

THE SITUATION AROUND HO MURNG

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group
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In January 1996 well-known drug warlord Khun Sa officially surrendered to the State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta ruling Burma, ending his leadership of the Merng Tai Army (MTA). Khun Sa moved to Rangoon, where he is now a successful businessman, and the MTA ceased to exist, though a large portion of it became the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) under commander Yord Serk. The SURA has since become part of the new Shan State Army (SSA) alliance and is now actively fighting a guerrilla war against the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), which is what the SLORC now calls itself.

The headquarters of Khun Sa and the MTA was at Ho Murng (often spelled Ho Mong), a remote village in southwestern Shan State near the Thai border which had grown to the size of a small town under the MTA's influence. Immediately following the surrender of the MTA, SLORC troops moved in and occupied Ho Murng. Up until that time villagers from the area say they had lived fairly peacefully, most of them farming rice and sesame. Some opium farming existed, but Khun Sa bought most of his raw opium from other areas for refinement into heroin. According to the villagers, when SLORC first occupied Ho Murng there was little change for the first few months, but after that life in the area changed entirely. Once the SLORC Battalions had firmly installed themselves in the area they began making heavy demands on villagers for money, livestock, alcohol and other goods, as well as forced labour. Villagers were forced to tear down empty houses and to help the troops build Army camps, and now they are being used as forced labour breaking and carrying stones to pave one of several roads being worked on in the area. This road goes from Ho Murng towards Lang Kher, a town about 80 kilometres further north where the SPDC operations command for the area is located.

Forced labour and other abuses in the area have become such a heavy burden on the villagers that several villages have almost completely emptied out, with most of the villagers fleeing to Thailand. The situation only got worse when fighting broke out between the SPDC and the SSA in the area earlier this year. In March 1998, a group of several hundred villagers from the Ho Murng area fled and arrived at Pang Yon in Thailand. SPDC troops crossed the border and threatened to attack them, so the Thai Army had to move into the area and eventually many of the refugees were moved out of the area and into an existing Karenni refugee camp. According to the refugees, the SPDC troops contacted them and tried to convince them to go back, most likely because they need villagers in the Ho Murng area to do forced labour and to provide loot and extortion money for the SPDC officers. To convince the villagers to go back, the SPDC troops told them they would help them to begin growing opium so that they could make a lot of money. Most of these villagers had never grown opium before, and they all refused.

Villagers, porters who have been through the area and SPDC deserters have reported that many new opium fields have been created near Ho Murng since the SLORC/SPDC occupation of the area, particularly in late 1997 and early 1998. For several years now farmers from Shan State have stated that anyone in SLORC/SPDC-held areas is free to grow and transport opium as long as they pay the required tax to the local military. Those who are arrested are simply those who have not paid the taxes. Occasionally people who have paid the taxes are also arrested, most likely when local Battalions receive orders from above to produce a certain number of arrests within a certain time frame so that the junta can show impressive statistics to some international aid donor. Even when this happens it is never the key people who are arrested, just the small farmers or itinerant labourers who are carrying the opium to make a living. People from Ho Murng area now claim that some of the opium fields have been set up by the Army, that villagers are forced to do labour in these fields, and that much of the buying, selling and transportation of opium in the area is done by SPDC officers. It appears that the SPDC Battalions also control almost all of the business producing and selling Ya Ma (known as 'crazy medicine' or 'horse medicine'; 'myin say' in Burmese), an amphetamine-type drug popular in Burma and Thailand. One villager from near Ho Murng claims that since the SLORC/SPDC occupation of Ho Murng the price of Ya Ma has dropped from 50 or 100 Baht per tablet to 10 Baht, and that SPDC troops tightly guard the Ya Ma factories.

