Profile: One of the Unlucky Ones—Former Child Soldier Deported to Burma

The DKBA were there on the other side of the border. They were searching for KNU soldiers. … My whole body was shaking with fear.
—Former child soldier, describing being deported in August 2003.[a]

"S" is one of many refugees who knows that Burmese who are "informally deported" may face a dangerous and harrowing experience. A former child soldier with the KNU, S was terrified when he was forced to meet his former enemies—soldiers from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)—upon being dropped off in Burma, on the other side of the river from Mae Sot.

> For those who come to Thailand just to find a job, who have no security problems in Burma, it's no problem. But for me, it was a problem. There are SPDC agents in Mae Sot and DKBA soldiers across the border. There were money and security problems for me—I had to borrow money to get back.

S had left his village in Burma when he was fourteen years old and joined the KNU, along with his younger brother. "We left because the government army mistreated us," he said. "Forced labor, portering, taxes—plus they asked for food and shot our pigs and cows. They treated the women badly."

S was schooled by the KNU, but spent the "summer holidays" on the front lines carrying a gun with the other soldiers. When he finished high school he joined the KNU army fulltime. In 1998 his captain sent him back to his village for his own safety after S was named in a personal conflict with members of an allied resistance faction. His family helped S hide near the village for a year, fearing that he would be arrested or killed by the SPDC. After SPDC troops interrogated and tortured people in his village to get information about the whereabouts of S and other KNU soldiers, he fled.

S walked for eight days—mostly at night—to the Thai border, which he crossed at the end of June 1999. He stayed in a Thai-Karen village where he had a relative, but soon had to leave because of the danger of arrest by Thai authorities or reprisals from KNU soldiers. "The KNU leaders were searching for soldiers who had deserted, to catch them and take them back, or punish them," he said.

A friend helped him get to Bangkok. On July 23, 1999, he applied for an interview with UNHCR. The next morning he went to one of the refugee camps, where he stayed unofficially for almost a year. Finding it difficult to survive as an unregistered refugee in the camp, he returned to Bangkok, where he volunteered with a church. In November 2001, when UNHCR finally recognized S as a refugee, his situation did not get much better:

> It is hard—there is no security, no protection. I only have the UNHCR paper. Police can arrest me at any time. Plus I can't find a job because the Thai employers want only people with work permits. It's difficult to make it on 2,000 baht (U.S. $50) a month.[b]

S, who married a Karen refugee in June 2003, was detained several times in Bangkok by Thai police, who shook him down for bribes after demanding to see his papers. On August 5, 2003, both S and his wife were arrested by Thai police when they were returning from UNHCR. They were sent to a police station, and then on to the Immigration Detention Center (IDC) in Bangkok. S identified himself as a refugee to UNHCR staff at the IDC and asked for help.

> They said they couldn't help—I should go to Mae Sot [and be "informally" deported]. I said I wouldn't go to Mae Sot. The U.N. staff said it was my decision. I hadn't made any decision when two days later my wife and I were sent to Mae Sot.

Upon arrival in Mae Sot with sixty other deportees, Thai military intelligence officers processed them at an immigration detention center. The group was then driven to the river marking the border, where they were sent across to the Burma side by boat. There, S faced his worst enemy: soldiers from the DKBA, the renegade faction of the KNU, who were searching for KNU soldiers:

> When I saw the DKBA soldiers I threw all my documents in the water. My whole body was shaking with fear. The DKBA soldier asked me my name. They asked in Burmese, not Karen. I felt unconscious with fear and couldn't answer. One of the soldiers hit me from behind and said, "Did you hear the question?" I gave them a false name.
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> My biggest fear was to say I was KNU. The DKBA knows that KNU refugees say bad things about DKBA. It's a big problem. If you can't answer, they ask again. Then they hit you, and ask again. After that, they put you in prison, and ask again. Then they kill you. Killing is the last question for you.

After telling their names to the soldiers, the group of deportees were able to circle back around to the bank of the river. They got into the very same boat that had taken them to the Burmese side, and returned to Thailand—at a cost of 500 baht (U.S.$12.50) per person.

As soon as S and his wife arrived back in Mae Sot, they were arrested—again. "The police said they were going to send us back across the very same day," he said. "If we paid 2,000 baht (U.S.$50) each, they said they would release us."

S paid the bribe, and made his way to a friend's house in Mae Sot, where he and his wife hid for a month. Then they arranged for an agent to take the couple by foot to Tak, avoiding police checkpoints along the way, and then continued by bus to Bangkok. That set the couple back another 10,000 baht (U.S.$250), a sum they are still struggling to repay.

[a] Human Rights Watch interview with former KNU child soldier, Bangkok, November 12, 2003. He was recognized as a refugee by UNHCR in 2001.

