



Report from the Field

July 29, 2006 / KHRG #2006-F7

Forced Labour, Extortion and Abuses in Papun District

As the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) continues its Karen State offensive into the rainy season, villagers living in Lu Thaw township in northern Papun District have come under increasing pressure as a consequence of the military encroachment onto their land. KHRG field researchers have documented attacks on villages, destruction of crops and targeted killings in the area. Villagers residing in Dweh Loh and Bu Tho townships further south, outside the area of the systematic offensive against villages, confront a different pattern of abuse involving constant demands for labour, money, food and building supplies. These villagers are confronted with a situation of heightened insecurity as a consequence of the persistent demands of SPDC and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces.

Papun District, situated in northeastern Karen State adjacent to the border with Thailand, is covered almost completely by steep mountains which descend sharply to the Bilin and Yunzalin Rivers and their tributaries. Over the past ten years the SPDC has expanded its presence in the district, most notably along the Kyauk Kyi-Saw Hta, Bilin-Papun, and Ka Ma Maung-Papun roads. These roads remain unpaved and in need of annual repair, but they nevertheless assist SPDC and DKBA forces to access the villages situated alongside them; provide an obstacle to the movement of villagers hiding in the forest; and allow rapid mobilisation across the district. The SPDC has used these roads in its campaigns to move those villagers living beyond its immediate control in the mountains to relocation sites such as those at Ku Thu Hta and Meh Way in Dweh Loh township and Meh Nya Hta in Bu Tho township.

Recent KHRG reports have documented extensive attacks against villagers living in Lu Thaw township along the Bilin and Yunzalin Rivers as part of the SPDC's current offensive throughout northern Karen State, conducted since November 2005 (see *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts*, KHRG #2006-B7). Troops have been shelling villages and destroying food stores as they sweep through the area eliminating any civilian presence.

The Ongoing Offensive in Lu Thaw

In Lu Thaw township of northern Papun district, the SPDC is continuing its attacks on Karen villages on at least two fronts. North of the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Hta vehicle road (see map), several battalions of Military Operations Command (MOC) #10 and MOC #15 are still operating together to destroy villages and consolidate control in the hills west of the Yunzalin River (Bway Loh Kloh in Karen). As reported previously by KHRG,¹ these battalions were establishing a new Army camp north of Naw Yo Hta. This new camp is now active, located on a hilltop known as Twee Mi Kyo (or Hill 4780) just west of the Yunzalin River near K'Baw Kee village. Some of the MOC 10 troops are now stationed there and are expected to hold it as a permanent camp. Meanwhile, the remaining MOC 10 and MOC 15 troops in the area

¹ See *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (KHRG #2006-B9, July 4th 2006).

have sent a column north from Twee Mi Kyo toward Kay Pu to destroy all villages west of the Yunzalin River. As of July 22nd, this column had reached Dtaw Ko Mu Der village, halfway between Naw Yo Hta and Kay Pu. The entire population of hill villages between Ler Mu Plaw and Naw Yo Hta, and all villages west of the upper Yunzalin River between Naw Yo Hta and Kay Pu, have fled their villages into the surrounding hills and do not dare return to their hillside rice fields as long as these troops remain in the area – which the establishment of the new camp suggests will be a long time. This year's rice crop will almost certainly be lost for the entire local population, creating major problems of food scarcity.

Making things worse, KHRG recently reported² that a second column from MOC 15 was on its way to Bu Sah Kee from the west, with apparent plans to come south from Toungoo district into Papun district and connect with the abovementioned column at Kay Pu – thereby squeezing the villagers west of the Yunzalin River in a 'pincer' between two large SPDC columns, one coming from the north and the other from the south. This second column appears to have been delayed, having made a wide detour northward to Kler Lah in central Toungoo district, apparently to resupply and seek reinforcements. Since July 15th they have been sending advance supplies down the road to Bu Sah Kee, however, and KNU intelligence now believes the column may already be on its way to Bu Sah Kee to launch the expected pincer movement southward into Papun district.

The SPDC offensive is also continuing south of the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Hta vehicle road in Yeh Mu Plaw village tract. MOC #10 has established another new camp on a hill called Thay Wah Kyo (or Hill 3474), near Bpee Thu Der and Yeh Mu Plaw villages (see map). Between July 15th and 22nd, Light Infantry Battalions #368 and 369 have been actively destroying villagers' houses, farmfield huts and rice storage barns in the area. At time of writing KHRG has not yet obtained detailed information on the extent of the damage, because all villagers in the Bpee Thu Der and Yeh Mu Plaw areas have fled into the surrounding forests and have not yet been able to return to assess what has been destroyed. As in the case north of the vehicle road, the establishment of the new Army camp makes it unlikely that they will be able to return to their fields in the near future and this year's crop will almost certainly be lost.



