionally organised armed forces, and they have enjoyed some outstanding successes over the past half century, but they have been sundered by factionalism at critical junctures, such as the Communist fracture in 1953, and the formation of the DKBA in 1994.

The KNU/KNLA

The Karen National Union (KNU) only recovered from the conflict over Communism with the ascendance of Bo Mya in the late 1970s. Born in the Papun hills in 1926, he had served with the British during the Second World War, and gone underground with the KNU in 1949, and was appointed Commander of the KNLA's 7th Brigade (in the central Papun/Pa-an area of Karen State) in the early 1960s, and then Commander of the whole Eastern Division in April 1963, already famous for his daring exploits against the Tatmadaw.⁴⁸ His marriage and conversion to Christianity in 1963 prompted a more zealous campaign against Communism within the Karen movement, which he finally won in 1976 - by which time he was President of the KNU, Minister for Defence, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Commander-in-Chief and Chief of Staff of the KNLA. He soon had an army of over 10,000 well-armed soldiers.⁴⁹

The KNU/KNLA was more than a political party with a large army. It provided 'all the machinery of government' - a judiciary, health care, education, and administrative services and infrastructure - throughout the Karen Free State of Kawthoolei.⁵⁰ In the 1970s and 1980s, as Burma's economy foundered, a massive black market developed, engendering vigorous trade across the Thai-Burma border. The KNU established customs gates at most of the accessible crossing points, such as Mae Sam Laep, Kawmura (Wangkha), Waley, Palu, and Three Pagodas Pass, at which they collected taxes on the booming trade.⁵¹ By 1995, the KNU controlled most of the illegal cross-border logging operations. These activities provided the funds for weapons, communications systems and other defence equipment, but they also generated bribery, corruption and wide income differentials.

By the early 1990s, the KNU was in serious trouble, and in January-February 1995 it suffered its most devastating defeats, with the loss of its remaining territory in Burma, including its last strongholds at Manerplaw and Kawmura. Manerplaw had been the subject of a major Tatmadaw offensive in 1992, and although the KNLA had managed its successful defence, it was gravely weakened. The Tatmadaw suffered much higher casualties, but these were replaceable, whereas some 10 per cent of the KNLA was wiped out. Through 1992-1994, discontent and political strife spread within the KNLA, at both field command and troop levels. The KNU/KNLA leadership had become old, uninspiring, dictatorial, nepotistic and corrupt. It had also lost support from the Thai Army, which saw little further need for an anti-Communist buffer along the border after the CPB collapsed in 1989.

By early December 1994, some 400 Buddhist KNLA troops were in open revolt against the KNU, and on 21 December the DKBA was formed. This represented not merely a religious schism between the Buddhist-Animist soldiers and the predominantly Christian leadership, but rebellion by rank-and-file troops tired of positional warfare tactics, which was costing them greatly, to defend the trade gates making others rich. Many had simply grown weary of fighting, and become resigned to SLORC authority. The split was skilfully manipulated by the SLORC, and particularly Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt and Major General Maung Hla, commander of the Southeastern Command, who was based in Pa-an for the occasion. In the end, Manerplaw was captured, on 27 January 1995, not because of the Tatmadaw's overwhelming numerical superiority over the KNLA, but because of the treachery of the DKBA troops, who guided the Tatmadaw forces through the stronghold's formidable defences.⁵²

Since 1995, the KNU/KNLA has been in a desperate position. It has little funds and has a permanent hold on no territory. There was some reconstruction of the KNU/KNLA organisation following the disaster, but Bo Mya retained the Presidency and most of the military hierarchy remained in place. A strategy of guerilla warfare was perforce adopted, with the HQ facilities being moved around the 6th Brigade area (Dooطلا District). There have been further substantial losses, particularly in the 6th Brigade area in 1995-96 and the 4th Brigade area (Tenasserim) in 1997. The HQ of the 7th Brigade, at Tha Ko Sutha (Ta Doh Tu Ta), north of Myawaddy, was temporarily captured by the Tatmadaw in March 1998.⁵³ On the other hand, the KNLA has been able to mount some substantial operations in the past couple of years, involving 300-400 troops at a time, and has recently recorded some battlefield victories. In the southern part of Pa-an District, the 7th Brigade remains capable of 'attacking any points' along the route from Moulmein (Mawlamyine) to Myawaddy.⁵⁴ In some sections of the KNU/KNLA, including among young staff officers, morale is now better than at any time since 1995.

