

## **Karen National Union (KNU)**

The KNU is an organization working for the equal rights and dignity of the Karen people, to free them from all oppressions and particularly from the oppression of dictatorship. The KNU is structured as a government body or civil structure, and has installed laws / acts for civilians, organizations and military to follow. If somebody breaks the law which is related to a crime he will be sent to court. There is a civilian court and a military court. There is a strict law regarding sexual abuse or harassment against children, and the KNU categorizes this action as a crime and if anyone commits this crime he will be taken to court to be punished.

The KNU was organized as a civil structure which has 14 departments that focus on education, health, forestry, mining, defense, etc. The KNU has its own rules for the protection of children. The department of Health, Education, and Social welfare focuses on child-protection as they are working directly for the children. The Burmese army is the violator who repeatedly commits violations against children while the KNU tries in many ways to protect these children in the armed conflict areas.

### **Education**

The KNU Education department has a clear policy that every child should receive primary education, so that they are at least able to read and write in their native language and perform basic arithmetic. To make sure that every child in each village has the opportunity to receive primary education, the administration of the KNU at the township level has appointed a headman in each village. They are responsible for organizing an education committee to take responsibility for the children's education in the village, by arranging teachers, buildings and school materials and by encouraging the children to join the primary school.

Moreover, next to these committees on the village level, the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) and Karen Women Organization (KWO) also each have an education committee. These are independent organizations with their own constitution, elections and activity planning processes. The KYO particularly focuses on continued education, whereas the KWO work on nursery school level and women's education. The heads of the education committees in KYO or KWO have the role to encourage and educate the villagers, particularly the parents, to send their children to school, as well as to support the teachers. They have to find out whether the children are interested in going to primary school, and if children do not join, they have to meet with the parents and find out if they have any problems with sending their children to school. If some parents cannot afford the school because they are poor, then the KYO and KWO have to take responsibility to support the children on funding or food, which they supply depending on how they can manage within their organizations. If there are no teachers in the village, the education committees from KWO, KYO and the village have to negotiate and look for teachers in the village. If they cannot find any teacher they can volunteer until they find one. Sometimes the parents who are educated have worked for the village as a teacher. The people value education and they find ensuring education for children very important, which is shown by this policy.

When the children have completed primary school it is often difficult for the parents to send them to middle school. While primary schools are mostly set up in every village or community, the middle

schools and high schools cannot be set up in every place. There are 2 or 3 middle schools and only one high school in each district. Thus, the children have to move to other places to continue their study. However, some parents cannot afford to do this because they cannot provide food or other needs, and also they do not want to put the children away from them because the children are young and cannot take care of themselves yet. Often the villagers are living in the mountainous region and the transportation is very difficult and it will take the whole day or more than one day to go to the other school location. Therefore, many children end up with only primary education.

The KNU takes great care of children's education; so many parents have come to the KNU and asked for help to support in furthering the children's education if the parents could not afford to do. As explained above, the KNU, KYO and KWO have supported many children on each level to finish their middle schools or high schools and has also encouraged other community based organizations to support the children. There are also special education program for orphans and the children who's their parents are poor or have many children that the KNU sponsors.

The KNU has a good education policy and system, but the problem is that the schools in the villages in armed conflicts areas are repeatedly attacked by the Burmese soldiers. Therefore, the children cannot study freely and properly. In this situation, the KNU's Education Department tries hard for the children's education, by organizing funding for the schools in areas that the KNU controls. The Burmese army has often invaded the villages in the KNU-controlled areas and attacked the inhabitants. People could no longer live in their own villages and children cannot exercise their right to enjoy their lives. They constantly live under the fear of attack as they have to move from one place to another all the time. The schools have to close when the Burmese soldiers attack the villages or the areas and they have to move from one place to another. Some schools have had to move more than 3 times in a year. Even in this critical situation the community leaders and parents try their best for their children's education. When the people set up their temporary residents they start a school for the children, which sometimes become a mobile school or movable school. Even if there are only 3 or 4 families in a place they set up a class for the children.

## **Health**

Health is a main issues and important for KNU in the KNU areas. The health department is responsible for the civilian health care and children's health is considered as the priority. The problem, as mentioned above, is that the civilians are repeatedly attacked which has an impact on the health of the children. As a consequence of the attacks, their parents move around and do not have permanent residents or locations. They cannot provide proper food and it becomes a big problem that children do not regularly receive nutrition or supplementary food. KNU encourages the community based organizations and health department to set up special programs for the children in schools and dormitories, to provide supplementary food and nutrition food centres for the children who are facing malnutrition. For example, the KWO focuses on women's hygiene and the Health Department works on maternity welfare. They often work together, sharing information and cooperating to meet emergency needs. KNU does not have enough clinics, medics and health workers, particularly in the remote and conflict areas. However, children's health is saving the lives of children which is important and everyone is taking care of what they can do.