The body of a convict porter killed and left behind by SPDC troops from MOC #15 while operating around Dta Paw Der and Dta Meh Der villages in the Bilin River area, Lu Thaw township in June 2006. [Photo: KHRG]

Overall, the movements of SPDC columns attacking villages have significantly slowed and become more localised in recent weeks, but this is not due to any lack of will to continue the offensive among top SPDC leadership. The continued movement and resupply of these columns suggests that they are under intense pressure from above to continue the offensive at full force, but conditions on the ground make this virtually impossible. It is now approaching mid-rainy season: roads are completely washed out, while footpaths are quagmires of water-saturated clay that alternate between sucking the boots off your feet and turning as slippery as ice down the hillsides; all clothing and equipment is muddy, full of mould and mildew, and never gets a chance to dry; food rots in hours, and leeches constantly cover your legs; rain falls every day, often all day and night; equipment jams and breaks down; pens won't write on paper saturated by the humidity; starting a fire is near to impossible; and SPDC soldiers, most of them conscripts and many of them children, none of

² Ibid.

them wanting to be here, are from the plains and not used to these conditions. At any one time half of them may be down with malaria and other ailments. In these conditions, one soldier stepping on a landmine can grind a column of 300 to a halt for days, and officers take any excuse to return to base for resupply and reinforcement. Yet the offensive is continuing, and if the rains let up it can be expected to return to full force at any time.

The KNLA now reports having intercepted SPDC radio messages indicating that the SPDC plans to develop Pwa Ghaw, along the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Hta vehicle road, into a ‘town’, with a large scale military presence and a forced relocation site set up to hold all villagers forced down out of the surrounding hills. Pwa Ghaw was once a productive area of flat irrigated rice fields, highly valued because flat land is rare in Papun district, but was abandoned by local villagers as the SPDC increased militarisation and then built the road to Saw Hta right through Pwa Ghaw. The former fields are now abandoned and overgrown, dominated by a major SPDC Army camp on the adjacent Baw Hser Ko hilltop and the occasional temporary SPDC Army camp set up on the flatland itself.

Under the pretext of ‘counter insurgency’ the current SPDC offensive has been directly aimed at eliminating Karen villagers from the hills. Intentional killing of civilians directly serves this goal as it creates a heightened level of insecurity and fear. One woman from Lu Thaw township told a KHRG researcher how SPDC soldiers shot and killed her husband while he was working his field.

“My husband was killed by our enemies, the Burmese soldiers, who shot and killed him on April 15th 2006. The Burmese soldiers shot my husband beside a hill field at Ler Klaw Kee. My husband had gone to the forest to clear his hill field and the Burmese soldiers saw him. They shot at him and he ran away to the other side but his leg got tangled between some pieces of wood and he fell down and he was injured. The SPDC rushed to him; they stabbed and shot him many times and he died.”

- Naw A--- (female, 29), M--- village, Plah Ko village tract, Lu Thaw township, (May 2006)

Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Dweh Loh and Bu Tho

Villagers living in SPDC- and DKBA-controlled areas are routinely subject to demands for uncompensated labour, food, construction materials and money. KHRG researchers have been documenting such abuses during the first half of 2006, in parts of Dweh Loh and Bu Tho townships south of the current offensive. Travel within military-controlled areas is highly restricted, making it difficult for villagers to tend their agricultural fields and visit neighbouring communities. The abuses perpetrated in these areas of SPDC control differ from those occurring in areas of internally displaced communities in that their primary function is to support the military presence. Villagers confront routine demands and heavy restrictions that hinder their capacity to evade military forces whose presence is far more extensive.

The patterns of abuse documented in SPDC-controlled areas of Dweh Loh and Bu Tho townships in southern Papun could be the future of the villages currently being attacked further north in Lu Thaw township, if the SPDC secures control of that area and establishes more roads and Army camps. Rather than a situation of peace, the human rights violations documented in this report demonstrate that the consolidation of military control leads to a situation where villagers’ capacities to evade and mitigate abuses are severely hindered. The absence of overt armed ‘conflict’, in the sense of a cessation of large-scale attacks against villages, does not result in a decrease in abuses against villagers, but merely a change in the character of abuse. Moreover, such developments further the SPDC’s overall objective of complete militarisation of Karen territory.

