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BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS

BURMA'S LONGEST WAR

ANATOMY OF THE KAREN CONFLICT

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Executive Summary

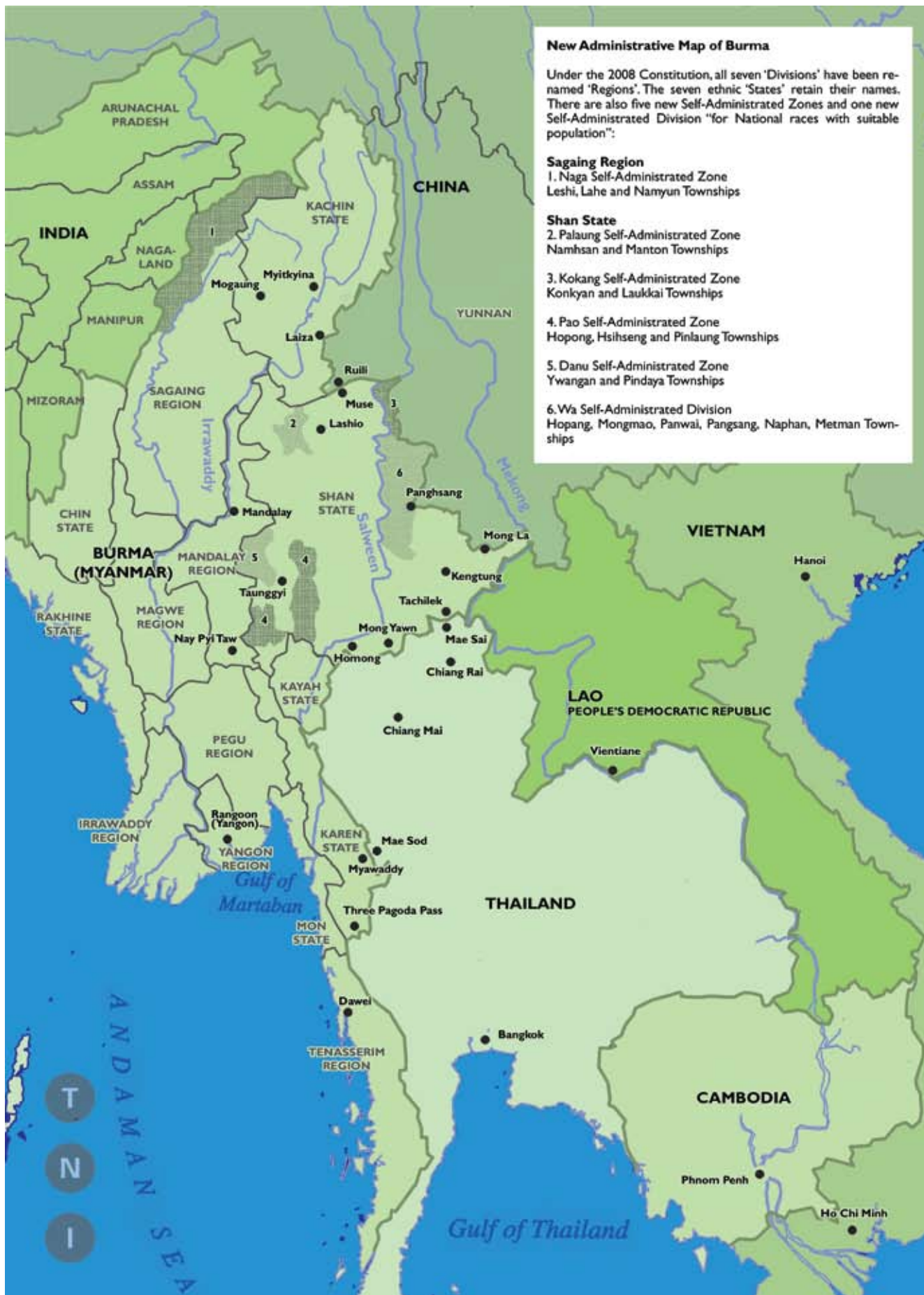
The number of Karen people in Burma (or Myanmar, as the country is officially called) is unknown, with estimates varying between three and seven million, speaking a dozen related, but mutually non-intelligible, dialects. The majority of Karen people are Buddhists, with perhaps 20% Christians, and small numbers of animists who live mostly in remote areas. There is also a small minority of 'Karen Muslims'.

Despite this diversity, many Western observers view the Karen as a more-or-less exclusively Christian people. Similarly, although the majority of Karen people live beyond zones of armed conflict - mostly in areas which have been controlled by the government for decades - political activists often regard 'the Karen' as a whole as in rebellion against the government. This is to ignore the lives and positions of a majority of Karen people, who are not aligned with opposition groups, and who - although they may be deeply critical of the military government - do not subscribe to armed groups' militant objectives. Even for those living in militarised contexts, significant numbers are oriented towards armed networks aligned with the government, rather than with the long-standing Karen National Union (KNU) insurgency.

The KNU does enjoy strong support from elements of the Karen population, particularly Christian communities, who are more likely to have contacts with international patrons. Therefore most external analyses regarding the political situation, armed conflict and its humanitarian impacts in Karen areas derive from the perspective of the anti-government KNU and affiliated organisations. The KNU is perceived by many international observers and actors to be the sole legitimate political representative of the Karen nationalist community in Burma. However, after 60 years of armed conflict, the organisation is facing serious political and military challenges. It has lost control of most of its once extensive 'liberated zones' and has lost touch with most non-Christian Karen communities. Already greatly weakened militarily, the KNU could be ejected from its last strongholds, should the Burma Army (known as the Tatmadaw in Burmese) launch another major offensive.

Many Karen-populated areas have been subject to (mostly low-level) insurgency and often brutal government counter-insurgency operations since 1949, the year after Burma's independence. The humanitarian impacts on civilian populations have been immense. Thailand-Burma border areas saw an upsurge in fighting following elections in November 2010. The announcement in February 2011 of a new military alliance between the KNU and several other armed ethnic groups, including three that (at the time of writing) have ceasefires with the government, may presage a new phase of armed conflict in the border areas, at least in the short-to-middle term. However, the long-term

Map I - Burma – States and Regions



prognosis for armed conflict in Burma is one of a decline of insurgency.

Other countries in mainland Southeast Asia have long ago emerged from the armed conflicts which characterised the Cold War period, and regional economies are booming. The challenge facing Burma's military and political leaders, including the new government and opposition groups, is whether to respond positively to the changing political and economic context, or to remain stuck in the confrontational politics of the past. In re-committing to an armed conflict in which government forces have a decisive upper hand, the KNU risks becoming further marginalised, militarily, politically and economically.

While the KNU remains a key stakeholder, a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Karen-populated areas should take account of other organisations. These include a range of non-state armed groups, not all of which ascribe to the liberal-democratic values with which Western observers are most comfortable. Another important set of Karen actors consists of a range of community-based organisations (CBOs) and local non-government organisations (NGOs), including Buddhist and Christian networks. These include various groups operating in government and ceasefire group-controlled areas, as well as those working among refugee populations, and in cross-border regions from Thailand, in zones of ongoing conflict. The latter tend to be better known due to their access to international donors and media outlets. In contrast, groups and networks not affiliated with the KNU or wider Burmese opposition organisations tend to enjoy limited access to international support networks.

Under pressure from the military government, during 2009 to 2010 the most significant non-KNU armed Karen groups, including most elements of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), were transformed into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under direct Tatmadaw control. Although their autonomy and ability to articulate and promote a distinct Karen ethnic nationalist agenda has been undermined by such developments, non-KNU armed factions nevertheless remain significant military, political and economic players on the ground. However, international engagement with such groups remains problematic, as they act as proxies for the Tatmadaw and demonstrate limited interest in supposedly universal norms of conduct in the human rights field. Most also have unclear political agendas, often focusing primarily on economic issues.

It is yet to be seen whether the November 2010 election will introduce significant new kinds of governance in southeast Burma. The political space available to the small number of Karen and other independent candidates elected is limited and, in the future, will depend on the will of senior Burmese military officials, who have dominated the country since the 1962 military coup. The degree to which the generals are willing to tolerate some independent political

space in Karen and other ethnic nationality-populated areas will be largely determined by whether the military is able to control the domestic political agenda, including, above all, being able to contain Aung San Suu Kyi, and popular aspirations for change. It is possible that members of the three Karen political parties elected in November may gain some influence over the formulation of humanitarian and development policies affecting their communities. Developing supportive relations with civilian politicians elected in 2010 will be an important task for those who seek to engage positively with Burma. However, those seeking to develop relations with state officials must anticipate some criticism on the part of exiled Burmese politicians and their support networks, and also take account of the Burmese military's political sensitivities.

Another key challenge will be how to support the civil society sector, whose re-emergence in the past decade-and-a-half has been one of the few positive aspects in an otherwise bleak political scene. Successes in local development activities on the part of Karen and other civil society actors have helped to build social capital, and promote local resilience and trust, providing limited amounts of protection to hard-pressed civilian populations. Ultimately however, in the age of globalisation, more influential than the civil society and aid sectors will be the role of capital and business more generally. The recent announcement of a multi-billion dollar deep-sea port and industrial project at Dawei on Burma's southern seaboard, together with several proposed 'special economic zones' in the border areas, indicate that Thai, Chinese and other regional economic actors have serious interests in promoting the stabilisation of southeast Burma. There is a pressing need for Karen social and political actors to demonstrate their relevance to the new political and economic agendas playing out in Burma, and in particular to articulate positions regarding major economic and infrastructure development projects.

Historically, external support for the Karen nationalist movement has included the activities of missionaries and Cold War security interests. More recently, the KNU has received material assistance and legitimisation through support for refugees living in camps along the Thailand-Burma border. An important factor in understanding this international support is the correlation between the rights-based promotion of liberal-democracy adopted by Western aid agencies and donors, and the values espoused by the KNU, which seeks legitimacy through appeals to international norms. In the humanitarian spirit of the 'Do No Harm' doctrine, aid agencies and donors should analyse the relationship between their assistance and advocacy activities and the dynamics of conflict in Burma. They should understand that, by supporting the refugee camps in Thailand, they are helping to underwrite the KNU's ability to continue waging armed conflict in Burma. The camps provide refuge to KNU members and their families and are a source of limited material support to the insurgents; and implicitly legitimise the KNU's struggle. This may - or may

not – be an appropriate use of assistance. As in other zones of conflict in the world, aid agencies and donors need to be honest about their relationships with armed non-state groups. Only then can they judge whether the humanitarian imperative of supporting displaced people in and from Burma outweighs the risks of contributing to the political economy of armed conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government

- Act in good faith to resolve conflicts peacefully between the military-backed government and armed non-state groups. Endeavour to maintain ceasefires agreed previously with Karen and other armed ethnic groups.
- Support Border Guard Force and other ceasefire groups to provide humanitarian and development assistance in areas under their influence, and to improve their governance capacities and accountability to local populations.
- Allow local communities and elected Karen representatives to participate to the fullest extent possible in governance and development activities, including in relation to infrastructure and economic development projects.
- Work with local and international organisations, to improve humanitarian access to, and development conditions in, Karen-populated areas.

To the KNU and other armed non-state actors

- The KNU should do more to engage with non-Christian Karen communities, especially Buddhists and Pwo-speakers, beyond the borderlands.
- The KNU should assess its continued support for exiled opposition alliances, seeking instead to engage more with Karen and other progressive forces inside the country.
- Karen armed groups should clearly identify their long-term visions for political and social development, and assess their continued commitment to armed conflict
- Karen armed groups should seek support to develop their governance capacities and provide the space within which local and international agencies can implement humanitarian and community development activities.
- Karen armed and political groups should demonstrate to the international community - and particularly to the private corporate sector - that they can play constructive roles in relation to major infrastructure and economic development projects in southeast Burma. They should seek to engage with companies involved in infrastructure development projects, to promote corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability.
- Karen armed groups should continue to seek mutual understanding, starting at local levels. Rather than any one organisation seeking to dominate this diverse community, Karen leaders should seek to form coalitions of common interest and intra-community cooperation (consociational democracy).

To Karen civil society actors

- Endeavour to better coordinate assistance and development activities, conducted cross-border from Thailand and by groups working inside the country. While taking advantage of international facilitation, local actors should ensure that they retain ownership of such processes.
- Develop positions and policies in relation to infrastructure and economic development projects in southeast Burma.

To the international community

- In addition to addressing the ‘democratic deficit’ and widespread human rights abuses in Burma, prioritise the issues which have structured half-a-century of ethnic conflict. Avoid reproducing simplistic assumptions regarding the nature of conflict in Burma, and attempt to engage with a wide range of actors, including ceasefire groups, civil society and political leaders inside the country, as well as those in the borderlands and exile.
- While continuing to provide support for border-based humanitarian activities, provide greater funding and capacity building assistance to initiatives undertaken by local and international actors inside Burma. In doing so, international organisations and donors should be careful not to inadvertently harm vulnerable local networks.
- The United Nations should continue to use its ‘good offices’ to promote conflict resolution and national reconciliation in Burma, as opportunities arise.
- International organisations should carefully observe political developments in Burma following the 2010 elections, assessing opportunities to engage constructively with new political structures, particularly at the local level.

To humanitarian actors

- Humanitarian support to highly vulnerable civilian communities, provided in and from Thailand, should be continued, complemented by increased assistance and capacity building provided through international and local agencies working inside the country.
- Pay careful attention to the relationship between aid and conflict in Burma, in terms of the material support and legitimisation which assistance can lend to armed and political groups. Undertake assessments of the range of stakeholders in Karen-populated areas, and try to avoid working with just one set of actors.



Introduction

The ongoing armed conflict in Burma constitutes the longest-running civil war in the world. Many Karen-populated parts of the country were devastated by the Second World War and have been affected by armed conflict since 1949, the year after independence. Although Karen communities living in the Irrawaddy Delta, lowland areas of Yangon and Bago Regions and the Mon and Karen States have not experienced direct fighting in many years, those living in the mountainous areas bordering Thailand continue to be subject to ongoing armed conflict. Even in those areas where insurgency¹ and counter-insurgency operations have come to an end, communities remain vulnerable to a range of threats, including various forms of violence and deep-seated poverty.

Home to more than 100 ethno-linguistic groups, since independence the country has been subject to conflict between the central government and a range of armed ethnic and political groups. Conflict in Burma is orientated along two main axes: a predominantly urban-based movement struggling to achieve greater accountability and democracy in a state dominated by a military government since the 1950s; and an overlapping set of conflicts between a centralised state and representatives of ethnic minority communities, which make up approximately 30% of the population. This report focuses in particular on armed conflict-affected parts of the country populated by members of Karen-speaking ethno-linguistic groups.

Terminology

- **Burma/Myanmar:** In 1989 the then SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) military junta renamed the country 'Myanmar Naing-ngan'. Several other place names were changed at the same time. Some new spellings have become common in English (e.g. Bago), whereas others (e.g. Mawlamyine) have not.² This report follows the more traditional usage of 'Burma'. However, 'Yangon' is preferred to 'Rangoon'.
- **Karen/Kayin:** In 1989 the government officially redesignated the name of the Karen ethnic community using the Burmese language exonym 'Kayin'. Thus Karen State became Kayin State.
- **Burman/Burmese/Bama:** 'Burman' (or in the Burmese language Bama) designates members of the majority population; Burmese is a more general adjective for all citizens, the majority language and the country.
- **Minority/nationality:** Elites within Burma's ethnic communities generally prefer the term 'nationality', which is considered to confer more political status and legitimacy.³



Small shop in Karen refugee camp (TK)



The Karen Conflict

The Karen nationalist movement in Burma can be dated to the late 19th century, with the formation in 1881 of the Karen National Association.⁴ Early Karen nationalists were influenced in particular by the American Baptist Mission. Through provision of Christian education, a pan-Karen national identity emerged and was developed during the first half of the 20th century. Burman nationalists regarded elites within the Karen minority as favoured by the colonial administration, laying the seeds for conflict during the Second World War and the post-independence period.

The Karen National Union was established one year before independence, in February 1947.⁵ Having failed to reach a political agreement with the newly independent government, the KNU went underground on 31 January 1949 at the battle of Insein; this date has since been celebrated by the KNU as 'revolution day'. While some observers have accused the KNU leadership at that time of being overly ambitious in its territorial and political claims on the central government, others have emphasised the grievances felt by Karen communities as a result of abuses perpetrated by predominantly Burman militias during World War II and afterwards, and the strongly-held nature of Karen aspirations for national self-determination.

For much of the next half century, the KNU operated as a de facto government, controlling large swathes of territory across Karen State, and adjacent parts of the Bago Yoma highlands and Irrawaddy Delta, where many Karens live. After some early successes however, from the early 1950s the KNU was fighting a protracted rearguard operation. By the 1990s, it had lost control of most of its once-extensive 'liberated zones', although the organisation still exerted varying degrees of influence over areas contested with government forces and proxy militias. The decline of the KNU was exacerbated by the defection in late 1994 of several hundred battle-hardened soldiers, who established the government-allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and shortly afterwards overran the KNU's long-standing headquarters at Manerplaw. This was a huge setback to both the KNU and the loose alliances of pro-democracy organisations it sheltered along the Thailand border (see below).

The DKBA was established in protest against the Christian domination of the KNU under its long-term strongman Gen. Bo Mya, who died in 2006. The KNU's problems were exacerbated by the assassination on 14 February 2008 of its General Secretary, P'doh Mahn Sha, who had played a key role in political relations and shoring-up the organisation, during a period of decline.

In a 2009 interview KNU Central Executive Committee member Saw David Taw estimated that the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA, the KNU's armed wing) fielded

Map 2 - Karen State

Government township names and demarcations



KNU district names and demarcations



KNLA soldier (TK)



not more than 3000 soldiers in total.⁶ Within a few years of its 1994 formation, the DKBA had overtaken the KNU/KNLA as the militarily and economically most powerful Karen non-state actor. Whereas, in previous years, the KNU had been strong enough to demand at least symbolic loyalty from locally-based field commanders, the collapse of the organisation's fortunes in the 1990s led to a significant decline in the KNU's authority and the reorientation of Karen armed groups – most of them breakaway factions from the KNU - towards the military government and its networks of control. Other ex-KNU/KNLA armed factions included the Karen Peace Force (KPF, established 1997), the 'P'doh Aung San Group' (formed 1998, by the defection of the influential KNU forestry minister), the KNU-KNLA Peace Council (2007), and a small ceasefire group in Toungoo District, northern Karen State (1998), as well as various local militias. Several of these groups have recently been disbanded or transformed as a result of the government's Border Guard Force (BGF) initiative (see Table 1).

By the mid-1990s, as a result of decades of armed conflict, tens of thousands of mostly ethnic Karen refugees were living in several small camps spread out along the Thailand-Burma border. In addition, an unknown but significantly larger number of Karen and other civilians were internally displaced in Burma, and about two million Burmese migrant workers (many of them Karen) were living a precarious existence in Thailand with a very uncertain legal status.

Population and Governance

Since independence, successive central governments have underestimated the size of non-Burman communities, and the breakdown of population by ethnicity remains highly contested. Official demographic figures and indicators are particularly flawed in relation to border areas, some of which are still inaccessible to the government and international agencies. The 1983 census records 69% of the population as belonging to the majority Burman (Bama) group, 8.5% as Shan (including various sub-nationalities), 6.2% as Karen, 4.5% as Rakhine, 2.4% as Mon, 2.2% as Chin, 1.4% as Kachin, and 1% as Wa.⁷

Karen dialects occupy the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan languages. There are some 12 Karen language dialects, of which the majority speak Sgaw (particularly in hill areas and among Christian communities) and Pwo (especially in the lowlands and among Buddhist communities). The size of the Karen population is unknown, no reliable census having been undertaken since the colonial period. As Martin Smith notes,⁸ "Karen population statistics are disputed; rebel leaders' estimates are over 7 million Karens in modern-day Burma, but government figures are less than half that number." In 1986 the KNU estimated the Karen population in Burma at 7 million.⁹ Many commentators emphasise the Christian identity of the Karen.¹⁰ However, not more than 20% of the Karen population are Christians.¹¹ There are also some small populations of 'Karen Muslims'.¹²

Under the 2008 constitution, the country is demarcated administratively into seven predominantly ethnic nationality-populated States and seven Burman-majority Regions. The government divides the Kayin (Karen) State into seven townships: Hpa'an, Kawkareik, Kyain Seikkyi, Myawaddy, Papun, Thandaung and Hlaingbwe. The KNU meanwhile has organized the Karen free state of Kawthoolei¹³ into seven districts, each of which corresponds to a KNLA brigade area¹⁴: First Brigade (Thaton), Second Brigade (Toungoo), Third Brigade (Nyaunglebin), Fourth Brigade (Mergui-Tavoy [Dawei] in Tenasserim Region), Fifth Brigade (Papun), Sixth Brigade (Duplaya) and Seventh Brigade (Pa'an). Each KNU district is divided into townships (28 in total), and thence into village tracts (groups of villages administered as a unit by the KNU). These do not correspond with the central governments' administrative divisions.