The DKBA

At the time of its formation in December 1994, the DKBA issued a pro-

gram which declared that it 'shall strive toward building a peaceful life for all national groups residing in the Kayin State',⁵⁵ and established a governing organisation (the DKBO) comprising a board of six Buddhist patrons, headed by U Baddanta Thuzana, Sayadaw (or Abbott) of the Monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu village in Hlainghwe township, Pa-an District, and a Central Committee consisting of some monks, four Majors from the KNLA, and three civilian leaders from around Papun. U Thuzana was one of the most venerated Sayadaws in eastern Karen State, but his differences with the KNLA had been growing since 1992, flamed by a pagoda he was building on the strategic mountain of Lay Kay Tu, or Naw Hta hump, which KNLA officers thought could be used by Tatmadaw units to direct fire against front-line KNLA positions.⁵⁶ Soon after the fall of Manerplaw, several senior SLORC officials (including Lieutenant General Tin Oo, Secretary (2) of the SLORC, and Major General Maung Hla of the Southeastern Command) visited Myaing Gyi Ngu to pay obeisance to him.⁵⁷ He has been seldom seen in Myaing Gyi Ngu over the past couple of years, but he remains the spiritual leader of the DKBA.

Myaing Gyi Ngu (known as Khaw Taw in Karen and Pyi Daun in Burmese) was set up by U Thuzana, with the backing of the SLORC, as a 'refuge' to attract people from the KNU/KNLA. The population was estimated in 1998 to consist of 3,000-5,000 families, or about 30,000 people. (There is also a small group of Christians in a camp across the Salween River). Most of the families have provided a member to the DKBA. Residents are not allowed to farm or eat meat, although they receive a small and generally inadequate ration of rice and occasional beans from the SLORC/SPDC.⁵⁸ The village is reportedly 'spotlessly clean'; its most prominent features is a massive pagoda, built by thousands of workers.⁵⁹

The Central Committee of the DKBA now has 31 members, most of whom were involved in the formation of the organisation in 1994-95. The Chairman is still Padoh Thar Htoo Kyaw, formerly Chairman of the KNU's 1st Brigade area (Thaton District), who was appointed the first Chairman on 26 December 1994. The Vice Chairman (1) is Lt.Gen. Kyaw Than, who was formerly a Sergeant-Major in the KNLA militia, who started the mutiny in December 1994, led the forces which captured Manerplaw in January 1995, and who has also been Commander-in-Chief of the DKBA since 1996. The Vice Chairman (2) is Padoh Lar Ba, who had been a KNU official at the township level in the 7th Brigade area (Pa-an District). The General Secretary is Padoh Yar Yu, formerly KNU Secretary of Pa-an District, who went to Myaing Gyi Ngu in mid-December 1994 for discussions with U Thuzana and the Buddhist rebels, but who 'drank the water of loyalty' with Kyaw Than and stayed at Myaing Gyi Mgu.⁶⁰

Of the 26 ordinary members, the most senior are three retired DKBA Generals and the current High Command. The retired Generals are Ywar Hey, who had been a Major in the 1st Brigade, who commanded the capture of Kawmura in February 1995, took charge of 'mopping up' operations against KNU/KNLA remnants in the 7th Brigade area in February-March 1995,⁶¹ and who became the first Commander-in-Chief of the DKBA;⁶² Major