Forced Labour

For villagers living in SPDC- and DKBA-controlled areas of Papun District, forced labour is a pervasive abuse. Indeed, the systematic perpetration of forced labour functions as an integral component of the militarisation of Karen territory, inseparable from the structures of military rule. The incidents of forced labour reported here have occurred in areas of military control away from the current SPDC offensive. In towns near army camps or along roadways villagers have been forced to porter rations and building supplies to military camps, serve as guides, construct military structures and fences, clear brush from the sides of roads and work on military plantations previously confiscated from the villagers themselves. This labour is compulsory under threats of torture and arrest for both men and women.



Villagers from H---, Htee Th'Blu Hta village tract, Dweh Loh Township load thatch onto bullock carts as ordered by K'Saw Wah battalion of DKBA Brigade #777 in March 2006. They were also ordered to pay 100,000 kyat. [Photo: KHRG]



The same villagers transport 3,000 shingles of thatch on seven bullock carts to the DKBA camp at K'Dter Dtee (Ka Dtaing Dtee), over 11 kilometres (7 miles) away. [Photo: KHRG]

"DKBA and SPDC soldiers stay in my village all the time. If they give orders to go somewhere, we must go at once. If we do not go, they torture us... The village head must do [forced labour] and go first when they give an order to go somewhere. We have to do 'loh ah pay' [forced labour]³ all the time, such as carry loads to the villages of Meh Ku Kee, Meh Nay Hta, and Twee Thi Oo."

- K--- (male, 37), M---- village, Meh Ku village tract, Bu Tho township (April 2006)

"The SPDC forces are receiving their rations now and our villagers have to porter for them. They wrote a letter to us and we went to porter for them. If we did not do as they demanded, they would have come to arrest us. Ten of our villagers carried yesterday, April 4th 2006. The army rations came from Bilin by truck and the villagers went to wait for the trucks at Lay Kaw Htee. The villagers followed the trucks to the Meh Way Law riverside then carried the rations to the army camp at Meh Way T' Waw Kaw. Villagers have to carry rice, oil, kerosene, and milk. Villagers have to pack their own rice and carry all day starting at 6:00 a.m. and finishing at 6:00 p.m. Today, April 5th 2006, eight of our villagers have gone to carry SPDC rations from Meh Way T' Waw Kaw camp to Maw Thay Hta. The distance from Meh Way T' Waw Kaw to Maw Thay Hta is five hours by foot."

- Saw W--- (male, 36), T---- village, Meh Way village tract, Dweh Loh township (April 2006)

³ 'Loh ah pay' is a Pali term traditionally used in reference to short-term volunteer labour on temple or village projects. The SPDC has misappropriated the term for use in reference to all forms of short-term forced labour demanded from villagers.

Those villagers who are unable to comply with demands for labour are required to either hire another villager to take their place or pay a fine. While engaged in forced labour villagers are provided no supplies and must therefore bring their own rations and tools along with them. Time spent labouring on military projects also cuts into villagers' work schedules and undermines their capacity to adequately manage their livelihoods.

"K'Saw Wah battalion of DKBA Brigade #777 forced villagers from Keh Daw to clear their rubber plantation. They order the villagers to clear it for them twice a year. It takes 3 days to finish clearing the plantation. The DKBA also forced the villagers to build 3 houses for them. Even though they forced the villagers to do this for them, they didn't give them any tools. The villagers had to bring their own tools, and they also forced the villagers to bring 60 logs of wood, 1500 shingles of leaves and split bamboo to build houses for the DKBA."

- Saw S--- (male, 45), K---- village, Dweh Loh township, (March 2006)

Extortion

As the SPDC requires frontline units to 'live off the land', demands on villagers for food and cash occur regularly wherever military personnel are present. Extortion is endemic where any armed groups operate, including the DKBA, ceasefire groups, and to a lesser extent the KNLA. SPDC and DKBA battalions establishing new camps, or merely repairing older ones, typically force villagers to supply the necessary building equipment, such as roofing thatch and bamboo poles. These demands are sometimes labelled as 'taxes' in an attempt to portray them as legitimate. The benefits to villagers from such 'taxes' are non-existent. Rather, this systematic extortion serves to bolster the very military presence that undermines villagers' own livelihoods. During the first half of 2006 villagers have reported incidents of being fined by DKBA forces in southern Bu Tho township, allegedly as a penalty for KNLA attacks. Retributive punishment for such reasons is also meted out by SPDC forces. Routine demands for money, food and equipment all contribute to sustaining the military presence. Furthermore, the culture of impunity endorsed throughout the ranks of the SPDC and DKBA fosters entrepreneurial exploitation by individuals and groups serving in these forces which places further strains on villagers' already limited resources.