As this report is being printed, SPDC representatives are attending a United Nations conference on drugs in New York in order to plead for money to combat drug production. The United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) is claiming that by working with the SPDC and providing them with tens of millions of dollars they can completely eradicate opium cultivation in Burma within 10 years, despite the fact that experienced US drug agents in Thailand have stated that during 30 years in Thailand, even with the help of a cooperative government, they have still only managed to cut 70 percent of Thailand's drug production - which was never more than a small fraction of what Burma's production is today. The SPDC and the UNDCP say that the first priority in order to reduce drug production in Shan State is to construct all-season roads into all the remotest areas of the state, so that farmers can get crops to market in the rainy season as part of the crop substitution programs. Large sums of aid money are supposed to be needed to build these all-season roads. In fact, very few crops in Burma are harvested in rainy season, they are harvested before or after rainy season. And as one villager points out in this report, even if the SPDC has a budget to build a road they generally keep it and use villagers for forced labour instead. Another villager adds that even Khun Sa used bulldozers and backhoes, but the SPDC prefers to use villagers. When the villagers flee, the SPDC suggests to them that if the human rights abuses are making life too hard for them, they could always come back and survive as opium growers. When villagers do so because they have no other choice, the SPDC can then point to the rising opium production as a reason to receive even more international anti-drug aid.

However, the money-driven bureaucracies mandated to fight drug production go on acting as though they believe there is no connection between human rights and fighting

drugs. The villagers interviewed in this report could tell them otherwise. Even the mere discussion of implementing crop substitution programs in Shan State, where the SLORC/SPDC has systematically destroyed over 1,400 villages and forcibly relocated over 300,000 people since 1996, sounds absurd to Shan farmers who have already been driven off their land by human rights abuses. [For details of the mass forced relocation program in Shan State see the reports **“Killing the Shan”** (KHRG #98-03, 23/5/98), and **“Dispossessed”** (Shan Human Rights Foundation, April 1998).] However, when the governments of the world get together to decide how to ‘help’ people, the voices of those people are often the last thing they want to hear.

This report consists of Interviews #1 and #2 with refugees from the Ho Murng area, Interview #3 with human rights monitors documenting the situation in that area, and Interview #4 with a Shan villager from Karenni (Kayah) State who was imprisoned for carrying opium in 1994. The names of those interviewed have been changed and some details omitted where necessary to protect people. All interviews were conducted by KHRG in April and May 1998.

Index of Interviews

Note: Names which have been changed are shown in quotes.

<u>#</u>	<u>Pg.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Subject</u>
1	4	“Sai Heng”	M	30	Rice and sesame farmer from near Ho Murng talks about SLORC/SPDC forced labour since arrival in 1996, looting, extortion, beatings, tying up villagers, forced labour carrying rocks to pave the Ho Murng - Lang Kher road, forced labour of women and children, rape, flight of many villagers in the area, SPDC attempt to get them back by telling them to grow opium, SLORC/SPDC soldiers and officers including operations commander buying and selling opium, controlling production of Ya Ma and selling it in Thailand, SPDC troops making new opium fields and forcing villagers to work them
2	7	“Loong Kham”	M	43	Rice and sesame farmer from near Ho Murng talks about forced labour breaking rocks on the road, forced labour of women and children, forced labour getting building materials for Army camps, flight to Thailand, steadily increasing repression of villagers near Ho Murng
3	9	Maung Too	M		Human rights monitors discussing information villagers
		“Htun Kyi”	M		from the Ho Murng area have told them about SPDC involvement in opium production
4	9	“Sai Long”	M	30	Shan man who was arrested in 1994 while carrying opium to Khun Sa’s area because his employer had not paid the Army tax to transport opium, served 4 years of his sentence in Loikaw before being taken as a porter and escaping

Abbreviations

SPDC	State Peace & Development Council, military junta ruling Burma
SLORC	State Law & Order Restoration Council, former name of the SPDC until Nov. 1997
SURA	Shan United Revolutionary Army, formed by former MTA commander Yord Serk after the MTA surrender; main group which is fighting SLORC/SPDC. In September 1997 allied itself with SSA and SSNA to form ‘new’ SSA.