General Htun Hlaing, who helped Kyaw Than capture Manerplaw,⁶³ and then became commander of the DKBA base at Mae Ta Wah, near Manerplaw, from which he led a series of brutal attacks against Karen refugee camps in Tha Song Yang district in Thailand in April-May 1995;⁶⁴ and Major General Kyaw Hai, the former Deputy Commander of the KNLA's No.20 Special Battalion (attached to the GHQ at Manerplaw), who was one of the first KLNA officers to defect in early December 1994.⁶⁵

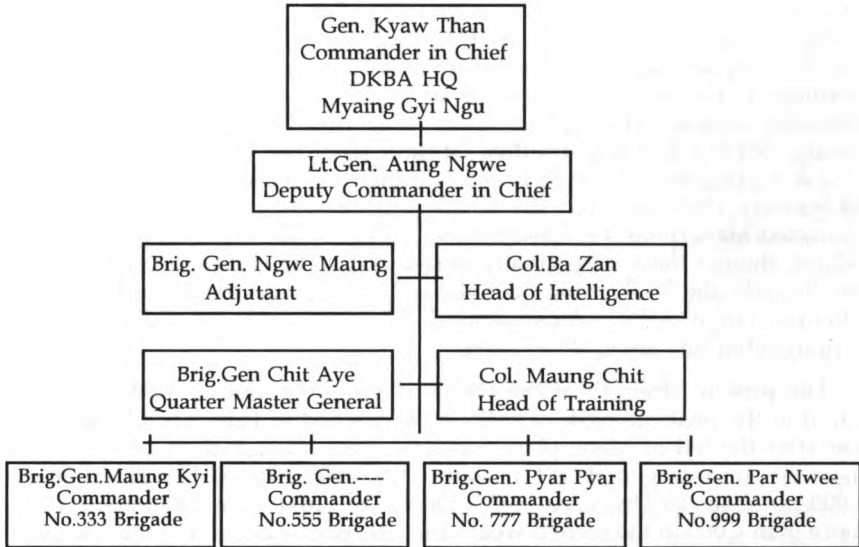


Figure 1

The current DKBA High Command is shown in Figure 1. Major General Aung Ngwe, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief, was formerly a Captain and Company commander in the 19th Battalion of 7th Brigade, who was wounded on 3 January 1995 in one of the first firefights between the Buddhist defectors and the KNLA.⁶⁶ The Adjutant, Brigadier General Ngwe Maung had joined the KNLA in 1970 and served as a radio mechanic, but was a Captain when he defected. Brigadier General Chit Aye, the Quarter Master General, had been a platoon commander in the KNLA's 2nd Brigade. The head of the Intelligence Section, Colonel Ba Zan, had been a Corporal in the 1st Brigade. And the head of Training, Colonel Maung Chit, was a 2nd Lieutenant and special operations training officer under the KNLA Quarter Master General at Manerplaw.

Organisationally, the DKBA has four Brigades. The largest and most

active is 999 Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Par Nwee, which has about 400 troops and which operates in the southern part of the KNLA's 7th Brigade area and the northern part of the 6th Brigade area (opposite Mae Sot in Thailand). Par Nwee was a KNLA Captain and Company commander from the 19th Battalion of the 7th Brigade, like Aung Ngwe, and was very active in the capture of Kawmura and the defeat of the KNLA's 22nd Battalion, which operated nearby, in February 1995.⁶⁷ The 333 Brigade, which operates around Papun and Nyaunglebin (Kler Lweh Htoo) districts, is commanded by Brigadier General Pyar Pyar, a former Captain and Company commander in the 104th Battalion, attached to GHQ, Manerplaw, who had defected on 16 December 1994, helped organise the defence of Myaing Gyi Ngu against a KNLA attack on 5-7 January 1995, and led the capture of Manerplaw with Kyaw Than and Htun Hlaing three weeks later.⁶⁸ The 555 Brigade has its HQ at Myaing Gyi Ngu, and operates around the northeast of the KNLA's 7th Brigade area. The 777 Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Maung Kyi, operates around Hlaingbwe, northeast of Pa-an. Maung Kyi was another Captain from the 104th Battalion at the KNLA's GHQ, who defected to the Buddhists with Pyar Pyar, and who on 25 January 1995 captured the KNLA outposts around Bina, which had protected Manerplaw's southern flank.⁶⁹ Each of the Brigades has five battalions, though these vary greatly in size and some are quite small. In the 999 Brigade, the 3rd Battalion had about 73 troops and the 4th Battalion had 146 troops in mid-1999. A battalion of 777 Brigade at Payah Gyi in western Nyaunglebin has about 90 soldiers.⁷⁰