"At midnight on February 15th 2006, three SPDC soldiers came to my house and tried to rob us. They ordered us not to light the fire. They pointed their pistols at us and ordered us to give them our money. I told them that we didn't have any money. Then he saw 11,000 kyat and 300 Thai baht belonging to my cousin N--- and they took it. They said that we had money when we told them we didn't have any. They grabbed our hair and frightened us with their pistol. They searched everywhere in the house. The old man, K---, was 70 years old. He was too old, but they grabbed his hair, put a pistol to his head and took his radio... They were from Light Infantry Division #44." [Note that only officers carry pistols]

- Saw P--- (male, 38), T--- village, Kaw Pu village tract, Bu Tho township (April 2006)

"On May 12th 2006, SPDC Infantry Battalion #30 demanded 200 large pieces of bamboo from our village. Each piece of bamboo had to be 14 cubits [6.4 m / 21 feet] long and two hand spans [45.72 cm / 18 inches] in circumference. The SPDC army will build a rice barn and repair their camp. The commander wrote a letter to the village head and the village head then asked the villagers. The commander said if the villagers did not obey him, he would come and take action. So, the villagers were afraid of him and they did as he ordered."

- Naw K--- (female, 52), T--- village, Meh Cho village tract, Dweh Loh township (May 2006)

By maintaining a system of extortion, the SPDC and DKBA undermine villagers' capacities to adequately address their immediate subsistence needs. The resulting impoverishment further limits villagers' options in managing and mitigating human rights abuses. Whereas demands for forced labour, for example, can often be circumvented by bribing those who demand it (and in fact this is often the actual objective of the demand), systematic exploitation leaves villagers with little that might placate such individuals.

In January, DKBA non-commissioned officer (NCO)⁴ Pu Plah demanded 500 shingles of thatch for himself and 500 shingles of thatch for his camp from Ler Kheh Khaw village in Bu Tho township. He also demanded thatch from six other villages. A villager from T---, Bu Tho township reported that on January 18th, DKBA NCOs Pah Mya and Tun Kyaing demanded 1,000 shingles of thatch and 500 pieces of bamboo for the construction of their camp. The DKBA demanded 500 shingles without compensation and paid only 12,500 Kyat for the rest, which was below the market value. Villages staying near to the location of the intended camp were also forced to work on its construction. On one occasion in February and again on March 14th, Commander Aye Chan Tha Yan from SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #341 sent a letter to the head of Klaw Day village, Bu Tho township demanding thatch (150 shingles in the first instance and 300 in the second). The villagers were forced to carry the thatch to T' Kun Htaing, which was one hour away by foot.



Villagers from K---, Dweh Loh township construct a raft to transport bamboo down the Bilin River to the SPDC Infantry Battalion #30 camp at Wa Mu in May 2006 upon demand by the troops based there. [Photo: KHRG]

Following an attack on February 26th by the KNLA against a DKBA camp at Meh Mweh Hta, Bu Tho township SPDC soldiers summoned seven village heads from the area to Wah Klu Ko where they detained them along with the village head of Wah Klu Ko itself and interrogated them all about the KNLA attack. The DKBA then fined six villages in Meh Mweh Hta village tract because of the attack. The names of the villages and amounts of money fined were: Meh Mweh Hta, 200,000 Kyat; Nay Thay Law, 200,000 Kyat; Ler Kheh Khaw, 200,000 Kyat; Wah Klu Ko, 300,000 Kyat; T' Per Pah, 300,000 Kyat; and Kler Chit Ko, 300,000 Kyat. Village heads had to collect money from each family to assemble the demanded amount, and villagers who did not have enough money had to borrow from others in order to meet their share of the fine.

