

# **Karen Human Rights Group**

## **Report from the Field**

**An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group**  
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### **Pa'an District:**

### **Land confiscation, forced labour and extortion undermining villagers' livelihoods**

Villagers in eastern Pa'an District, in central Karen state adjacent to the border with Thailand (see map), have faced serious problems for many years and continue to do so now. At present their livelihoods are being seriously undermined because of forced labour, extortion of money and demands for livestock and materials by State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) authorities who exert control over the region. The confiscation of villagers' land without compensation is a growing problem, particularly as part of SPDC plans to expand Dta Greh (a.k.a. Pain Kyone) village into a town. Rape, arbitrary detention and torture are still committed by local authorities with complete impunity, making it difficult or impossible for villagers to resist these abuses and causing some of them to flee to areas protected by the Karen National Union (KNU) or to Thailand. This report will focus on events in Lu Pleh and Dta Greh townships in northern Pa'an district (which make up the SPDC township of Hlaing Bwe; see map) throughout the year 2005.

Villagers living in these areas have told KHRG researchers that they can never prosper or feel safe while living in areas under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces, because the soldiers are constantly forcing and demanding things from them and threatening them. Since the ceasefire between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the SPDC began in 2004, armed conflict has slightly reduced but forced labour and demands by SPDC and DKBA forces have not been reduced at all.

### **Forced labour and other demands**

Over the years forced labour and demands for money have become routine features of the villagers' lives. Wherever SPDC or DKBA army camps are situated near villages, the villagers are constantly forced to do work for the soldiers based in the camps, such as cleaning the camp compound, carrying water, cutting bamboo and trees to build huts for the soldiers, making fences around the camp compound, standing as sentries, acting as messengers, and doing whatever else the soldiers and officers request of them. This results in poverty and food

shortages among the villagers, most of whom dare not complain because the soldiers sometimes physically abuse them or rape their female relatives.

Village tracts<sup>1</sup> near the DKBA's central headquarters at Khaw Taw Pu (a.k.a. Myaing Gyi Ngu) in northern Hlaing Bwe township face a large number of demands. Senior DKBA officers like General Kyaw Than and General Tun Hlaing order the officers under them to recruit forced labour and demand money from villagers. In 2005, DKBA officers demanded 1,000 Kyat in cash from every household in all villages near Khaw Taw Pu to pay for birthday celebrations for the DKBA's founding monk U Thu Za Na to be held at the headquarters. Villagers living in the DKBA headquarters area report that DKBA officers Bo Thein Win based in Dta Mu Yan village tract and Bo Than Tin based in Ma Eh village tract both operate under direct control of DKBA headquarters and both demand money five or six times a year, with the amounts each time ranging between 7,000 Kyat and 16,000 Kyat per village. Villagers living near Khaw Taw Pu also have to do forced labour at the headquarters, particularly carrying water, sand, stone and making bricks for the construction of pagodas. Villagers are also forced to clear the ground every year for DKBA anniversary celebrations held at the Ta Zaw Mon full moon (usually in November) and Karen New Year celebrations (at the new moon in December or January). In 2005 the DKBA demanded ten bullock cart loads of coconut palm fronds and ten truckloads of firewood from the people of Htee Lah Neh village for a big pavilion at Khaw Taw Pu. Other villages near the DKBA headquarters regularly face similar and additional demands of materials and labour for the support of the headquarters. These village tracts surrounding the DKBA headquarters are controlled by the DKBA on behalf of the SPDC, so people do not have to do forced labour for the SPDC but only for the DKBA.

In village tracts jointly controlled by SPDC and DKBA forces villagers face demands for forced labour, money and materials by both groups, but DKBA forces tend to be more in evidence so their demands are the heaviest. For example, on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2005 DKBA #555 Brigade officer Maung Thaw Aye demanded 6,000 Kyat in cash from each village in Htee Pa Reh village tract in Lu Pleh township so he could hold a festival celebrating renovations to his camp at Meh Dta Mu Hta. He also demanded 300 shingles of thatch from each village and told village leaders that if they could not provide the thatch they must hand over its market value in cash. Meanwhile, SPDC troops came to Khaw Thu Kee, which is one of the villages in this tract, and stole and ate 7 viss of chicken (about 12 chickens) and one big tin (13 kg./29 lb.) of rice belonging to the villagers.

After the villagers of Khaw Thu Kee finished ploughing their paddy fields in mid-2005 they were about to let their cattle and buffaloes into the hills near their village, but DKBA officer Paw Peh at Naw Ka Reh Kyo camp said he had laid landmines in the hills. He said if the villagers wanted to send their livestock there he would have to remove his mines, and demanded one pig worth about 70,000 Kyat for his trouble. Fearing for their livestock, the villagers gave him a large pig, but later found out that no mines had been planted and that Paw Peh was simply using the threat of mines as an excuse for extortion; they believed, however, that had they failed to comply with his demand he probably would have laid some mines to kill their livestock as punishment. This was not Paw Peh's first such demand; beginning on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2005 he had already demanded 500,000 Kyat from the entire Htee Pa Reh village tract, allegedly to hire messengers and porters instead of taking villagers by force to do this work.