The KNU encourages the health department and community based organizations to take the responsibility to look after babies if their mother died, by providing assistance to the father or relatives. The KNU has rules and law regarding adoption. The Karen people have tight family bonds so the relatives will ask for support but prefer not to give away the baby to other people. Even if they cannot support milk they produce rice water and mix this with honey or sugar so they can still take care of the baby themselves. If the child is going to be adopted, they have to go through the legal system properly with the district leader or judicial and have a signed agreement on paper. Because it the treatment of children is important for the KNU, the parents and the community, the children will not be given away to a person who is not trusted and may maltreat the child. If KNU would not have the policy of taking care of the children, many orphans and poor children would lose their lives and would not be able to access education. In the past years parents and single parents have usually came to the KNU leaders from different levels from the head quarter to the districts and township levels and seek for assistance to sponsor their children to school. The KNU believes that education is important for the children and KNU sponsor the children as much as it can.

### **Child Use and Recruitment**

The KNU is practicing Kaw Thoolie law (Karen People law) which has separate articles for the children, and within the Karen community it is recognized that children are those under the age of 16. The marriage law states that a person under 16 is a child and is not allowed to marry. If anyone is forced to marry or when sexual abuse is committed, the perpetrator should be punished. If someone has sex with girls or boys under 16, the person will be punished. If he really loves the girl they have to wait until turning 16 and get a legal marriage.

In the past, the KNU recognized children as under the age of 16. Army law on recruiting stated that the army could recruit at the age of 16 if they are not in their studies and if they have more than one brother as well as if they have both parents. They may not be recruited if they have a single parent, are studying, or are the only son or child in the family.

In 2000, at the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, the KNU discussed the age of recruitment issue, but not decision was made. It was raised again in 2002 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting of the KNU Central Standing Committee and at the same time the 2<sup>nd</sup> Military annual meeting after the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress in December and at that time it was approved that the recruitment and acceptance of KNLA soldiers was set at 18 and above. The order and announcement was distributed on 28 January 2003 to all the military headquarters at the brigade level and then from there to the districts and township level of the KNU.

The discussion which eventually resulted in the change of policy was launched following reports published by the UN and other NGOs which reported the KNU/KNLA as using and recruiting child soldiers. The KNU was informed about these accusations through the radio news as well as alliances and community members who met with the UN. This is how the KNU became aware that the use and recruitment of child soldiers (anyone under 18) was prohibited by international law.

In 2007, the KNU met with UNICEF to discuss the issue, and a Deed of Commitment was signed with them on the issue of child soldiers the same year.

The KNU has seen there are changes immediately for recruiting soldiers. Since the law has changed the recruitment of soldiers concerns adults. There are no more soldiers under 18. The limitation of the age of children is more known within the community as nowadays more human rights groups talk about international law and more and more people are familiar with human rights, children rights, women rights and the link of international law and humanitarian law such as war crime, crime against humanity and these law are more popular and familiar to our military men and officers.

After amending the military law /acts of recruiting the soldiers after 18, we did not have any problems since we informed the offices on each level to follow the rules. If they do not follow it action will be taken. To date, there have been no cases of violations

Since 2002, we had more connection with the ICRC, as they are the only organization that contacts us directly and help us with training such as war crime and other international humanitarian law to the military offices and this information passed down to each level and the KNU and KNLA in the district levels have more familiar with the international law. So we feel more links to international.

## **Training**

The newly recruited soldiers cannot join the combat immediately. They have to work on other field areas in the military camps for at least 2 years, depending on the situation and the urgent needs. If the Burma army attacks become too strongly, and there is not enough army personnel, then they can join the operation. If not, they stay behind and work for the camps' security, as runner, in food supplies and preparation, or others task.

The soldiers are trained to have military skills after they join or are recruited. Every new soldier receives training, also on how to help the civilians. We do not have particular training for the children and civilians but we educate the civilians on how to protect themselves and the children when the Burmese soldiers are attacking the areas and when they are hiding. We instruct them on which way they should escape and on radio communications. Most of the civilians have their own knowledge, as they have experienced an attack many times and they are now passing this information and instructions on to new generations. For example, they teach not make the fire smoke during day time, and not take dogs and roosters with them when fleeing. The KNU encourages and supports the community based originations and Karen NGOs to provide these services and activities.

The child rights education introduced to the second line leaders and the teachers as well as the parents. First we sent our representative to attend the training and workshop of Child Rights organized by the Human Rights Education Institutes of Burma. We are working with them to provide the training for our military officers on child soldiers and child protection to be more familiar with the United Nations conventions on child protection.

KNU -KNLA included topic of education on the child soldiers and civilian protection in every basic military training and military officer's trainings.

## **Child Protection**

Even though we practice, or try to make sure the civilian and military men practice and protect, the rights of children, we cannot fulfill them all because the living conditions of the people are similar to those of internally displaced persons which are the circumstances children have to live in. Parents do not have enough food, clothes and toys for the children. At home children are the hands of the parents because they take care of their baby sisters/ brothers while the parents work for the farms. Parents ask the children to help them to be a baby sitters, do home chores, look after animals , do the laundry, sell home-made food house by house. We cannot support the parents to hire child care, and this is where the families have to support each other and children are very useful for the family in helping with small things.

