

Recent Developments on the Thai-Burma Border

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The first quarter of 1995 saw some of the most dramatic changes in years along the traditionally volatile Thai-Burmese border. On 27 January, Burmese government troops captured the jungle base of Manerplaw, which for more than years had served as headquarters for insurgents from the country's ethnic Karen minority. On 8 February, Kawmoora, the second-most important base of the rebel Karen National Union (KNU), also fell to government forces.

This meant that a large stretch of the frontier north of the border crossing at Mae Sot in Thailand and Myawaddy in Burma for the first time since Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 is now controlled by the central government in Rangoon. But the fighting, which has claimed hundreds of lives, has also forced more than 8,000 civilians to flee into Thailand and pushed the ethnic rebels to the south, where they have begun to launch guerrilla attacks deeper inside Burma.

On 8 March, five members of a Burmese team surveying the route for a gas pipeline, which is to be built from the Andaman Sea to Thailand, were killed in a rebel ambush 35km from the border, and only 12km from the coast. 11 people were wounded in the attack, which prompted Total of France, one of the foreign contractors who have been assigned to build the pipeline, to make an official announcement in Paris two days after the attack. Karen rebel leaders, on their part, have declared that, since the loss of the border bases, they intend to launch more attacks close to urban centres deep inside Burma.

The changing geopolitics of the ethnic insurgency along the Thai-Burma border comes at a time when Thailand is attempting to improve relations with its historical foe, Burma. The old policy of encouraging ethnic minority rebels from Burma to establish bases along the border has given way to a more business-like approach.

Official border-trade is being promoted and, in October last year, construction on a 430-metre

concrete "*Friendship Bridge*" began across the Moei border river. When completed in March 1996, the bridge will link Mae Sot with Myawaddy, and provide a solid surface connection between the two countries in an area which for decades has been plagued by war.

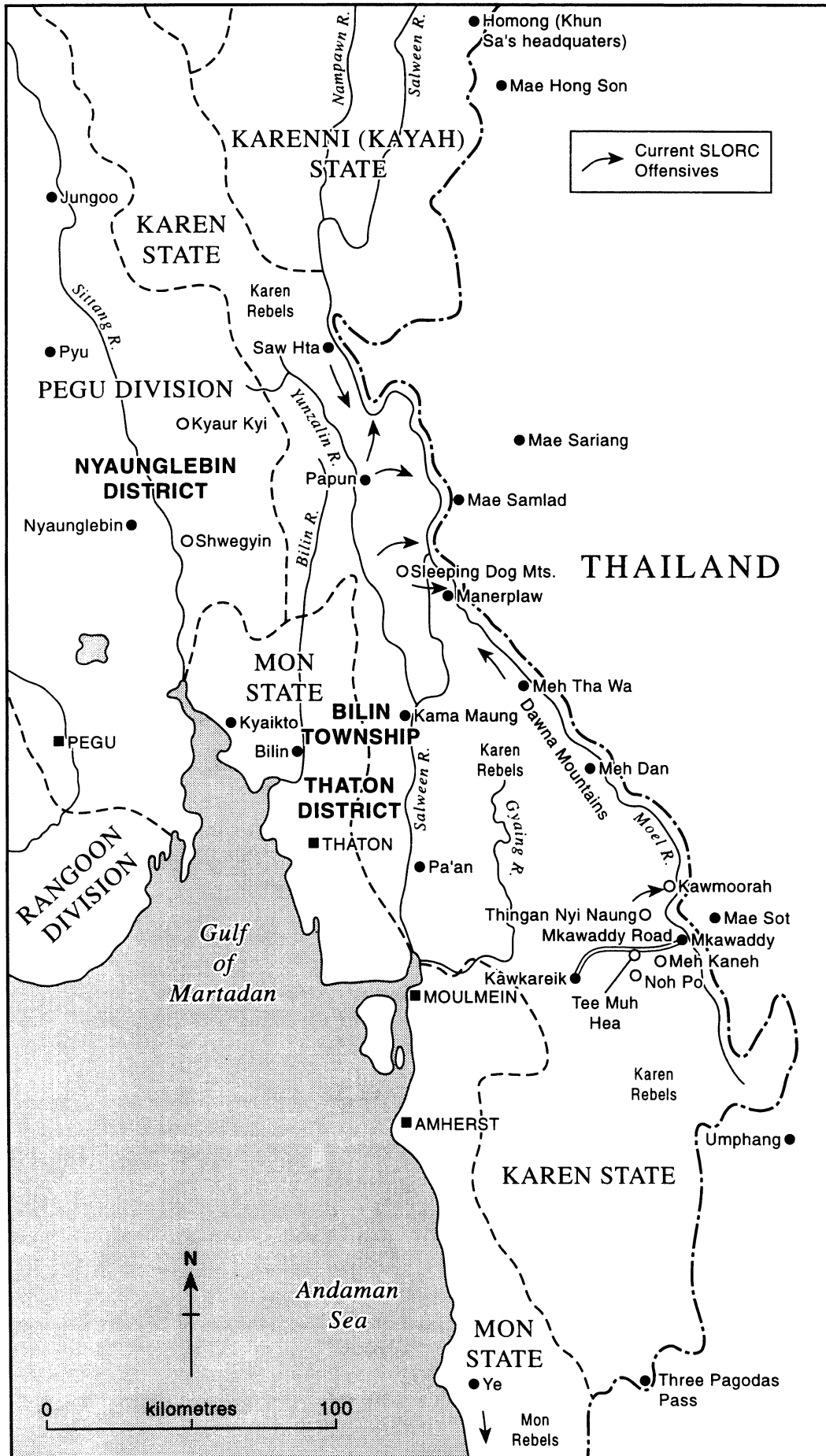
The pipeline project which was attacked recently, is another example of improved relations between Bangkok and Rangoon, at least on the official level. The recent 30-year gas supply deal is meant to be lucrative for both Thailand and Burma. Thailand will get badly needed energy for its growing cities and industrial centres, and Burma will earn foreign exchange from the sale of US\$400 million worth of natural gas annually.