SSA	Shan State Army, which had a ceasefire with SLORC/SPDC. In September 1997 allied itself with SURA and SSNA to form 'new' SSA.
SSNA	Shan State Nationalities Army, which has a ceasefire with SLORC/SPDC. In September 1997 allied itself with SURA and SSA to form 'new' SSA.
MTA	Merng Tai Army, commanded by Khun Sa, surrendered to SLORC in 1996.
IB	Infantry Battalion (SLORC/SPDC), usually about 500 soldiers fighting strength
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion (SLORC/SPDC), usually about 500 soldiers fighting strength
Kyat	Burmese currency; US\$1=6 Kyat at official rate, 200+ Kyat at current market rate
Baht	Thai currency; US\$1= approximately 36 Baht at time of printing

Interviews

#1.

NAME: “Sai Heng”
Shan Buddhist farmer
SEX: M
AGE: 30
FAMILY: Married, 2 children aged 1 and 4
ADDRESS: Nong Yao village, Ho Murng township
INTERVIEWED: 29/4/98

[“Sai Heng” farms rice and sesame in his village near Khun Sa’s former headquarters at Ho Murng. He recently fled to Thailand.]

Q: Where are you from?

A: We are originally from Nong Yao village close to Ho Murng, then we moved to Pang Yon *[a place in Thailand where many new Shan refugees took temporary refuge]*. We arrived at Pang Yon the second week of the fourth month *[in March by the Shan calendar]* and we stayed there more than 20 days. Sorry I don’t remember exactly, but we fled our village after the celebration of Union Day *[February 12th]*. Nong Yao is two hours’ walk from Ho Murng, north of Ho Murng. There is a road to get to the village but the road is quite old.

Q: Why did you flee from your village?

A: Because we were oppressed by the Burmese soldiers so we could not live there any longer. That is why we moved. And I want to say how they oppressed us. Very often they forced us to carry stones to pave the road, so we didn’t have time to earn our own living. We didn’t have any chance to work in our farms because they were forcing us to carry rocks all the time. We couldn’t stand it anymore so we had to escape that situation. When we refused to go *[to forced labour]* we were tied and beaten. Even our village headman was seized and beaten. That is why we could not stay at all, and finally the village became empty of its people. Nobody dared to stay. Besides, all our chickens, cooking oil, rice, our pigs, our chillies, even our pots and dishes, whatever they *[SPDC soldiers]* saw they took it away by force. They ate our food and our livestock, and even though we begged them not to do it they just tied up the owners and then killed their cattle, pigs and chickens. Then they ate them while they drank alcohol. Even worse, even after we had nothing left to give them we were supposed to go and buy things from other villages to give to them. When we went to the other villages to buy the things that they asked for, sometimes the house owner was not there and the neighbours said, “Oh, the owner of this house is not here, he went to the jungle to become a revolutionary”. Then when we went back and told the soldiers that the person wasn’t there, they went and broke open the lock and took all the house owner’s belongings.

Q: What kinds of labour did you have to do?

A: Mainly carrying rocks to build the road. We could make only two trips in one whole day. They were forcing us to work on the road from Ho Murng to Nam Lin to Pang Kong *[at the bank of the Salween River]* to Tai Yoi Mu. This road is heading to Lang Kher. The other roads *[on which people have to work]* go from Ho Murng to Mai Kai

and from Ho Murng to Hok. Even when the villagers had to work on those roads they *[the SPDC officers]* would ask for a budget from their headquarters and they would keep that money only for themselves.

Q: In your village, how many people had to do this work each day?

A: More than 30, one person from each house had to go to work for them every day. If we only had two or three people in the house and we couldn't go to work for them, we had to give them money, a hundred Kyats a day. If we didn't have any money, we had to give them alcohol or chickens instead. If we had no chickens we had to give them beef, not the whole cow, but we had to kill a cow and give them some of the beef *[this is a serious burden on a family because cattle are a major form of savings - once killed the meat must be used quickly or dried, as people have no access to refrigeration]*.