The present strength of the DKBA is probably around 1,500, as compared to the peak strength of 2,000-3,000 reached in February-March 1995, just after the fall of Manerplaw and Kawmura (though there are no exact figures). According to SLORC accounts, 'the armed strength' reached about 1,000 on about 26 December 1994, 3000 in the first week of January 1995, more than 4,000 in the second week, and exceeded 4,500 in the third week.⁷¹ However, SLORC figures have always been very inflated. They include recruits who enlisted under pressure from the Tatmadaw but who soon returned to their villages, as well as many camp-followers who are not armed. On the other hand, General Bo Mya said in early 1998 that only 'between 500-600 DKBA troops remain',⁷² but this is too niggard. The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) estimated that it had 1,500-2,000 troops in early 1996,⁷³ and 1,000-2,000 in May 1998.⁷⁴

At the rank-and-file level, all of the original Army in December 1994-March 1995 were defectors from the KNLA, but although there have been further sizeable defections in subsequent years, the Army is now made up mostly of new recruits enlisted from villages on a quota basis. The DKBA commanders inform the village headman of their quota (which for a small village would be around two youths). To avoid service, a family must pay a fee of around 20,000-30,000 kyat, which is usually collected from among all the villagers. Recruits are given 2-3 months training at the headquarters at Myaing Gyi Ngu.

The activities of various DKBA groups, and their behaviour towards

local villagers, vary greatly from area to area. As the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) has noted:

The command structure within the DKBA is very weak, so local groups tend to act largely on their own initiative and/or simply follow the orders of the local SLORC battalion. The character of each DKBA unit depends largely on the character of its leaders. Some groups ... have become notorious for their viciousness in looting and torturing villagers, while other groups are led by men with a sincere desire to improve the lot of the Karen people.⁷⁵

In some areas, such as eastern Dooطلا District, the DKBA is reportedly very helpful in protecting villagers from SPDC abuses and retaliations. According to the KHRG, the DKBA at Waley and in the 'hump' protruding into Thailand have been especially benevolent, warning villagers to run and hide whenever Tatmadaw troops are coming to conscript porters, 'stepping in to rescue villagers from detention and torture by SPDC troops, and telling the SPDC to leave villagers of this area alone'.⁷⁶ In March 1998, when the SPDC ordered an attack on the Maw Ker refugee camp, the local DKBA units at Waley and They Bew Boe (Thi Ba Bo) refused, and the SPDC had to bring in a special unit from Pa-an District, to attack the camp.⁷⁷ This was commanded by Maung Chit Thu, the Deputy Commander of the 999 Brigade's Special Security Battalion, who had also led an attack on Ber Klaw (Mae La) refugee camp earlier that month. During the attack on Maw Ker, he captured two Thai soldiers, and took them back to Burma and executed them.⁷⁸

The DKBA and the Tatmadaw

The DKBA is a proxy army of the government in Rangoon. It was formed with the connivance of SLORC Generals (especially Lt.Gen. Khin Nyunt and Maj.Gen. Maung Hla), and although DKBA groups frequently pursue their own concerns, they also serve at the behest of the government. This is, of course, denied by the government, which wishes both to convey some impression of legitimacy to the DKBA within Karen State, and to dissociate itself from DKBA atrocities. Lt.Gen. Khin Nyunt has described it as 'an armed outlaw group', and told Thai officials that Thailand 'can do whatever it wants to retaliate' whenever DKBA troops transgress the border.⁷⁹ Major General Khet Sein, Commander of the Southeastern Command, said in April 1995 that the SLORC could not control the DKBA forces, 'who are like children staying under [our] roof'.⁸⁰