Only a minority of the Karen population live within the borders of the modern-day Karen State, which was established in 1952. The majority live scattered through the Yangon, Irrawaddy and Tenasserim Regions, eastern Bago Region and the Mon State. Although many of these communities identify themselves as Karens, for most people the tough reality of day-to-day survival is the main priority, with issues of political affiliation being secondary considerations.

Map 3 - Main Karen Armed Groups



Karen villager in the ashes of her house, burned down by Burma Army (FBR)



In practice, in many Karen-inhabited areas of Burma, apart from borderland areas, it has been over three decades since the KNU exercised a regular presence. In contrast, conflict-affected parts of southeast Burma continue to be subject to multiple authorities. Although this report refers to insurgent-controlled, government-controlled and ceasefire group-controlled or influenced areas, the situation on the ground is rarely so clearly demarcated. In reality, areas of disputed authority and influence blur into each other, with frontiers shifting over time in accordance with the season and the dynamics of armed and state-society conflict. Reflecting these realities, many Karen villages have both a 'KNU headman' and a 'government headman', and also often a village leader accountable to another armed faction. These complexities of governance reflect the changing and complicated nature of conflict in southeast Burma and the variety of armed non-state actors.

Longevity and Consolidation of Military Rule

Since the 1960s,¹⁵ military operations by the central government have been characterised by counter-insurgency campaigns that have targeted civilian populations in an effort to defeat the diverse insurgencies. Numerous reports testify to the systematic and brutal nature of state counter-insurgency policies that were first introduced against KNU and other insurgent groups in lower Burma before being targeted against militant forces in the borderlands.¹⁶

Introduced in the late 1960s and continuing today, the 'Four Cuts' strategy¹⁷ is designed to transform rebel-held (or 'black') areas into zones actively contested between government forces and insurgents ('brown' areas), and

then into firmly government-controlled zones ('white' areas). This is an effective military strategy, which uses 'free fire zones' to undermine the operational capacities of insurgent forces, facilitating state penetration of previously semi-autonomous areas. A popular Karen saying has it that the undeclared 'fifth cut' is to decapitate the insurgents.

Since the late 1990s, Tatmadaw (Burma Army) battalions in the field have been required to be more-or-less self-sufficient in rice and other basic supplies. Tatmadaw units have often achieved these objectives by appropriating resources, including land upon which to grow crops and civilian labour from local populations. This self-support (or 'living off the land') policy has exacerbated conflict and displacement across much of rural Burma.¹⁸

In 1997 the SLORC reorganised itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The military junta continued to dominate state, society and the economy under the leadership of Senior General Than Shwe with significant power and influence shared by the Military Intelligence chief (and during 2003-04 Prime Minister), Gen. Khin Nyunt. A master-strategist and moderniser (although by no means a democrat), from 1989 Khin Nyunt oversaw the agreement of a series of ceasefires between armed ethnic groups and the government (see below). Most Burma-watchers were taken by surprise, when Khin Nyunt and most of his circle were purged from office in October 2004, in a move which demonstrated Than Shwe's consolidation of power. The ascendancy of Than Shwe was further demonstrated by his unilateral decision in November 2005 to move the national capital away from Yangon to a new location in the centre of the country at Nay Pyi Taw. The promulgation of the 2008 constitution, the November 2010

election and 2011 formation of a new government can all be seen as part of Than Shwe's strategy to ensure regime stability and his family's security as he enters his late 70s.

This strategy has been largely successful, despite some serious challenges to military rule. These have included the August-September 2007 'saffron revolution', led by monks and joined by many ordinary citizens, which the government suppressed by force. In May the following year, parts of the Irrawaddy Delta were devastated by Cyclone Nargis, which killed at least 130,000 people. The government was widely criticised for its failure to respond effectively to this unprecedented natural disaster. However, one result of the regime's initial refusal to allow access to international aid agencies was that space was created for ordinary citizens and local NGOs to demonstrate the capacity of civil society in Burma in responding to the emergency.¹⁹ Despite decades of military rule, community life is not static on the ground.

Ceasefire Groups and Border Guard Forces

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Burma was subject to a complex and shifting network of armed ethnic and political insurgencies. One of the main strategic achievements of the SLORC junta, which assumed power in 1988, was the negotiation of truces with a majority of armed opposition groups. Between 1989 and 1995, Gen. Khin Nyunt negotiated ceasefire arrangements between the Tatmadaw and over 25 insurgent organisations, including a dozen local militias that agreed unofficial truces.

The first of these were breakaway groups from the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB) that collapsed in 1989 due to ethnic mutinies. The largest was the 20,000-strong United Wa State Army (UWSA) which became Burma's most powerful non-state armed group. From 1991, agreements were also struck by the regime with several groups allied with the KNU, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in 1994 and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in 1995. The ceasefires were not peace treaties, and generally lacked all but the most rudimentary accommodation of the economic development demands of these ethnic opponents, some of which had extensive civil administrations of their own. In most cases, however, the ceasefire groups were allowed to retain their arms and granted de facto autonomy, control of sometimes extensive blocks of territory, and the right to extract natural resources in their territories.

Following the purge of Khin Nyunt and his military intelligence apparatus in October 2004, the ceasefire agreements came under renewed pressure. In 2005-06, two of the small ceasefire groups in Shan State were forcibly disarmed by the Tatmadaw, while others had business concessions revoked. In a controversial move, in late April 2009 the government proposed that the remaining armed groups with which it

had negotiated ceasefires transform themselves into Border Guard Forces. These formations would be under the direct control of Tatmadaw commanders, and would be paid by the Burma Army. Of the 326 personnel in a BGF battalion, 30 would be drawn from the Tatmadaw, including the deputy commander and quartermaster. Several of the less militarily powerful ceasefire groups accepted transformation into BGF formations. In general, these were groups that only enjoyed limited territorial autonomy, and where there was front-line overlap between ceasefire and government forces in the field. However most of the larger groups resisted, including the UWSA, KIO, NMSP and a break-away DKBA faction.²⁰



Landmine victim in IDP camp in Karen State (TK)



Karen Armed Groups

For many observers, the history of Karen armed nationalist movement is synonymous with that of the KNU. However, after over six decades of conflict, the organisation is only one of seven Karen armed groups that are still active in early 2011 (see Table 1).

The Karen National Union

Between the late 1940s and early 1990s, the KNU was arguably the most significant of Burma's diverse ethnic and political insurgent groups. For much of this period, the KNU operated as a de facto government, controlling large swathes of territory across Karen State and adjacent areas. Although not internationally recognised, the KNU administration aspired to reproduce modern state-like structures, including departments for health, education, law, forestry and other aspects of civil administration, making claims to a legitimate monopolisation of security and policing, as well as the right to extract taxes.

Since the 1960s however, the armed Karen nationalist movement has been retreating from lowland Burma into the eastern border hills. This long retreat has seen elites from the Irrawaddy Delta and Yangon assume leadership over disparate Karen-speaking communities in remote areas. As Chris Cusano notes:²¹

as the eastward retreat into the Dawna mountains and towards the Thai border hastened during the 1960s and 1970s, lowland and urban Karens from the Irrawaddy Delta, Yangon and Insein began moving to the new 'liberated areas'. Serving the KNU's mountain strongholds, the lowland Karens married local highlanders, producing a generation of culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse Karens who personify the socio-demographic impact of the KNU's eastward migration. As a war in the mountains intensified, the KNU recruited more of the traditionally insular highlanders, and the fate of migrant KNU insurgents and local Karen civilians became inextricably linked.

By the 1990s, the KNU had lost control of most of the once-extensive 'liberated zones', although in the Thai borderlands the organisation still exerted varying degrees of influence over areas contested with government forces and proxy militias. This process was accompanied by a dramatic fall in revenues for the organisation, derived from taxing the black market, cross-border trade and logging deals.

The formation of the breakaway DKBA in December 1994 heightened the sense of crisis within the KNU. The fall of KNU headquarters at Manerplaw the following month caused 10,000 refugees to flee to Thailand. In March 1995 Kaw Moo Rah, the KNU's last major base north of Mae Sot, fell to a sustained Tatmadaw onslaught. The KNLA rem-

TABLE 1: Karen Armed Groups (Does not include various local militias.)

Name	Formation	Status	Leader	Strength
Insurgent groups				
Karen National Union	February 1947	Active armed conflict	Tamla Baw	7 Brigades/ 3000-plus active Karen National Liberation Army soldiers [Karen State and Mon State, Bago and Tenasserim Regions]
'Kloh Htoo Baw' group [ex- Democratic Karen Buddhist Army – a.k.a. DKBA Brigade 5 – plus some other non-BGF DKBA units]	December 1994/ November 2010	ex-ceasefire group; resumed armed conflict November 2010	La Pwe [a.k.a. N'Kam Mweh – 'Mr Moustache']	500-800 [southern Karen State]
Ceasefire groups				
Karen Border Guard Force [ex-DKBA]	December 1994/ August 2010	ex-ceasefire group; incorporated into Tatmadaw command structure August 2010 [aligned with Karen State Democracy and Development Party]	Tha Htoo Kyaw	12 Battalions/ 3-4000 soldiers [central and northern Karen State, Mon State]
Thandaung Peace Group [a.k.a. Leikto Group]	April 1998	ceasefire group; semi-defunct	Farrey Moe [a.k.a. Pee Reh]	100 soldiers [Toungoo area, eastern Bago Region/ northern Karen State]
P'doh Aung San Group	April 1998	ceasefire group; semi-defunct	P'doh Aung San [ex-KNU forestry minister; successful USDP candidate 2010 elections]	Max. 20 [Pa'an area, central Karen State]
Karen Border Guard Force [ex-Karen Peace Force/ Hongth-arong Peace Group]	February 1997/ August 2010	ex-ceasefire group; incorporated into Tatmadaw command structure August 2010 [aligned with Karen State Democracy and Development Party]	Daw Daw/Lae Win [previously Thu Mu Hae]	1 Battalion, plus some militia (prior to BGF transformation, 3 columns)/ 150-200 soldiers [southern Karen State]
KNU/KNLA Peace Council	February 2007	non-BGF ceasefire group; relationship with government highly unstable	Htein Maung	300 soldiers [central Karen State]

nants retreated north into the Papun hills and south to the Sixth Brigade area in lower Karen State. Life in the Karen insurgency would never be the same again.

The fall of Gen. Bo Mya's Manerplaw headquarters to the DKBA and Tatmadaw symbolized the beginning-of-the-end of the veteran warlord's influence. In 2000 he was demoted to KNU Vice-Chairman and, as his health declined, Bo Mya was largely sidelined from the leadership. He was succeeded by his old protégé, Saw Ba Thein Sein. These factors, in combination with pressure from neighbouring Thailand, led to the KNU taking part in a series of ceasefire negotiations with the military government.

Despite these territorial losses, the KNU has continued to operate in remote mountain and forest localities. Like the Tatmadaw and other Karen forces, the KNLA uses land mines extensively. Indeed, it seems unlikely that the KNU could continue to mount a guerrilla war in Burma without recourse to these devices.²² Over the years, Karen non-state armed groups (including the KNU) have also perpetrated a range of abuses, including forcible taxation and conscription, and unlawful killings.²³ In general, however, KNLA personnel seem to be involved in human rights violations on a less systematic level than either the Tatmadaw or DKBA.²⁴

In pursuit of their goals, the KNU, affiliated organisations and individuals have long called for Karen 'unity'. In practice, this has generally meant the KNU being granted uncontested political leadership of the nationalist movement. Given the diversity of Karen communities however, strategic approaches celebrating 'unity amid diversity' may be more likely to achieve Karen consensus in the future (see below).

KNU Ceasefire Negotiations

Following largely unsuccessful peace talks in 1963-64, thirty years elapsed before a new phase of negotiations got underway between the government and the KNU. In 1994 Karen mediators from Yangon undertook two trips to Manerplaw, led by the late Anglican Archbishop Andrew Mya Han. The formation later that year of a five-member Karen Peace Mediator Group facilitated four further 'confidence-building' meetings between the KNU and SLORC between 1995 and 1997.

Alan Saw U²⁵ recalls that Archbishop Mya Han "pleaded with Karen leaders to ... [achieve] 'resolution of the Karen ethnic affairs', rather than ... ushering in 'true democratic ideals and freedom for the whole country'"; i.e. he prioritized the 'ethnic question' above issues of national-level democracy. By insisting on the need for a comprehensive settlement to Burma's political and humanitarian crises as a precondition for negotiations with the military government, the KNU leadership effectively foreclosed the pos-

sibility of agreeing a ceasefire. Critics accused the hard-liners in the KNU leadership of sacrificing the interests of Karen communities in the conflict zones for the sake of an increasingly elusive breakthrough at the national political level.

At the urging of exile Burmese opposition groups, the KNU agreed not to further pursue ceasefire negotiations in 1994. This was a decision that cost the organisation dearly.²⁶ Within a few months, the emergence of the DKBA had severely weakened the KNU, and in January 1995 the opposition alliance headquarters at Manerplaw was overrun.

In December 1995, and three times in 1996, KNU delegations travelled to Moulmein and Yangon, where they met with military intelligence officials close to Khin Nyunt. For a while, it seemed that the symbolically important, although militarily much weakened, KNU might also agree a truce like the KIO, NMSP and other ethnic ceasefire forces. However, Gen. Bo Mya and other hard-liners were unwilling to accept the standard SLORC ceasefire package. Instead, at a February 1997 meeting of insurgent - and some ceasefire - groups at the village of Mae Hta Raw Tha in the KNLA Sixth Brigade area, they released a declaration, demanding a nation-wide ceasefire, the release of political prisoners and substantive political dialogue. Unsurprisingly, the SLORC was unwilling to compromise, and soon after launched a devastating offensive against the last KNU liberated zones, in Fourth and Sixth Brigades - again causing thousands of civilians to flee across the border, as well as further splits in KNU ranks.

KNLA soldiers on Moei River bank near Thai border (HvdB)



In December 2003 Gen. Bo Mya sent an unofficial five-man delegation to Yangon, composed of his own private staff and officers of the KNLA Seventh Brigade, who had convinced him of the need for a settlement to the armed conflict. Acting without the authority of the KNU Central Committee, Bo Mya was concerned to bolster his legacy and revive the waning influence of his family, including his ambitious but inexperienced son Ner Dah.

On 12 December, at a press conference at a Bangkok hotel, Bo Mya announced the existence of a 'gentleman's agreement' to cease fighting with the SPDC. This dramatic development took the official KNU leadership by surprise. After some heated discussions in Mae Sot (where the KNU leadership was effectively based after the fall of Manerplaw) - and despite serious misgivings in some circles - the KNU endorsed its erstwhile leader's initiative.²⁷ Although the following year-and-a-half saw a reduction in hostilities, both sides continued to conscript recruits. Tatmadaw units used the truce as an opportunity to re-supply front-line positions and to move troops into new bases in previously contested areas, much to the frustration of KNLA commanders.

Substantial KNU-SPDC ceasefire talks began in Yangon in January 2004. The mood was symbolised by photographs of the veteran KNU commander, Gen. Bo Mya, and his long-time adversary, Gen. Khin Nyunt, engaged in a friendly discussion at a government guesthouse. The talks might have led to the agreement of a substantial truce. During these negotiations a government representative for the first time admitted that the Tatmadaw had engaged in extensive population relocation as part of its counter-insurgent strategy. He also accepted that, with an end to the fighting, these people might be able to go home and receive appropriate assistance.

However the next round of talks was delayed for several months. This followed an incident on 23 February 2004 in which KNLA Third Brigade troops attacked a Tatmadaw camp in western Nyaunglebin District, killing several soldiers and seizing weapons and some communications equipment. Although the KNLA returned the captured materials and disciplined the troops involved, the SPDC broke off negotiations for several months.

The purge of Khin Nyunt in October 2004 represented a serious setback to the negotiation of a settlement to the long-running Karen insurgency. Since 2005, it has become clear that the military government is no longer interested in negotiating new ceasefires with its erstwhile battlefield foes.

Two further rounds of ceasefire talks did take place in March and May 2005 in Moulmein and Myawaddy. The KNU team's negotiating strategy was to define a series of problems to be addressed (agenda-setting), in order to identify the nature of the issues, before engaging the

government side on possible solutions. However, in the aftermath of the fall of Khin Nyunt, the Tatmadaw representatives showed little interest in negotiation. The KNU was offered three small patches of territory in which to station troops (in KNLA First, Fifth and Sixth Brigade areas), and given some vague assurances regarding the provision of development assistance. In effect, the KNU was told to 'take it or leave it'.

These developments served to strengthen the hand of hardline, anti-ceasefire actors on the border and undermined the positions of those who sought to negotiate an end to the armed conflict. Subsequently, the SPDC's 2009 Border Guard Force initiative to transform ceasefire groups into Tatmadaw-controlled militias confirmed for many KNU leaders the ascendancy of hardliners within the military government who appear less interested in compromising with armed ethnic opposition groups.

Alliance Politics

Burmese politics emerged into international consciousness as a result of the suppression by the military State Law and Order Restoration Council of the 1988 'democracy uprising'. Among many historic events, this turbulent period was notable for the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's independence hero, as a national political leader who articulated and symbolised the desire of many citizens for democratic change.

Following the September 1988 suppression of the 'democracy uprising', and again after the military government failed to recognise the results of the May 1990 elections, some 10,000 students and other activists and refugees fled to border areas controlled by ethnic Mon, Karen, Karenni and Kachin armed groups. They established a series of camps, where 'student soldiers' received basic military training and supplies from the battle-hardened insurgents. The political significance of these new arrivals was considerable. The events of 1988-90 had focused international attention on the situation in Burma, and it seemed that at last a degree of unity had emerged between ethnic forces and the largely urban-based, Burman-dominated pro-democracy opposition. The new alliance represented a real threat to the control and legitimacy of the SLORC military government.

In November 1988 the KNU and 22 other anti-SLORC groups formed the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), a broad-based, joint ethnic minority-Burman opposition front. In the DAB 'liberated zones', the early 1990s witnessed a degree of optimism absent from the ethnic insurgencies for more than a decade. However, this growth in momentum among border-based opposition groups and their supporters was short-lived. Following the 1989 collapse of the Communist Party of Burma, insurgent strength began to decline to its lowest point since independence.

KNLA soldiers in Karen State (TK)



Partly, this was due to the ceasefires agreed by the regime with different ethnic opposition forces. But it was also partly due to a lack of unity and political skills among the different opposition camps. Opposition political formations became increasingly reliant on refuge in neighbouring countries and exiles overseas. Indeed the patronage of foreign governments and donors kept the exiled alliance afloat longer in the borderlands than might otherwise have been expected.

Despite these setbacks, border and exile-based opposition formations continued to wage a war of political propaganda, combined with limited insurgent activities. At the beginning of 2011, the main political opposition umbrella group was the National Council for the Union of Burma (NCUB, established, under a different name, in 1990²⁸), with armed ethnic nationality groups represented by the National Democratic Front (NDF, established 1976²⁹), and minority political and social organisations participating in the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC, established, under a different name, in 2001; re-formed 2004). The continued relevance of these opposition alliances was challenged in February 2011 with the formation of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC: see below).

Over the years, Gen. Bo Mya and other KNU leaders on the Thailand border have linked their dominant positions within the Karen nationalist movement to participation in anti-SLORC/SPDC united-front politics. By playing leading roles in alliance politics, KNU hardliners have been able to stifle dissent within their own organisation, while drawing on the patronage of an international Burma de-

mocracy campaign. Such developments inevitably made the KNU a more significant target for suppression by the military the regime. Some non-KNU Karen leaders have questioned the organisation's close relationships with exile political groups and suggested that the Karen nationalist movement should focus more on its own core constituency among the Karen people in Burma itself (see below).

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army

The emergence of the Democratic Kayin³⁰ (Karen) Buddhist Army constituted a massive upheaval within the Karen nationalist movement, the repercussions of which are felt to this day. The history and dynamics of the DKBA are less well-known than that of its 'mother organisation', the KNU.