Arbitrary Arrest and Detention

Both SPDC and DKBA forces regularly detain villagers on the accusation that they support or provide assistance to the KNU and KNLA. After clashes occur with the KNLA, villagers are often detained in retaliation. The SPDC attempts to legitimise such actions under the rubric of 'counter-insurgency'. However, it is more often the case that the detention of villagers has less to do with eradicating the KNU/KNLA than it does with intimidation in support of the general military build-up in the area. Furthermore, villagers are easier targets than KNLA forces who quickly disappear after sudden guerrilla-style attacks. Detentions are often, therefore, perpetrated in a manner aimed at instigating fear amongst villagers so as to make them more susceptible to military control and extortion and weaken their support for the KNU.

⁴ Non-commissioned officers include corporals, lance corporals, sergeants and sergeant-majors.

In areas of eastern Lu Thaw township along the Salween River, the SPDC has been detaining villagers, prompting some to consider abandoning their village to avoid further SPDC abuses. On February 6th 2006 village head Saw Mer Ler of Dta Khaw Hta village, just north of Saw Hta on the Salween River, was arrested by SPDC troops and accused of having written a travel pass used by someone to travel to Toungoo and detonate a bomb on February 4th. This was an absurd charge, because such a travel pass would not get anyone as far as Toungoo and because no one had yet been arrested for the bombing; it appeared to be a public show to convince people that the bomber had entered Burma by crossing the Salween from Thailand. Another villager arrested with Saw Mer Ler escaped en route to Toungoo, while Saw Mer Ler was taken to Toungoo. On April 29th KHRG reported that he had been allowed no visitors and had disappeared.⁵ A KHRG researcher now reports that Saw Mer Ler was later released and returned to Dta Khaw Hta, having been detained and interrogated for 1-2 months at the SPDC Army's Southern Command Headquarters in Toungoo. Only two weeks after his return, however, he was ordered back to Toungoo for further interrogation. In July he arrived back at his village again, but this time he has fled because he says he fears the SPDC may be planning to make use of him in some way to exert additional control along the Salween River. Other villagers at Dta Khaw Hta now say they are also considering flight, and they are watching the situation closely for any sign of SPDC action against them.

Following clashes between DKBA and KNLA forces in Meh Mweh Hta, Bu Tho township, SPDC Column Commander Nyi Nyi Min of Infantry Battalion #232 summoned four village heads whom he forced to accompany the troops on patrol. The commander made one of the village heads, Loe Tin, walk in front of the troops. This is a common tactic whereby villagers are used as human minesweepers before advancing military units. The commander threatened Loe Tin that if there were any attacks, he would shoot him.

"On February 26th 2006, when the KNU [soldiers] attacked the DKBA camp based in Meh Mweh Hta, SPDC soldiers came to our village. They threatened villagers and they arrested a 17-year-old villager named P--- and the village head of Wah Klu Ko. The SPDC soldiers covered the two villagers' faces with a plastic sheet and tied their hands behind their backs... They were detained only three hours. When SPDC soldiers were detaining them the soldiers did not allow anyone to go to meet with them."

- Saw T--- (male, 48), L--- village, Ler Mweh village tract, Bu Tho township (April 2006)

Rape

Rape, including gang rape, of civilian women and girls by SPDC military personnel is common in Karen State,⁶ and though it is not a daily or weekly occurrence the structures of power connected to militarisation do heighten villagers' vulnerability to such abuses, and the fear of potential rape serves the military as a tool for intimidation and control of women and entire communities. The threat of rape is most prevalent where military units are based or temporarily encamped near villages already under SPDC control. In these circumstances off-duty soldiers and officers sometimes go to nearby villages to loot, to look for women or simply out of boredom. Naw P--- describes how she was raped on February 1st by NCO San Aung, a drunken SPDC soldier belonging to Infantry Battalion #349 camped at W--- village:

"I had gone to see a movie and then came back to sleep. A soldier came to my house and called me. I did not know that it was a soldier calling me. I thought he was a villager because he called me in the Karen language 'naw... naw,' [sister...

⁵ See *Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun district* (KHRG #2006-F3, April 29th 2006).

⁶ See for example *Attempted rapes and other abuses in northern Karen districts* (KHRG #2006-B2, March 15th 2006).

sister] and I responded to him. He climbed up to my house. He had gotten drunk at the wedding and he asked me 'where is your husband?' and I replied that my husband was not at home as he had gone to the wedding house. Then I started to stand up to flee but he caught me. I jumped down [out of her house] to the ground and he caught me again. He did not carry his gun when he came to my house. When he caught me I struggled, and he showed me his fist. I am a woman weaker than him. In the end he raped me but I did not want to have sex with him. No one was near my home because everyone had gone to look at the movie show at the wedding place."