Q: Did the SLORC give you any food while you were working?

A: How could they feed us, they even stole the rice we brought with us! We had to bring our own lunch with us and then they took and ate our lunch. So we were hungry, we missed our lunch, and when that made us feel exhausted they beat us! Sometimes instead of stealing our rice they exchanged our good sticky-rice with their Burmese rice, saying that it was sticky-rice but it was not *[glutinous rice, which is preferred by villagers in this area]*. The soldiers wanted to have the villagers' sticky-rice. Some stole the sticky-rice from the villagers and then the people who had no rice became weak and they got beaten by the Burmese - and the Burmese said, "Oh, you are very lazy". If someone was working slowly he got beaten, because the soldiers were guarding us; but no one died. Women and children were working there also. They preferred men but if there were no men the women were obliged to go. If there were no adults then children had to go. When the parents got sick the children had to go for them. They were teenagers, fourteen and older. The youngest children had to carry half of what the adults carried.

Q: Did the Army come to your village very often?

A: They came and camped in the village for a few days, then they went and camped for a while in every village around there. In Nam Kuyt they caused problems. There were three women who were on their way to buy things to eat in Ho Murng, and they met some Burmese troops in Nong Laeng. The soldiers said "Come, we have rice", and they made the three women go into their camp, and then they raped those three women. After that they gave them one *pyi* of rice each *[about 2 kg/4.4 lb]* and they said "You don't have to pay for this rice". They were from Nam Kuyt, not our village. I don't know the names of the women, they were Pa'O and we live five miles away from them.

Q: What about the other villages around?

A: The other villages also had the same problems as we did. The first village is Lon Yao, the second is Ho Kit, the third is Nong Ai, the fourth Myo Yat, and the fifth Mayk Houn; all of these villages are totally empty now because they *[the soldiers]* did as I have explained. They started emptying out two months ago. They treated us badly and we could not stand this kind of oppression. Whenever we couldn't give them what they asked for we were supposed to give them money.

When the soldiers realised that we had all moved to the border of Thailand they sent someone to tell us, "Come back, all of you come back, come and work in your opium fields again. When you grow it we will buy all that you produce, and we will pay you the same price that you could get from others." That is what they said. They were three battalions, #525 [LIB], #332 [LIB] and #99 [IB] from Murng Pan and Lang Kher. We answered, "No we don't want to come back." We didn't even farm opium before. I farmed rice and sesame. We told them that we don't want to farm opium and that we won't go back.

Q: Isn't it forbidden to cultivate opium?

A: When the Burmese soldiers arrived in that area [*in 1996, after Khun Sa's surrender*] it was full of people, but later there were fewer and fewer people because of their oppression. They didn't like that [*they need villagers for forced labour and as a source of loot and extortion money*]. They tried to find out why the villagers left their villages. They were wondering, "Why did people leave after we arrived?" So finally they tried to make us go back home by telling us that if we did, we would be allowed to cultivate opium. They said, "If you farm opium you will earn good money, you will have money and gold, you will do good business. If you don't know where to sell it we will buy it, but we'll collect a tax."

Look, when Khun Sa was there it was said that Khun Sa was an opium warlord but we never saw this kind of thing happening around our village. But now, since Khun Sa surrendered, the price of Ya Ma has gone down to 10 Baht per tablet [*'crazy medicine', known in Burmese as 'myin say'; an amphetamine-type drug that makes you aggressive and stupid, common in Burma and Thailand*], and the Burmese soldiers carry their opium and their Ya Ma along with them from place to place. They even come and sell it in Thailand, in Mai Kai On and Mai Kai Long villages. Before I'd never even heard about these kind of things, but now I've seen it myself.

Q: Do you know if there is a place where they produce Ya Ma in your area?