Development of the gas fields in the Gulf of Martaban off the Burmese coast from which the gas will be piped to a 2,800-MW power plant in Thailand's Ratchaburi province, is undertaken by a consortium comprising Total of France, the US energy concern Unocal and the Petroleum Authority of Thailand, which is a partly Thai-state owned company.

But recent events also show that this is not going to be a smooth development. Without a political settlement to Burma's ethnic conflict, stability along the border with Thailand will remain elusive.

Bangkok's policy of maintaining 'buffer zones' along its western borders began when in October 1953 a Burmese aircraft strayed across the frontier near Mae Hong Son further to the north of Mae Sot, and accidentally bombed a Thai village. The Burmese army was conducting an offensive against renegade Nationalist Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) forces in the northeast of the country and the pilot mistook the Thai village for an insurgent camp.

The incident, minor as it may have seemed, nevertheless served to revive atavistic fears in Thailand, where even to this day



schoolchildren learn little more about Burma than its invading armies destroyed the old royal capital of Ayutthaya in 1767.

As a result, while the then Thai prime minister P. Phibunsongkram publicly threatened to shoot down any Burmese aircraft that violated the country's airspace, privately he invited leaders of the Mon and Karen rebel armies in Burma to Bangkok where for the first time secret negotiations were held between ethnic minority groups from across the border and senior Thai officials.

For Thailand to police the porous, 21,000 kilometre border with its historical enemy would have been a difficult and extremely costly business. Instead, the Thais adopted the concept of letting ethnic minority groups from Burma serve as buffers along the frontier. While Bangkok gave the rebel armies from Burma no direct support, they were allowed to set up camps along the frontier, their families were permitted to stay in Thailand and they could buy arms and ammunition.

These buffers became even more important as Burma's economy collapsed in the wake of the military takeover in Rangoon in 1962 and when communist insurgencies in northeastern Burma and northern Thailand gained momentum in the early 1970s. From an economic point of view, the buffers served as conduits for contraband crossing the border in both directions. Consumer goods from Thailand flooded into Burma's markets while Burmese traders moved gems, jade, timber, opium and cattle in the other direction. This trade was conducted through a string of border checkpoints controlled by the ethnic rebels, who taxed the trade and used the income to buy munitions and other supplies from Thailand. From a more strategic point of view, the minority groups also acted as a kind of border police to prevent a link-up between Burmese and Thai communists.

A network of Thai military liaison groups and intelligence agencies oversaw this informal arrangement. In the early 1980s, the system was further refined and streamlined. Task Force (TF) 32 became responsible for border security in Chiang Mai province, TF 33 in Chiang Rai, TF 34 in Mae Sot and TF 35 in Mae Hong Son and Mae Sariang.

However, by the mid-1980s these old border buffers began to become obsolete. Thailand's communist insurgency almost collapsed as China cut off its support in the wake of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in January 1979. China needed Thai territory to funnel supplies to the anti-Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, and Thailand readily agreed if Beijing halted its support to Thailand's communist insurgents. An alliance of convenience was formed between Bangkok and Beijing to counter their common enemy, Vietnam. The losers became the rebels in Burma.

In 1984, the Burmese government launched its first massive offensive against Karens camps along the Thai border. At first, the Thais gave the rebels limited support, but also that ceased when in late 1988 Rangoon decided to legalise the hitherto illegal cross-border trade with its neighbours. Thai timber companies secured more than 20 logging concessions in eastern Burma, and Thai merchants began travelling to Rangoon to sell their goods directly to Burmese merchants. The rebel economy was effectively undermined, and the armies began to crumble. In early 1989, the Burmese army captured a string of Karen bases, and soon only Kawmoora and Manerplaw remained.