The challenge we are facing with respect to the protection of children from the areas affected by armed conflicts under the KNU control, is that the civilians are often attacked by the Burmese army. The most vulnerable are women and children who are living a life in constant fear and insecurity. Parents cannot provide proper and sufficient food for them so they are facing health problems such as malnutrition, diarrhoea, skin disease, chronic cold (as they do not have enough clothes) and many of them become slow in learning. The children are physically protected by The Karen National Liberation Army while escaping from the attack. The KNLA is responsible to guard them to a safe place, guard their property, as well as carrying the children if required. We have a social study regarding how to be a good citizen and within this we have how to protect children and elderly during their travel and any place.

## **Gender**

There are no different rules of policy for boys and girls but in line with traditional belief, boys can work outside and girls stay at home for work. Boys are the right hand of the father and girls the right hand of the mother. Often it is believed that boys can study more and they can work outside home, doing hard work in other places or even far away from home, while girls should be at home to work with their mother. This includes cooking, cleaning, raising siblings and managing the household. They are not supposed to work in any other place. Girls do not need high education, like boys do, because after they are married they have to stay at home and take care of the family and house work. Men can work after marriage and thus can apply their education. This is the stereotype which is still the case in the Karen society, particularly for those who live in remote areas.

## **International Cooperation**

The KNU started meeting with the ICRC in 1999 to allow for the ICRC to travel safely in KNU controlled areas. In 2000, the ICRC met with the KNU leaders to discuss how to cooperate with the training of members in international law of armed conflict. In 2001, a more detailed schedule was developed and on 10 October of the same year, a KNLA military officers workshop was organized by the ICRC. From 2002 onwards, more trainings were planned, however, due to border security issues and the ICRC not being able to go inside to the KNU areas, these have not taken place. This is the biggest problems for us in working with the INGOs.

As stated above the KNU welcomes the co-operating and coordinating in working with the INGOs and UN agencies but the problem is that the SPDC does not allow them to work with us.

We have signed Deeds of Commitments regarding Child soldiers with UNICEF in 2007. The signing of the Deed of Commitments on child Soldiers by the KNU does not mean that KNU focuses only on Child soldiers' issues. The KNU is committed to child protection in many other sectors. KNU has internal policy and rules for the protection of children and the KNU-KNLA is committed to avoid crimes related to children such as killing, using children during the war for carrying things or ammunition, putting land mines, forcing children to join the army or to work for the military or for the community. KNU repeatedly physically reconstructed schools where they were destroyed by the Burmese army. The KNU is not able to follow all the resolutions of the UNSC, for example the resolution on women's participation in peace processes, it is very hard for them to put this into policy and implement it. Currently there are no quotas within the organization, and in addition, women have not had the opportunity to develop themselves on this issue.

KNU is always aware of the international or UN reports, and if the report includes mention of KNU regarding child soldiers, KNU firstly releases a statement of clarification that KNU has a clear policy on recruiting soldiers and calls for the UN agencies or any organization to come and visit the KNLA areas. Moreover, KNU looks closely at the cases mentioned in the report and follows up with thorough investigation, whether it is true or not. If the case is true, action has to be taken. For the one case, where we had details of an incident was reported in the UNSG report, we followed up on this and found that no recruitment had taken place. If it is not true we send clarification information / report to the organization concerned/ involved.

The KNU signed "Deeds of Commitments". We haven't had any further discussion for an action plan. We usually release statements from time to time to make sure the international community is aware of our policy and hope the name of KNU to be de-listed. KNU has sent a letter of invitation to the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to visit us, but there has not been any response. As KNU has a clear policy on child soldiers and recruiting soldiers, KNU is disappointed that the KNU name is listed as a violator. KNU wants the name to be de-listed so KNU welcomes the UN agencies or team concerned to come and visit KNU areas to make sure that the KNU has clear policies and does not recruit child soldiers.

The KNU calls the UN to pressure the SPDC to allow them to come to KNU-KNLA areas where KNU can meet freely with them and have an opportunity to further discussion to cooperate on an action plan. The KNU would like to cooperate and work with the UN and INGO on the children protection so it will promote better and secure lives for the children and civilians living under the rule of dictatorship. The KNU would like to request and urge any NGO, organization, individuals, team working for the Child Protection or Civilian Protection to contact us for cooperation with KNU in order to promote and improve the work of KNU for the better and successful protection of children in armed conflicts areas.

The KNU is calling for the cooperation of the UN or INGO, NGO to support the work of KNU for promoting the better lives of children in armed conflicts. There are many needs for the protection of the children; your support is direly needed. Education materials, food supplied, supplementary food, clothing, and bedding, and organizing children camps of events and all these things will much improve and secure the lives of children.