

Sold to be Soldiers

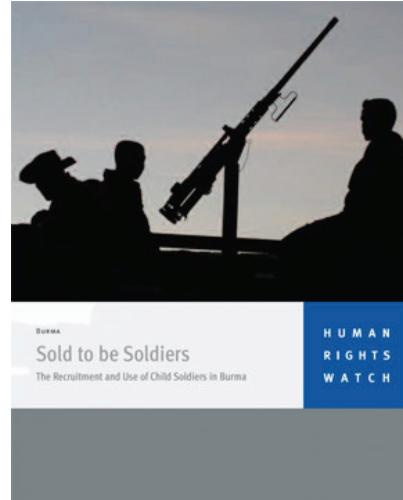
The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma

Summary

By the time he was 16, Maung Zaw Oo¹ had been forcibly recruited into Burma's national army not once, but twice. First recruited at age 14 in 2004, he escaped, only to be recruited again the following year. He learned that the corporal who recruited him had received 20,000 kyat,² a sack of rice, and a big tin of cooking oil in exchange for the new recruit. "The corporal sold me," he said. The battalion that "bought" him then delivered him to a recruitment center for an even higher sum—50,000 kyat.

When his aunt learned that Maung Zaw Oo had been recruited a second time, she and his grandmother made a long trip to his battalion camp to try to gain his release. The captain of the battalion company offered to let Maung Zaw Oo go, but only in exchange for five new recruits. Maung Zaw Oo said, "I told my aunt, 'Don't do this. I don't want five others to face this, it's very bad here. I'll just stay and face it myself.'"

By age 16 Maung Zaw Oo seemed resigned to his fate. When his unit went on patrol, he would volunteer for the most dangerous positions, walking either "point" at the front of the column, or last at the back. He said, "In the army, my life was worthless, so I chose it that way."



BURMA
Sold to be Soldiers
The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

In Burma, children have become commodities that are literally bought and sold to fill the ranks of the national armed forces. Recruiters use coercion, threats, and physical force to enlist children as young as 10.

¹ Pseudonym

² Approximately US\$15 at market exchange rate. This amount is more than the typical monthly salary for an army private.

In Burma, boys like Maung Zaw Oo have become a commodity, literally bought and sold by military recruiters who are desperate to meet recruitment quotas imposed by their superiors. Declining morale in the army, high desertion rates, and a shortage of willing volunteers have created such high demand for new recruits that many boys, some as young as 10, are targeted in massive recruitment drives and forced to become soldiers in Burma's national army, the Tatmadaw Kyi.

For over a decade, consistent reports from the United Nations (UN) and independent sources have documented widespread recruitment and use of children as soldiers in Burma. At the beginning of 2004 the ruling military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), responded to international criticism of its child recruitment practices by establishing a high-level Committee for Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children. However, close scrutiny reveals that the Committee has taken no significant action to redress the issue. Instead, the Committee's primary role appears to be to denounce accounts of child recruitment as false.

Military recruiters target children in order to meet unrelenting demands for new recruits due to continued army expansion, high desertion rates, and a lack of willing volunteers.

Child soldiers are also present in the majority of Burma's 30 or more non-state armed groups, though in far smaller numbers. Some of these groups have taken effective measures to reduce the number of child soldiers among their forces, but others continue to recruit children and use them in their ranks.

The Government of Burma's Armed Forces: The Tatmadaw

The Burmese government claims that its national armed forces, the Tatmadaw, is an all-volunteer force, and that the minimum age for recruitment is 18. However, Tatmadaw soldiers, officers, and other witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch consistently testified that the majority of new recruits are conscripts, and that a large proportion of them are children. Since the early 1990s the number of voluntary recruits has been far from sufficient to staff the rapidly expanding Tatmadaw. At

the same time the Tatmadaw has been plagued by high rates of desertion. To meet this staffing crisis, specialized recruitment units have been established throughout the country, and regular army battalions have also been ordered to fill recruitment quotas. In mid-2006 a senior general called for the recruitment of 7,000 new soldiers a month, four times the actual recruitment rate of a year earlier. Battalion commanders failing to meet their recruiting quotas are subject to a range of disciplinary action including the loss of their command posting.