[b] Recognized Burmese urban refugees (POCs) generally receive monthly stipends of 2,000 baht (U.S.$50) per person.

Profile: Burman Former Political Prisoner

Even if you have a UNHCR card you can be deported. They would put me back in jail. We always live in fear.

> —Burman woman who fled to Thailand after years of imprisonment in Burma for her political activities[a]

"K", a Burman woman in her late forties, was a student activist with the pro-democracy movement in Rangoon in 1988. She helped organize a rally at Shwedagon Pagoda, where she gave a speech criticizing the military government.

Afterwards, members of her group, the All-Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), sent her to Ranong, Thailand. When she returned to Burma, her colleagues worried that if she were arrested and tortured, she would be forced to reveal information about the movement. They sent her to the Kachin area in the north, where she joined a battalion and attended military training.

In 1989 there was a split within the ABSDF. Concerned for her safety, a member of the Kachin Independent Army helped her reach a remote outpost on the Burma-China border.

"I was pregnant and all alone there," she said. "There was no one to help me." She returned to Rangoon by train, where she was arrested at the train station and sent to MI-7 detention center in Rangoon. Military intelligence officers interrogated her every day for twelve days, from 4 am to 11 pm, slapping and hitting her at times. She was five months pregnant. She was then transferred to the notorious Insein Prison because of her connection to the rebels:

> In the big prison I spent three months in a dark cell that was six by eight feet. The only food was rice with salt, sometimes fermented fish. When I gave birth to my baby, there was no doctor, just an inexperienced medic. She made me push too hard and I've had problems with my uterus until today. After six months, a relative took the child.

After three months in the dark cell, K was sentenced to five years in prison. "The court was in the prison—a military court. All they did was read out the order [sentence], and that was it."

When she was released from prison in 1993, she rejoined the National League for Democracy (NLD). She worked as a campaigner and organizer for them for five years, until she was arrested again. This time she was detained in a barracks for six months.

[a] Human Rights Watch interview with Burman woman, 48, Bangkok, November 8, 2003. She was recognized as a Person of Concern by UNHCR in 2001.

After her release in 1998, she continued to recruit for the NLD. When she learned that the government was getting ready to arrest some high-level members of the NLD, she went into hiding again, and then fled to the NLD liberated area on the Thai-Burma border, where she was in charge of information for two years.

Eventually because of conflicts within the NLD—and her intense fears of being arrested again—she crossed the border to Thailand, where she was recognized as a refugee by UNHCR in Mae Sot in 2001. She had hoped she would be eligible for resettlement because of the imprisonment and persecution in Burma she suffered for her involvement in the student opposition movement, but that didn't happen.

After a member of her group "disappeared" from Mae Sot, K became fearful for her own security on the border. "We think our colleague was killed. I was afraid and went to Bangkok, where I got a room with friends."

Like others, she doesn't feel that she and her family are safe in Bangkok. She fears not only the Thai police, but Thai Intelligence officers as well, who have established informants within the Burmese exile community in Bangkok. During the APEC meetings in October, two police officers were posted in front of her building, even though only two refugee families live there.

> We lock ourselves in our room. We talk very quietly—our neighbors are Thai. We don't want them to know we are Burmese—they would tell the police….Even if you have a UNHCR card you can be deported. They would put me back in jail. We always live in fear.

At the same time she is quick to dismiss the possibility of living in the refugee camp. For those who want to be politically active, camp life will have a deadening effect, she said.

"When you're put in the camp you can't form any organization or say anything because you're under the Thai authority." That's increasingly becoming the case in Bangkok as well. "Thai policy restricts the movement and speech of refugees," she said. "As long as we stay in Thailand no one can organize or speak—it's the same whether you're in Bangkok or the camps."

As for the possibility that she and her family might have to go to the refugee camp, she states bluntly: "I feel miserable about the news. What about security? I've heard about the Thai security personnel in the camps—people being beaten for carrying hand phones."

Also, the different ethnic and religious groups don't get along well, she said. In addition, she worries about basic livelihood issues for her family—they'll have to drink water from streams, medical care will be poor, and her grown son—who had started a law degree before fleeing Rangoon to join her in Bangkok—will have no access to education, no future. Finally, she's anxious about two other sons, who have not yet been recognized by UNHCR: "Can they enter the camp with me and be eligible for resettlement if I am?"

Profile: Karen Former Combatant

Most of the camps are controlled by different factions of the KNU. Since I had a conflict with a KNU faction, if I enter the camp I will be killed.