In August 2010 most DKBA battalions were transformed into Tatmadaw-controlled Border Guard Force units, although one prominent field commander in the southern Karen State refused this order and resumed armed conflict with the government (see below). Therefore, when referring to DKBA units for the period after August 2010, this report will use the designation 'DKBA BGF' (see Table 1). At the time of writing, it remains unclear how much of a distinct Karen nationalist identity and what degree of operational autonomy these DKBA BGF units will be able to retain. Since its formation in the mid-1990s, the DKBA has been under the Tatmadaw's operational and political control. Thus its transformation into BGF units may be primarily symbolic, with only limited impact on the ground.

The formation of the DKBA was, in part, a product of poor political skills at the top of the KNU, combined with often deeply-held grievances among many in the Karen Buddhist community. Inter-faith disputes arose out of years of neglect, and some localized suppression, of the Buddhist (predominantly Pwo) majority within the rank-and-file of the KNLA/KNU by the Christian and Sgaw Karen elite.³¹ These tensions came to a head after 1989 with the arrival of U Thuzana, a prominent Karen Buddhist monk, at the Thu Mweh Hta monastery a few miles north of Manerplaw.

Manerplaw - on the west bank of the Moei River that marks a stretch of the Thailand-Burma border - had been the KNU headquarters since the early 1970s (see Map 3). In the early 1990s, U Thuzana (who went on to become patron monk of the DKBA) was based a few miles to the north, proclaiming his vision of a Karen space of peace and tranquillity, centred on the building of Buddhist 'peace pagodas'.³² These traditional Karen millenarian themes had a special relevance in the war-weary villages and cantonments of the eastern Karen hills, and they recall discourse and practices characteristic of the famous monastic sanctuary at Thamanya, near Hpa-an (see below). Tensions came to a head in December 1994, when a group of disaffected Buddhist Karen soldiers deserted their front-line positions. Frustrated with decades of seemingly futile warfare, and concerned that their religious identities were not respected by the KNU leadership, these subaltern forces gathered at the Thu Mweh Hta monastery and swore allegiance to U Thuzana. On 21 December 1994 this loosely organised group established the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organisation (DKBO) and Army. From the outset, the DKBA received military and logistical support from local Tatmadaw units and Military Intelligence agents provocateurs. Ultimately, however, the emergence of the DKBA at a time of great crisis in the Karen nationalist movement was more a result of genuine grievances within the Buddhist community. Rank-and-file Buddhist KNLA soldiers in particular resented the domination of the KNU by Christian elites, and perceived corruption within the organisation.

Since its formation, the DKBA has lacked a coherent command-and-control structure. Local DKBA units have often acted as a proxy militia for the Tatmadaw, deflecting some domestic and international criticism for the military government's often brutal policies.³³ Like some of their KNU-KNLA counterparts, many DKBA commanders and soldiers are 'conflict entrepreneurs', for whom military and political status is a means to personal power and enrichment. However DKBA leaders often also employ strong ethno-nationalist rhetoric and have implemented several local infrastructure development projects. Furthermore, conditions for internally-displaced persons (IDPs) and other civilians in DKBA-controlled ceasefire areas are better than those in zones of ongoing armed conflict or government-controlled relocation sites.³⁴ Despite its name, there are Christians within the ranks of the DKBA, including some senior officers.

Senior DKBA leaders see the KNU, with its political western-oriented state-making project, as having failed. The DKBA agenda is focused on top-down economic development of the Karen nation. Some DKBA informants expressed confidence that they could continue to pursue this agenda under the new status as BGF formations. From 1995 through 2009, most DKBA units enjoyed considerable operational autonomy, while answering in general terms both to local Tatmadaw commanders and to the DKBA leadership at Myaing Gyi Ngu (in central Karen State: see Map 3). However, as the DKBA transformed itself into a BGF in the second half of 2010, field commanders came to enjoy decreasing levels of autonomy.

It remains unclear how much support the DKBA enjoys within the wider Karen population, many of whom are disappointed by the organisation's inability to promote a Karen nationalist agenda. For example, although there are schools in DKBA-controlled areas, these generally do not teach Karen languages, but rather follow the government (Burmese language) curriculum. However DKBA leaders point out that the organisation does patronise Karen language teaching during the school summer holidays.

The August 2010 transformation of most DKBA into BGF battalions was formally accomplished during four ceremonies held in different parts of Karen State that month, presided over by the Tatmadaw South-East Commander. In Karen State, there were 13 BGF battalions: 12 comprised of DKBA units and one formed by another KNU breakaway

DKBA leader U Thuzana in DKBA publication



group, the Karen Peace Force. In accordance with BGF regulations, several senior DKBA commanders had to retire, being over 50 years old.³⁵ Seven top DKBA commanders (including Kyaw Than, Tha Htoo Kyaw, Pah Nweh and Cit Thu) were enrolled in a 'advisory board', with a supervisory role in relation to the Karen BGF battalions. This, in practice, removed them from day-to-day military command. Nevertheless four DKBA BGF battalions were under the authority of Col. Chit Thu.³⁶ This ambitious DKBA commander had previously been in charge of eight DKBA battalions under the 999 'Special Battalion', based at Shwe Ko Ko on the west bank of the Moei River.

In October 2009 the DKBA's chief patron and advisor, the monk U Thuzana, met with KNU/KNLA leaders to discuss the possibility of an armistice between the two groups. Reportedly, this meeting was arranged after influential Karen monks and village leaders had written to U Thuzana, asking him to mend some of the damage done to Karen society by the DKBA, and because of the monk's unhappiness with the BGF proposal.

In some parts of southern Karen State where the KNLA Sixth Brigade operates, the KNU and DKBA enjoyed a relatively smooth relationship, based on mutual business interests in natural resource extraction (logging and mining activities). For many years, villagers living in these areas benefited from the relative stability that ensued. This lasted until 2010 when the local DKBA commander rejected transformation into a BGF.

Elsewhere in Karen State, many DKBA units gained a reputation for acting as predatory forces, perpetrating violence against villagers and KNU forces alike. In 2011, as the BGF issue continues to put strains on relationships between the government and DKBA formations, senior KNU leaders expect to receive more defections from disgruntled ex-DKBA members.

The Role of Thailand

The mountainous and once thickly-forested border zones between Thailand (formerly known as Siam) and Burma are populated by various ethnic minorities. Since before the momentous Burmese-Mon-Thai wars of the 18th century, Karen-populated border areas had served as a buffer between the lowland states - and traditional rivals - Thailand and Burma. During this period, Karen levies acted as porters and spies for different invading armies, while Karen princelings were allowed a fair degree of autonomy in running community affairs in areas distant from the central lowland courts.

The buffer role played by border areas continued into the modern period, with Thai (and indirectly American) security interests supporting Karen armed groups in southeast Burma in order to prevent well-armed and organised com-

munist parties in Thailand and Burma, backed by China, from joining up. From the 1950s through to the 1970s, Western security strategists feared that Thailand would become 'the next domino', following Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos into the communist sphere of influence. Such concerns explain Thai and American support for anti-communist Karen leaders, such as Gen. Bo Mya.

For many years, the main anti-communist forces in Burma were Kuomintang remnants from China that settled on the Shan State-Thailand border. But at the height of the Cold War these forces also came to include the KNU, as well as Shan, Mon and other ethnic formations. From the late 1980s however, Thai policy regarding its neighbours changed from one of surreptitiously undermining rivals and traditional enemies through supporting armed groups in the border areas to a strategy of directly engaging national governments. The policy of 'turning battlegrounds into marketplaces' is credited to Thai Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan. This was a precursor to the ASEAN regional strategy of 'constructive engagement' with Burma, and under which state - and above all private corporate - agencies sought to engage directly with the military government and business networks. The policy of 'constructive engagement' accelerated following Burma's 1997 membership of ASEAN, witnessing considerable amounts of overseas (ASEAN but also Chinese) investment in Burma, particularly in natural resource extraction. As a result of the new policy environment, insurgent groups in the borderlands found their previously supportive relationships with Thai business and security authorities greatly weakened. In summary, the KNU was transformed from a valuable (if low-profile) ally of the Thai security establishment to a nuisance, impeding investment in the borderlands.

Economics and Infrastructure Development

The border areas have historically been remote from the centres of political and economic power in Thailand and Burma. However, the implementation of major infrastructure projects is likely to incorporate these previously marginal areas into significant regional economies. The Greater Mekong Sub-region initiative of the Asian Development Bank, including the Asia Highway from Mae Sot to Hpa-an via Myawaddy and the East-West Economic Corridor and related initiatives, could transform southeast Burma. The government already earns more than \$2 billion annually from oil and gas sales, an amount which may rise over the next decade to some \$8 billion a year.

Large-scale infrastructure projects will have major impacts, as illustrated by the Dawei Development Project that will be centred on the construction of a deep-sea port in the Andaman sea. Due to be implemented by Ital-Thai company, the first stage alone is estimated to be valued at some US\$13 billion and will include railway and road links from Dawei to Kanchanaburi in Thailand, industrial estates, a re-

Map 4 - Economic and Infrastructure Development



- H Proposed Dams
- Proposed Highway
- ▲ Proposed Deep Sea Port
- Gas Pipeline

finery and a steel mill in Dawei. Significant environmental concerns have been raised by the prospect of dirty industries being relocated from central and lower in Thailand. Potential problems also include the lack of rights workers in these developments will have and local landowners' vulnerability to forcible appropriation of their farmlands. Previous large-scale infrastructure developments in Burma have resulted in 'development-induced' displacement and increased vulnerability.

The Dawei Development Project is an indication of the future direction of relations between Thailand and Burma. Thailand sees many opportunities along the shared border: hydroelectricity schemes, export processing zones, contract farming, and tourism.³⁷ As the economic relationship between the two countries becomes ever stronger, this will have major implications for the southeast of Burma, and indeed for mainland Southeast Asia as a whole. It will give Thailand a major stake in stability in the area, which may result in greater pressure on the KNU and other armed groups. It will also give the Burma government greater leverage over Thai policies towards Burma dissidents and refugees in Thailand. Any economic opportunities to populations in southeast Burma will be accompanied by risks, including environmental costs and the threat of labour exploitation. Therefore, in the short-to-middle term at least,

infrastructure and other development projects in southeast Burma are likely to be drivers of conflict, possibly generating patterns of forced migration.³⁸

For the Karen and other ethnic nationalities in Burma, much will depend on how community leaders position themselves in relation to such economic developments. Will they be able to demonstrate to the international community, and in particular the private corporate sector, that they are part of the solution to developing a modern, equitable and sustainable economy, or will they remain stuck in the politics of opposition or defiance which has characterised much of the past half-century in Burma?

Guns and Governance - Political Economy and Political Cultures

With the outbreak of widespread insurgency following independence, localised forms of governance re-emerged, sometimes recalling the political cultures of the pre-colonial period. Burma in the 1950s was characterised by a patchwork of armed conflicts, motivated by a combination of social and political grievances (articulated through appeals to communism or ethnic nationalist agendas), and political-economic self-interest.



Women forced to carry loads for the Burma army (FBR)

As occurred during the pre-colonial period, local strongmen sought to mobilise populations through a combination of charisma, violence, economic incentive and appeals to various forms of legitimacy, based on the articulation of grievances which often resonate strongly with local population. In chaotic situations of armed conflict, local 'war economies' emerged, often based on the exploitation of natural resources and/or extracting revenues from the peasantry. Insurgent commanders tended to fuse their personal and professional roles and finances, leading to the re-emergence of neo-patrimonial forms of governance.³⁹ In southeast Burma, the long-time KNU Chairman, Gen. Bo Mya, typified these characteristics, with his combination of strongly-held ethnic nationalist views, and self-interested economic agendas.

Commenting on the distinction between 'traditional' and modern forms of political administration, Thongchai Winichakul describes state frontiers in pre-colonial Southeast Asia as discontinuous, rather than tightly-bounded. Pre-colonial frontiers were "the limit within which the authorities of a country could exercise their power... the areas left over became a huge corridor between the two countries."⁴⁰ Such 'unbounded' frontier areas characterised the insurgent-controlled para-states in Burma which emerged in the 1950s. These atavistic characteristics extended into the governance of refugee and exile communities. Ananda Raja⁴¹ analysed the manner in which, unlike the modern nation-state with its clear territorial boundaries, the insurgent para-state has a 'frontier' area or zone, rather than a border, which may overlap with the frontiers of other para-states, or with more firmly established governance structures of the internationally recognised state.

As noted above, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under ceasefires negotiated between the military government and some two dozen armed ethnic groups, the insurgents 'liberated zones' were transformed into government-recognised 'Special Regions'. In many cases, the ceasefire areas continued to be ruled as personal fiefdoms, with ill-defined borders which overlapped with those of the state and other non-state actors.⁴²

Greed and Grievance

Scholars such as Paul Collier⁴³ have analysed the causes of armed conflict primarily in terms of the economic opportunities available to combatants ('greed'-based explanations). David Keen,⁴⁴ criticises this approach, pointing out that conflict actors' perceptions of socio-political and historic injustices are equally important in understanding their motivation ('grievance'-based motivations).⁴⁵ Over time, armed conflicts tend to be transformed, as structural influences move away from original (often 'grievance'-based) causes, towards new ('greed'-orientated) factors. Armed conflict and civil war also create new grievances as they transform.

Following the fall of former Military Intelligence chief and Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004, the government moved to incorporate these networks of compliance into more formal relationships under a new constitutional arrangement. A number of ceasefire groups supported the governance structures emerging through the government-controlled National Convention process (1993-2007), either because they had no choice, because they considered acquiescence politically expedient, or because they perceived advantages in doing so for their communities and their leaders' interests. The new governance arrangements were codified in the May 2008 constitution, which came into law during 2011 when the new government was convened following the November 2010 elections.

Forms of Political Authority

As Mary Callahan notes,⁴⁶ "citizens in the ethnic minority states of Burma live under the authority of multiple 'states' or 'state-like' authorities' that extract resources from citizens, both mediate and cause conflict, and provide some services for residents and commercial interests. The range of competing systems of authority sometimes creates ambiguity ... [which also] generates opportunities for personal advancement and wealth generation for some, but much of the population is left with limited strategies for survival or improvement." Callahan utilizes Mark Duffield's⁴⁷ concept of the 'emerging political complex' to explain novel forms of governance emerging in these armed conflict-affected regions. In the Burmese context, such local, often violent and inequitable, adaptations constitute: "a set of flexible and adaptive networks that link state and other political authorities to domestic and foreign business concerns (some legal, others illegal), traditional indigenous leaders, religious authorities, overseas refugee and diaspora communities, political party leaders, and NGOs. All of these players make rules, extract resources, provide protection, and try to order a moral universe... They exist in a competitive, yet often complicit and complementary, milieu that varies across geographical space and time."

These 'emerging political complexes' often provide the only forms of protection for vulnerable people, living beyond the reach of formal state authorities or international agencies. Martin Smith⁴⁸ has also utilized Duffield's work, to demonstrate how durable conflict actors have adapted to changing political-economic conditions, against a backdrop of conflict, in which "the lines between legitimacy and illegitimacy have frequently been blurred, the politics and economics of self-survival have come to dominate, and predatory warlordism has often been rife on all sides of the conflict-zones."



Karen Civil and Political Society 'Inside Myanmar'

For half-a-century, the state has sought to penetrate and mobilize the country's diverse social groups. The existence of armed opposition to the central government has provided a pretext for the further extension of state control, and suppression of diverse social groups. After 1962, the military regime's suppression of non-Burman cultural and political identities, epitomized by the banning of minority languages from state schools, has in turn driven further waves of disaffected ethnic minority citizens into rebellion.⁴⁹

Among the few institutions in Burma not directly controlled by the state, religious-based institutions, particularly the 250,000-strong Buddhist Sangha and the Christian churches, are among the potentially most powerful sectors of civil society. Most recently, Buddhist monks' leadership of anti-government protests in August and September 2007 illustrated the deep unpopularity of the SPDC regime and the influential role of the Sangha. They recalled those few weeks in the summer of 1988, when it seemed that 'people's power' might prevail in Burma.

However, such public displays of protest have been rare. During the SLORC-SPDC era, social control was systematically reinforced by the reformation of local militias and mass organizations, and the indoctrination of civil servants. The police, and even the fire brigade, were brought under military control, and the regime established a number of new 'Government-Organised NGOs' (GONGOs). The most substantial of these new organisations was the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), established in September 1993 along the lines of the pro-military GOLKAR party in Indonesia, with a reported membership of more than 20 million. The USDA's objectives included upholding the regime's 'Three National Causes' (non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of national solidarity), which may be seen as a muscular affirmation of the Tatmadaw's self-appointed state and nation-building role. Indeed, the USDA and the para-military Peoples Vigorous Association (PVA or Sorn Arr Shin) were heavily involved in the suppression of the September 2007 protests. In 2010 the USDA was transformed into the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which inherited many of the association's funds and networks of influence (see below).

Outside of regime control, the first decade of the new millennium also saw an acceleration in the re-emergence of civil society and political networks in non-government circles. This was particularly the case within and between ethnic nationality communities, including the Karen. Although the sector remained liable to infiltration and suppression by the militarised state, its blossoming during this period was a progressive aspect in an otherwise bleak

socio-political scene in Burma. Several of the most prominent Karen civil society initiatives espoused a strong ethnic nationality identity, without however endorsing the strategies adopted by insurgents in the borderlands.

These non-KNU Karen voices have been marginalised in most discussions of Karen nationalism in Burma, especially in English language discourses produced by outside actors, such as missionaries, aid workers and activists. Nevertheless, those Karen civilians who are not members or active supporters of the KNU constitute a very large majority of the population.⁵⁰ Many of these actors differ to the KNU in terms of both strategy and social and political goals.

An important exception to this critique of existing literatures is the work of Ardeth Maung Thawngmung.⁵¹ She notes that "despite [the KNU's] history of armed struggle, a sizeable number of Karen remained in the Union of Burma, either because they rejected the principles and methods of the KNU, because they thought the risk of joining the armed resistance was too great, or simply because they were politically passive." It is not possible to characterise members of such a diverse ethno-linguistic and socio-economic community as the Karen in terms of a few common characteristics. Nevertheless, by isolating certain tendencies in relation to political orientation, a fuller picture of the 'Union Karen' community emerges.

The Union Karen perspective incorporates a loosely-defined set of ideas of Karen nationalism, distinct from the KNU's militarised nation-building objectives. Associated with elites in Yangon and the Irrawaddy Delta, this less aggressive nationalist stance has sought accommodation with the state, rather than challenging its foundations. A broad range of Union Karen views were quite well-represented through the independence and parliamentary periods; for example, by the Karen Youth Organization in the post-Second World War years. However, since the imposition of military rule in 1962, and especially following the events of 1988-90, the Union Karen voice has been marginalised in comparison with the uncompromising rhetoric produced by opposition groups along the Thailand border. In part, this exclusion is explained by government restrictions on international access to Karen groups working 'inside' the country,⁵² which led to the lack of a Union Karen voice in reporting on the country. Relatively few researchers have made efforts to engage with this sector of Karen political and civil society. Indeed, members of the Burma activist community tend to assume that those actors working for socio-political change inside the country must be stooges of the military government. In its most extreme form, opposition discourse denies the legitimacy of any activity to promote socio-economic or political change carried out in government-controlled areas, beyond the out-and-out opposition of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its allies. Furthermore, due to the restrictions and frustrations of working in military-ruled Burma, the Union Karen have had to adopt strategies of subterfuge, working

behind-the-scenes in ways that do not attract attention, and producing writings that have to be read 'between-the-lines'.⁵³

Many Karen communities in Burma are led and guided by their religious leaders (pastors or monks). Most active Union Karen networks operate under the patronage and umbrella of protection of a handful of mostly elderly politicians, many of whom are retired state officials or politicians who 'returned to the legal fold' in the 1950s and 1960s. This change in personal strategy was often due to frustration with the KNU's hard-line nationalist position. In most cases, these elites subscribe to a Christian-oriented Karen identity, similar to that held by border-based groups. However, they do not perceive a fundamental contradiction between citizenship of a centrally-governed state and the pursuit of greater economic, social, cultural, linguistic and political autonomy for their communities.