There is no Tatmadaw liaison office attached to the DKBA HQ at Myaing Gyi Ngu. However, control over the organisation is exercised through the DDSI or Military Intelligence (MI) network in Pa-an district - MI 25 HQ at Pa-an, with Detachments based at Hlaingbwe, Myawaddy and Kawkareik, and officers posted to the Tatmadaw units.

At the operational level, coordination is achieved through meetings of

the DKBA Brigade commanders and the commanders of the Tatmadaw in Karen State, such as the commanders of the 22nd Light Infantry Division (LID) based in Pa-an, the 44th LID in Thaton, and the Military Operations Command (MOC) at Kawkareik. DKBA soldiers generally accompany Tatmadaw formations as they move around the region. For example, a Tatmadaw column of 50-100 soldiers would have about five DKBA troops with them, who serve as guides, help collect food, money and forced labourers for the Tatmadaw, and point out suspected KNU collaborators.

There is no doubt that many of the DKBA attacks against Karen refugee camps in Thailand are directed by the Tatmadaw, and Tatmadaw soldiers sometimes accompany the DKBA units into Thailand. In January 1997, for example, the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) in Tha Song Yang intercepted radio communications in which a DKBA commander asked Tatmadaw troops near the border for food, ammunition and supplies.⁶¹ In March 1998, a Tatmadaw message was intercepted which ordered the DKBA to attack the Beh Klaw (Mae La) camp.⁶²

The most savage and treacherous association is the involvement of DKBA soldiers with the recently organised SPDC 'Guerilla Retaliation' execution squads, which first appeared in Nyaunglebin District in September 1998 'and began systematically executing all villagers who were suspected of even the slightest possible contact with Karen [i.e., KNU/KNLA] forces, even if that contact happened years ago'.⁶³ Their area of operations has since spread to southern Toungoo District, and there have been reports of their presence in Thaton and Pa-an Districts as well.⁶⁴ Directly controlled by the Bureau of Special Investigations (Sa Thon Lon) in Lt.Gen. Khin Nyunt's DDSI, they are also known as the *Sa Sa Sa* and the *A'Htoo Ah Na Ya A'Pweh* (Special Authority Group). They report to the MI 3 base in Toungoo, although they also relate to the Army's Southern Command HQ in Pegu for selection of men for the squads.⁶⁵ The total *Sa Sa Sa* force consists of about 200 men, accompanied by about 60 DKBA soldiers (from Nyaunglebin, Thaton, Pa-an and Dooplaya Districts). The unit operates in small sections of 5-10 men, with one or two from the DKBA who point out people for torture and execution.

The SLORC/SPDC provides the DKBA soldiers with all their food, ammunition, uniforms and cash salaries. However, 'none of these are provided in sufficient quantity, so most DKBA units have fallen into a pattern of looting villages, extorting money and taking forced labour from villages for their own sake as well as SLORC's'.⁶⁶

The relationship between the Tatmadaw and the DKBA is very uneasy. Some Tatmadaw officers and soldiers hate Karen of all political affiliations; others resent the DKBA's relationship with the MI. There are suspicions that some DKBA soldiers continue to deal with the KNU/KNLA, sometimes selling ammunition and other supplies provided by the Tatmadaw. On some occasions when DKBA troops have been under attack by KNLA units and called for Tatmadaw support, the Tatmadaw has stood aloof, regarding it as 'between Karen and Karen [and] not our affair'.⁶⁷ Occasional gunfights between DKBA and Tatmadaw soldiers have been noted.⁶⁸

