



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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DKBA bans alcohol consumption to justify human rights abuses in Pa'an District

DKBA soldiers in T'Nay Hsah township of Pa'an District have prohibited villagers from drinking alcohol, effectively forbidding several long-standing cultural traditions among the Karen population. Villagers caught drinking have been beaten, punished with forced labour and threatened with conscription into the DKBA. The incidents in this report occurred in August and September 2008.

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Special Battalion #999, led by Maung Chit Thoo, has implemented draconian measures to prevent villagers in T'Nay Hsah township from drinking alcohol. Villagers who have been caught drunk or even with the smell of alcohol on their breath have suffered various forms of punishment from soldiers, including torture, forced labour, and the threat of conscription into the DKBA. The DKBA's prohibition of alcohol consumption functions as both an (unjustified) excuse to commit human rights abuses and also an assault on Karen tradition, as it is customary among many villagers to drink during social gatherings and especially after the end of the annual harvest.



In this photograph, rice is being distilled into a local type of alcohol drunk by many Karen. At this time of year, as the Karen are harvesting their crops, it is custom to celebrate the end of the work period by drinking alcohol with friends and family. [Photo: KHRG]

On August 11th 2008, Saw H--- and Saw P---, both from T--- village, drank two bottles of BEC (a type of local liquor) in Kawkareik town and returned to their village that night. DKBA officer Saw Lah Thay found out about the incident the next day and, at around 9:00 am, ordered soldiers to arrest Saw H--- and Saw P---. The villagers were forced to go to Taw Thoo Loe – where the DKBA is building a new army camp – and had to carry out construction work for 15 days. Saw H--- told a KHRG researcher that,

“When I went to work at the new DKBA camp, I saw 15 other villagers who had also been forced to work there. These villagers are from T---, Y--- and Th--- villages. After I worked for 15 days, DKBA officer Saw Lah Thay told me that if I drink alcohol again or if my mouth smells of alcohol again, I will have to work [forced labour] for three months. And, if I drink again [for a third time], I will have to join the DKBA army.”

On September 29th 2008, Saw G--- and Saw H---, 28 year olds from C--- village, crossed the border into Thailand to buy food in Wah S'Kay village. In order to get to Wah S'Kay, the villagers had to pass through a DKBA #999 army camp and register their names with DKBA officials. They then bought groceries and drank some alcohol after they had finished shopping. They crossed back over into Burma and, while registering again at the DKBA camp, a soldier named Saw Pah Bper accused them of smelling like alcohol and violating DKBA rules. Saw Pah Bper repeatedly hit Saw H--- with the butt of his gun and punched him until Saw H---'s face became swollen. The two villagers were beaten and tortured by DKBA forces for the rest of the day and held in custody that night. The following day, villagers and the village head from C--- village met with the DKBA soldiers and told them that villagers who broke the "alcohol rule" should be brought to village leaders instead of being detained by DKBA forces. These villagers also asserted that that the mistakes made were not serious enough to warrant such harsh treatment.

The DKBA seeks to assert its authority in Pa'an District by threatening local villagers with forced labour, extortion, torture and movement restrictions. Rather than a valid measure intended to protect villagers, the DKBA's current prohibition on alcohol appears to be a capriciously applied rule meant to excuse and justify its policy of abusing local civilians' human rights.

For more information on the situation in Pa'an District see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa'an District (September 2008)*
- *Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District (September 2008)*
- *Forced labour and extortion in Pa'an District (August 2008)*
- *DKBA soldiers burn down Ler Bpoo village Pa'an District (August 2008)*

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrq.org>



A map of Southeast Asia showing Burma (Myanmar) in white. Surrounding countries are labeled: Tibet, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. Bodies of water are labeled: Gulf of Bengal, Andaman Sea, and Gulf of Thailand. A yellow rectangular area is highlighted in the southern part of Burma, indicating the region of interest for the study.