Neighbouring Plaw Nya Thi village tract in Lu Pleh township has three villages: Pee Tu Hta, Plaw Nya Thi and Htoo Pler Plaw. On November 10<sup>th</sup> 2005, DKBA officer Ter Pee from Naw

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<sup>1</sup> A village tract is a local administrative area usually made up of three to twelve villages.

Ka Reh Kyo camp demanded 60,000 Kyat from the village tract for messenger (*set tha*), sentry and porter 'fees'. Like the 500,000 Kyat mentioned above, these 'fees' are supposed to be paid in lieu of performing forced labour so that the officer can hire replacements, but in many cases the fees are simple extortion and villagers still have to do the unpaid labour. The 60,000 Kyat was requisitioned based on the number of houses in each village, so Pee Tu Hta village had to give 30,000 Kyat and the other two villages together provided the other 30,000 Kyat. The villages in Plaw Nya Thi tract were also forced to provide 1,500 bamboo posts and 300 thatch shingles per village to DKBA #999 Brigade officer Pu Htoo for repairs to Dta Kaw Bee DKBA camp.

In Dta Greh township villagers also have to face forced labour carrying Army rations and supplies, making roads, hauling timber and cutting bamboo for SPDC army camps. In addition, they are now being forced to build a large rice storehouse in Dta Greh village for SPDC soldiers, and to build a bridge across the Dta Greh river (also called the Hlaing Bwe river) between Dta Greh and Moe Naing village, part of the road from Dta Greh to Naw Ter Yan hill.

Many villages in Pa'an district face constant orders for porters and other forced labour. These demands are rotated between the households of the village. Porterage usually involves carrying food and rations for the soldiers, and if no one in the household can go they must find and hire someone to go in their place for 1,000 Kyat per day. For rotating shifts of forced labour like messenger and sentry duty at SPDC and DKBA army camps, many villages collect money from each household, then give the money to the camp officer to 'hire' replacements. Some officers then use this money to hire people, while others simply keep the money and either do without the labourers or take them from another village.

### **Land confiscation**

The SPDC announced in November 2004 that they would enlarge Dta Greh village (called Pain Kyone in Burmese) into a town, and that land will be confiscated for this purpose. Villagers were told, "All land belongs not to the civilians but to the government, so we can occupy any land we want." Unfortunately under Burmese 'law' this is true; the Burmese constitution of 1974 and several state decrees since then have given all land ownership to the state, which allows people to acquire rights to use the land only as long as this suits the purposes of the state.<sup>2</sup> Thus far the military has confiscated the irrigated ricefields belonging to two villagers without paying any compensation and has used this land to build a hospital and offices. Since November 2004 they have notified 64 farmers in the village that some or all of their land is to be confiscated for military or administrative purposes. These small-holding farmers are to lose a total of over 110 acres (45 hectares), averaging about half of their productive land, and no compensation is being paid. Some are losing all of their fields, others their homes or part of their fields.

Villagers in Dta Greh are afraid that this mass confiscation without compensation will destroy their livelihoods and say they are extremely sad and afraid and uncertain what to do. Moreover, they fear that the expansion of their village into a larger centre with a stronger presence of SPDC administrative and military personnel will lead to a great increase in various forms of forced labour and extortion. These villagers report that the demands placed on them up to now have already made them poorer and poorer, that they cannot receive sufficient wages for their work or keep enough of their crops to survive, and many of them say that even if they

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<sup>2</sup> See Nancy Hudson-Rodd and Myo Nyunt (2001) 'Control of Land and Life in Burma', *Tenure Brief* No. 3, April 2001: 1-8. Published by Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

‘work in the morning’ they no longer get enough ‘to eat in the evening’ – a reference to the Karen idiom ‘work in the morning to eat in the evening’ which refers to people who are reduced to living hand to mouth.

### **‘Development’ projects**

Making things worse, many parts of Pa’an District suffered floods during the 2005 rainy season. Some of the irrigated rice fields near the Dta Greh river were flooded, washing away all of the topsoil and leaving the fields too rocky to continue growing rice there. During the floods when the villagers were facing many problems, SPDC leaders from Pa’an town came to Pa Kah village (just 5 kilometres/3 miles east of Dta Greh across the Dta Greh river) to inspect the damage. They saw the villagers’ problems but said they could not help the villagers with anything. Then they demanded money from the villagers to cover the cost of the petrol they had expended to come for the visit.