Cross-border Attacks

The DKBA units have no compunction against crossing the border into Thailand, or attacking Thai citizens as well as Karen refugees, on the orders of the Tatmadaw and on their own volition. According to the most authoritative account, DKBA groups made 'more than 150 violent incursions' into Thailand in the period from February 1995 to April 1998, sometimes involving organised forces of over 100 soldiers, and sometimes just handfuls of soldiers on looting expeditions, resulting in 'at least 79 recorded deaths'.⁸⁹

The first massive raids took place in February-May 1995, soon after the fall of Manerplaw and Kawmura and the flight of more than 10,000 new Karen refugees into Thailand. Several camps, including Shoklo, Kler Kho, Kler Thay Lu, Klay Mu Hta and Mae La (Beh Klaw), were completely or partially destroyed. DKBA leaders stated that the attacks would continue until all Karen refugees had returned to Burma.⁹⁰ Some of the raids were motivated by revenge and a desire to capture or kill KNU/KNLA leaders who had also fled to the camps. More generally, they were intended to terrorise the refugees into returning to Burma in order to provide a civilian support base for the DKBA and to deny such a base for the KNLA; they were also intended to put pressure on Thai authorities to induce them to forcibly repatriate the refugees.

The attacks ceased during the 1995 wet season, and when they resumed in late 1995 and 1996 they were much smaller and more concerned with looting and extortion. The SLORC was at this time trying to negotiate a ceasefire with the KNU, and evidently thought that this had more chance of getting the refugees to return than destruction of their camps.⁹¹

In January 1997, the DKBA attacked three of the largest camps in Thailand - completely destroying Huay Koloke and Huay Bone, and some of Mae La, and rendering more than 10,000 people homeless.⁹² These attacks each involved more than 100 DKBA (and Tatmadaw) troops, in separate but simultaneous raids; they could not have been organised, and the transportation of the troops and supplies arranged, without the direction of the SLORC.

In February-March 1998, three large camps were again attacked - Huay Koloke, which was almost completely burned down again, Mae La, and, for the first time, Maw Ker. The attack on Mae La was supported by mortar fire from a Tatmadaw base across the border. These attacks seemed to have been designed mainly to persuade the Thai authorities that the 'Karen infighting' was too unbearable and they should send the refugees back.⁹³

During the 1999 dry season there were only 11 intrusions across the border and no major attacks on the refugee camps.⁹⁴ By now, the organised military activities of the DKBA had become focussed on Karen areas further within Burma, rather than directly adjacent to the border.

DKBA Illegal Activities

The DKBA has become increasingly involved in various sorts of illegal

activities, including drug trafficking and illegal logging, and some of the raids into Thailand have undoubtedly been concerned with these.

After 1995, much of the illegal cross-border timber business in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces, which had hitherto been controlled by the KNU, was taken over by the DKBA. For example, on 30 December 1995, DKBA troops attacked a Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) patrol in Tha Song Yang district who had stumbled upon an illegal logging operation involving DKBA soldiers and Thai timber smugglers.⁹⁵ In September 1997, DKBA guerillas involved in illegal logging in the Salween National Park in Sop Moei district of Mae Hong Son province clashed with a BPP unit.⁹⁶ And in March 1998, DKBA troops attacked the BPP base at Ban Ta Fang in Mae Sariang District in response to efforts to curb illegal logging in the Salween National Park.⁹⁷ In April 1998, Padoh Aung San, the former KNU Forestry Minister, defected to the DKBA, together with some 38 KNLA guerillas and about 200 relatives, after the DKBA had offered to put him in charge of logging operations and the border timber trade in its areas.⁹⁸