Soldiers in Burma's army parade in Naypyidaw, Burma's capital.
© 2007 Nic Dunlop / Panos Pictures

The unrelenting pressure to meet recruitment quotas has placed boys at constant risk of forced or coerced recruitment. Battalions and recruiting centers offer cash and other inducements to their own soldiers to bring in recruits, but are also willing to “buy” recruits from civilian brokers and the police. In 2005 the going rate for new recruits ranged from 25,000 to 50,000 kyat—representing one-and-a-half to over three times the monthly salary of an army private. Would-be recruiters watch train stations, bus stations, markets, and other public places, looking for “targets”—the easiest being young adolescent boys on their own. The boys are then induced with promises of money, clothing, status, a job and a free education,

“The officers are corrupt and the battalions have to get recruits, so there’s a business. The battalions bribe the recruiting officers to get recruits for them. These are mostly underage recruits, but the recruiting officers fill out the forms for them and say they’re 18.”

Than Myint Oo,
forcibly recruited
twice as a child

or threatened with arrest for loitering or not being in possession of an identity card and offered military service as the alternative. If necessary boys are beaten into “volunteering” for the army. Some boys interviewed by Human Rights Watch told how they and others had been detained in cells, handcuffed, beaten, bought and sold from one recruiter or battalion to another, and eventually taken to the recruitment centers. As this report was going to press in September 2007, Human Rights Watch continued to receive eyewitness accounts of army units recruiting children and transporting them to training centers.

The government’s deployment of the army in September 2007 to attack Buddhist monks and other peaceful protesters may increase the vulnerability of children to recruitment. Even before the crackdown, young men were often reluctant to join the military, because of its low pay, difficult conditions, and the poor treatment of enlisted soldiers. The use of the army in attacks, killings, and detentions of protesters may further discourage voluntary enlistment, and prompt recruiters to seek out even greater numbers of child recruits.

At the time of enlistment, all recruits are required to provide documentary evidence that they are over 18 years old. In practice, such proof is rarely requested and recruitment officers appear to consistently register underage recruits as being 18, even when the child states otherwise. One boy recruited at age 11 told Human Rights Watch that he failed his recruitment medical because he was only four feet three inches (1.3 meters) tall and weighed only 70 pounds (31 kilograms), but that his recruiter bribed the medical officer to ensure his recruitment regardless.

Child recruits are held as virtual prisoners until sent for 18 weeks of basic military training, where they are forced to do heavy physical work and are punished if they fail in their

“They filled the forms and asked my age, and when I said 16, I was slapped and he said, ‘You are 18. Answer 18.’ He asked me again and I said, ‘But that’s my true age.’ The sergeant asked, ‘Then why did you enlist in the army?’ I said, ‘Against my will. I was captured.’ He said, ‘Okay, keep your mouth shut then,’ and he filled in the form. I just wanted to go back home and I told them, but they refused. I said, ‘Then please just let me make one phone call,’ but they refused that too.”

Maung Zaw Oo, describing the second time he was forced into the army, in 2005

training exercises. Recruits who attempt escape, including children, are punished, often severely. Human Rights Watch has received consistent reports of soldiers who desert from training being beaten with sticks by as many as 200 or more trainees; injuries sustained from such punishment sometimes leave them disabled for weeks.

After training, child soldiers are deployed to battalions, where they are subject to physical abuse by officers and are sometimes forced to participate in human rights abuses such as burning villages and using civilians for forced labor. Some battalions keep their younger children away from combat, but in others, child soldiers may be sent into combat zones within a few days to a month of their arrival; most of those interviewed for this report had seen combat and violent death.