A: Only the Burmese [*soldiers*] produce Ya Ma and it is forbidden to go to the factories where they make it. It is forbidden and the places are guarded by soldiers. They make the Ya Ma outside the villages. In our area the man who transports the opium drives a 4-wheel drive truck [*small pickup truck*]. No matter what checkpoints he has to pass by he is never checked, and he has all kinds of equipment for transforming opium [*into heroin*] in his 4-wheel drive truck. He is an operations commander [*'byu ha mu'; strategic commander*]. He buys the rough opium with gold, he buys one and a half viss [*2.4 kg/5.2 lb; i.e. he buys about this much on each trip*]. I don't know his name but he is from that same regional command, from Lang Kher. Now he's already moved, but the other units also do it the same way. Now only the Burmese do that business, the Shan and Pa'O don't do it. In Ho Murng there is a lot of Ya Ma, plenty! The sellers and the buyers are both Burmese. The Burmese soldiers just put on their mufti [*civilian clothes*] and then they sell the stuff from village to village as far as Mai Kai Long [*in Thailand*]. They go there not only to sell Ya Ma, they sell opium as well. They sold what they seized from

the opium merchants after Khun Sa surrendered. After that they made their own fields at Gong Sarng and Gong Mai HOUNG and they forced the villagers there to work for them.

Q: Would you say that there are more opium fields now than before Khun Sa surrendered?

A: In Khun Sa days people were talking all the time about opium, but I had never seen it. I didn't even know what it looked like. But now, since the Burmese came to rule the area we've had the chance to see what opium, Ya Ma, and also heroin are. But we don't buy it, we don't use it. We just saw it when they came to deal in it. Before when Khun Sa was there, we just heard people mention opium and we saw opium in pictures, as though it were some kind of vegetable. *[Khun Sa bought most of his opium from other areas before refining it into heroin; see the interview below with "Sai Long", who was arrested while transporting opium into Khun Sa's area.]*

Q: Is the situation getting worse this year? Why did you decide to flee only now?

A: In Khun Sa's days, before he surrendered to the Burmese troops, we didn't have to be porters, we didn't have to pay money to the soldiers and we were not forced to work for them; but after the Burmese soldiers started ruling our area life only remained peaceful for about three months. After that, the situation started getting worse and worse until the land became empty *[of people]*.

Q: Didn't you flee because of fighting between the SPDC and the SSA?

A: No. I think if the Burmese soldiers stay there I won't go back to my home, but when we achieve freedom I will go back. When we are living in Thailand we can't cut trees in the forest like at home *[to build a house]*, and it is hard to survive. At home we can farm and cultivate, we can do small business there, but here we don't see anything we can do, so when the Burmese have gone we would love to go back. If it is not possible to go back we don't have any idea what we'll do.

NAME: "Loong Kham" **#2.** **SEX:** M **AGE:** 43
Shan Buddhist farmer
FAMILY: Married, 4 children aged 2-15
ADDRESS: Gong Long village, Ho Murng township
INTERVIEWED: 29/4/98

["Loong Kham" farms rice and sesame in his village near Khun Sa's former headquarters at Ho Murng. He recently arrived in Thailand.]

Q: When did you arrive in Thailand?

A: I arrived on March 7th. I came because of the oppression of the Burmese, like the others. I sent my wife and children first and then I fled. I had to do the same things as the others. There was more *[forced]* work in my place *[than in "Sai Heng"'s village; see interview above]*. You could see a lot of piles of stones along the road in Gong Long, a hundred and twenty piles of rocks along the road just for our village. There were more than 30 houses in the village, 35 houses. We had iron sticks to break the stones. One person from each house had to go. If we had no men, we had to replace them by women. Women and children had to go. They beat the people the same way they did in "Sai Heng"'s village because it was the same road, just a different section of it. The soldiers and their chiefs were watching us.

Q: When did you start to work on that road?