Other DKBA elements have evidently been engaged in drug trafficking, involving both opium/heroin and amphetamines, in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces. For example, in May 1995, DKBA troops attacked the BPP outpost at Sop Moei and killed three BPP troopers, following the seizure by police of opium from DKBA leaders in the area.⁹⁹ More recently, there have been reports about cooperation between the DKBA and Kokang Chinese and Wa representatives from Shan State with respect to the production of amphetamines in the Myawaddy area of Karen State.¹⁰⁰ For example, it was reported in September 2000 that the SPDC was assisting the UWSA and the DKBA to expand their drug production and cross-border smuggling activities in areas opposite Tak province.¹⁰¹

The Future of the DKBA

The DKBA has declined to about half the size it was at its peak in 1995, and has been able to mount fewer large-scale cross-border attacks. Most of its actions lack political purpose. But it is not going to wither away in the foreseeable future. Indeed, some accounts in mid-1998 stated that 'DKBA numbers continue to grow'¹⁰² and that its members could 'sense their own organisational momentum building'.¹⁰³

The prospects depend upon several factors, including 'the attentions and manipulations of the government, the potential resilience of the KNU, and not least of all, the behaviour of the DKBA itself'.¹⁰⁴ The behaviour of the DKBA today is probably even more atrocious than it was in 1995, though its brunt falls less on refugees encamped in Thailand and more on villagers in Karen State itself. But the DKBA will not pass away. DKBA soldiers have found, as armed groups in Shan State and elsewhere found earlier, that in Burma, for those associated with the regime in Rangoon, crime can be enriching. Most importantly, it is too valuable to the government - for propaganda, for conducting disavowable cross-border operations, and for rooting out resistance within Karen State - for it to be let die.

The KPA

The DKBA has never been very strong in the KNLA's 6th Brigade area (Doooplaya District), but the SLORC/SPDC has established another proxy army there - the *Nyein Chan Yay A'Pway* (literally 'Peace Force'), usually called the Karen Peace Army (KPA). It is led by Lt.Col.Thu Mu Heh, the former commander of the KNLA's 16th Battalion, who was reportedly 'notorious for corruption and abuse of villagers',¹⁰⁵ and was formed in February 1997, during the full-scale offensive by the Tatmadaw against all KNLA areas, when Thu Mu Heh's defection delivered much of central Doooplaya to the SLORC.¹⁰⁶ He promoted himself to General, and was given by the SLORC 'authority' over all of Doooplaya, from Kawkareik (between Moulmein and Myawaddy) in the north to Three Pagodas Pass in the south.¹⁰⁷ The KPA's HQ is located at Klih, about 10-15 km north of Kyaikdon.¹⁰⁸

The KPA had some 300 troops in early 1998, organised on a militia basis, and has been actively recruiting.¹⁰⁹ Villagers throughout Doooplaya have reportedly been told that if they join the KPA, 'their house will be marked and their family will no longer have to do forced labour for the SPDC'.¹¹⁰ The KPA has particularly targeted the Dta La Ku for recruitment. This is a Karen religious minority, comprising some 4,000-5,000 people in several villages in Doooplaya, with very strict beliefs and practice, including pacifism, for which they have been victimised by many armed groups.¹¹¹

In March 1998, a major operation by the SPDC against ABSDF students in Nong Luang village in Umphang was spearheaded by the KPA.¹¹²

Coalitions and Alliances

Throughout the half century of civil war, factionalism and fragmentation have been the scourge of the armed ethnic organisations. All of the major ethnic groups suffer from Burman oppression, and all of them want some form of political autonomy (or, in a few cases, independence), for which they have been prepared to fight. Their common interests are immense, but their political and military efforts have been dissipated and nullified by the lack of cooperation between groups and the internecine conflicts within them. Even the DKBA and the KNU have 'more in common than not', competing in similar fashion for leadership of the Karen nationalist cause, with the DKBA also professing the goal of Karen autonomy,¹¹³ but they have incompatible views about the means, and, indeed, quite different ends-means logics.

