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Child Soldiers: Graduating From the School of Hard Knocks Isn't Easy

By **Katya Cengel** / December 28 2013 1:02 PM



Thein Htut Oo has the Burmese word for “mother” tattooed on his right bicep and “father” on his left. Like young men the world over, he got the tattoos while serving in the military, in this case Myanmar’s military.

Only at the time he was not a young man, but a 15-year-old boy who missed his parents.

On the backs of his hands are more tattoos: “zeal” on his right and “brave” on his left. They were also done while he was in the military, not by choice, but by force after he tried

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to run away. They serve as a reminder of what he endured in the three years he spent in the military, like the malaria from which he also still suffers.

No one is sure how many children serve in Myanmar's armed forces, one of the largest standing armies in Southeast Asia. In recent years, about 500 have been released after they were punished for deserting or have left in other ways. But experts agree many more children remain serving in the nation's military and in non-governmental armed groups.

In June 2012, after half a decade of negotiations, Myanmar signed a U.N. pact to end the use of child soldiers. Since then the government has held four official events releasing 176 children and young adults from the military. That they are returned to civilian life suffering from serious physical and mental trauma is a given. Whether they can ever recover is less clear.

"What has happened cannot be undone," said Bertrand Bainvel, head of UNICEF Myanmar. "However, research has clearly demonstrated that when children experience extreme forms of trauma — whether sexual abuse, physical or psychological violence, or experience in combat — they can and often do become full, productive members of communities."

The go-to guide on the topic, [The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups](#), states that former child soldiers can contribute positively to society if given the appropriate help, support and encouragement. According to the principles, this means acceptance from their families and communities when they return, safety from harm, dignified employment and education.

Unfortunately, efforts to release and facilitate the recovery and reintegration of the world's estimated 250,000 child soldiers often fall short when it comes to tending to their needs, said Charu Lata Hogg, Child Soldiers International's Asia program manager.

"What we've seen in other contexts is that when the release

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of children from armed groups and their rehabilitation is not integrated in ceasefire and peace agreements, then this issue has contributed to instability and violence,” Hogg said.

If something isn't changed, that could be the case in Myanmar. According to Steve Marshall, head of the U.N.'s International Labor Organization (ILO) in Myanmar, “Not enough has been done” when it comes to rehabilitation and reintegration. But, he added, “The reality is not much more could have been done under the circumstances.”



Thein Htut Oo, 19, besides his wife and relatives in their neighborhood in Pathein, Myanmar. The former child soldier served in the military for 3 years, where developed malaria and a habit for drinking. Diana Markosian

As part of the 2012 pact, the 176 Burmese former child soldiers released in four waves are supposed to be rehabilitated and reintegrated back into the community by the Myanmar government's Department of Social Welfare, in partnership with UNICEF and the cooperation of Save the Children, World Vision and four national NGOs. Case workers oversee their reintegration into the community, with a focus on education and vocational training.

At first, the children are aggressive and untrusting, said Thanda Kyaw, program adviser for the child protection programme of Save the Children International Myanmar. Maung Pu, with the 88 Generation Students Group in Chaungtha, a beach town five hours' drive from the

country's commercial capital Yangon, goes even further.

"They are numb," he said. "The first thing rehabilitation needs to do is change their emotional feeling because they don't care about anything."

In many cases they were not kidnapped and forced into the army but were tricked into joining under false pretense and they may feel guilt over deserting or being released. They have to be made to understand they are being demobilized not because they were bad soldiers but because "an army is not the place for a child", said Nicolay Paus, child protection specialist with UNICEF Myanmar.

But UNICEF and Save the Children admit the psychological support on offer is too inadequate to be called true counseling. In a preliminary assessment, Child Soldiers International found psychological support lacking and the Myanmar Ministry of Social Welfare to be underfunded and lacking capacity.

U Aung Kyaw Moe, with the Department of Social Welfare within the Ministry of Social Welfare, said the department does have enough funding, but would not reveal the specific amount set aside for the purpose. Both the government and UNICEF admit support is not always available in rural areas. And those who desert (76 of them between January and September 2013, according to ILO estimates) are not usually treated.

Thein Htut Oo is 19 now, but was 15 when he joined the military. He lives in a three-foot-high space under his in-laws' wood home in the outskirts of the city of Pathien, a four-hour bus ride from Yangon. He keeps his clothes under a tarp and rocks his ten-month-old daughter, Khar Nway Oo, in a makeshift hammock tied to the floorboards of the home above.

There are no walls to his "home" and he must crawl to enter and exit the muddy space. He and his wife, Thin Thin, store the wood planks with which they one day hope to build a house next to the woven mat on which they sleep, eat and live. Thin Thin, who is 20 and four months pregnant with a boy, cooks their meals on an open fire by a

stream.

“I want my children to be educated,” says Thein Htut Oo, who is tall and sinewy and pulls his hair back with a headband. “But I worry my son will be taken by the military.”