Karen Civil Society in Burma

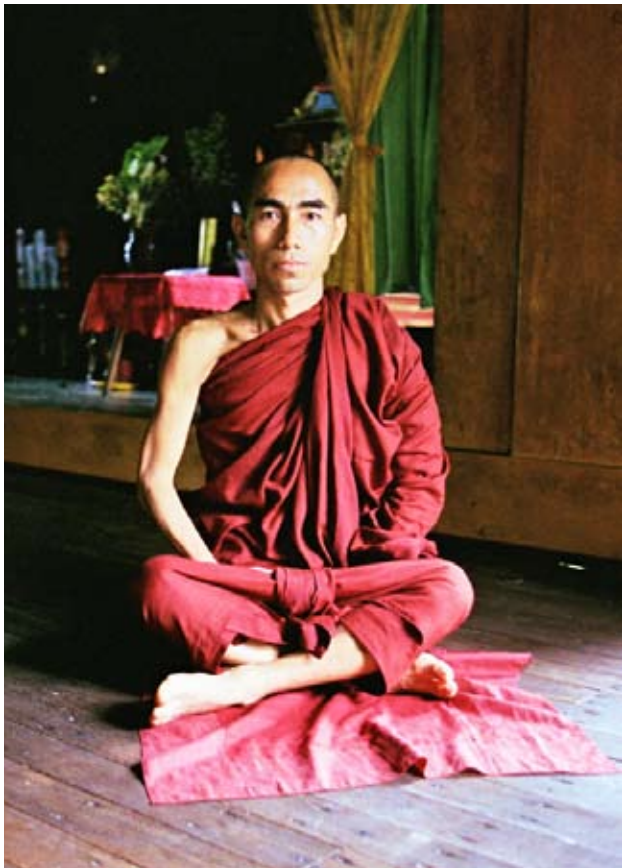
According to Alan Saw U,⁵⁴ a key Karen civil society actor in Burma:

many Karen people in Myanmar have become very weary and fed up with the prolonged civil war and its consequences. They are of the opinion that it is imperative ... to direct their energies to mobilizing their cultural wisdom, religious knowledge and social understanding so as to constructively work towards a better future. Since the beginning of the 1990s, various Karen groups in Myanmar have been trying ... to build confidence and strengthen capacities of the various elements in the Karen community and to foster cooperation between them. The Karen leaders in Myanmar have projected the idea of transferring the 'armed struggle in the battle field' to the 'political struggle around the table.'

Alan Saw U provides a surprisingly frank account of civil society and low-profile political developments within the Karen community since the mid-1990s.⁵⁵ He describes activities in the fields of peace-making, including various initiatives to resolve the armed conflict, undertaken by Karen community (mostly religious) leaders who include Buddhists as well as Anglican, Baptist and Catholic churchmen and women. He also analyses community development and humanitarian activities undertaken by a range of Karen civil society groups, including the establishment of the Karen Development Committee (KDC) in June 1994.

Over the following decade, under the leadership of Dr Simon Tha, the KDC developed an innovative health care programme. The Kwe Ka Baw clinic was originally established in the Karen-populated northern Yangon suburb of Insein in 1990. By establishing his clinic in the name of Kwe Ka Baw (a limestone outcrop near Hpa-an and a symbol of the Karen nation) Dr Simon was making an explicitly ethnic nationalist statement. The foundation of

Karen Buddhist monk in Hpa-an (TK)



this first private clinic was followed by several others. Dr Simon's team also undertook regular mobile outreach trips to remote parts of the country, including conflict-affected areas of Karen State and elsewhere. Other KDC projects included the Karen Women's Action Group and the Rising Sun youth group.

In April 2002 the Karen Peace Mediator Group (KPMG) convened the first Karen Forum on Development at the Karen State capital Hpa'an. The opening address was given by Professor Tun Aung Chain, the retired director of the Myanmar Historical Research Commission and a leading member of the Union Karen community. He was also a leading figure in the government's National Convention, a position which gave him the prestige and authority necessary to sponsor such a sensitive event.

The revival of Karen community activism in government-controlled areas since the late 1990s also led to the formation of the Karen Development Network (KDN), which emerged out of the KDC in 2002 and was formally established in 2004. Originally a loose network of individuals drawn from a number of Karen (and later Karenni and Mon Christian) organizations, the KDN focused particularly on networking and training at the leadership and community levels. It established an internationally-accredited distance-learning Community Management Programme, implemented at centres in Yangon, Moulmein, Hpa'an, Pathein, Toungoo, Lashio, Myitkyina and elsewhere. The KDN also convened a series of meetings (the Local Development Forum), leading to a coordinated approach to document-

ing and analysing the situation and needs of internally displaced populations in Burma.⁵⁶ Several of those associated with these civil society initiatives have also engaged in more explicitly political activities, both in terms of (necessarily low-profile) contacts with border and overseas-based groups, and through participation in aboveground politics inside the country.

Religious 'Mandalas'

These developments within the secular branches of Karen civil and political society were mirrored by initiatives among Christian and Buddhist networks. For centuries, monasteries in Burma have functioned as havens of peace and refuge, and Karen monks have long provided assistance to members of the laity.⁵⁷ In recent years in Karen State, this has especially been the case at the DKBA's Myaing Gyi Ngu headquarters, and most famously at the Thamanya monastery near Hpa'an. U Vinaya, late sayadaw (abbot) of this large monastic complex, oversaw a feeding programme of more than 10,000 people a day, supported mainly by the donations of pilgrims. U Vinaya was an ethnic Pao, part of the Karen ethnic family. The beneficiaries were displaced civilians, whose residence in the Thamanya compound protected them from forced portering and other abuses on the part of the Tatmadaw and DKBA. Although the venerable 93-year-old monk passed away in December 2003, his successors continued his work, albeit on a reduced scale. The Thamanya monastery is an example of localised autonomy, dependent upon the charismatic power of an ascendant civilian patron.

One of the most prominent of a younger generation of Karen monks in such roles is U Pinya Thami, the abbot of Taungalae monastery just north of Hpa-an. A perceptive and charismatic individual, U Pinya Thami has been able to mobilise the community around agricultural and other local development projects, as well as overseeing Karen participation in the November 2010 elections (see below). He also played a leading role in inter-faith dialogue with Karen Christian leaders. His influence extends throughout central Karen State, where he is regarded as a 'democracy monk' and something of a competitor to U Thuzana, patron of the DKBA. As such, he has received much less support from the government than the Myaing Gyi Ngu sayadaw.⁵⁸ Again, this religious leader's personal patronage and authority are central to the creation of a zone of relative local autonomy. In this area, he has been able to provide some limited protection for local civilians from the abuses of various armed groups. He has also promoted community development projects and a well-regarded (secular) school.

In addition to such indigenous actors as the KNU, civil society leaders and the military government, external and transnational organisations and networks may also demonstrate mandala-like qualities. The shifting mosaic

of donors and international NGOs which constitute the 'humanitarian industry'⁵⁹ on the Thailand-Burma border and the activist lobbying networks beyond, may be considered as a collection of often collaborating, but sometimes competing, centres of power, the authority of which expands and/or declines according to various criteria. Like other patrons, the influence of border-based humanitarian agencies is diminished, as their clients (e.g. the KNU and affiliates) decline in power. In the meantime - in some DKBA-controlled areas at least (for example, Shwe Ko Ko) - a small number of donors and NGOs have been able to engage with local commanders, such as Col. Chit Thu, in order to implement aid projects.

Christian churches have also been deeply involved in community-based development activities. These include branches of the main Baptist, Anglican and Catholic churches, as well as a number of local congregations. Several of the more formal Karen civil society groupings have received assistance in building their organisational capacities from national-based civil society groups, such as the Metta Development Foundation and Shalom Foundation.⁶⁰ Some of these church-based NGOs and CBOs were involved in the forefront of impressive efforts undertaken by Burmese civil society networks in responding to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 which afflicted both Burman and Karen communities across the Irrawaddy Delta.

The 2010 Elections

Three Karen political parties participated in the 7 November 2010 elections. In their different ways, each has sought to promote and protect Karen interests.⁶¹ The Karen (Kayin)

Peoples Party (KPP) was established in early 2010. It is associated with Yangon and Irrawaddy Delta (predominantly Christian) elites, and is positioned as an issues-based party, designed to appeal beyond the Karen community. Several of its leaders are retired government (including Tatmadaw) personnel, allowing the KPP some level of protection from state suppression, but also generating some distrust, particularly among political activists who have learned to be suspicious of anyone connected to the government. The KPP is perceived by some non-elite (and especially non-Christian) Karen as dominated by Christian mission-educated, urban intellectuals, retired state officials and business interests. Indeed, in addition to linguistic and religious pluralism within the Karen community, there continue to be marked tensions between those living and working in Karen State and those Karens in Yangon and elsewhere.

Such differences explain the formation of the Ploung-Sgaw Democracy Party (PSDP – Ploung being an alternate spelling for Pwo Karen) to contest the elections in Karen State, and adjoining areas of Mon State, where the party enjoys good relations with the All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP). Unlike the KPP, most PSDP members and patrons are Buddhists. Leaders of the PSDP in particular have expressed their anxiety regarding the limited human resources available in Karen State and the need for capacity building. This is also the case with the Karen State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP), which was formed in August 2010 by elements close to the DKBA leadership immediately after the BGF transformation.

While several Karen leaders stood for election themselves, other key actors were more interested in persuading others to do so in order to 'test the waters'. Thus 2010 could be

Karen men playing board game (TK)



characterised as an 'election by proxy', with various key actors and networks putting forward substitute candidates.

In contrast, many independent or anti-Tatmadaw parties refused to contest the November elections. Extensive international publicity was given to a boycott promoted by the NLD and overseas-based activists. Nevertheless, 37 political parties contested the elections, including a handful of independent candidates and some two dozen non-government aligned parties. These opposition parties were not so naive as to believe the polls would be free and fair, but they did hope that the military regime would be confident enough in controlling the overall outcome to allow some independent voices to be elected.

Non-government parties contesting the elections have a long-term strategy of slowly expanding the amount of space available to civilian political networks in order to incrementally change the balance of power in Burma. Many regarded the 2010 elections as a 'dry run', in order to build capacities and prepare for the next polls, due to be held sometime in 2015. In the absence of the NLD, two main

urban-based, national-level opposition parties sought to gain support among citizens opposed to continued military rule: the National Democratic Force (NDF, an NLD breakaway) and the Democratic Party (Myanmar). In addition, some two dozen parties ran on behalf of the country's diverse ethnic minority nationalities. Some of these parties sought to position themselves between the government and existing opposition groups, such as the NLD. With the NLD boycotting the elections, the NDF and a handful of ethnic nationality parties became the focus of hopes for progressive change in Burma.

The turnout on November 7 was somewhere between half and two-thirds of registered voters. It seemed by late that evening that many non-government parties had done remarkably well. However, in numerous instances, vote counting was interrupted once it became apparent that pro-government candidates were losing. Subsequently, when the official results were announced over the coming days, it became apparent that many non-government candidates had been beaten by their pro-government opponents, largely due to a massive influx of 'advanced votes' which were introduced late in the day. In some cases, the number of recorded votes exceeded the total population of registered voters, indicating that election officials panicked when they realised that pro-military candidates would lose and therefore stuffed the ballot boxes.⁶²

In the final results, the pro-government USDP won 874 of the 1140 seats declared by the end of November, giving them firm control of the two national-level assemblies. The big losers on November 7 were the NDF, which succeeded in gaining only 16 seats. However, even taking into account the 25% of seats reserved for the military, pro-government parties did not have a stranglehold on all of the seven ethnic state assemblies. In fact, a number of ethnic nationality parties performed well in the elections. The party with the third-largest number of seats (57) is the Shan Nationalities Democracy Party, with Rakhine, Mon, Chin, Pao and Karen parties also winning a significant number of seats. In many cases, these small parties gained clusters of seats in their ethnic homelands, providing them with regional representation and potential influence.

Among the Karen parties, the PSDP gained nine seats (three in the upper house, two in the lower house and four in Karen State assembly). The PSDP's relatively good showing owed much to voter education and local organisational efforts at the grassroots, undertaken by Karen youth during the run-up to the elections. The KPP gained six seats (one in the upper house, one in the lower house and four in Karen State). Several KPP candidates were disappointed not to do better, especially in the Irrawaddy Delta and Tenasserim Region. Finally, although they received less publicity than the other two parties, the DKBA-aligned KSDDP gained one seat each in the upper house and Karen State. The successful KSDDP candidates included one each from the DKBA and KPF, including the latter's vice-chairman

Election leaflet of the Kayin Peoples Party (KPP)



TABLE 2: Karen Political Parties Contesting the 2010 Elections (Does not include Karen members of USDP and other parties.)

Name	Formation	Orientation	Leader	Seats [successful candidates November 7 2010 election]
Ploung-Sgaw Democracy Party	2010	Karen State-based; strong networks in Buddhist and Christian communi- ties; independent of government	Khin Maung Myint	Upper House [Na- tional Assembly]: 3 Lower House [Peo- ple's Assembly]: 2 Karen State: 4 total: 9
Karen Peoples Party	2010	Yangon and Bago Re- gions and Irrawaddy Delta-based; networks among mostly Chris- tian elites; indepen- dent of government	Tun Aung Myint	Upper House: 1 Lower House: 1 State/Region: 4 total: 6
Karen State Democracy and Development Party	2010	Formed after incorpo- ration of most DKBA and KPF units into Tatmadaw-controlled BGF; aligned with government	Tha Htoo Kyaw	Upper House: 1 Lower House: 0 Karen State: 1 total: 2

Aung Tin Myint. The influential ex-KNU Forestry Minister, P'doh Aung San, who defected in 1998, was elected for the USDP.

While some Karen and other observers have decried the lack of election unity within the community (illustrated by three separate parties contesting the polls), others suggested that this diversity was strategically wise. Any alliance of non-government groups - particularly among the Karen community, elements of which are still at war with the Tatmadaw - is likely to be perceived by the government as a threat. By dividing up the political community, Karen nationalists may be able to coordinate their positions without being perceived as a threat by Tatmadaw leaders.

In late November 2010, the government announced measures restricting certain freedoms of speech in parliament.⁶³ Nevertheless ethnic nationality parties in several of the state assemblies should be able to scrutinise - and sometimes even block - future legislation. Furthermore in the ethnic states, many USDP candidates come from minority communities and enjoy long-standing relationships with members of ethnic nationality parties. Thus an important indicator of future political freedoms will be whether, and to what degree, ethnic nationality candidates will be pressured or co-opted into following the USDP-Tatmadaw /military line, or whether in some cases they will use the space created by their election to give voice to their communities, gaining access to improved services for their electorates. Such opportunities are not without their potential pitfalls: successful candidates are likely to

be tempted by the fruits of office (including the possibilities of corruption) and, lacking experience, their vocation as future democrats is not assured.

In January 2011 the PSDP joined four other ethnic political parties in calling on the international community to lift economic sanctions on Burma and for the government to announce a general amnesty to illustrate that "the process of democratic transition has begun". The ethnic parties thereby indicated that they understand how to engage on key issues in a constructive manner, charting a course independent of both the NLD and the government. Sources close to the PSDP leadership say that they wish to remain independent of both pro- and anti-government parties, while seeking to work for development in Karen-populated areas and building capacities for the future. Nevertheless, in February two PSDP elected representatives were appointed as Kayin State ministers, together with one each from the KPP and KSDDP, one from the AMRDP, three from the USDP, and one Tatmadaw appointee.⁶⁴

The political rules and landscape in Burma remain very uncertain, as the country embarks on its first period of elected and multi-party government since 1962. Given the possibility of the four PSDP, KPP and AMRDP representatives working together, and likewise the four USDP-Tatmadaw appointees, it seemed that the (presumably pro-government) KSDDP might hold the notional balance-of-power in Karen State, at least in relation to the State assemblies' highly circumscribed powers.



Humanitarian Issues

Given the lack of accurate data regarding basic demographics in the country, it is not surprising that reliable humanitarian indicators are unavailable for many areas. The dearth of reliable information is especially acute in conflict-affected areas, to which the government and international agencies have limited access, such as southeast Burma. An Integrated Household Living Conditions Assessment conducted by the UN during 2003-5 (a sanitised version of which was published in 2007)⁶⁵ found 32% of the population of Burma living below the poverty line, with approximately 75% of household income spent on food. The survey also identified wide regional disparities; for example, 73% of people in the Chin State were living in poverty.⁶⁶ The analysis confirmed that the situation is particularly dire for people living in areas currently or recently affected by armed conflict.

Other country-wide problems include lack of access to health and education services, or to safe drinking water or adequate sanitation. As a result of deep-rooted poverty, approximately one third of children under-five in Burma are moderately malnourished and 9.4% severely malnourished. Widespread poverty is also associated with low levels of school enrolment and high drop-out rates. Despite these indicators, Burma remains what Mark Duffield has called an 'aid orphan', receiving far less foreign assistance per capita than comparable countries (e.g. Cambodia or Laos).⁶⁷

Humanitarian Assistance in Southeast Burma

Humanitarian assistance to vulnerable Karen civilians in Burma is provided by local agencies, some of which receive substantial international support.⁶⁸ Cross-border groups, working out of Thailand, have access to IDP populations in areas of ongoing armed conflict, as well as to some communities in 'mixed administration' and government-controlled areas. Most assistance is short-term relief (mainly medical assistance and cash to purchase food), which is delivered according to need and monitored by local staff. Cross-border groups are not neutral, most being the welfare wings of the KNU or allied insurgent groups. However, some cross-border groups operate more independently; for example, those working in the field of education.

The advocacy activities of Thailand-based groups generally take the form of documenting and denouncing Tatmadaw and DKBA human rights abuses. Data on IDPs is accurate, but only includes a sub-group of the vulnerable civilian population; i.e. those who make themselves available to armed conflict actors. Public advocacy reports do not analyse the relationship between assistance and the armed conflict. These documents tend to portray the civilian population as victims of the Tatmadaw and government,

usually without acknowledging the role of KNU and other anti-government forces as conflict actors.

Meanwhile, a handful of international NGOs working inside government-controlled Burma provide fairly substantial assistance to displaced and other vulnerable populations in the southeast of the country. This mostly consists of healthcare and community-based development activities, with occasional relief supplies. In order to maintain access, such assistance has to remain low profile, with local access and modes of delivery managed by national staff.

A range of civil society actors, including CBOs and local or national NGOs based out of government-controlled areas, also have access to the conflict-affected southeast, including to IDPs and adjacent communities affected by conflict. In most cases, beneficiaries live in government and/or cease-fire group-controlled areas, with some limited numbers in areas of ongoing armed conflict. In many cases, these are faith-based (Christian but also Buddhist) networks. Even more than for international NGOs, the activities of these civil society groups have to remain low profile. Assistance consists of local development projects and some relief activities, including health and education programmes. Local agencies have limited capacities to deliver assistance in technical sectors, such as healthcare, although they can play an important role in public health activities. In the future, they are likely to remain vulnerable to restriction or suppression by the state agencies of the USDP-Tatmadaw government.

While Thailand-based and cross-border agencies can be forthright in their data-collection and advocacy activities, groups working inside the country must be more cautious. With some exceptions, advocacy activities are in the mode of ‘persuasion’ (engaging behind-the-scenes with power-holders in order to modify - or mitigate the impacts - of their behaviour) and ‘mobilisation’ (quietly sharing information with mandated agencies and mobilising human rights-oriented actors). As the information and advocacy activities of groups based in Burma have to remain low-profile, they tend to be under-appreciated by political lobbying groups, especially outside the country.

Most civil society networks operating in the conflict-affected southeast are vulnerable to exposure and possible suppression by the authorities. Among other dangers, NGOs in Karen and other conflict-affected areas can be exposed to danger through contact with international – and especially high-visibility UN - agencies.

It is probable that the scope for cross-border activities will be reduced in the years to come, or at least radically transformed in nature, especially if any repatriation of refugees from Thailand goes ahead. Cross-border operations rely on armed groups to provide access to territory in Burma, on the broader advocacy movement to promote human rights and democracy in Burma and to leverage support



Water pump in Mae La refugee camp (HvdB)

and funding, and on those humanitarian agencies supporting the refugee camps for logistical support and the political cover to operate ‘under-the-radar’ in Thailand. Future constraints on each of these actors will mean that cross-border aid operations will probably have less influence and reach in the coming years. However, changes are likely to be gradual rather than sudden, and the proximity of some vulnerable populations to Thailand, combined with the logistical difficulty of reaching them from inside Burma, mean that cross-border delivery of services will continue to be relevant.

The Refugee Regime

The first semi-permanent refugee settlements in Thailand were established in Tak Province in 1984, as Karen civilians fled from fighting and human rights abuses in Burma.⁶⁹ The Royal Thai Government (RTG) allowed these people temporary refuge, so long as the task of providing basic assistance was taken up by a small number of international NGOs.

In the early years, most Karen refugees initially fled with their KNU-orientated community structures more-or-less intact. Aid agencies therefore considered it most efficient to deal with these people through refugee committees established by the KNU. This approach also suited the Thai

Horse and mule teams carry relief supplies in northern Karen State (FBR)



authorities' desire for a low-key solution to the crisis, as the RTG did not want to repeat the large-scale international refugee-oriented intervention that had occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s on the Cambodian and Lao borders. The NGOs, meanwhile, hoped to avoid imposing alien structures upon the refugees and to avoid creating 'aid dependency' among them.⁷⁰ From the outset, therefore, border-based humanitarian agencies worked through the insurgent-nominated refugee committees.