—Former KNU soldier living as a refugee in Bangkok with his wife and five children [a]

"M"—a heavyset man with a prosthetic leg—was a former combatant with the KNU. He fears running into former enemies from both the KNU and its splinter group, the DKBA, if forced to return to a camp in the border region. One person he fears is a former commander, who beat M severely when he resisted orders for teachers to become ammunition porters. The commander is still a high profile figure. "He's still on the border, crossing back and forth into the camps," said M.

In 2001 M—who lost his leg to a landmine in 1997 and suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure—was sent directly from the jungle in Burma to Bangkok by friends, after surviving a foiled assassination attempt. "A high official of the KNU was killed by a landmine planted by a DKBA guy, who had actually planned to kill me," he said.

While he is concerned about his safety in the camps, like most urban refugees he is also very anxious living in Bangkok, where he worries about being picked up by police on the street and immediately deported.

> I live in constant fear in Bangkok. We always worry about arrest and lock ourselves in the room. When the children go out I don't let them talk to other people. Once two police came to our room and checked our documents—they left after they saw our documents. Our neighbors, local Thais, often threaten to turn us in.

M is adamant, however, that his life would be put in danger if sent to the camps. "I'm handicapped—I can't go to the border. I'll run into conflict with the DKBA faction's troops." In addition, he says that KNU soldiers are scornful of former combatants who have applied for asylum as "political refugees." He is part of an association in Bangkok of Karen refugees working to convince other groups that Karen who have become refugees have not abandoned the political struggle, and also to advocate for third-country resettlement. "KNU members think if you become a refugee you are a 'deserter refugee,'" he said. "I want to convince people we are political refugees."

Asked about his thoughts about going to the camps, he said:

> We couldn't stay in Burma or along the border so we came to Bangkok. If we are sent to the camp, we have many questions. What kind of security will they provide; what provisions will be made for my family. My children were born in the jungle. Is there any plan for our future, especially education, and for our security? We are unwilling to go unless we know exactly where we're going, and how security is going to be provided.

Aside from general concerns about his family's safety and livelihood, M feels he will be personally targeted again for assassination if he returns to the border.

> Most of the camps are controlled by different factions of the KNU. Since I had a conflict with a KNU faction, if I enter the camp I will be killed. I had personal and ideological conflicts with the KNU…. I have a different opinion about what a "refugee" is than the KNU group. So I'll have a problem with KNU if go to the camp. When the Karen revolution started the main leaders were from the Delta region [south of Rangoon]. When we got to the border, there was a split: those who wanted to struggle to the end and never surrender, and the present KNU, which wants negotiations with the SPDC government. The two groups can't live together—we will be in danger.

[a] Human Rights Watch interview with disabled Karen man, 44, Bangkok, November 8, 2003. A former KNU combatant, he and his family have lived in Bangkok since 2001, where they have been recognized as refugees by UNHCR.

Profile: Po Karen Widow Who Had to Flee Burma without Her Four Children

I'm a widow—I have no family or relatives here. I'm alone—what about my security as a single woman in the camp?

—Po-Karen woman whose husband died after being tortured in detention in Burma [a]

"L's" problems began in October 2001 when SPDC troops accused her of supporting the KNU and arrested her. She and her husband ran the village store, which was frequented by KNU members. Also, her cousin was a member of the KNU.

> SPDC troops came into my village and accused me of supporting the KNU because we sold to the KNU. I was taken to the military base and detained one night. My husband had gone to Moulmein to buy things for the shop. The next day when my husband found out I'd been arrested, he negotiated with the commander and paid money for my release.

After she was released, the authorities made her sign a promissory note swearing loyalty to the SPDC. She feared she would soon lose her job as assistant teacher in the village school. Several days later the family was warned that SPDC troops had been asking around about her by name. "My husband urged me to flee, so I ran to another village quite far away," she said. She left him and her four children behind.

> When the soldiers came to my village and didn't find me they took my husband to the station and tortured him to get him to get me to come back. When I heard that, I wanted to go back, but my relatives advised me not to.

Her husband died shortly afterwards as a result of injuries sustained during his detention. In 2002 relatives arranged for an agent to take L to Mae Sot, where she stayed for a while before continuing on to Bangkok.

> I didn't know much about the camp. In Mae Sot friends from church advised me to go to Bangkok and helped arrange an agent for me. They said for security reasons I should go to Bangkok and apply for refugee status.

As a woman living on her own in Bangkok, L said she feels unsafe all the time and seldom leaves her room. She fears the Thai police as well as plainclothes SPDC agents.

Her biggest concern is whether her four children, who she had to leave behind in Burma, will be able to join her in Thailand—especially if she becomes eligible for resettlement.

[a] The Karen minority group includes the Sgaw Karen and the Po Karen subgroups. Human Rights Watch interview with a Po-Karen woman, 36, Bangkok, November 8, 2003. She was recognized as a refugee by UNHCR in 2002.