A: In the tenth month of 1997 *[October/November by the Shan calendar]*. In the tenth month it was still raining so we didn't have to work as much, we just had to work for about twenty days that month. It took us three months to finish that road *[the section they had been assigned]*, until the twelfth month *[December]*. We had to finish it by then because they said that the road had to be finished completely by the end of the year. We had to work for them and follow the timetable that they gave us. If we didn't finish on time our village headman would be punished. We are all Shan and we didn't want to see anyone get hurt, so we helped each other and in the end nobody had to be punished.

Q: Do you know where the road was going to?

A: The road that we built was going from our village to Ta Hung, to Sop Paeng, Tza Long and then on to Ho Murng. There was a lot of erosion because the streams are very strong. In Khun Sa's day they tried to repair that road, but now in the Burmese days there are no bulldozers or backhoes. Instead of that they use the villagers *[Khun Sa used*

heavy equipment but the SPDC rarely does, preferring to use the cheaper option of forced labour]. They didn't build a dam on the river, so when the heavy rains come the water gets higher, the current is very strong and destroys the road along the riverbank. We fixed that road for three months. This road is used by the forestry department [for logging], and the military use it to carry their supplies and their rations from Lang Kher.

Q: Did you have to do other work for the Army?

A: Yes, we also did other things. When they wanted to build a school they tore down the houses of people who weren't around; some people had gone to Thailand or other places, and some had gone away to earn money. We had to tear the houses down for them and carry the building materials to their camp. If we hadn't done it we would have been beaten.

Q: Was anybody forced to move by the Army in your area?

A: They didn't force us to move in that area because our village is close to the road, they come and stop there when they transport their rations. They were [*Light Infantry*] Battalion #525 from Pan Taw Wet. There were some people who fled the village but they didn't come here [*to Thailand*], they just went to Ho Murng. A big crowd of us came here - myself, L---, N---, K---, and also P---, S---, N---, P---, L---, another one we call Teacher, and T---; altogether 11 families, and also W---, all from the same village. Some others are in other places in Thailand. Some young people have fled to Thailand while their parents stayed behind.

Q: How did you come here?

A: We walked through the jungle for two days. We just hid from the soldiers and walked through the jungle, but if we had met the soldiers they wouldn't have allowed us to come. We couldn't carry any bags, not even any rice, otherwise we would have been accused of providing rice to the rebels. For the same reason we couldn't carry any dried noodles or cheroots. But we didn't even know where the rebels were. We've never seen any rebels, we've just heard about them.

We came as a group to Pang Yon [*in Thailand*], then we tried to bring some of our relatives who were left behind in Nam Kut and Kai Lon. Some people from Mai Kai tried to do the same, but the Burmese found out and blocked the way. In the end those people couldn't come, though their children are all already here. In Pang Yon we found day labour to survive. With what we earned for one day we could survive that one day, but we were short of food.

Q: Is it true that the Burmese Army came to see you when you were in Pang Yon?

A: They did, even just 2 days ago on the 27th [*of April*] they came and fired their guns over on the other side of Pang Yon, which is still Thai territory, and also at Long Juk which is close to the Thai border. They even came and camped in Mai Kai Long, which is Thai territory, and they kept in contact by radio [*with their base*]. So then the Thai Army also went and visited there. The Thais camped at Hong Yarm, and they also went to Mai Kai Long because it is very close by. Both the Burmese and the Thais go up there [*Mai Kai Long*] quite often.

Q: Do you think more people are going to try to come to Thailand?

A: If the villagers can find a way to come they will come. They can't stay there anymore because of the oppression by the Burmese Army. They are treating the villagers harder and harder all the time. In the beginning when the [*SLORC/SPDC*] soldiers first arrived they didn't dare force the villagers to do things because there were too many of

us, but as the number of villagers gets fewer and fewer they treat them harder and harder, just like keeping hens in a cage, and people can't find a way out. *[As the population gets lower the demands for forced labour, food and money remain at least the same, so each villager faces a heavier burden.]* Under the present situation I don't want to go back because we won't be able to survive. Even now the situation there is very hard.