In the late 1980s the main NGO consortium assisting the refugees was reorganised, as the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC); in 2004 it was re-named the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). As well as the officially-registered NGOs, by the 1990s a number of small, unofficial groups had emerged which undertook a wide range of mostly small-scale relief and development activities, including programmes directed at Burmese migrant labourers in Thailand. Many are engaged in advocacy work, such as the documentation and denunciation of human rights abuses perpetrated by government forces, but very rarely by opposition groups.

In 1984 most of those involved had assumed that the Karen refugee crisis, and the resulting international response, would be short-lived. However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s a humanitarian and human rights industry grew up along the border, under the umbrella of the refugee relief regime, following the continued and growing influx of Karen refugees into Thailand. The NGOs, and in particular the [T]BBC, provided aid via indigenous refugee committees, such as the KNU-administered Karen Refugee Committee (KRC).⁷¹ This arrangement was based on the (generally un-

examined) assumption that the KNU was the sole legitimate representative of the Karen people, and therefore the KRC was the appropriate body to represent and administer the refugee population.⁷²

In January 2011, the refugee caseload verified by TBBC was 141,549 people, living in nine camps strung out along the middle section of the border. The previous three years had been marked by the resettlement of some 30,000 Karen and other Burmese refugees to third countries abroad. The acceptance of Karen refugees for resettlement in the West (particularly North America, but also Australia and Europe) signalled that donor countries considered it unlikely that any resolution to Burma's complex state-society and armed conflicts would be achieved soon. Despite the resettlement programme however, new arrivals continued to enter the camps at more-or-less 'replacement level'. At the same time, moves were afoot in some Thai circles to consider sending the refugees back to Burma.⁷³

Aid, Legitimacy and Conflict

Since the nineteenth century, international actors have played various roles in mediating ideas of Karen nationalism. To the present day, international NGOs supplying the refugee camps in Thailand have empowered camp administrations dominated by a self-selecting, Sgaw-speaking, largely Baptist elite, which the aid agencies accepted as the refugees' natural and legitimate representatives. For most of the history of the camps, they have been dominated by KNU-affiliated authorities, most of whom were male and Christian.

Fiona Terry⁷⁴ observes that in the process of negotiating access to needy populations, humanitarian actors often serve to legitimize non-state groups, whose cause they perceive as just. Likewise, Mark Duffield⁷⁵ analyses the ways in which relief aid can “reinforce the dominant relations and forms of ... legitimacy [and] political recognition” among the local authorities it engages with.

The position of ‘solidarity’ with the suffering people of Burma, adopted by many Thailand and overseas-based agencies, does not necessarily contradict the humanitarian principle of ‘impartiality’.⁷⁶ Indeed, it may be necessary to adopt more-or-less explicitly political positions in order to address the often political causes of humanitarian vulnerability, rather than merely responding to immediate needs. However, such positions mean that most aid agencies operating along the border are far from ‘neutral’ in their relationship to the military and political situation and in Burma. Rather, their interventions empowered one side to the armed conflict.

Thousands of personnel of the KNU/KNLA, and/or their families, continue to receive shelter in and supplies from the camps. While this may not be the purpose of interna-

tional NGOs and their donors in assisting the refugees, access to such resources supports the KNLA’s continued operations across the border. The refugee camps in Thailand have provided refuge to the victims of the civil war and unofficial base areas for the KNU and other armed groups. The existence of the refugees - and of two or three million other internally and externally displaced Burmese - provided testimony to the abuses of the military government, while the KNU’s loose control over elements of this civilian population bestowed a certain legitimacy on the insurgency.⁷⁷

Thailand-based NGOs have generally failed to investigate the impacts of foreign aid on the conflict in Burma - not only between the military government and the KNU, but also on relations between various Karen actors. Humanitarian agencies’ rice and rhetoric have supported the KNU’s militarised nation-building agenda, during a period when the Karen insurgency was becoming increasingly driven from within the refugee camps. In part, this naivety may be explained by the lack of internationally experienced humanitarian professionals along the border in the 1980s and 1990s, when few aid workers had comparative experience of refugee situations in other parts of the world.



Families in hiding in aftermath of Burma Army operation (FBR)



Contested Legitimacies

The traditional pattern of governance and state-formation in the southeastern borderlands of Burma has been similar to that in other peripheral areas of South-East Asia. Following the introduction of Theravada Buddhism in the first millennium CE/AD, emergent leaders constructed fiefdoms, mobilising populations through a combination of violence and other forms of coercion. This was often achieved by controlling access to licit and illicit natural resources and trading opportunities, and via claims to legitimate authority.

The concept of mandala is helpful to conceptualising zones of authority in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Mandala⁷⁸ are radiating zones of personalised authority, the power of which declines towards the geographic and symbolic periphery of the governed population or territory. As local rulers consolidated their authority, their associated mandala expanded in scope and cultural-symbolic significance, attracting increasing numbers of followers. The degree of often very loose control exercised by such princelings (minor princes) tended to decline with distance from the symbolic centre of power.⁷⁹ Various principalities often enjoyed overlapping claims of sovereignty in a particular area, or over certain populations and/or types of resources. While their chieftains were often in conflict, loose alliances also emerged between different mandala. The key to the fulfilment of patron-client obligations was power, and the various strata of society were loosely integrated in a series of fluctuating patrimonial relations. Thus the princeling-warlord stood in a patron-client relationship to his followers or subjects.

In this political culture, the exercise of power provided its own legitimisation. To assume the throne was to exemplify merit. Especially if he was the leader of a peasant rebellion, the emergent strong-man generally claimed legitimacy as a charismatic *min laung* (pretender to Buddhist kingdom). Stability emerges in such a system, when a ruler is able to establish control over lesser princes. Petty chieftains sought to secure their authority and prestige through accepting vassal status vis-à-vis, and paying tribute to, a greater power, be it more powerful local prince or a firmly established lowland kingdom.⁸⁰

The Politics of Legitimacy

Most senior KNU leaders demonstrate an ideological commitment to a combination of nationalism and democracy, positioned within the framework of liberal capitalism. Previously, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the organisation adopted a more left-wing 'national democratic' ideology.⁸¹

By the 1970s, the KNU had abandoned ideas of an independent (secessionist) Kawthoolei, in favour of a feder-

The Romance of 'Zomia'

An alternative conceptualisation of the KNU and other non-state actors' forms of governance valorises their semi-autonomous zones of authority as spaces of resistance to the oppressive and predatory lowland state. Such notions derive in part from an historical analysis of processes of state-formation in Southeast Asia, and the transnational and transitional lacunae between these. Perhaps most celebrated among such perspectives is James Scott's⁸² adaptation of Van Schendel's notion of 'Zomia'.⁸³

Understanding state and non-state spaces to be mutually constitutive, Scott describes the latter as sites of 'anarchist autonomy'. His account focuses primarily on the pre-modern era, before the closure of the Southeast Asian 'land frontier'. This was a time when flight from the lowland state, up into the hills, was feasible for large numbers of people, who thus came to be identified as 'ethnic minorities'.

Unfortunately, such analysis easily lends itself to a romanticisation of non-state spaces as sites of 'resistance', while underplaying the manner in which such zones are themselves sites of often violent contests for power. Indeed, Scott's analysis is strangely apolitical, rarely taking account of elite positions or the influences of socio-economic interests. Instead, the valorisation of non-state spaces serves to perpetuate the myth of 'heroic freedom fighters' in the hills of Burma. Scott's analysis nevertheless indicates an important dimension of conflict in southeast Burma: that many Karen and other civilians desire above all else to be left alone, to pursue their lives in peace.

alist platform, epitomised by the organisation's status as founding member of the pan-ethnic insurgent NDF. By the 1980s, the KNU was articulating a position that "the Karen revolution is a fight for self-determination and true democracy."⁸⁴ Today, the KNU continues to appeal to values, such as "private ownership ... democratic rights, politically, economically, socially and culturally. Freedom and equality of all religions is guaranteed."⁸⁵ Furthermore, "we strongly believe in the Charter of the United Nations, its Declaration on Human Rights, the principle of Self-Determination and the Democratic Rights of Peoples."⁸⁶

According to Gravers,⁸⁷ the KNU struggle involves the construction of a "pan-Karen global and cosmopolitan identity." In this, the KNU has been supported by a network of Thailand- and overseas-based (transnational) activists and lobbyists, with linkages to the Burmese opposition-in-exile that emerged following the suppression of the 1988 democracy protests and the SLORC junta's refusal to recognise the results of the 1990 elections. Exile groups have played important roles in patronising certain elements

of the KNU, and influencing the organisation's positions on a range of issues, including its support for certain exile political formations.⁸⁸ Indeed, the (then) KNU Foreign Affairs Secretary, David Taw⁸⁹ has described how in 1993 exile Burmese politicians prevailed upon Gen. Bo Mya not to pursue a ceasefire with the military government, because they expected the 'international community' to support the KNU and its exile allies in a diplomatic campaign against the SLORC, thus hastening victory for the opposition alliance.

From the 1960s, and especially from the 1970s through the 1980s after the organisation jettisoned most of its leftist policies, the KNU derived support through its role as a 'buffer' between communist insurgents in Thailand and Burma. The KNU consolidated a strong anti-communist identity, which made it a useful minor (and unacknowledged) ally of the US during the Cold War. However, with the collapse of communism in Southeast Asia, the KNU's geo-strategic importance - and thus its value as a strategic player - declined. In some ways, the organisation can be seen as a remnant of the Cold War years.

In addition to Thai (and by proxy, American) business and security interests, foreign influences on the KNU came to include Western aid agencies and donors, many of which were mobilised through transnational networks. Material support has generally been provided in the form of refugee and IDP relief, which since the 1980s has become a major 'humanitarian industry'.⁹⁰

As the KNU lost control of its once-extensive 'liberated zones' in the 1980s and 1990s, foreign aid insulated the organisation and its supporters from the realities of life in Burma. The camps in Thailand provided refuge to the victims of the civil war as well as to personnel and family members of the KNU and other armed groups. This was a significant, although unintended, development in the KNU's increasingly dependent relationship with international patrons. The existence of the refugees provided testimony to the abuses of the military government, while the KNU's loose control over this civilian population bestowed some legitimacy on the insurgency back over the frontier.⁹¹

The refugee camps also brought Karen networks in closer contact with Western visitors and influences. Since the nineteenth century, international actors have played various roles in mediating ideas of Karen nationalism, often associated with a strong Christian identity.⁹² From the early 1980s international NGOs began supplying the refugee camps in Thailand and (later, and to a lesser extent) displaced people across the border. Such interventions have empowered the KNU's Sgaw dialect-speaking, largely Christian (mostly Baptist) KNU elite, which the aid agencies accepted unquestioningly as representative of a linguistically and religiously diverse Karen community. No doubt unwittingly, foreign donors and aid agencies thereby

reinforced the KNU's identification of Karen nationalism with Christianity and related ideas of 'modernity' and 'progress'.⁹³

Since the 1960s, the KNU leadership has reproduced an essentialised and stylised form of Sgaw Christian culture as the authentic expression of Karen identity. This 'Sgawization' of Karen society in the borderlands and refugee camps resembled aspects of the central state's Burmanisation of national culture, for which the military government has been criticized by ethno-nationalist opposition groups and activists.⁹⁴ This phenomenon helps to explain the frustration felt by many non-Christian Karen, and thus the emergence of the DKBA.⁹⁵

The DKBA emerged in the mid-1990s in the context of the fragmentation of the once-dominant KNU mandala. Unlike the KNU, which remains orientated towards external patronage, the DKBA looked to support from the military government, which has been a jealous suzerain, prone to violent, punitive and disciplinary campaigns. Sixteen years after its foundation, the DKBA (and DKBA BGFs) remains detached from international networks, in part due to most commanders' lack of English language skills and their non-Christian faiths. Furthermore, the DKBA does not reproduce the liberal democratic, rights-oriented discourse favoured by international donors and dominant in the mainstream fields of security and protection, on which foreign patronage is generally conditional. Therefore, although they enjoy considerable influence at the community level (and in relation to the government), the DKBA and other non-liberal actors tend to be marginalised in international discourse and practice.

Claims to legitimate authority beyond the KNU's decreasing circle of influence have tended to rely on a combination of coercion and other forms of violence, the purchase of loyalty, and appeal to traditional values. For DKBA field commanders, legitimacy derives from their roles as local strongmen, whose exercise of power is proof of legitimacy, and as guardians and protectors of non-Christian (particularly Buddhist) Karen religion, and non-Sgaw (particularly Pwo speaking) Karen dialects. Indeed, DKBA leaders have reportedly demanded that the Eastern Pwo dialect be recognised as the official language of Karen State.

As Ingrid Jordt observes regarding legitimisation in Burma, understandings of "political authority ... must be situated from the point of view of the governed."⁹⁶ Although the DKBA was a fragmentary organisation, often acting as a proxy for the Tatmadaw, its leaders nevertheless have made (often implicit) claims to legitimacy which seem to resonate with sections of the Karen community. This approach is illustrated by Col. Chit Thu of the 999 Special Battalion, who has 'vowed' that he will promote and protect the Karen peoples' "existence, foundation, culture and tradition, our heredity, religion, way of life and convention."⁹⁷ Such agendas may be characterised as 'modernist', inasmuch as individual DKBA commanders like Chit Thu promote a 'top-down' model of economic development.

Other appeals to legitimisation are not couched in the rational-bureaucratic, rights-based language and rationale familiar to and sponsored by the international humanitarian and human rights community. Rather, the DKBA's agenda resonates within non-westernised elements of the Karen community. According to Gravers⁹⁸, the "zone of peace and

KNU leaders Soe Soe, Kaserdoh, Bo Mya and Htoo Htoo Lay in Mae Sot in 2004 (HvdB)



Buddhist merit [as devised by the Thamanya and Myaing Gyi Nyu sayadaws] is probably still a model, that can attract Karen across denominations and intra-ethnic boundaries.”

Under these traditional forms of governance, the superior power (the king, or in this case, Tatmadaw commanders) has an interest in ensuring that tributary powers (e.g. the DKBA) do not gather too much strength to themselves, thus challenging the authority of the centre. It is for this reason that the military government has regularly rotated powerful regional commanders in order to ensure that they do not consolidate too much local control. Such concerns also explain the government’s move in 2009-10 to incorporate the DKBA and other non-state armed groups into Tatmadaw-controlled Border Guard Forces. With the acceptance by most DKBA leaders of the BGF order, the future military and political influence of the organisation on Karen society is likely to diminish.

Beyond the Mainstream

In such a contested and violent political and economic sphere, the DKBA has not been unique among non-KNU Karen armed groups. Earlier claims to the status of custodian and legitimate political vanguard of ‘traditional’ Karen ethno-culture were, for example, made in the 1970s by the religious sect, the Telecon and other traditionally-oriented movements.⁹⁹ However, observers have generally regarded such traditionally-oriented movements as historical or cultural oddities. The Telecon and other millenarian groups have not been deemed serious political actors, in part because such groups have expressed their concerns and aspirations, and organized their activities, according to traditional conceptions of power.

At least two branches of the long-haired Telecon sect exist in the villages of Kyain Seikkyi and Kawkareik townships where the KNLA Sixth and parts of the Seventh Brigade operate or control territory. The majority of the original 40-plus Telecon villages of Kyain Seikkyi fled to the border in the late 1990s, as a result of Tatmadaw offensives against the KNU. The Telecon sect was founded in the mid-19th century by a charismatic spiritual leader, the Poo Kyaik. While acknowledging the importance of the historical Buddha (Gautama), the Telecon look toward the coming of a ‘white monk’, who will prepare the way for the future Buddha-to-come (Arimettaya). In the meantime, members of the cult, who include both Sgaw and Pwo speakers, observe numerous taboos and perform various rituals associated with the Karen animist heritage. Telecon leaders have at times positioned themselves as the ‘true’ Karen, guardians of the ancient heritage in opposition to the modernist KNU. Until quite recently, Telecon monks in the Kawkareik area engaged in military activities, especially during the full-moon period, when their purity and magical practices were considered to make them invulnerable. With the aid



Poster of 'Karen National Leaders'

of various supernatural entities, including life-size, animated statues, they have occasionally engaged the Tatmadaw, but with mixed success.¹⁰⁰

In the KNLA Sixth Brigade area in 1972, the ninth Poo Kyaik (ninth in succession from the sect’s founder) explicitly challenged the KNU for local leadership of the Karen nationalist community, calling the Telecon the only culturally ‘pure’ Karen and denouncing the KNU’s misguided leadership. Having been invited to the brigade headquarters for talks, a dozen Telecon leaders were put on trial and executed on the order of the Sixth Brigade Commander.

Millenarian tendencies have also emerged in Karen communities further to the south, in the Tenasserim Region where the KNLA Fourth Brigade is based. ‘God’s Army’, or ‘The Soldiers of the Holy Mountain’, was formed in the immediate aftermath of the major Tatmadaw offensive against the KNU in February 1997. Following the collapse of the mainstream Kaw Thoo Lei forces, villagers and KNLA remnants rallied around two twelve year old twins, Johnny and Luther Htoo, who led their followers to some surprising, if minor victories, in armed clashes with government troops.

Guided - or manipulated - by local Karen elders, the twins and their 200-strong, rag-tag militia enjoyed some notoriety in the Thai and international media. However, God’s Army eventually broke up under pressure from the Thai authorities, following a bloody siege of a hospital in Ratchaburi in Thailand in January 2000.¹⁰¹

Following their surrender to the Thai authorities in 2000, the Htoo twins were quietly settled at Don Yang refugee camp near Sangkhlaburi, where they later married and had children of their own. In June 2006 government intelligence operatives persuaded Johnny to return to Burma.

The Reorientation of Karen Armed Networks

As the power and degree of territorial control enjoyed by the KNU has declined since the 1980s, so too has its ability to enforce a minimum degree of compliance upon neo-patrimonial strongmen operating on the peripheries of its shrinking fields of influence. The authority of the old insurgent mandalas had at one time permeated most Thailand-Burma border areas. By the 1990s though, the Tatmadaw and government constituted the dominant centre of power in these contested zones.

The DKBA phenomenon is a prime example of the manner in which armed groups and networks along the Thailand-Burma border, which were once under the loose authority of the insurgent mandala, have been re-oriented as clients of the Tatmadaw. For example, in the late 1990s, in KNU Leh Deh Soe Township (northern Tenasserim Region), a Karen strongman named Da Bleh emerged as an ally of local Burma Army commanders. The Tatmadaw had greatly expanded its presence in the area, as a result of the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline.¹⁰² Local Burma Army commanders were largely content to let Da Bleh's militia provide security in the southern sector of the 'pipeline corridor', which in practice meant denying the KNLA Fourth Brigade access to the area. With his authority enhanced by Tatmadaw patronage, Da Bleh was able to impose a degree of stability in his area of control and began to attract some displaced villagers to settle in what amounted to an unofficial ceasefire zone. Around this time, a handful of Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO - KNU 'home guard') soldiers defected to Da Bleh's militia and began working with him on local logging deals. Following some internal disputes regarding the division of revenues, the ex-KNDO men decided to move against Da Bleh. During the conflict, militia men loyal to Da Bleh burnt down the ex-KNDO contingents' camp. On 6 March 2001 the latter retaliated, attacking Da Bleh's house and killing him, his wife and son.