More generally, there has been an abject failure among the ethnic organisations to appreciate the over-riding necessity of cooperation. There have been innumerable attempts to form coalitions and alliances, most of which have been insubstantial and fruitless, but there have been some important exceptions which effectively demonstrate the potential utility of cooperative activities. At the beginning of the civil war, when there were about 30,000 insurgent forces (including more than 10,000 Karen and 10,000-15,000 Communist troops), outnumbering the government forces, their cooperation (often tacit) nearly brought victory - and al-

most certainly would have if they had had better coordination and discipline.¹¹⁴ The National Democratic United Front (NDUF), formed after General U Nu's take-over in 1958, was a highly successful alliance, involving the CPB, NMSP and the KNUP, which for a decade and a half kept the Tatmadaw at bay across much of Lower Burma.¹¹⁵ The National Democratic Front (NDF), formed at Manerplaw by representatives of nine ethnic insurgent groups in May 1976, also had 'a really significant impact on the course of the civil war'.¹¹⁶

The Tatmadaw is stronger now than it has ever been, and the prospects for the remaining ethnic insurgent groups are bleak. They must recognise that without cooperative action they are destined for political and economic subjugation. Action must take place on several fronts, but designed to meet a common purpose. There have been some positive developments here over the past couple of years. To begin with, at the political level, mechanisms must be organised for dialogue and consultation about common issues. A noteworthy event in this respect was the Nationalities Seminar at Mae Tha Raw Hta in Karen State (opposite Umphang) on 7-14 January 1997. The meeting was 'especially remarkable', according to Bertil Lintner, because it brought together not only the KNU and a few other rebel armies still fighting the government, but also four groups which have made ceasefire agreements with the government: the Wa, Mon, Kachin and Karenni. Not since the 1980s had so many ethnic minority groups discussed common issues.¹¹⁷ The subsequent Thu Mwe Kloh meeting held on the Moei River in 1998 reaffirmed the Mae Tha Raw Hta agreement and the commitment of all ethnic groups to national reconciliation. More recently, the vision of a peaceful transition has been supported with the establishment of the National Reconciliation Program. Through consultation, conflict resolution and capacity-building mechanisms, the Program aims to prepare the various opposition groups for a future transition through tripartite dialogue (which would involve the SPDC, and pro-democracy and ethnic organisations). The outcome of its November 1999 meeting convened in Chiang Mai was unanimous support for reconciliation.

Second, with regard to those ethnic organisations willing and able to continue the armed struggle, cooperation is imperative at the operational and support levels. A noteworthy event here was the formation in June 1999 of an alliance between five of the non-ceasefire groups: the KNU, which hosted the formative meeting, the SSA, the Arakan Liberation Party, the KNPP and the Chin National Front.¹¹⁸ According to Colonel Yawd Serk, the alliance would cooperate in military affairs, politically and on intelligence issues.¹¹⁹ A minimal level of intelligence cooperation would involve the regular exchange of information about the Tatmadaw order of battle and the movement and activities of Tatmadaw units. With respect to military operations, a notable initiative was the organisation of the joint force of some 1,500 SSA and 300 KNPP soldiers which defeated Tatmadaw forces and reportedly captured important territory near Ho Mong in May-June 1999.¹²⁰

Third, the design, development and maintenance of high quality, inter-operable and secure communications networks are required to effect the arranging of political cooperation, coordination of military operations and exchange of intelligence material. The communications must be secured by encryption and sophisticated transmission techniques to avoid exploitation by the Tatmadaw's signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities, which were critically important in the success of the Tatmadaw's counter-insurgency operations through the 1990s.¹²¹ The HQs of the insurgent groups require mobile, redundant communications systems (which can fit in a pick-up truck). All of the required hardware and software can be obtained on the Internet or is available commercially.

Finally, the most imperative requirement is a change in the forms of cognition and conceptualisation which determine the insurgents' political activities from the 'pre-modern, non-rational' to more 'single-stranded', referential approaches. Unless ends-means relations are clarified and correlated, the few political and military advances of the last couple of years will inevitably be nullified.

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