- Naw P--- (female, 31), W--- village, Wa Mu village tract, Dweh Loh township, (May 2006)

Displacement

The SPDC military offensive throughout northern Karen State and covering parts of Lu Thaw township in northern Papun District is aimed at consolidating SPDC control over Karen territory. As such, the SPDC targets villages resistant to military demands instead of KNLA forces that are more difficult to overcome. All civilians living beyond the direct and easy reach of the Army are ordered and physically forced to move to villages and relocation sites which are easily accessed from SPDC bases. However, many villagers, aware of the prevalence of abuse in military-controlled areas and unwilling to give up their land, choose to evade the SPDC's operations by fleeing into the forest near their villages and fields. In these situations the SPDC perceives displaced villagers as a threat to the consolidation of military control and works to destroy their ability to sustain an adequate livelihood while living in the forest. All attempts are made to force villagers out of the forest and into SPDC-controlled areas. Food supplies and fields are destroyed; displaced villagers are shot on sight; and the military works to sever all contact and trade between villagers in hiding and those under SPDC control.



Displaced villagers in Lu Thaw township construct temporary shelters after SPDC soldiers attacked and burned down their homes. [Photo: KHRG]

After attacking villages in Lu Thaw township and forcing villagers to flee their homes, SPDC forces have looted property, burned homes and crops and eaten villagers' livestock. Anything that cannot be eaten or looted is destroyed. Military control of trade routes has limited access to food supplies and displaced villagers living in the forest have been treated as enemies and shot on sight. Nevertheless, as villagers have come to expect such attacks, they have been able to employ a variety of means to resist SPDC abuses. Food stores are hidden outside the village and villagers monitor SPDC troop movements often in cooperation with the KNLA.

"The first time that we heard the SPDC army was coming to Bway Day, we prepared ourselves and waited to flee. I went to the KNLA soldiers and asked about the SPDC soldiers' situation. The KNLA soldiers asked me 'Have you prepared yourself already?' I answered 'yes.' They told me 'you should run away now.' I returned to my village and then fled."

- Saw M--- (male, 34), T--- village, Tee Mu Der village tract, Lu Thaw township (May 2006)



A displaced villager in Lu Thaw township cooks underneath a temporary shelter following SPDC soldiers' destruction of her home. [Photo: KHRG]

So long as SPDC troops remain in the area, displaced villagers wait in the forest, monitoring the movements of the military. They return to their villages and hidden storage barns to retrieve food supplies or to work their fields, sometimes by night or with KNLA escorts for security. Food security in such circumstances is precarious and displaced villagers are restricted to either trading at clandestine jungle markets set up for this purpose; covertly venturing into towns or larger villages; or meeting local villagers just outside of their village proper in order to obtain supplies.

"The villagers who want to avoid the SPDC or DKBA must use the name of another village that has accepted to meet with the SPDC or DKBA [villages that live under SPDC control without fleeing] whenever they go to buy their food [in towns]. If the SPDC or DKBA asks them anything, they tell them the name of another village. They never say their own village's name. If they say their own village name they will be faced with a problem."

- Saw K--- (male, 37), M--- village, Meh Ku village tract, Bu Tho township (April 2006)

If SPDC troops then move out of their area, displaced villagers often return to their homes and attempt to save any crops, food supplies and belongings that were not destroyed. KNLA troops usually accompany them to check for landmines, which are often left in the village by the departing troops in the knowledge that the villagers will return. However, if the SPDC manages to establish and support new permanent bases in the region, many villagers living in these places will be unable to return to their homes. New army camps and supporting roads also cut down the ability to evade control by living in hiding in the forests.

"We must resist them if we can. But we are not sure of the situation yet. If they make more activities we will not be able to work hill fields or flat fields. If the SPDC makes more activities and if we do not have food to eat, some people may have to go to refugee camps, but we are not certain yet. We will continue to hide ourselves from the SPDC army and watch the situation here for now. We do not know the plan of the SPDC yet. If the SPDC does not do any more activities we will go back to clear our land to make flat and hill fields again."

- Saw M--- (male, 34), T--- village, Tee Mu Der village tract, Lu Thaw township, (May 2006)

On April 27th or 28th, a combination of 50 SPDC soldiers and porters from Maw Kyo Ko camp in Lu Thaw township attacked Bway Day village. They burned down eight houses and three field huts. Inside the huts there were ten baskets of seed paddy and 13 viss [21.229 kgs./46.8 lbs.] of salt which was destroyed as well. The soldiers also ate three pigs and shot another. Following the attack on Bway Day village, the troops marched on to attack a KNLA camp.