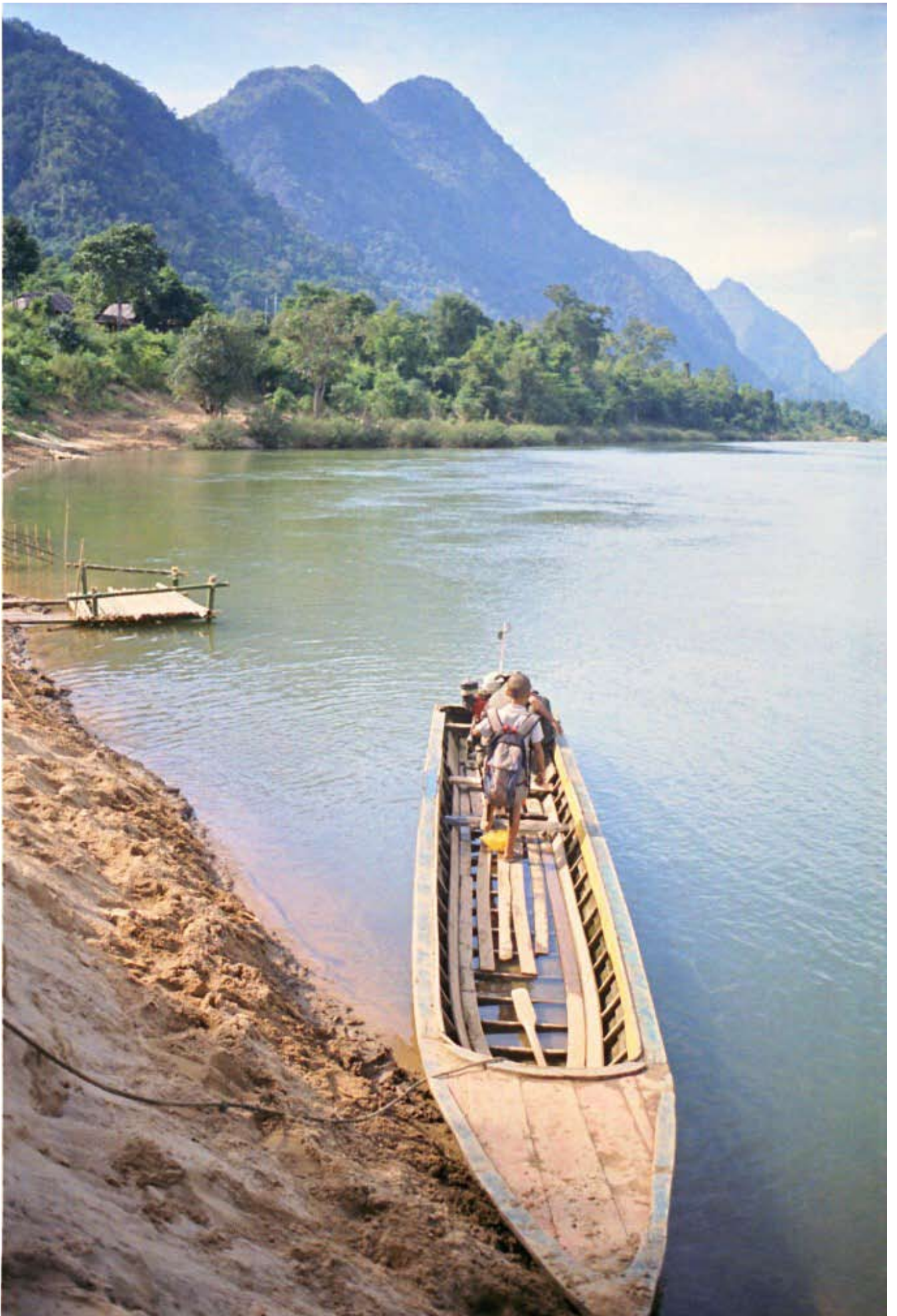
Another example of changing loyalties on the front-lines of conflict is provided by the case of Lt-Col. Thu Mu Hae and the Karen Peace Force (a.k.a. Hongtharong Special Region). Since the late 1980s, Thu Mu Hae's Sixteenth Battalion had operated more-or-less independently of Brig-Gen. Shwe Hser's KNLA Sixth Brigade headquarters. Officials from the mainstream KNU could only enter Thu Mu Hae's area of control in Kawkareik Township, if accompanied by fifty-plus soldiers. Thu Mu Hae's battalion was in effect a private warlord army, which acknowledged the symbolic leadership of the KNU, but was by no means under its control.

Until the late 1990s, it suited both parties to maintain the fiction that Thu Mu Hae and his followers were part of the KNU. However, in February 1997 the Tatmadaw launched a major offensive against the remaining KNU strongholds in the Fourth and Sixth Brigade areas. Thu Mu Hae quickly switched his allegiance to the Tatmadaw, allowing it to gain control of much of the Sixth Brigade area (KNU Duplaya District) without encountering organised resistance.

The fall of Duplaya District caused a mass exodus of refugees to flee into Thailand. The following month, Thu Mu Hae was featured on Burmese state television in a ceremony during which his men (few of whom had been forewarned) handed over their weapons to SLORC Vice-Chairman, Gen. Maung Aye. In exchange for his compliance, Thu Mu Hae's newly-formed KPF was given control over three ceasefire zones: near Kyain Seikkyi, in the Three Pagodas Pass area, and near Kyaikdon in central Duplaya District. The group was also granted various, mostly small-scale, business concessions. This arrangement served to further divide the Karen armed groups, not least by setting up a rivalry in lower Karen State between the KPF and another government client, the DKBA.

A further example is provided by the defection of elements of the KNLA's Seventh Brigade on February 11 2007, when the elderly brigade commander, Brig-Gen. Htein Maung, split from the KNU to make a separate peace with the government. Following the death of his old ally and patron (and Seventh-day Adventist co-religionist), the KNU strongman Gen. Bo Mya, Htein Maung and his advisers sought to make a ceasefire in their area of influence in central Karen State in the name of the KNU-KNLA Peace Council. The Peace Council has since initiated relief and community development projects in areas under its influence, with some international assistance.¹⁰³

The post-armed conflict landscape in Karen-populated areas could hardly be described as 'peace'. Along most of the Thailand border, the Tatmadaw still operated as a marauding army, terrorizing local populations. Practices such as forced labour, extra-judicial arrests and punishments carried out against perceived opponents remained widespread.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, in areas of 'mixed administration', overlapping centres of power still exert authority (and extract resources) from villagers. Even in areas of greater stability, day-to-day life for most people is a struggle for survival in the face of deteriorating local economies, and systematic injustices and structural violence, perpetrated by a range of predatory power-holders. However, some pockets of relative stability and civility exist in the form of local zones of influence (and indeed of safety), exercised by non-military patrons, especially charismatic religious leaders. These civilian networks represent an alternative set of relationships and axes of authority to the armed groups and networks that still dominate many aspects of daily life. In summary, the Karen State had ceasefires but it did not have peace.



The Moei River, with Karen State on the left side (TK)



Karen Politics in a Time of Change

For many Karen nationalists, the KNU enjoys a special status as the vanguard party of 'the revolution'. Karen civilians have a range of opinions regarding different conflict actors. Many express considerable sympathy for the KNU as representing 'our people'. Such views are particularly common among Christian Karens, but are also shared by many Buddhists and animists.¹⁰⁵ However many of the same people also expressed dismay regarding the impact that KNU actions have on villagers' safety.¹⁰⁶

The organisation's long and desperate struggle also gives it a symbolic weight in Burmese politics, beyond the KNU's actual military and political capacities. Nevertheless, the KNU's authority is in steep decline. Although its supporters may attempt to present the organisation as the sole legitimate representative of the Karen people, such presumptions are not necessarily shared by the wider Karen community. Indeed because of defections and breakaways by groups still claiming KNU legacies, many Karen people in front-line areas question which among the competing factions actually is the KNU.

Particularly notable are contrasts between the KNU central leadership based in the Thai border town of Mae Sot and the organisation's District administrations inside Burma, some of which are characterised by fairly high levels of political dynamism. Meanwhile, it seems that the DKBA's widespread use of coercion and arbitrary taxation and conscription tactics, employed in its 2009 campaign against the KNU, is widely resented by people living in the border areas. Indeed it is unlikely that the DKBA can continue with this strategy in the future, as to do so would risk depopulating the areas under its control, as civilians flee, unable to bear increased demands for taxation and recruits.

Furthermore, following its 2010 transformation into government-controlled BGFs, it is questionable whether such an entity as the DKBA continues to exist, beyond those elements of the organisation that refused to comply. It remains to be seen whether ex-DKBA BGF leaders can (or are interested in trying to) reinvent themselves and their organisation in a way which generates positive support from at least some elements of the Karen community. The ex-DKBA BGF battalions (or individual commanders) may make appeals to locally-relevant aspects of legitimacy, based on 'traditional Karen values' rather than on Western-originated norms of democracy and human rights. For example, DKBA Brigade 999 Commander Pah Nwe has in the past been ordained as a monk and is well known for building pagodas in areas under his control.

Regardless of whether such a transformation is conceivable, it seems clear that the KNU's historic attempt to reconfigure Kawthoolei as a 'modern' state, based on uni-

versal, international norms has failed - or at least badly faltered. The KNU's failure was prefigured in the manner in which its field commanders have, for many years, tended to act as neo-patrimonial warlords, in the areas under their control. Despite the rhetoric produced by its headquarters leadership, and reproduced by international supporters, the KNU has focused more on developing positions (pro-human rights and democracy, anti-military dictatorship and drugs) than ensuring that day-to-day governance in the areas under its control reflected such values. More fundamentally, the organisation has been encouraged through Western support to believe that the international community would make good on the promise to promote democracy in Burma through support of the KNU's nation/state-building goals. Although, among the peoples in Southeast Asia without a state, the Karen have come closest to establishing their own de facto para-state, in 2011 this dream seems further away than ever.

Over the past two decades the KNU has become highly dependent on foreign support in terms of humanitarian and symbolic assistance. The KNU has also become dependent on the existence of refugee camps, and supply lines to Thailand. It seems likely that the camps will eventually be closed, for three inter-linked reasons: firstly, depopulation as a result of overseas resettlement, particularly to the USA (which generally removes better-educated refugees and many KNU cadres), combined with moves to better integrate the remaining refugee population in local Thai-Karen villages; secondly, declining funding due to 'donor fatigue', which is exacerbated by the global financial crisis; and thirdly, the desire of the Royal Thai Government for better relations with the Burma government and for great-

er security for investments, such as roads and dams, along the border. In particular, the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Salween River will disrupt cross-border supply to northern Karen State, further weakening the KNU but not the DKBA, which is regarded as supporting these projects. The Dawei Development Project in the Tenasserim Region is likely to have a similar impact on the KNU. In the case of this and other mega-development projects, Karen social and political organisations are challenged to demonstrate their relevance in a rapidly changing political and economic environment.

Borderland marginalisation for the KNU relates to another important challenge. As the KNU has lost territory over the years, the organisation has lost touch with the majority of the Karen population in Burma. Although it retains a following among those populations in the hills to which it still has access, many other Karens feel alienated or marginalised and distant from the KNU, especially non-Christians. This is the single greatest challenge facing any pan-Karen political organisation: to connect with both Sgaw and Pwo speaking, Christian and non-Christian (particularly Buddhist) communities. Large numbers of Pwo-speaking Buddhists regard themselves as Karens and, as the 2010 election demonstrated, will support a Karen political organisation. They generally distrust the government (and respect Aung San Suu Kyi), but do not feel represented by the KNU. As a result, many Buddhists have supported the DKBA, but over the years most feel disappointed by the outcome of its political-military enterprise.

At the KNU's October 2008 14th Congress, a group of reform-minded leaders tried to persuade their colleagues

Ceremony of DKBA unit transformation into BGF



of the need to substantially reform the organisation, adopt more accountable procedures and review key policy positions. Instead, hardliners within the KNU prevailed, backed by exile Burmese groups who have a strong interest in prolonging the armed conflict in Burma. This outcome was a reflection of the infighting and uncertainties over strategies that have undermined the KNU's coherence since the 1990s. But for these reformers within the KNU, this was perhaps the organisation's last chance to embrace reform at a meaningful time.

Significant differences also exist between the 'Mae Sot KNU' (a critical moniker, designating the Thailand-based senior leadership) and KNU - especially KNLA - formations inside Kawthoolei. In particular, in recent years tensions have emerged between the KNU/KNLA Third and Fifth Brigades in the north (and also Fourth Brigade in Tenasserim Region in the south) and the central leadership. Instead of reforming at the 14th Congress, the KNU re-committed itself to an all-or-nothing victory in its battle against the military government under the leadership of veteran guerrilla commander, Lt-Gen. Tamlah Baw. However, as national and regional geo-politics continue to change around the KNU, the organisation's future looks increasingly precarious.

There is a warning here from history. As long as there were Hmong refugee camps in Thailand, the Hmong ethnic insurgency in Laos could continue, using the camps as fall-back bases. However with the closure of the last Laos-origin refugee camps along the northern border in the 1990s, the Hmong insurgency was reduced to a few rag-tag guerrilla bands that pose no threat to the Lao government but, conversely, did serve as a pretext for the continued militarisation of remote, ethnic minority-populated areas.

Despite such disappointments and portents of KNU failure, the Karen population in Burma still could be mobilised to achieve certain socio-political goals. In the 21st century, the Karen cause will not only depend on the KNU. Large numbers of Karen people living beyond the hills (e.g. in central Karen State, Yangon and the Irrawaddy Delta) have had little contact with the KNU for many years. Many of these communities nevertheless retain a strong Karen identity. As the 2010 general election showed, other Karen networks are emerging that seek to represent the Karen cause. Indeed, the continuing conflict with the KNU provides the government with a pretext for militarisation and repression, further constraining the ability of Karen communities to undertake development activities and mobilise politically in government-controlled areas where the great majority of Karen people live.

The challenge thus remains how the legacies of armed struggle, and the mostly elusive quest for unity among the Karen peoples, will be resolved in the cause of achieving peace, justice and equitable representation in the modern state of Burma.

A Commission of Inquiry?

With the organisation in crisis in the border areas, KNU leaders have looked to the international community to solve their and Burma's problems. Perhaps overly-reliant on the rhetoric of exile Burmese politicians and their support networks, those leaders remaining within the KNU have supported calls to hold the Burmese military government accountable to international legal standards.

The UN Human Rights Council and its predecessor have appointed a series of Special Rapporteurs for Burma, whom the government has often denied access to the country. In addition, the UN Secretary-General has appointed a series of Special Representatives and Advisers, tasked with promoting reconciliation between the government and opposition parties and ethnic groups. The human rights situation in southeast Burma has been one of several serious concerns raised by these envoys.¹¹¹

There has also been considerable pressure from international human rights organizations, exiled opposition and activist groups for some form of UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry into alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes in Burma. The current Special Rapporteur has raised this possibility in a recent report¹¹², and the possibility has been endorsed or supported by two of his predecessors and by a number of Western states. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether any Commission of Inquiry will be established.¹¹³ Calls for such a body, however, can have an impact on the ground, especially in terms of humanitarian access to southeast Burma. Civilian and military authorities are likely to be very sensitive to the UN or other international agencies expanding access into precisely those areas where it is alleged that international crimes have taken place. There is also likely to be controversy over who would be the subject of such an inquiry - i.e. would it focus on abuses by armed opposition as well as government forces?

The Border Guard Forces and their Discontents

To date, the transformation of ceasefire groups into Border Guard Forces has not proceeded smoothly, neither in Karen State nor in the rest of Burma.¹⁰⁷ In June and again in October 2009 the KNU/KNLA Peace Council, under the leadership of the former KNLA Seventh Brigade commander Brig-Gen Htein Maung, refused the SPDC order to reform into a Tatmadaw-controlled BGF. Peace Council leaders feared that this refusal might earn the wrath of the military government and expose them to future vulnerability. Nevertheless they took the risk. Relations with the Tatmadaw then deteriorated further in December 2010, when six Peace Council soldiers were killed by government

soldiers.¹⁰⁸ However in early 2011 the KNU/KNLA Peace Council continued to control about a dozen villages along the Moei River as well as its headquarters areas at To Kaw Ko, southeast of Hpa'an.¹⁰⁹

In contrast, on 23 August 2010 another Karen ceasefire group, the KPF was quietly transformed into a BGF militia under direct Tatmadaw control.¹¹⁰ At this time the ailing Thu Mu Hae retired, following the stipulation that BGF personnel be under fifty years old. Like the DKBA BGFs, some KPF leaders also participated in the 2010 elections.

The greatest volatility, however, occurred within the DKBA, where many troops were unhappy about the BGF orders. This discontent burst into the open on election day, 7 November, when the strategic border town of Myawaddy in central Karen State was occupied by elements of the DKBA¹¹⁴ led by Col. La Pwe (N'kam Mweh: 'Mr Moustache'), a field commander who was dissatisfied with the limited political and economic opportunities available in the new political environment in Burma.¹¹⁵ Sometimes referred to as DKBA Brigade 5, this militia preferred the designation 'Kloh Htoo Baw' (or 'Golden-Yellow Drum'). Reliable sources estimated the strength of N'kam Mweh's soldiers at over 500 men.

The following day, 8 November, other non-BGF DKBA battalions occupied the small town of Three Pagodas Pass in southern Karen State.¹¹⁶ In both places, several people were killed, and state property was damaged. As a result, some 20,000 refugees fled to Thailand from Myawaddy and surrounding areas. About 3,000 refugees fled from Three Pagodas Pass to Thailand, with a similar or greater number moving into the adjacent NMSP-controlled ceasefire zone. On 11 November the Tatmadaw overran N'kam Mweh's

base camp at Waley in central Karen State, displacing more people into Thailand and forcing others into hiding in the borderlands. These episodes of forced migration constituted the largest movement of refugees into Thailand in a decade.¹¹⁷ The outbreak of hostilities between the Tatmadaw and elements of the DKBA was particularly devastating for villages which had enjoyed relative stability in recent years (for example, near Three Pagodas Pass and in the Waley area).

Following clashes with the Tatmadaw, on 9 November the renegade DKBA force withdrew from Myawaddy. A week later, a small ceremony was held in southern Karen State, in which N'kam Mweh's renegade DKBA forces formally allied with the KNLA. The situation at nearby Three Pagodas Pass was more confusing, with control of the town changing hands at least once during the week, before government forces reasserted control.

Once the Tatmadaw had regained control of Myawaddy, the Thai authorities began to repatriate refugees - in some cases, against their will. Many refugees from Three Pagodas Pass in the Sangkhlaburi area returned home, only to flee back to Thailand later, when fighting broke out again. Further north, in the area around Myawaddy, refugees and IDPs remained in an uncertain situation in the area between Waley and Phop Phra in Thailand. Human rights and relief organisations working on the border reported numerous instances of Thai soldiers pushing Karen refugees from this area back across the border.¹¹⁸ In part, such responses by the Thai authorities illustrate the anger felt by many business and security personnel in Thailand, whose investments in southeast Burma appear threatened by such episodes of insecurity. Indeed, KNLA sources report that Thai business and security interests were extremely frus-



IDP camp in Karen State (HvdB)

trated with Col. N'Kam Mweh's actions, and have repeatedly told the KNU that while fighting inside Burma is acceptable, armed conflict should not flare up along the border. As a result of KNU and DKBA tensions in the border areas, the lucrative trade gate between Myawaddy and Mae Sot was closed in early 2010, costing local Thai and Burmese businesspeople millions of dollars a week.

Senior KNLA sources indicate that the emergence of widespread dissatisfaction within the DKBA ranks is a mixed blessing for the KNU. There are concerns that Col. N'Kam Mweh may be 'playing' the KNU, in order to leverage the government. According to this argument, N'Kam Mweh is jealous of his rival commander in the DKBA, Chit Thu, and may have launched the attack on Myawaddy in order to demonstrate his power to the government, with the aim of getting a better deal out of eventually transforming his battalions into BGF units. Reportedly, the DKBA's patron monk, U Thuzana, visited N'Kam Mweh to request him to join the BGF.¹¹⁹ In a similar vein, senior KNLA informants indicate that they have requested large numbers of dissatisfied rank-and-file DKBA personnel not to defect to the KNLA in 2010, because they are worried that these troops are very undisciplined and that their behaviour may not reflect well on the KNU.

These developments were a reminder that the KNU and its new 'DKBA' allies could still play important roles as 'spoilers', undermining stability in the border areas. They were also testimony to widespread frustration regarding the lack of political progress in Burma among (but not limited to) ethnic minority communities.

By November 2010 several hundred ex-DKBA personnel and their family members had defected to the KNU/KNLA, taking refuge in Mae La and Umpien Mai refugee camps. Many more DKBA troops were reportedly frustrated at having been transformed into BGF units. Incidents were reported of Karen BGF soldiers tearing off their military patches and protesting loudly. Following the incidents in early November in Myawaddy and Three Pagodas Pass, local Tatmadaw commanders reportedly allowed DKBA chiefs (and particularly Col. Chit Thu) to resume greater authority in the day-to-day running of the BGF battalions. Nevertheless, a group of about 70 DKBA ex-999 Special Battalion soldiers in the area of the old KNU headquarters at Manerplaw were also reportedly unhappy with the BGF transformation, and in December 2010 were threatening to defect to the KNU. Such sentiments were exacerbated when Karen flags were taken down at former DKBA bases, such as Shwe Ko Ko, and replaced by the new Myanmar national flag.

In the middle-to-long-term, the brief occupation of Myawaddy and Three Pagodas Pass was probably not very significant. Border-based insurgency has been in decline for some years, with most armed ethnic groups marginalised in relation to major developments in the country.

Nevertheless, insurgency in Burma may be prolonged a while longer, if the KIO, NMSP and other non-BGF ceasefire groups join forces with the KNU and remaining insurgent groups.