#3.

[Human rights monitors Maung Too of the All-Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) and "Htun Kyi" (not his real name) gave the following information in an interview in May 1998.]

Maung Too: On the 27th and 28th [of April] we met 209 people who had fled [to Thailand], they were Shan, Pa'O and Palaung. We interviewed them. Among them there was a Shan lady from Nang Kang and she told us about her village. About 1½ hours' walk west of her village there is a Burmese camp, it is Light Infantry Battalion #332. She said they force the villagers to grow opium and then they collect opium taxes *[the money you routinely have to pay to SPDC for permission to grow opium]*. In the village of that lady they have to pay 12,000 Kyats. They had already paid the taxes, but after they had paid and were selling the opium the soldiers arrested them. They took all the opium but they didn't do anything to the people. So they tell the villagers to grow opium, they take the taxes but then they also take the opium from the villagers when they see them selling or buying it. The porters *[who had escaped from SPDC troops]* said that in Thing Gaung the villagers are growing opium and the Burmese base knows about it, so they ordered the villagers to destroy the opium plants; but not all of them, only the opium which is not perfect, the plants which are not a hundred percent good. So the villagers collected money for the widows whose opium plants had been destroyed. *[The SPDC probably ordered the plants destroyed in order to show it in the media and report it to foreign agencies, possibly for a "drug burning" ceremony.]*

"Htun Kyi": On March 27th the new arrivals were Shans from Ho Murng. They said that LIB #332 is in Ho Murng. It is very close to where they grow opium, and the SPDC soldiers force the villagers to go *[to work in the opium fields]*.

Maung Too: The SPDC soldiers make the villagers grow the opium. These are new fields, just since last November or December. The villagers say that now many people are growing a lot of opium on the hillsides.

#4.

NAME: "Sai Long" **SEX:** M **AGE:** 30
Shan Buddhist
FAMILY: Married, 3 children aged 5-9
ADDRESS: xxxx village, Loikaw township
INTERVIEWED: 1/5/98

[“Sai Long” was arrested in 1994 for carrying opium and sentenced to 10 years. While serving his sentence in Loikaw jail, he was taken as a porter early this year for SPDC troops patrolling Karenni areas and eventually escaped. The text below is excerpted from the full text of the interview with “Sai Long”, which is printed as Interview #5 in the report “A Struggle Just to Survive: Update on the Current Situation in Karenni” (KHRG #98-06, 12/6/98).]

Q: When did you arrive here [*a refugee camp*]?

A: I arrived here on the 5th of April. I came here because the SPDC forced me to be a porter. First I was a prisoner in Loikaw jail, then they took me out of jail and forced me to be a porter.

Q: Why were you in jail?

A: I went to prison because of drugs. I didn't want to carry opium and I never used it, but I had to think of how I could earn a living. They gave me money to carry opium. A Chinese paid me 500 Kyats for each piece, and I carried eight pieces. I have no idea where it came from. I carried it from Lwae Neh to Mae Aw, then from Mae Aw to Ho Murng. They didn't sell it in Karenni State, they were selling it to Khun Sa and they transported it there [*Ho Murng was Khun Sa's headquarters*]. I was arrested on April 9th 1994 by LIB #530 because I hadn't paid them the money. If you pay them money they don't arrest you. [*The SLORC/SPDC charges a tax on those who independently produce or transport opium and heroin, and if you don't pay it you are arrested. His boss had not paid the tax.*] I think you have to pay at least a hundred thousand Kyats, but the amount depends on how many pieces you have. The more you carry, the more you have to pay them. They arrested four people. I had a trial. I got a ten-year sentence and I stayed for four years of it. At first I had to stay in shackles for one and a half years. My serial number there was xxxx.