In 2005 Pa Kah village also received a visit from the leadership of SPDC #22 Light Infantry Division in Pa’an. The Division officers informed the villagers that they would dam the Dta Greh river (a.k.a. Hlaing Bwe river) and construct a hydroelectric power dam just outside the village at Oo Wih Hta. Two SPDC policemen were then sent to guard the site. Not long afterward, the two policemen got drunk and junior policeman Win Naing shot and killed his commander, Police Sergeant Saya Kyaw. They were not replaced, and the villagers said that the local spirits must be opposed to the dam. Both the villagers and the DKBA in this area are opposed to the dam, but feel they can do nothing to stop the SPDC’s plans. To clear the site the SPDC authorities asked for villagers and paid them 1,000 Kyat per day, but the villagers feel this was done to win their cooperation and that when more labour is required later they will probably force the villagers to do the work without payment. According to the villagers, even when the SPDC asks for something nicely people know that if they do not comply the troops will be sent in to terrorise them and force them to do it, so the villagers see little difference between requests and threats when these come from SPDC authorities.

### **Rape and retaliation**

SPDC Light Infantry Division #22 based at Pa’an and Light Infantry Battalion #205 based at Htee Loh have sent three military intelligence men to live among the villagers in Dta Greh village. Named Pyo Cho, Thein Soe and Kyaw Soe, they do not try to keep their intelligence role secret; villagers have seen their military intelligence cards and say they go each month to get their rations from their home camps. Pyo Cho married a widow in Dta Greh named Naw Mu Dee. According to the villagers, all three men abuse their power to treat the villagers badly; for example, Pyo Cho has been known to threaten children with his machete and steal people’s chickens and belongings.

Kyaw Soe arrived in Dta Greh village in February-March 2005 and moved into the house of village headman Saw Tha Wah; he spent some of his time tending Saw Tha Wah’s cattle. When Kyaw Soe returned from the fields to eat on the afternoon of June 6<sup>th</sup> 2005, he found Tha Wah’s wife Ma Chu Klu alone in the house. He took out his machete, threatened her with it and said, “Don’t make any noise, if you make noise I will kill you now.” Ma Chu Klu was afraid of him and dared not make any noise, and Kyaw Soe forced her down and raped her in her house. After he raped her he said, “Never tell your husband Saw Tha Wah. If you tell him I will kill you and all of your family.”

However, Ma Chu Klu felt so depressed, ashamed and sad that she told her husband Tha Wah about the rape and about Kyaw Soe's threat after raping her. Tha Wah then arranged to call Kyaw Soe on another matter to come and meet him at his farmfield hut. When Kyaw Soe arrived at the hut at 10 o'clock that night, Tha Wah and three of his friends killed him.

When SPDC intelligence officer Pyo Cho and his wife Naw Mu Dee found out that Kyaw Soe had been killed they went and informed the local DKBA, and Brigadier Bo Pa Nwee from DKBA #999 Brigade sent his soldiers to arrest the four men involved in the killing. After hearing their reasons, the DKBA Brigade deputy commander Pa Wah fined the men and their families a total of 1,200,000 Kyat and released them, telling them not to inform the SPDC authorities. However, Pyo Cho had also gone to inform the SPDC military. When the four men heard of this they feared for their lives and fled with their families to KNU territory near the Thai border.

## **Health, Education and Religion**

Most people in Pa'an District have to face diseases like malaria, dengue fever, skin diseases and diarrhoea. People who get sick do not have enough money to pay the heavy bills at town hospitals so they have little access to doctors or medicines, and many people therefore die needlessly. The present threats to their livelihoods only make this situation worse. Some people are lucky and recover from illnesses using only traditional herbal medicines and spiritual treatments, but these are often ineffective against very serious ailments.

People living in rural areas of Karen State do not have easy access to schools, and most students do not have enough money for the required books, pens, pencils, uniforms and school fees. In schools run by the SPDC, teaching Karen language is forbidden and many Karen children therefore grow up unable to read and write their own language. In the towns, many Karen children cannot even speak their mother tongue fluently. This is part of what has been called the SPDC's 'Burmanisation' campaign, which seeks to weaken non-Burman political identities by eradicating their language and literature.

