

Burma's sons of sorrow

Awzar Thi

Accompanying all the latest to-do over whether or not Burma's regime is trying to obtain nuclear weapons has been the usual background noise about the menace of its conventional armed forces. Foreign pages' editors excitedly describe the army as having half a million troops, as if they are all poised on the border to spill over into neighboring territories at a moment's notice.

Nobody knows the real size or capability of the army in Burma, although that doesn't stop analysts the world over from sifting through secondhand sources for something with which to make a claim about this or that. Not even the army itself is likely to know precisely how many personnel it actually has, given that unit commanders play with numbers to satisfy the requirements of their superiors.

But one thing we do know is that not all of these soldiers are adults. Last week a Thailand-based group released a new report on the recruitment of children to the Burma army. The report, entitled 'Child soldiers, Burma's sons of sorrow,' explores government claims to be addressing the problem of child soldiers, and presents evidence to the contrary.

The charge that the armed forces in Burma use children as personnel is not new. Throughout the 1990s many agencies released reports on this topic, and in 2002 Human Rights Watch issued a bulky document on the incidence of child recruitment.

In 2005 the government set up a committee to prevent children being taken as recruits, and has reported to international agencies and diplomats to demonstrate its seriousness about the problem. It has also had a few children returned to their families under the watchful eyes of United Nations staff.

But according to a new 72-page study by the Yoma-3 news service, the army is having trouble with large numbers of deserters. Add to that increased demands from headquarters for more new recruits, and local commanders are hard pressed to get enough adults to join. So they continue to bring in underage boys, sometimes through deceit, sometimes through promises, sometimes through threats.

Fourteen-year-old Maung Phoe Zaw says that he accepted a lift while returning home from shopping in July 2004, not knowing that the car driver was an army sergeant. He was taken to a camp instead of his house, and after a bit of training was sent to an operations area in a region not far from Thailand. He finally fled in 2008.

Kyaw Naing Soe says that in November 2003 he was picked up with a group of friends at a railway station and held at a camp for seven days during which time they were threatened with imprisonment if they didn't enlist. He was then 13. Other narratives recount how children were kidnapped or offered money to join.

Yoma-3 cites a former recruitment sergeant as estimating that the average number of underage soldiers in the battalions with which he worked would be 70 to 80. He says that when recruiting he paid no heed to the age of recruits because of the need to meet quota targets. Recruiters also pay local officials to bring them new enlistees.

Although the study is modest in size and scope, the concern of the government with not having any independent reporting on the continued use of child soldiers is borne out by the treatment of people whom it blames for assisting to collect and document these stories.

Among them, the head of a small human rights group in Rangoon, U Myint Aye, was last November sentenced to 28 years' imprisonment for having had contact with people involved in making this report. The charges the police leveled against him included that he sent false information on child soldiers abroad, and also arranged for one boy to go and speak at the United Nations, who was subsequently unable to return home. By contrast, the International Labor Organization has said that the complaints of forced labor it received through Myint Aye were legitimate.

That such a small document comes at such a high cost to those who made it speaks to the size of obstacles faced by groups and individuals who seek to address the recruitment of children to Burma's army. While in most other countries in Asia this sort of work would generate public debate and create pressure for an official response, in Burma it motivates the authorities to hunt for the people responsible and redouble their efforts to keep things under wraps.

There will be more reports like this before the problem of child soldiers in Burma is in any way addressed. They may not significantly affect what goes on within the country, but at least should contribute to more informed writing about an army that is not for the most part well-trained, equipped and professional. Rather it is a heterogeneous mass that includes in its ranks large numbers of underfed, badly-paid and ill-equipped teenagers.

(The Yoma-3 report is available online at:
<http://www.yoma3.org/bookmark/CSreport/Yoma3CSreport220709.pdf>)

(This article was originally published on 6 August 2009 for a column entitled Rule of Lords at http://www.upiasia.com/Human_Rights/. His work can also be found at <http://ratchasima.net>.)