Those who desert the army are often caught when they return home, and imprisoned or re-recruited. Several of those interviewed had escaped only to be recaptured and forced to join the army a second time while still a child. Than Myint Oo, for example, was first recruited at 14, escaped the army, but was captured and sentenced to six months' imprisonment for desertion at age 15. He escaped from prison, was captured and re-recruited to the army, and eventually deserted again and reached Thailand. Now 19, he no longer dares return home.

All of the former soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch



A 16-year-old boy who escaped from his Army unit in December 2003. He had been forcibly conscripted at 13.
© 2004 Child Soldier Coalition,

"I can't remember how old I was the first time in fighting. About 13. That time we walked into a Karenni ambush, and four of our soldiers died. I was afraid because I was very young so I tried to run back, but [the] captain shouted, 'Don't run back! If you run back I'll shoot you myself!'"

Aung Zaw,
describing his first exposure to combat

reported the presence of children in their training companies. Of the 20 interviewed, all but one estimated that at least 30 percent of their fellow trainees were under age 18. The prevalence of child soldiers in army battalions varies significantly. In some infantry battalions child soldiers comprise less than 5 percent of total staffing, while former child soldiers reported that in some newly created battalions, up to 50 to 60 percent of all privates were below age 18. Given these variations and the difficulty of estimating overall staffing levels within the Tatmadaw, this report makes no attempt to estimate the total number of children in Burma's army.

Government Failure to Address Child Recruitment

The SPDC has consistently denied the presence of any child soldiers in the Tatmadaw, and has failed to take substantive action to end the army's institutionalized and pervasive recruitment of children. The Committee for Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children has a Plan of Action to address the issue, but in practice this body has done little to implement the steps outlined therein.

The Committee's Plan of Action calls for public awareness efforts regarding child recruitment, but Human Rights Watch found very little evidence of government-led awareness raising initiatives either within the armed forces, or among the public. None of the current or former soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch, including battalion commanders and a clerk in a military operations command headquarters, were aware of any military directives concerning child recruitment. Human Rights Watch found no evidence of public education efforts through various media, as outlined in the Plan of Action. To the contrary, the principal public awareness raising function of the Committee (in fact, its principal effort overall) seems to be to disavow any child recruitment by the Tatmadaw. The state-run media has asserted that such reports are "slanderous accusations," and as recently as September 2007 declared that

"It is necessary for us to always refute the accusations [about the forcible recruitment of child soldiers] systematically... [and] always project before the international community the correct efforts being made by the committee and refute baseless accusations."
Adjutant General Thein Sein, in his concluding speech to the Committee for the Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children, 2005

the government was working with UN agencies “to reveal that accusation concerning child soldiers is totally untrue.”

According to figures released by the SPDC, only 122 child soldiers have been released from the army since 2004—an annual rate that is significantly lower than the number of child soldiers reportedly released in the years immediately preceding the Committee’s creation. Some parents who have lodged protests with international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have succeeded in having their sons released from the army after these organizations petitioned the government. In other cases, however, the government has refused to accept documentation of claims, or has offered parents money or goods to dissuade them from making formal reports. Human Rights Watch also received numerous reports that military officials had demanded that parents or guardians pay them bribes to secure the release of their children.

The SPDC claims to have taken disciplinary action against child recruiters in at least 30 cases since 2002. However, it has not made public any information regarding the sanctions imposed, and its own reports indicate that no child recruiters were disciplined in 2005 or 2006. Impunity for child recruiters is the norm. Testimony collected for this report demonstrates that not only do Tatmadaw officials tolerate the recruitment of children, but many are complicit by falsifying age records or paying out money for recruits who are clearly underage.

Non-state Armed Groups

Human Rights Watch did not attempt to document the use of child soldiers by all non-state armed groups in Burma. The report discusses 12 groups as examples, including most of the larger groups. Most of Burma’s non-state armed groups have at least some child soldiers in their ranks, but they differ greatly in

their practices, and in their willingness and efforts to stop using child soldiers. These groups are much smaller in troop strength than the Tatmadaw, and as a whole have far fewer child soldiers than the Tatmadaw.