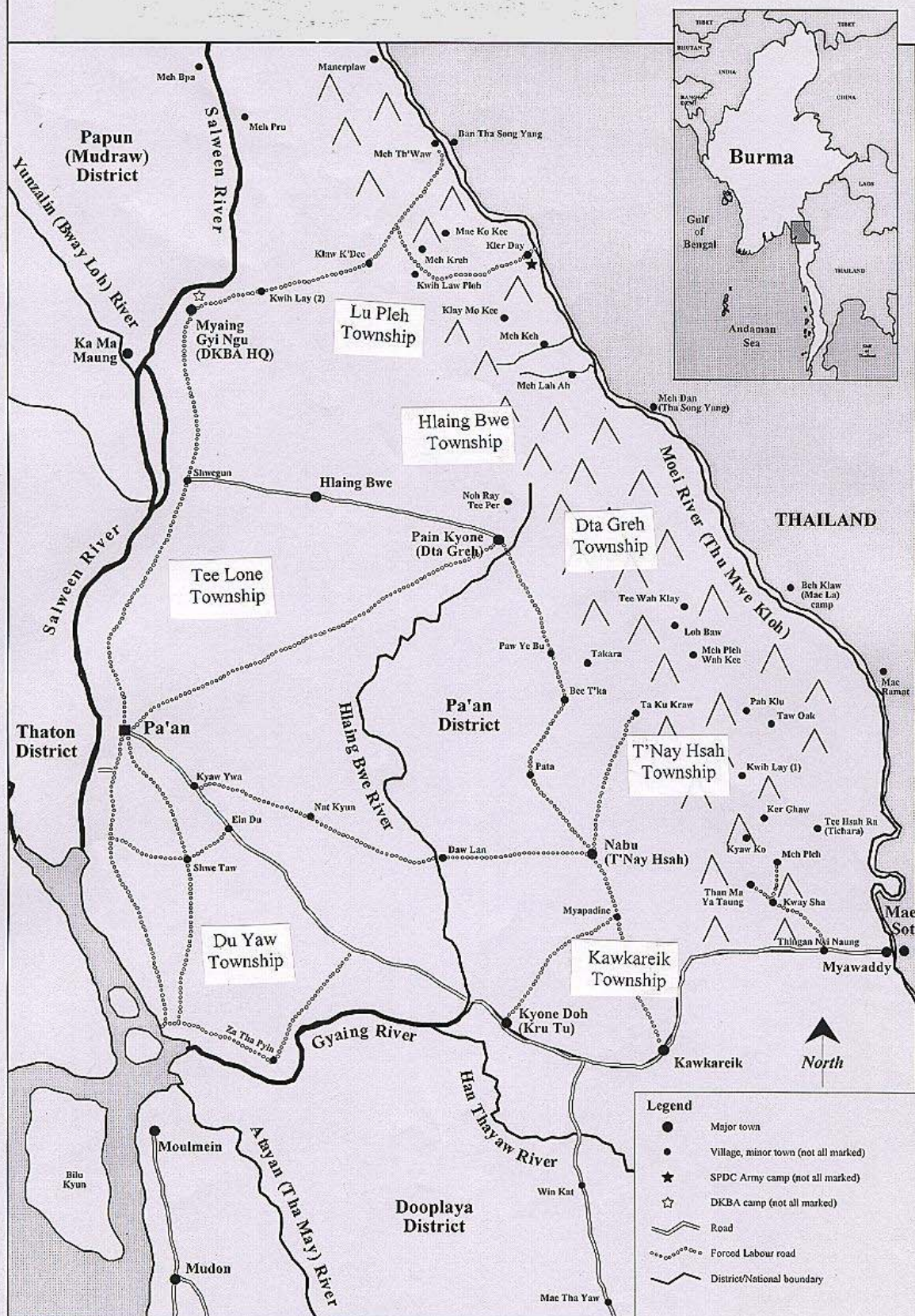
The DKBA uses similar tactics to marginalise non-Buddhist religious practices. In Pa Kah village near Dta Greh in 2004, Brigadier Bo Pa Nwee of DKBA #999 Brigade and DKBA Company deputy commander Toe Heh of Battalion #4 instigated the construction of a pagoda right in front of the gate of the village's Baptist Church. The church members told a KHRG researcher that they were saddened by this DKBA effort to insult their religion.

## **Background**

The information above is drawn from research and interviews conducted by KHRG. For further information see also *Pa'an District: Food security in crisis for civilians in rural areas* (KHRG Bulletin #2005-B3, March 2005) and *Forced Labour and the DKBA in T'Nay Hsah Township, Pa'an District* (KHRG Bulletin #2005-B2, February 2005). Photos from the region are included in *KHRG Photo Set 2005A* of May 2005. Additional background on the situation in Pa'an District can be found in the KHRG updates *Eastern Pa'an District: Forced Labour, Food Security and Consolidation of Control* (KHRG #2004-U1, 23/11/04) and *Consolidation of Control: The SPDC and the DKBA in Pa'an District* (KHRG #2002-U4, 7/9/02). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site (<http://www.khrg.org>).



# Pa'an District





# Districts of Karen State



**Scale:** 1 cm to 22 km  
1 in. to 35 miles

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group