Health

The health situation for villagers living in Papun District is dire, as local clinics are nonexistent and those previously maintained by the KNU and other groups were targeted and destroyed by the SPDC Army. Treatment may be available in SPDC-controlled towns or larger villages, but hospital fees are typically beyond the means of most villagers. In some cases villagers are able to address ailments using traditional medicines. Limited cross-border medical assistance is also provided by independent Karen relief organisations which support displaced villagers. The perpetual demands of armed groups undermine villagers' capacities to address their own subsistence needs, let alone purchase expensive medicines. Forced labour and extortion have fostered a pervasive poverty undercutting villagers' means of adequately providing for their nutritional needs and assuring that they cannot save resources for times of illness or afford medical care when required.

"We don't have a clinic in our village, so when we get sick we must go to K--- hospital. The SPDC provides medicine, but when we go to them, they ask us to give them a chicken [in payment] for an injection. They ask for something back when they give us medicine or injections."

- Saw P--- (male, 38), T--- village, Kaw Pu village tract, Bu Tho township (April 2006)

The situation is even worse for villagers choosing to live beyond SPDC control by hiding in the forest when necessary. These people risk arrest if caught in an SPDC-controlled village or town, even if they are there for medical treatment. Their only options are therefore to try to pretend they are from an SPDC-controlled area, or to rely on forest medicines and whatever medical relief they can receive in their home area from KNLA medics or mobile medical teams entering Karen State from Thailand.

Education

Despite the plethora of 'taxes' extorted from villagers living under SPDC control, schools in Papun District receive no support in return. Villages must finance the construction and maintenance of local schools themselves as well as the salaries of the teachers. Villagers must also pay a yearly tuition and all costs for school materials in order for their children to attend school. This places further strain on family resources already constricted by the excessive demands of SPDC and DKBA soldiers operating locally.



Teachers in W---, Dweh Loh township wanted to upgrade this primary school to teach up to 7th standard so that students would not have to go elsewhere to attend middle school, but SPDC Infantry Battalion #30 officer Htun Aung forbade them and said that he would destroy the school if they did so. [Photo: KHRG]



Students from W--- village travel through the forest to attend school in another area after SPDC officer Htun Aung would not allow their village to open a middle school. [Photo: KHRG]

"We have a school in our village up to grade three. Villagers built the school. We have two teachers. Villagers support the teachers with three baskets [75 kgs./165.345 lbs.] of rice per household if their children attend school and three big tins [37.5 kgs./82.674 lbs.] of rice per household if their children do not attend school."

- Kyaw Raw (male, 37), M---, Meh Ku village tract, Bu Tho township, (April 2006)

Schools are only allowed to provide classes in Burmese and English, as all instruction in Karen languages is banned. Furthermore, as part of attacks on villages in Lu Thaw township, the SPDC has been burning school buildings along with houses and field huts. As villagers must constantly flee, displaced communities have had to close their schools and many have not been able to reopen since the current attacks began in November 2005. Most displaced villagers have tried to continue schooling their children in hidden sites, leaning makeshift blackboards against trees or constructing rudimentary school shelters which sometimes serve as basic schools for displaced children from several communities. For the villagers, this is a key part of retaining their sense of community and dignity and the future of their children despite the SPDC onslaught.