As frustration over the BGF order and the 2010 elections grew, a new military and political alliance emerged between the KNU and a range of other armed ethnic groups. In November 2010 a Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union was established, which was succeeded in February 2011 by the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). The 12 UNFC member organisations included the KNU and several smaller ethnic insurgent organisations, plus three ceasefire groups: the KIO, NMSP and Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army-North (SSPP/SSA). The new alliance was dominated by military commanders, as symbolised by the appointment of KNLA Commander-in-Chief Mutu Saepaw as UNFC Chairman; NMSP General Secretary, Nai Hongsa was named General Secretary, demonstrating that some key ceasefire group leaders wished to send a strong signal of discontent to the government.

The establishment of the UNFC alliance represented an important symbolic development, publicly confirming the behind-the-scenes relationships which had always existed between Burma's ethnic ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups. It also illustrated a degree of confusion regarding the complex plethora of opposition alliances within which armed ethnic groups such as the KNU are embedded (including the NDF, ENC and NCUB). Although the degrees of assistance these groups could lend each other was necessarily limited, due to their territorial fragmentation, the new alliance indicated that militarisation remained a fact of life in many ethnic minority-populated areas. This was especially the case in the context of an upsurge of Burma Army activities directed against the KNU and non-BGF compliant DKBA units during the 2010-11 dry season.

Ultimately, the new alliance differed little in make-up to the NDF joint front of armed ethnic groups, which had failed to achieve its objectives and had broken up under pressure from the Tatmadaw in the 1990s. Given that the NMSP and KIO were unlikely to initiate armed conflict against government forces, the significance of the UNFC was therefore primarily symbolic. Furthermore, two key armed ethnic groups, the (ceasefire) UWSA and (non-ceasefire) Shan State Army-South were not represented in the new alliance.

In the meantime, the latest bout of fighting along the Thailand border was largely directed against the breakaway DKBA faction and adjacent KNLA units, with the situation in most KNU areas further inside the country reportedly fairly stable (as of late February 2011). These clashes along the border led to large numbers of civilians being displaced, many of whom sought refuge in Thailand, resulting in several incidents of forced repatriation by the Royal Thai Army between December 2010 and February 2011.

The Aung San Suu Kyi Factor

For many people in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi is an inspiring symbol of hope. Following her latest release from house arrest, just five days after the November elections, she began to mobilise her supporters.

Relationships between 'the lady' and the government could become confrontational, quite quickly. In this case, the military is unlikely to allow even semi-independent voices in the elected assemblies to have much autonomy. Leaders of some ethnic nationality parties have already indicated their willingness to work with Aung San Suu Kyi, and even follow her leadership. If such alliances coalesce, this could lead to a new phase of zero-sum political conflict in Burma.

In one of her most significant - and controversial - statements since her release, Aung San Suu Kyi endorsed the possibility of re-visiting one of the foundational documents of Burma's independence: the Panglong agreement of 12 February 1947, under which leaders of some ethnic nationality communities (although not the Karen) agreed to join the Union of Burma. In line with a declaration produced before the election at Kale in Chin State, she joined a number of ethnic nationality leaders in calling for a 'second Panglong conference' to renegotiate the relationship between the central state and Burma's diverse ethnic nationalities.¹²⁰ Calls for a 'new Panglong' symbolise the widespread dissatisfaction with Burma's current political settlement felt by many ethnic nationality communities. However, such 'politics of the grand plan' remain stuck in the 20th-century, and demonstrate little in the way of the pragmatism and strategic flexibility.

Meanwhile, some local NGO and CBO actors in Burma are concerned that Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters may turn to activism in the civil society sector, following the political de-registration of the NLD, as a result of it not contesting the 2010 election. They are worried that, if the NLD branches out into social work, this may politicise the civil society sector, inviting unwanted attention from the state authorities and possibly undermining existing relief and development activities.

Despite such developments, the long-term prognosis for insurgency in the borderlands remained one of decline, especially given the unlikelihood of Thai (or further to the north, Chinese) support for the resumption of large-scale armed conflict in Burma. Southeast Burma remains characterised by a complex patchwork of different military, political and community-based organisations, reflecting continuing state-society tensions. The humanitarian and livelihoods situation for Karen and other civilians living in these areas remains dire.

Future Prospects

As new national and regional/state governments form during the first quarter of 2011, Karen politics - like national politics - are undergoing their most uncertain cycle in two decades. Previous eras of governmental change in Burma have been followed by volatility, and recent events in Karen-populated areas prefigure significant but uncertain changes in the coming year. In this context, any predictions have to be made with caution.

In exchange for incorporation of their units into the BGF, most DKBA leaders are likely to expand their economic interests in Karen State. These include various logging, mining and, reportedly, illicit yaba drug trafficking activities. For its part, the new military-backed government is planning to build further economically and militarily strategic roads and other facilities in the border areas, together with a series of 'special economic zones', where manufacturing and other industries will be based. Local powerholders, including DKBA BGF commanders, are likely to be involved, if they continue to follow government instructions. Beyond the economic sphere, it remains uncertain whether the DKBA BGF will be able to articulate a version of Karen ethnic nationalism, nor is it clear how much day-to-day control over their soldiers ex-DKBA commanders will enjoy. Rank-and-file soldiers may continue to defect from the DKBA, either to join the KNU/KNLA or to go back to their villages.¹²¹ Similar questions remain regarding the status and disposition of the KPF BGF and the KNU/KNLA Peace Council, with the latter in particular having a very fragile relationship with the government following its refusal to become a BGF unit.

Conversely, the transformation of most DKBA units into BGF battalions has in some ways been helpful to the KNU, bolstering its position as the sole independent Karen armed group. However, the organisation remains in deep crisis. By 2011, the KNU's areas of control had been reduced to a substantial patch of territory in the hills north of Papun (KNLA Third and Fifth Brigades), plus a few enclaves along the Salween River (constituting Thailand-Burma border) and some forest bases in southern Karen State and Tenasserim Region (KNLA Six and Fourth Brigades: see Map 3). Due to its lack of territorial control, the KNU has only limited access to revenues from logging and taxing the black market trade. Short of money, it thus lacks ammunition and influence within the Thai security establishment, and its ability to resist Tatmadaw offensives is in decline.

Politically, the KNU also faces numerous challenges. In many areas, the organisation (and particularly the KNLA) is characterised by 'neo-patrimonial' practices, or outright warlordism. Often, the distinction between KNU finances and those of individual leaders and their families is blurred, with some clans making a good living out of the tail-end of armed conflict in the border areas.

Notwithstanding this problem of corruption and the institutionalisation of insurgency, many of those remaining in the front-line of 'the revolution' are deeply committed to the struggle for self-determination in Burma, demonstrating levels of social and political solidarity not apparent within the DKBA. However, many senior leaders are ageing and infirm, with some of the most talented cadres having left the organisation during the past two decades, in many cases to start new lives as refugees in third countries, particularly the USA. Many of those who remain can be characterised as 'hardliners,' who mainly live in Thailand and are more interested in demonstrating their revolutionary credentials than in finding practical solutions to the diverse problems of the Karen communities in Burma. This lack of political imagination within the KNU leadership is demonstrated by its continued alliance with a range of border-and exile-based opposition groups, most of which have grown out of touch with the situation in Burma and have limited understanding of issues facing the Karen people.

In terms of continued relevance, the biggest challenge facing the KNU is how to reach out to the wider Karen communities. It is no coincidence that the last few KNU strongholds are mostly populated by Christians and animists. If it is to remain relevant to the majority of Karen people, the organisation needs to find ways of engaging with Buddhist and Pwo-speaking communities. It also needs to reconnect with Karen communities in Yangon, the Irrawaddy Delta and other parts of lower Burma, where a majority of Karens live.

At the same time, the persistence of insurgency in southeast Burma demonstrates the long-standing existence of widespread dissatisfaction among minority communities. It is

not only Karens, but Mons, Shans and other ethnic groups that have resisted Sen-Gen. Than Shwe's state-building goals. Despite these frustrations, it is difficult to see how the KNU can regain a leading role on the political stage, unless there is a major change in politics at the national level – a transformation over which the armed Karen nationalist movement is likely to have little influence. Meanwhile, the KNU is likely to hang on along the Thailand border for some years to come. It is arguable that the persistence of low-level insurgency in the Karen hills is welcomed by at least some Tatmadaw commanders, providing a pretext for continued militarisation of the borderlands. As Duffield has noted,¹²² Tatmadaw strategists are experts at crisis management (i.e. rule by emergency decree and the politics of punitive brinkmanship). They may therefore prefer to maintain a degree of instability and chaos in the borderlands. Ironically, therefore, Tatmadaw and KNU/KNLA leaders may have a mutual interest in maintaining the conditions of conflict.

Nevertheless, one of the biggest threats facing the KNU and its allies is the prospect of a major Tatmadaw offensive. If the government launches such an operation, it will depend largely on domestic political calculations, and whether Than Shwe and other Tatmadaw commanders are committed to crushing the remnant KNU and disciplining non-BGF forces. While an all-out offensive may not completely destroy the KNLA as a guerrilla army, it would further undermine the KNU's standing, causing further suffering to civilian populations and forcing more people into internal displacement or across the border into Thailand as refugees. At the time of writing, in February 2011, some KNU leaders were predicting a major offensive against their organisation following the convening of Burma's new

Karen couple in Irrawaddy Delta in temporary house after Cyclone Nargis (TK)



parliaments, while others expected Tatmadaw military operations to be restricted to a few strategically important border areas.

Meanwhile, the existence of refugee camps along the Thailand border continues to facilitate the KNU's ability to wage war in Burma. The camps provide a refuge for KNU personnel and their families, legitimisation and some material support to the KNLA's armed struggle.¹²³ Developing such ideas, Alan Kuperman¹²⁴ warns of the consequences of "offering rhetorical and military support for armed secessionists and revolutionaries in the name of fighting oppression and human rights ... [which may be] well intended [but] often backfires by emboldening rebels." He uses the notion of 'moral hazard' (derived from economics) to describe the manner in which the prospect of humanitarian, military or political interventions by the international community may embolden insurgents, thus underwriting armed conflict.¹²⁵ It is however debatable whether the negative consequences of providing assistance are outweighed by the immediate need to help the victims of civil war in Burma. Border-based humanitarian donors and organisations may nevertheless be in violation of the 'Do No Harm' doctrine,¹²⁶ according to which aid agencies should ensure that their interventions do not inadvertently harm intended beneficiaries by contributing to the continuance of Burma's protracted armed conflicts.

If the future of the KNU's state/nation-building project is no longer viable, what are the alternatives? Over the past decade, the DKBA has assumed a position of dominance in many Karen-populated areas, similar to that previously occupied by the KNU. The important difference is that the DKBA shores up its limited sovereignty through paying actual and symbolic tribute to military government, while the KNU looks to the international community as a primary source of legitimacy. However, it seems unlikely the government will allow the DKBA BGF to consolidate its power. The most likely scenario in the short to middle-term in conflict-affected areas of Karen State is one of continued fragmentation. The outlook for civilians living in Karen areas therefore remains bleak. Further humanitarian crises can be expected, at least until a political settlement is reached, which at present is a remote prospect.

After more than six decades of armed conflict, it seems unlikely that armed conflict can bring about positive change in Karen-populated areas. The most likely long-term result of continued fighting in the borderlands is that the Tatmadaw will ultimately defeat the KNU and allied armed groups, completing its domination and militarisation of previously semi-autonomous areas. Until this happens, the KNU will continue for some years to be able to launch guerrilla attacks. Given this impasse, it is important that Karen armed groups seek mutual understanding starting at local levels, if they are to remain representative voices. Rather than any one organisation seeking to dominate this

diverse community, Karen political leaders should consider forming coalitions of common interest and intra-community cooperation (consociational democracy).¹²⁷ This approach is likely to be more flexible than the 'politics of the grand plan', which continues to characterise most opposition groups in Burma. Rather than seeking ambitious 'blueprint' solutions to the country's complex problems, political and community leaders should perhaps adopt a more pragmatic approach, adapting their strategies to specific contexts and problems.

In this context, it is worth asking whether the November 2010 election will introduce a new system of governance in southeast Burma that involves a gradual transition away from militarised rule. For the time being, the operating space available to the small number of independent candidates elected is limited and will, in the future, depend in large part on the will of Sen. Gen. Than Shwe and other senior military officials. The degree to which they are willing to tolerate some independent political space in Karen and other ethnic nationality-populated areas will depend, in turn, on whether the military can continue to control the domestic political agenda, including pro-democracy groups symbolised by Aung San Suu Kyi.

In a best case scenario, the Ploung-Sgaw Democracy Party (PSDP) in Karen State, and the Karen Peoples Party (KPP) elsewhere, may have some influence on areas of local policy and be able to participate in social welfare.¹²⁸ This may allow independent Karen voices some influence over the formulation of humanitarian and development policies affecting their communities.

Although modest, such achievements could be important in consolidating and strengthening a burgeoning civil society sector. Although civil society actors can also become patrons themselves in the game of power-politics, local associations and leaders can nevertheless play important roles in establishing the beginnings of a system of accountability in certain conditions and localities. Such local development activities help to promote "social capital",¹²⁹ local resilience, and networks of trust and mutual support, providing limited amounts of protection to hard-pressed civilian populations.¹³⁰

Ultimately, however, in the age of globalisation, more influential than the civil society and aid sectors will be the role of capital, and business more generally. Indeed, the prospect of major infrastructure and other economic projects in southeast Burma will radically alter the social and political context, raising new challenges to Karen and other ethnic nationality leaders to demonstrate their continued relevance in this fast-changing region. For the present, the inclusion of Karen interests, whether individual or institutional, in national politics and economics remains limited and constrained. Until this is addressed, a new generation of Karen grievances and state resistance cannot be ruled out.



Conclusions

Most accounts of politics, armed conflict and humanitarian conditions in southeast Burma derive from the perspective of anti-government groups and affiliated organisations working in the borderlands. Although this 'selection bias' does not invalidate existing literatures, it does mean that much less is known about civilian populations, non-KNU armed groups, and political and civil society organisations operating inside Burma, beyond the insurgent sphere of influence.¹³¹

This distortion is of more than academic relevance, as the policies of key external stakeholders (e.g. humanitarian donors and Western governments) are structured by the limitations of knowledge, and ultimately reflect the presumed legitimacy of particular local actors. If political, economic, social and humanitarian analyses and action are to be grounded in well-informed understandings, then researchers and policymakers must do more to ensure that their work covers the full range of Karen stakeholders. Studies should not be limited to a recurring, but small, cast of actors and stakeholders along the Thailand-Burma border.

Various armed groups position themselves as defenders of Karen populations, in terms of providing physical safety, securing livelihoods and protecting Karen culture and national identity. Both KNU and (ex-)DKBA leaders regard themselves as legitimate representatives and guardians of the Karen peoples. Ultimately, assessments of their positions as protection and political actors will depend on the legitimacy accorded to these groups by different Karen, national and international audiences.¹³²

For many Karen nationalists (particularly Christians), the KNU remains the sole legitimate Karen political organisation. As such, they have long sought to establish the KNU's dominance over the Karen nationalist movement. At the same time, although many observers may find them unpalatable, it is essential that assessments of the Karen conflict also take account of non-liberal Karen actors, such as the DKBA BGF who remain important local power-holders.¹³³

Those seeking to develop relationships with stakeholders in the broader Karen society should also consider engaging with civilian politicians elected in November 2010. Due to the entrenched rhetoric of exiled Burmese politicians and their support networks, and the Burmese military's political sensitivities, developing supportive relations with civilian politicians will require careful negotiations and positioning. Such forms of engagement may however be more palatable to Western sensibilities than engaging with the DKBA and its successors. Talking to, and helping to develop the capacities of, a wide range of Karen and other ethnic nationality stakeholders will be particularly important in the fast-changing context of southeast Burma, where planned infrastructure and economic development projects are likely to radically alter social and economic realities in the coming years.

Footnotes

- 1 'Insurgency' is used to mean guerrilla warfare, in support of a political goal: Thomas Marks, *Ideology of Insurgency: new ethnic focus or old cold war distortions?*, in 'Small Wars and Insurgencies' (Vol.15, No.1 Spring 2004).
- 2
- | New/Official Name | Traditional/Former Name |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Ayeyarwady | Irrawaddy |
| Bago | Pegu |
| Dawei | Tavoy |
| Hpa'an | Paan |
| Mawlamyine | Moulmein |
| Myeik | Mergui |
| Patheingyi | Bassein |
| Tanintharyi | Tenasserim |
| Taungtha | Toungtha |
| Yangon | Rangoon |
- 3 David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (Cambridge, Polity Press 2008: ch.4) analyses elites' efforts to mobilise communities, by appealing to notions of ethnicity - often in the process furthering their own economic and political interests.
- 4 Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Zed Books; second edition, London 1999: 45).
- 5 Ibid. 61.
- 6 'The Irrawaddy' (March 2009). These figures are confirmed privately by senior KNLA commanders.
- 7 Government of Burma, *Burma 1983 Population Census* (Rangoon, Central Administration Department 1986).
- 8 Martin Smith, 'Burma: the Karen conflict', in Joseph Rudolph Jr. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Modern Ethnic Conflicts* (Greenwood Press, London and Connecticut 2003: 10-11).
- 9 Karen National Union, 'The struggle of KNU for justice', in *KNU Bulletin* (Manerplaw, November 1986, No.7).
- 10 E.g. Benedict Rogers, *A Land Without Evil* (London, Monarch Books/Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2004).
- 11 Mikael Gravers (ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (NIAS Press 2007).
- 12 It is necessary to distinguish between Bengali Muslim communities living in Karen-populated areas, and a small number of 'Black Karen' Muslim groups, who identify themselves as ethnic Karens.
- 13 Kaw-thoo-lei may be variously translated as 'the land burned black' (by 'slash-and-burn' farming, or by warfare), 'the pure land', 'the old land' or 'the land of the thoo lei plant'. In 1947, when the term was invented, Kawthoolei did not refer to a specific geographic area, but rather to a 'symbolic space' (Gravers 2007: 245).
- 14 In addition, the KNLA deploys a number of Special Battalions, based in economically important border areas, whose troops tend to be personally loyal to local commanders.
- 15 The Tatmadaw assumed control of the state in a March 1962 coup d'état, led by General Ne Win.
- 16 Amnesty International, *Myanmar: Lack of Security in Counter-Insurgency Areas* (July 2002); Karen Human Rights Group, *Self Protection under Strain: targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State* (August 2010).
- 17 Smith (1999: 259).
- 18 Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar armed forces since 1948* (Singapore, ISEAS 2009).
- 19 Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar civil society's response to Cyclone Nargis* (Phnom Penh, 2009); Justin Corbett, ALNAP Case Study No. 4: *Supporting Community-Based Emergency Response at Scale: innovations in the wake of Cyclone Nargis* (2010).
- 20 For an overview of the ceasefires and associated social and political issues, see Tom Kramer, *Neither War nor Peace: the future of the ceasefire agreements in Burma* (Amsterdam, Transnational Institute July 2009).
- 21 In Mark Vincent & Birgitte Refslund Sorensen (eds), *Caught between Borders: response strategies of the internally displaced* (London & Sterling, Virginia; Pluto Press & Norwegian Refugee Council 2001: 143).
- 22 According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, in 2009 landmine incidents increased significantly, making Burma one of the worst-affected countries in the world: *Landmine Monitor: 2010 Myanmar/Burma Country Report* (Bangkok, November 2010). For an overview of the way in which state and non-state armed groups (and also sometimes civilians) use landmines, see Ashley South, with Malin Perhult and Nils Carstensen, *Conflict and Survival: self-protection in south-east Myanmar* (Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 2010).
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 This impression is derived from the author's 20 years experience of working on political and human rights issues in Karen areas: Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: states of conflict* (Routledge 2008).
- 25 Alan Saw U, in N. Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing (eds), *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity* (ISEAS, Singapore 2007: 222).
- 26 According to David Taw, by the early-1990s, "for the younger, middle-level section of the KNU leadership it became clear that the burden of the conflict had become unbearable for the Karen population in the conflict area. This group viewed the KIO [ceasefire] decision sympathetically, feared the consequences for the Karen of further erosion of the KNU's military position and regretted the DAB's lack of understanding concerning the need for the ethnic armies to try to end the fighting in their areas. Meanwhile, reports of SLORC human rights abuses in Karen areas were being used by the [Burmese opposition-in-exile] to further undermine and discredit the SLORC and mobilize stronger international responses. However, there were foreign visitors to the KNU who urged the KNU to consider a strategy of minimizing the impact of SLORC military superiority by entering a ceasefire and relying on a more political strategy. There were also Karen leaders from inside Burma who visited the KNU as self-appointed 'mediators', urging the KNU to try to find a way to end the war. These non-KNU Karen 'mediators' were treated as SLORC stooges and given a very cool reception officially by the KNU leadership although receiving quiet encouragement from the pro-ceasefire faction. In 1994 an officially sanctioned KNU working group - initiated by those responsible for the KNU's foreign relations - won support within the KNU to explore a negotiation initiative on the basis of the political advantage in being seen to be willing to 'talk about talks'. Plans were laid for a delegation to go to Rangoon in the hope that such an initiative could win international support. The intention was to mobilize international pressure for a new approach to the SLORC, recognizing the need to open up some of the political issues (i.e. equal rights, the right to self-determination and a move leading towards federalism) for discussion, rather than simply demanding the removal of the SLORC ... This move collapsed late in the year when NCGUB leaders in New York pleaded with the KNU leadership not to make such a move, which they saw as undermining their own efforts at the UN to win decisive international action against the SLORC." David Taw, *Choosing to Engage: strategic considerations for the Karen National Union, in 'Choosing to Engage: armed groups peace processes'* (Conciliation Resources/ Accord Vol.16 2005).
- 27 The popular desire for an end to the armed conflict was illustrated by a photograph taken in October 2004 in Kawkaik Township. The picture shows a gathering of over 1000 Karen villagers in support of KNLA Sixth Brigade Commander, Mutu

(who became KNLA Commander-in-Chief that December), as he set off to join the ceasefire delegation. Several people were carrying makeshift banners, calling for an "end to the bloody war" and proclaiming "we want peace in our country."