Many child recruits volunteer to serve in these groups, either because their families cannot support them or because they wish to participate in the armed struggle or to defend their families and villages against the Burma army's human rights abuses. Some armed groups impose recruit quotas requiring villages or households to supply a recruit. In such cases a family often sends a child under 18 so that it can retain the older, more productive family members for the household, or because they have no children over 18.

Many non-state groups have only recently begun seeing child recruitment as an issue. Human Rights Watch found that some groups, like the Karen Army and the Karen National Liberation Army, have taken measures to try to bring their practices into line with international standards. Others are wary of engaging the international community on this issue: for example, the Shan State Army–South, which appears to have taken some measures on its own but is reluctant to allow outside monitoring, and the Kachin Independence Army, which considers accepting children into non-combat roles in the army as a form of foster care for vulnerable children, and prefers to deal with the issue without outside involvement.

Finally, some groups flatly deny having child soldiers despite clear evidence to the contrary, or demonstrate no concern over their recruitment and use of child soldiers, including the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, the Rebellion Resistance Force in Kachin State, and the United Wa State Army.

"Some really want to join, but others are conscripted. Each village tract has to send 10 people each time. ... People have to take turns sending a recruit, so some parents send boys under 18. They need to fulfill this obligation. If they don't fulfill it, the DKBA can make lots of trouble for them. They don't accept crazy or sick people, but if you're normal you have to go whether you're under 18 or over 18. They don't care how old you are."

Junior officer with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)

The Case for Action

The UN secretary-general has identified Burma's armed forces

as a consistent violator of international standards prohibiting the recruitment and use of child soldiers, listing the Tatmadaw Kyi in four consecutive reports since 2003. Several armed opposition groups have also been listed for recruiting and using child soldiers. The UN Security Council has stated repeatedly that it will consider targeted sanctions, including embargoes of arms and other military assistance, against parties on the secretary-general's list that refuse to end their use of children as soldiers, but so far has taken no action in the case of Burma. Given the abysmal record of the SPDC and some non-state armed groups in this regard, such action is clearly warranted.

Key Recommendations

To the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)

- Immediately [end all recruitment of children under the age of 18](#), and demobilize children under the age of 18 from the armed forces. Offer the option of an honorable discharge to any soldier now over the age of 18 but who was recruited as a child.
- [Ensure that all recruits to the military provide documentary proof that they are at least 18 years of age](#). Enact a system for monitoring that such documents have been received and verified.
- Develop and impose [effective and appropriate sanctions against individuals found to be recruiting children under 18 into the armed forces](#), and publicize information about these sanctions within the military and publicly. Eliminate all incentives, including monetary compensation, promotions, or military discharge for soldiers who recruit children.
- Seek international cooperation with relevant agencies in order to verify recruitment practices, and allow monitoring of recruitment and training centers by independent outside bodies.

To All Non-state Armed Groups

- Immediately end all recruitment of children under the age of 18 and demobilize children under age 18 from armed groups. Offer the option of an honorable discharge to any soldier now over the age of 18 but who was recruited as a child.
- Formalize a commitment to end all child recruitment, demobilize children in the armed forces, and allow outside monitoring.
- Develop and enforce clear policies, if they do not already exist, to prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 18. Ensure that such policies are widely communicated to members of the armed forces and to civilians within the group's area of influence.
- Develop reliable systems to verify the age of individuals recruited into the armed group, and ensure that all such recruits are at least 18 years old.
- Develop and impose systematic sanctions against individuals found to be recruiting children under 18.

To the UN Security Council

- In accordance with Security Council resolutions 1539 (paragraph 5) and 1612 (paragraph 9) on children and armed conflict, adopt targeted measures to address the failure of the SPDC to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Consider measures recommended by the secretary-general, including the imposition of travel restrictions on leaders, a ban on the supply of small arms, a ban on military assistance, and restriction on the flow of financial resources.

Sold to be Soldiers is available free for download at
<http://hrw.org/reports/2007/burma1007/>.