Conclusion and further reading

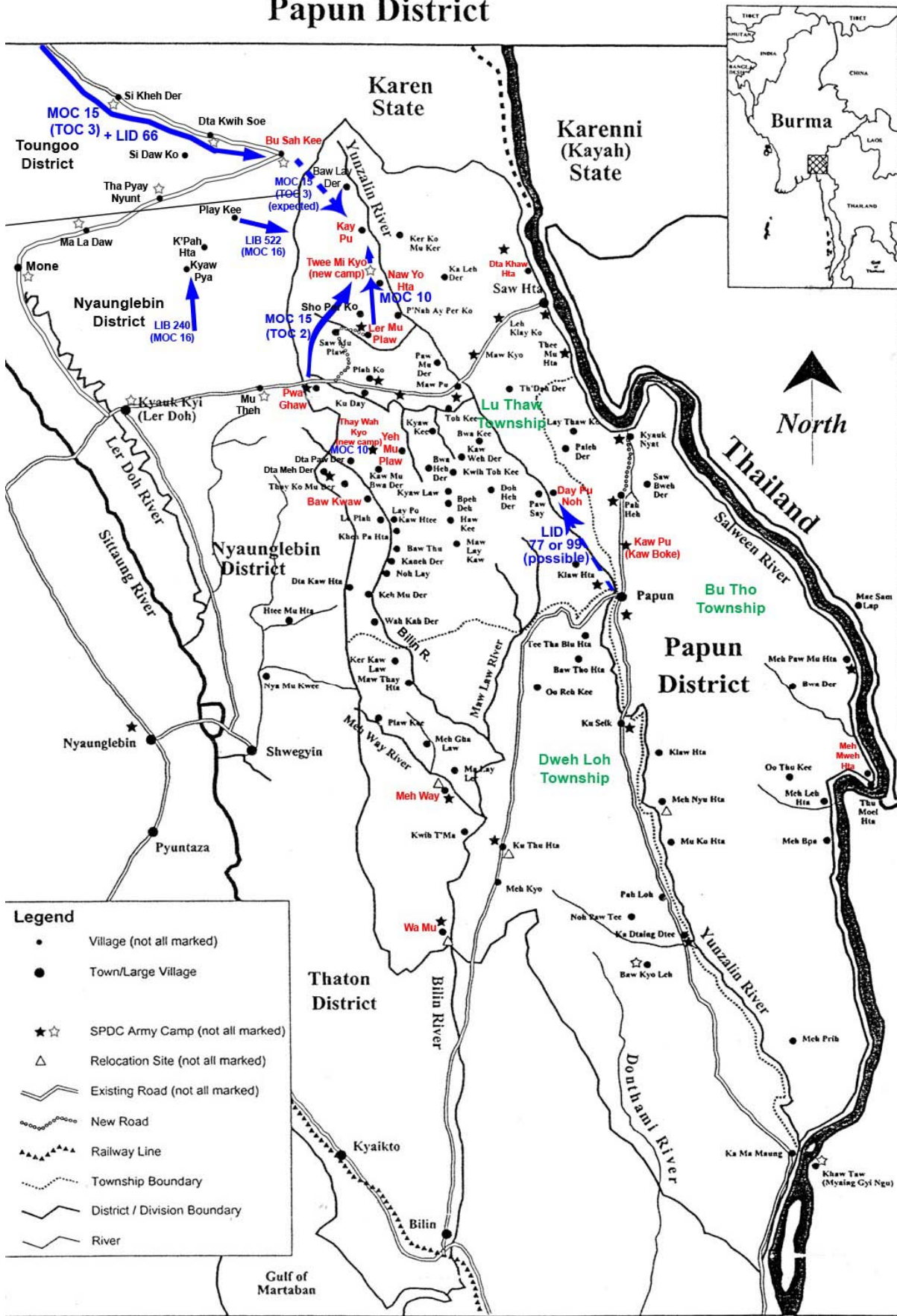
As part of the large-scale offensive throughout northern Karen State, the SPDC has been conducting widespread and systematic attacks against villages in Lu Thaw township which have continued into the rainy season. Troops have been bombarding villages with mortars and then advancing to raze houses, schools and rice barns. While these attacks continue into the rainy season, those villagers living in areas already controlled by SPDC and DKBA forces have been subjected to constant demands for labour, food, building supplies and money. These pressures create a vicious spiral of poverty and suffering by undercutting villagers' livelihoods while sustaining and bolstering the very military forces that exploit them. Such patterns of abuse occurring throughout military controlled areas suggest that the overall situation would certainly not improve for the Karen villagers currently under attack in Lu Thaw township should the current SPDC offensive bring about the mass clearance of Karen villages from the hills and the establishment of new roadways and adjoining military camps.

For further background see the following reports:

- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (KHRG #2006-B9, July 2006)
- *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts* (KHRG #2006-B7, June 2006)
- *SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-B6, June 2006)
- *Villagers displaced as SPDC offensive expands into Papun district* (KHRG #2006-B4, May 2006)
- *Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun district* (KHRG #2006-F3, April 2006)
- *Attempted rapes and other abuses in northern Karen districts* (KHRG #2006-B2, March 2006)
- *SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians* (KHRG #2006-B1, January 2006)
- *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (October 2001).

Photos from Papun and all neighbouring districts are presented in **KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005** (April 2006) and **KHRG Photo Set 2005A** (May 2005). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

Papun District



Scale: 1 cm to 7.5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

Karen Districts



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