28 Since the late 1990s, the NCUB has been dominated by its General Secretary, Maung Maung, who has close relations with anti-ceasefire elements within the KNU and other armed groups.

29 In a major policy shift, in 1984 the NDF changed its position from one of secessionism (i.e. the advocacy of outright independence) to a demand for substantial autonomy within a proposed Federal Union of Burma. This was an important change in emphasis: the military government had always accused the insurgents of scheming to wreck the Union. Now though, the ethnic nationalists were aiming at a democratic, federal transformation of the union, rather than a total repudiation of the state of Burma.

30 Kayin is the Burmese exonym for the Karen.

31 According to Gravers (2007: 229), throughout Burma Pwo Karen communities tend to be disadvantaged compared to the Sgaw, whom the former generally perceive to be the dominant sub-group.

32 Myaing Nan Swe (trans. Shin Khay Meinda), Myainggye Ngu Sayadaw: a Jahan who shines the light of Dhama (Mann Ba Nyunt Pe, Myaing Gyi Ngu Special Region, Karen State, August 1999) provides a very sympathetic account of the life of U Thuzana, with many interesting details regarding the formation of the DKBA.

33 Amnesty International 2002, KHRG 2010.

34 Ashley South, *Burma: The Changing Nature of Displacement Crises* (Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University, Working Paper No.39 2007).

35 A confidential DKBA document states that, in the case of the Karen BGF units, the maximum age limit is 45 years. For other BGF formations, the age limit is 50.

36 BGF battalions 1117, 1118, 1119 and 1120.

37 The Thai Ministry of Commerce is reportedly planning a 189-hectare Special Economic Zone (SEZ), six miles from Myawaddy: "According to the MOC, border trade in the area accounted for US \$606 million in 2008, and it expects that the SEZ, on which more than 100 warehouses have been constructed for storage or factory use, would push that figure up to \$1.2 billion annually": 'The Irrawaddy' (August 2010).

38 On human rights abuses and forced displacement in connection with railway and gas pipeline construction in Karen and Mon populated areas of southeast Burma in the 1990s and since, see Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: the Golden Sheldrake* (London, Routledge Curzon 2003: 195-204).

39 Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma: paradigms, primary sources, and prejudices* (Ohio University Centre for International Studies 1998: 158).

40 In Stein Tonnesson & Hans Antlov (eds), *Asian Forms of the Nation* (Curzon 1996: 73-74).

41 Ananda Raja, 'Nationalism and the Nation-State: the Karen in Burma and Thailand', in G. Wijeyewardene (ed.), *Ethnic Groups Across Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore, ISEAS 1996); 'A "Nation of Intent" in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation', in *The Pacific Review* (Vol.15, No.4 2002).

42 For a typography of ceasefire administrations, see Mary Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation and Coexistence* (East-West Center, Washington, 'Policy Studies' No. 21 2007: xiii-xiv), who identifies three "patterns of relationship between the national state and locally-based, often non-state actors [that] have emerged since

1988: near devolution, military occupation, and coexistence".

43 Paul Collier, *Resource Rents, Governance, and Conflict* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan 2005).

44 Keen (2008): ch.1.

45 A variety of different positions in this debate are collected in Jake Sherman & Karen Ballentine (eds), *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: beyond greed and grievance* (London, Rienner 2003).

46 Callahan (2007: xiii).

47 Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: the merging of development and security* (Zed Books, London 2001).

48 Martin Smith, *State of Strife: the Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (Policy Studies 36. Washington, DC. East-West Center, Washington 2007).

49 Smith (1999: 186).

50 In his Ph.D. *Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, c.1830-1930* (SOAS, London University 2005: 198), Will Womack notes that "the international press (popular and academic), cut off from meaningful contact inside Burma's borders, has been concerned primarily with the largely KNU-oriented Karen diaspora in Thailand, Britain, and the United States. Yet for many years, the Karen communities inside Burma have maintained their identity in the structures of civil society."

51 Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The Karen Revolution in Burma: diverse voices, uncertain ends* (East-West Center, Washington, 'Policy Studies No. 45' 2008: 10).

52 Mary Callahan adopts the 'inside'/outside' dichotomy, to describe these different modes of operation in regards to Burma. It should be noted that, particularly when discussing groups working in the fields of information and advocacy, this framing of actors is not always helpful. In such contexts, it may be more useful to talk about networks crossing various (official and informal) borders, with orientations towards nodes of international advocacy, and/or more inclined towards accepting the government: in Susan Levenstein (ed.), *Finding Dollars, Sense, and Legitimacy in Burma* (Washington, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Asia Programme 2010: 73).

53 Alan Saw U, in Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007: 219).

54 Ibid. (221).

55 Ibid.

56 South (2008: 185).

57 Gravers (2007: Introduction).

58 Some informants observe that the Taungalae sayadaw is close to the wife of Sen-Gen. Than Shwe.

59 The term is coined by Mark Duffield (2001: 191).

60 South (2008: 166).

61 Other, semi-dormant, Karen political parties include the Union Karen League, established by Delta Karen in 1946 (officially dissolved in September 2010), and the Karen National Congress for Democracy, founded in 1989.

62 Transnational Institute and Burma Centrum Nederland, *A Changing Ethnic Landscape: Analysis of Burma's 2010 Polls*, Burma Policy Briefing No.4, December 2010.

63 'The Irrawaddy' (27-11-2010).

64 The State PDC chairman, Brig-Gen Zaw Min, was appointed-

- ed Kayin State Chief Minister: Euro Burma Office, Political Monitor No.7 (12-18 February 2011).
- 65 UNDP, UNOPS, Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Integrated Household and Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar: Millennium Development Goals relevant information (Yangon, June 2007).
- 66 Cited by Mark Duffield, *On the Edge of 'No Man's Land': Chronic Emergency in Myanmar* (independent report commissioned by the Office of the UN RC/HC, Yangon and UNOCHA, New York; published by Centre for Governance and International Affairs, University of Bristol, Working Paper No. 01-2008).
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 South (2007).
- 69 TBBC (Program Report: July to December 2009, Bangkok 2010).
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 South et al (2010).
- 72 TBBC (2010). Throughout the 1990s, the KNU-controlled Karen Refugee Committee continued to administer the camps with little interference. However, since 2005, the TBBC has endeavoured to ensure that camp administrations are more accountable to the refugees.
- 73 The Royal Thai Government has always indicated that it would seek to repatriate this population as soon as the situation in Burma allowed it, and in mid-2010 the Foreign Minister announced his intention to do so following the elections in Burma. While a forced or coerced repatriation cannot be ruled out, it is more likely that any such initiative would proceed in a similar manner to the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh to Burma in the 1990s. That is, the operation may well be problematic in many respects, but the Burma and Thai governments might follow minimally-acceptable procedures, to allow UN involvement.
- 74 Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The paradox of humanitarian action* (Ithaca, Cornell 2002: 45-46 & 221-24).
- 75 Duffield (2001: 253).
- 76 For an overview of which, see Silvie Caverzasio (ed.), *Strengthening Protection in War: a search for professional standards* (ICRC Geneva 2001).
- 77 South et al (2010).
- 78 Since the 1980s, the mandala model has become a standard trope of Southeast Asian studies. As such, it is ripe for critical re-evaluation.
- 79 Oliver Wolters, *Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 1982).
- 80 In the case of Burma, Mikael Gravers has described how such patterns persisted in Karen populated areas of southeast Burma into the colonial era, under the British system of 'indirect rule': *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: an essay on the historical practice of power* (Curzon 1999).
- 81 Smith (1999: 171-5).
- 82 James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press 2009).
- 83 Willem van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia,' in *Development and Planning D: Society and Space* (20, 2002: 647-68).
- 84 KNU (1986: 3-4); this publication also rehearses the supposedly age-old antipathy between the Karen and Burman peoples.
- 85 KNU, *The Karens and Their Struggle for Freedom* (Manerplaw, July 1992: 13-14); this document, recently re-endorsed by the Central Executive Committee, provides an overview of the KNU's notions of Karen origins and history, and its propaganda and ideological positions.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Gravers (2007: 250).
- 88 South (2008: 109-13).
- 89 Taw (2005).
- 90 South et al (2010).
- 91 On the politics of legitimacy in Burma, see David Steinberg, *Turmoil in Burma: contested legitimacies in Myanmar* (Connecticut, EastBridge 2007).
- 92 South (2008: Ch.1).
- 93 Gravers, in Tonnesson & Antlov (1996: 258).
- 94 Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung san Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Monograph Series 33, 1999).
- 95 Discussing popular support for the government and/or KNU, Cussano notes (in Vincent & Sorensen 2001: 168) that "many displaced Karens are not interested in either side's claim to political legitimacy. Speaking their own dialect, managing their own affairs, surviving in their own domain, highlanders and forest-dwelling Karens wish, above all, to preserve their independence and stay on their land."
- 96 Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the cultural construction of power* (Athens, Ohio University Press 2007: 171).
- 97 Further details of DKBA ideology and instructions to troops are to be found in its soldiers' Handbook (Burmese language, no date)
- 98 Gravers (2007: 249).
- 99 Smith (1999: Appendix), Gravers (2007).
- 100 Martin Smith (1999: Appendix) recounts how the Telecon attacked a Burma Army outpost in Kyaikto in 1967, after first giving the garrison there a written warning. As this was not taken seriously, the Telecon force was able to kill several government soldiers. However, when the attackers returned, twenty-four were killed by the Tatmadaw.
- 101 This incident was blamed on God's Army, but was in fact instigated by the shadowy Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors, whose mainly ethnic Burman members had taken refuge with the twins and their followers, before taking over the hospital (and ultimately being killed by the Thai security forces).
- 102 South (2008: ch.5).
- 103 The Peace Council's Karen Relief and Development Committee also provided some assistance to the victims of Cyclone Nargis: KRDC, *Rebuilding Our Nation* (report, 2010).
- 104 Karen Human Rights Group, *Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts* (November 2010).
- 105 This impression is derived from the author's 20 years experience of working on political and human rights issues in Karen areas (see South 2008, South et al 2010).
- 106 International human rights and humanitarian law provide little recognition for the role of non-state armed groups as protection actors. However, many Karen civilian populations do regard

the KNU as an organisation which protects them - although in other cases, the Karen insurgency is seen as part of the problem. the KNU and all the armed groups, including the Tatmadaw, have over the years planted landmines, used child soldiers, demanded arbitrary taxes and exercised extra-judicial executions and other punishments (South et al 2010).

107 Transnational Institute and Burma Centrum Nederland, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: The Time for Solutions*, Burma Policy Briefing No.5, February 2011.

108 These casualties were under the command of Nay Soe Mya, youngest son of the late Gen. Bo Mya, who had defected from the KNU in March 2009, and unlike Htein Maung wanted to join the BGF or form a pro-government militia group.

109 The situation of the KNU/KNLA Peace Council was complicated by the fact that one of its founding leaders (Pastor Timothy) had become dissatisfied with the relationship with the government, and in 2010 issued a series of statements from outside the country, criticising the SPDC, and in particular the BGF transformation. These inflammatory statements served to raise tensions between his colleagues back in Burma and the Tatmadaw (see for example Peace Council statement, 23 August 2010: A Need For Urgency – threat of armed attack within one week). Along the border, rumour had it that the Peace Council had in fact signed a secret BGF agreement with the government in November.

110 Some KPF soldiers preferred to form a local militia (pyi thu sit), a status which gave them more operational independence than the BGF. About 10 KPF militiamen were disarmed by the Tatmadaw following the events of November 2010 (see below).

111 UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar (A/65/368, 15 September 2010).

112 UN General Assembly (Progress report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana, A/HRC/13/48, 10 March 2010).

113 With China (and probably also Russia) likely to exercise their vetoes, the UN Security Council is unlikely to endorse a Commission of Inquiry. The UN Secretary General has indicated that he would take his lead from member states rather than acting on his own authority in this matter; the General Assembly has no practice of establishing such commissions other than to look at internal UN administrative matters; and it is not clear that a majority of the Human Rights Council would vote in favour of such a measure.

114 Elements of this non-BGF compliant DKBA brigade, led by battalion commander Lt-Col. Kyaw Thet, had briefly occupied parts of Myawaddy, and surrounded the police station, in September.

115 Nukes Mweh was quoted in *The Irrawaddy* as saying "I am a DKBA soldier and will fight for my people... if they [the government] tell me to give them my weapons and badge, I will never hand them over" (7 August 2010).

116 At Three Pagodas Pass DKBA units were joined by KNU troops from KNLA 6 Brigade.

117 KHRG (November 2010).

118 KHRG, *More Arrests and Movement Restrictions: conflict continues to impact civilians in Dooplaya District* (30-11-2010).

119 'The Irrawaddy' (19 October 2010).

120 'The Irrawaddy' (22 November 2010).

121 Many in the DKBA have become used to exercising violence for various purposes, and may find it difficult to re-enter civilian life.

122 Duffield, (2008).

123 As Edward Luttwak notes, the existence of refugee camps can sustain warrior "nations intact [preserving] their resentments forever ... [as well as] inserting material aid into ongoing conflict ... By intervening to help, NGOs systematically impede the progress of their enemies towards a decisive victory that could end of the war": 'Give War a Chance', in *Foreign Affairs* (Vol.78, No.4, July/August 1999: 43).

124 Alan Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: genocide in Rwanda* (Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press 2001: viii).

125 For example, the KNU's 1993 decision to not pursue ceasefire negotiations with the Burmese military government was due to expectations - strongly promoted by Burmese opposition politicians in exile - that the international community would support a strategy of continued armed conflict (Taw 2005).

126 According to the influential 'Do No Harm' doctrine, humanitarian agencies should seek to minimise the negative impacts that can arise from the provision of assistance - for example, the empowerment of conflict actors or distortion of local markets: Mary Anderson, *Do No Harm: supporting local capacities for peace through aid* (Local Capacities for Peace Project, The Collaborative for Development Action, Cambridge 1996).

127 The main elements of consociational democracy are rule by a 'grand coalition' of elites (representing the different segments of a society), the provision of minority vetoes, proportional representation in decision-making and social sectors (and in allocation of funds and services) and segmental autonomy - or federalism. The basic idea is that, if co-operation and good-will can be achieved between elites, then 'unity in diversity' may be accepted, and even celebrated: Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: a comparative exploration* (Yale UP 1977).

128 In January 2011 the PSDP's Saw Thein Aung was among the five presidential and vice-presidential candidates nominated by the new parliament.

129 Robert Putnam uses the term 'social capital' to refer "to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions": *Making Democracy Work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1993: 167).

130 South et al (2010).

131 Recent reports by the TBBC and its partners (e.g. *Protracted Displacement and Chronic Poverty in Eastern Burma/Myanmar*, Bangkok 2010) attempt to redress this imbalance. However, such research is still carried out by parties closely associated with the armed conflict.

132 South et al (2010).

133 As Alex de Waal has noted, Western political and humanitarian actors tend to assume that conflict-affected countries such as Burma "ought to resemble European model states" in the ways that authority and legitimacy are derived. However the reality in much of Burma today, as the Karen struggle demonstrates, is that many local power-holders do not subscribe to Western, liberal democratic ideologies: *Protecting Civilians in Fragile States* (mss: Presentation to Oxfam-Novib, The Hague, 21-9-2009).

Abbreviations

AMRDP	All Mon Regions Democracy Party
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BGF	Border Guard Force
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DKBA	Democratic Karen (Kayin) Buddhist Army
DKBO	Democratic Karen (Kayin) Buddhist Organisation
ENC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
GONGO	Government-Organised NGO
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
KDC	Karen Development Committee
KDN	Karen Development Network
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNDO	Karen National Defence Organisation
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KPF	Karen Peace Force
KPMG	Karen Peace Mediator Group
KPP	Karen (Kayin) Peoples Party
KSDDP	Karen (Kayin) State Democracy and Development Party
KRC	Karen Refugee Committee
NCUB	National Council of the Union of Burma
NDF	National Democratic Front
NDF	National Democracy Force
NLD	National League for Democracy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMSP	New Mon State Party
PSDP	Ploung-Sgaw Democracy Party
PVA	Peoples Vigorous Association
RTG	Royal Thai Government
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSPP/SSA	Shan State Progress Party / Shan State Army-North
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium [BBC - Burmese Border Consortium]
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army

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Silkworm Books, Chiangmai, 1999

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Tom Kramer, TNI Drug Policy Briefing No.29, July 2009

Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle

A Drugs Market in Disarray

Tom Kramer, Martin Jelsma, Tom Blickman, TNI, January 2009

Political grievances among Karen and other ethnic nationality communities, which have driven over half-a-century of armed conflict in Burma/Myanmar, remain unresolved. As the country enters a period of transition following the November 2010 elections and formation of a new government, the Karen political landscape is undergoing its most significant changes in a generation. There is a pressing need for Karen social and political actors to demonstrate their relevance to the new political and economic agendas in Burma, and in particular to articulate positions regarding the major economic and infrastructure development projects to be implemented in the coming years.

The country's best-known insurgent organisation, the Karen National Union (KNU), is in crisis, having lost control of its once extensive 'liberated zones', and lacks a political agenda relevant to all Karen communities. Meanwhile the government's demand that ceasefire groups, such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, transform into Border Guard Forces under direct Burma Army control throws into question the future of various armed groups that have split from the KNU since the 1990s. In this context, Thailand-Burma border areas have seen an upsurge in fighting since late 2010. Nevertheless, the long-term prospect is one of the decline of insurgency as a viable political or military strategy.

Equitable solutions to Burma's social, political and economic problems must involve settling long-standing conflicts between ethnic communities and the state. While Aung San Suu Kyi, the popular leader of the country's democracy movement, seems to recognise this fact, the military government, which holds most real power in the country, has sought to suppress and assimilate minority communities. It is yet to be seen whether Karen and other ethnic nationality representatives elected in November 2010 will be able to find the political space within which to exercise some influence on local or national politics. In the meantime, civil society networks operating within and between Karen and other ethnic nationality communities represent vehicles for positive, incremental change, at least at local levels.

This joint TNI-BCN project aims to stimulate strategic thinking on addressing ethnic conflict in Burma and to give a voice to ethnic nationality groups who have until now been ignored and isolated in the international debate on the country. In order to respond to the challenges of 2010 and the future, TNI and BCN believe it is crucial to formulate practical and concrete policy options and define concrete benchmarks on progress that national and international actors can support. The project will aim to achieve greater support for a different Burma policy, which is pragmatic, engaged and grounded in reality.

The Transnational Institute (TNI) was founded in 1974 as an independent, international research and policy advocacy institute, with strong connections to transnational social movements and associated intellectuals concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable, environmentally sustainable and peaceful direction. Its point of departure is a belief that solutions to global problems require global cooperation.

Burma Center Netherlands (BCN) was founded in 1993. It works towards democratisation and respect for human rights in Burma. BCN does this through information dissemination, lobby and campaign work, and the strengthening of Burmese civil society organisations. In recent years the focus has shifted away from campaigning for economic isolation towards advocacy in support of civil society and a solution to the ethnic crises in Burma.