With the fall of these two last remaining camps along the Thai border, some observers suspected that the Karen insurgency which began in 1949, the year after Burma's independence would soon be over. Other analysts, however, emphasised that the "border buffer" concept was only one aspect of a complex ethnic conflict between the majority Burmans 60% of the population and more than two dozen various ethnic minorities, who make up roughly 40% of Burma's population.

A number of cease-fires have been concluded over the past few years between the military government in Rangoon and several ethnic rebel armies other than the Karens, and this has to some extent reduced the actual fighting. But according to the terms of these cease-fires, the rebel armies of ethnic Wa, Palaung, Pa-O, Shan and Kachin have been allowed to retain their arms and control over their respective areas. The ethnic issue as such has not been solved or even addressed.

Ethnic Rebel Armies from Burma Operating along the Border with Thailand.	
The Karen National Union/ Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA)	With 3,500-4,000 men in arms remains one of Burma's strongest ethnic rebel armies despite recent setbacks. They used to control almost the entire border area from Mae Sariang in the north down to the hills opposite Prachuap Khiri Khan in the south. Today, guerrilla units operate inside Burma opposite Mae Sariang and Mae Sot, and the rebel territory south of Mae Sot has so far not been affected.
The Democratic Karen Buddhist Organisation/ Army (DKBO/DKBA)	The leadership of the KNU has always been mainly Christian (Baptist, Roman Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist), but the overwhelming majority of the rank and file are either Buddhist or Animist. In December 1994, 300-500 Buddhist fighters from the KNLA broke away to set up the DKBO/DKBA. Eager to exploit the rift within the Karen rebel movement the mutineers received immediate support from the military government in Rangoon. The split enabled Rangoon's forces to capture Manerplaw and Kawmoora. Today, the KBO/DKBA is seen as little more than a proxy army for Rangoon, and no leaders of the organisation have so far emerged.
The New Mon State Party/ Mon National Liberation Army (NMSP/MNLA)	Active in the hills opposite Three Pagodas Pass, which marks the border with Burma in Thailand's Kanchanaburi province. The NMSP/MNLA has also lost several camps to the Burmese army over the past five years, and the organisation may today have no more than 700-800 men in arms, down from more than 2,000 in 1989. The Mons have also been under pressure to agree to a cease-fire with the Burmese government, partly because the projected pipeline is going through their areas of operations as well as the Karens. The Mons are a Mon-Khmer people related to the Khmers of Cambodia and they are numerous on both sides of the Thai-Burma border west of Bangkok.
The Karenni National Progressive Party/ Karenni Army (KNPP/KA)	A smaller group of a Karen-related tribe, the Karenni. Like most other groups along the border, also the Karennis have lost territory to the Burmese government over the past 4-5 years. Nevertheless, a few hundred KA troops are still active in the area opposite Mae Hong Son.
The Mong Tai Army (MTA)	The MTA of opium warlord Khun Sa claims to be an ethnic rebel army fighting for the independence of the Shans, a Burmese minority which is closely related to the Thais and the Laotians. Other observers assert that the MTA is nothing more than a drug-running outfit. Even so, it is Burma's biggest 15,000-18,000 men and best equipped rebel army. Its armoury includes heavy machine-guns, cannon, 75mm recoilless rifles, 120mm mortars, anti-aircraft batteries, and even Soviet-made SAM-7 missile systems. The MTA may become the next target for the Burmese government. Today, Khun Sa's men control most of the border from the hills west of Tachilek in the north down to Mae Hong Son.
The United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/UWSA)	Represents a smaller Mon-Khmer tribe, the Was. Former headhunters, they inhabit the border areas along the Yunnan frontier, but they also maintain a base at Loi Sam Sao near the northern Thai border town of Fang. The Was control vast poppy fields in northeastern Burma, and their base on the Thai border is an important outlet for narcotics. The Was are seen as Khun Sa's main rivals in the opium trade. The UWSP has had a cease-fire agreement with Rangoon since April 1989.

The problem has been frozen rather than solved, and if experiences from countries such as Indonesia (East Timor, Aceh) and China (Tibet, Sinkiang) are anything to go by, not even recently launched economic development schemes will solve Burma's decades-long ethnic crisis. Recent attacks by the Karens, who have resisted offers of a cease-fire with the government, also indicate that Burma's present tactics towards its ethnic minorities may actually be counter-productive.

Exacerbating the problem is the presence of tens of thousands of refugees along Thailand's border with Burma. Before the recent round of fighting began last December, there were 63,000 Karen refugees in Thailand. That number has now

increased to 71,000. In addition, there are also an estimated 10,000 Mon, Karen, Pa-O and Burman refugees along the border.

The unsettled situation along the Thai-Burmese border remains one of Thailand's most severe national security problems, as recent events have clearly demonstrated. Further fighting, which may break out in other areas along Thailand's border with Burma before the rainy season begins in May, is expected to drive even more refugees across the border and to cause even more instability.

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