Thein Htut Oo joined the military after a particularly bad fight with his stepfather, who, he said, beat him. He was promised the equivalent of \$10 for signing up and \$100 a month salary, a substantial amount to an uneducated 15-year-old. He received the \$10, but the promised \$100 monthly salary turned out to be only \$15 and was soon eaten up by uniform and transportation fees.

While in the military, he trained as a soldier during the day, learning how to fire a gun and becoming fit by running long distances with weighted packs. Because he was small and had trouble carrying a gun, he says he was frequently slapped and struck with bamboo.

At night he worked as a farmer and on weekends he collected firewood. In Myanmar the military functions both as a fighting force and a form of cheap labor. Thein Htut Oo never got enough to eat.

“That was the hardest, being hungry,” he said.

It was a year before he dared speak with his family as talking with family is punished by the docking of a month's salary. But Thein Htut Oo had a high fever and the medicine the military doctor prescribed wasn't working, so he asked his mother to send cash so he could receive private treatment.

Not long after he recovered, he ran away from the army. When the military found him they gave him 115 lashes and imprisoned him for four months.

After he ran away the second time, Thein Htut Oo knew better than to return. He obtained temporary release papers from the ILO that explained he was a former child soldier who was the subject of a case of possible illegal

recruitment.

Aside from receiving the ILO papers, he has received no other help. He struggles with his temper and drinks heavily, both habits he developed in the military.

“He stayed drunk when I was pregnant,” said Thin Thin. “I told him, ‘You have a child. You need to take care of your child.’”

Thein Htut Oo has slowly recovered from his harsh military experiences, but the malaria he contracted when in uniform has not been cured. When he has a high fever, he finds it hard to pedal his trishaw, a job that enables him to earn about \$3 to \$4 a day.



Thein Htut Oo, 19, a rickshaw driver in Pathein, Myanmar, takes his wife and child home. With little education or vocation training, most former child soldiers end up in low-paying jobs like rickshaw drivers and wood haulers. Diana Markosian

With little education or vocational training, most former child soldiers end up in low-paying, hard labor jobs like rickshaw drivers and wood haulers, said Sein Chit, a community organizer for Myanmar Council of Churches' Urban Rural Mission in Pathein. Sein Chit has been working with former child soldiers for three years and knows of only one who received any form of rehabilitation or reintegration, a young man who was given money towards an animal breeding venture he had started.

Save the Children provides some basic vocational training, but it has limited funding and scope. ILO is in the early stages of a program that would train former child soldiers and other vulnerable groups in basic business practices and income-generating skills. They have trained trainers to teach former child soldiers, but lack the funds to help their clients start their own businesses. Donors are eager to support getting children released from the military, said Marshall, but less enthusiastic about supporting programs to rehabilitate them back into normal society.

“The Western world and donors like sexy projects. They love getting kids out of the army,” he said. “Economic reintegration is not sexy.”

But it works. In 1988 a group of 39 child soldiers in Mozambique were offered psychological, social and economic rehabilitation and reintegration services for several years, then their progress was followed for a further sixteen years. The children became productive, responsible and caring adults. Studies in Sierra Leone and Uganda produced similar results.

Wai Htoo dreams of becoming an express bus driver. It was what got him in trouble in the first place. When he was 15, an army recruiter promised him a high-paying job as a driver. Instead, he found himself running five miles with a backpack loaded with sand.

He was kicked, slapped and beaten with bamboo. He watched fellow soldiers die from heat exhaustion during training exercises and friends kill each other in fights. He ate tasteless bean soup that looked like the water you wash your hands in and was beaten for being too loud when watching a movie on his day off. He contracted malaria.

He took up drinking to numb the emptiness he felt at missing his family. Now a compact and thoughtful 20-year-old, he rubs his face and picks at his skin when he talks about his time in the military.

His oldest sister, Moo Blay Wah, who raised him after their parents died of typhoid, remembers how sun-darkened his skin was when he escaped the military after four years. The

once smart little brother who was always singing gospel songs is now tight-lipped when she asks him about his time in the military. He is quick to anger and goes off by himself when he is upset.

“When he is scared, disappointed or sad, he drinks,” said Moo Blay Wah.

Thanda Kyaw with Save the Children would like to see a comprehensive long-term plan to ensure the official rehabilitation and reintegration programs are well funded effective, rather than the piecemeal, small scale projects used at present.

“A poor program might achieve in the short run, but in the long run they will not be employable and end up in a risky situation again,” said UNICEF’s Bainvel. Or, with no other options, the victims might drift back into the military, said Marshall.

That is Wai Htoo’s fear. He sometimes wakes up in a cold sweat, believing he has been caught and returned to the military. He has temporary papers from ILO, but he lacks official release papers from the military and hides whenever he sees a soldier.

“He is always scared,” said his sister Moo Blay Wah.

He works seven days a week as a bus driver’s assistant, cleaning the bus and answering passengers’ questions. If he hadn’t served in the military as a child he might already be a driver, earning almost double what he does now. And he wouldn’t have to remind himself not to say “Yes, sir” and swing his arms in formation when he walks.

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