

It's Rangoon, Not Rebels

Burmese government behind camp attacks

By Bertil Lintner in Kamaw Lay Kho, Thailand

It was late at night when more than a hundred heavily armed soldiers with guns at the ready came into Thailand's Kamaw Lay Kho refugee camp, recounts Saw Kauk Cho, pastor of the Baptist church in the camp 80 kilometres north of Mae Sot, a town on the border with Burma. Within minutes, the attackers doused the ethnic Karen camp with kerosene and set it ablaze.

The story of April 25 is familiar—six such camps housing 10,000 refugees have been burned since April 19. Before that, Karen rebels lost the last of their strongholds at Manerplaw and Kawmoora.

What's less known is that the attempts to drive the refugees back into Burma are being carried out by the Burmese army—rather than by a breakaway Buddhist faction of the Karen fighters themselves, as the Burmese Embassy in Thailand says. Most observers along the frontier, from foreign aid workers to Thai intelligence officers to refugees, offer evidence that points at troops of the Burmese regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council.

"It's Burmese regulars, with a few ex-Karen National Union defectors acting as guides, who are burning the refugee camps," says a Western aid worker along the border. "But the claim that it is the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army which is carrying out the attacks makes it appear as if the present imbroglio is an internal Karen conflict. For every DKBA soldier, there are at least five to 10 guys from the Burmese army."

The Kamaw Lay Kho camp is a stone's throw from the Moei river, which forms the border with Burma. The attackers came from across the water, Saw Kauk Cho says. Then, young privates poured kerosene on the bamboo huts in the camp and lit them while older officers in the background directed the action over walkie-talkies.

The pastor tells how mortars and rocket-propelled grenades were fired into the dense maze of houses. Within minutes, the refugee camp's 300 buildings became an inferno. The attackers told the refugees they had to return across the

border, or face a worse fate in the next attack, the pastor says.

Rangoon and the Thai press say the attackers are from the DKBA, a breakaway faction from the main KNU. The Buddhist faction was set up on December 21, when some Buddhist KNU soldiers mutinied against the predominantly Christian leadership.

According to a border intelligence source: "Not more than 200-300 KNU soldiers defected last December, and the

led delta have been recruited into the Burmese army.

The evidence that the attackers weren't from the Karen faction could explain the cautious response from the Thai side. It's true that on May 5, Thai helicopter gunships fired salvos on a Karen Buddhist position inside Burma. Military and civilian leaders in Bangkok have protested what they call the Karen Buddhist incursion, and called on the Burmese army to rein in its rebel allies. And in an effort that signals Thai defence of its sovereignty, Bangkok has sent reinforcements supported by field artillery to the border.

But in the refugee camps along the border, there are few signs that the Thais have stepped up security. Thailand's dilemma is obvious. The Thais do not want to confront regular Burmese troops, even

ones wearing the uniforms and insignia of the Karen Buddhist army. Some observers argue the Burmese motive for the camp attacks is to shake Thailand's will to harbour the refugees.

Observers along the Thai-Burmese border say both the Burmese and the Thai authorities want the refugees to return to Burma. Shortly after the first cross-border raid, Thai army commander Gen. Wimol Wongwanich said "it would take only a week to push all refugees back to Burma," if he were permitted to do so.

On May 2, Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart suggested that the 74,000-plus Karen refugees in Thailand should be moved away from their 23 camps on the border and concentrated in two or three protected camps. Refugee workers point out that in the new camps the Karens would be more difficult to attack—and easier to push back into Burma.

KNU leader Bo Mya has appealed to the United Nations to protect the refugees. But involvement of the international body would constrain the refugees' movement. Presence of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees would also attract international scrutiny, which the Thais clearly do not want.

The answer to the problem may be found down at the banks of the Moei at Mae Sot itself. The Thais began building a new bridge across the river last October and hope to finish it by 1996. Already, a concrete arch spans the Moei, and construction workers cross the border as if there weren't any conflict nearby. Markets and shops are springing up along the Thai road leading down to the bridge, and all in all it appears there's too much at stake for the Thais to risk war with the Burmese over the refugee issue. ■

