

Karen Human Rights Group **Report from the Field**

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Reports from the Field are drawn from situation reports submitted by KHRG researchers in the field. They are regularly published by KHRG to provide timely reporting of developments in particular regions or regarding thematic topics of concern, particularly when urgent action may be required. Reports from the Field are intended primarily for quick release via Internet, though hard copies are also available. Topics covered will generally be reported in more detail, with supporting testimonies, documents, and photos, in upcoming KHRG reports.

Papun District: Forced Labour, Looting and Road Construction in SPDC- Controlled Areas

Papun district is a region mainly made up of forested hills and small villages in northeastern Karen State (see **Karen Districts map**), and includes Lu Thaw township in the north, Bu Tho township in the east and Dweh Loh township in the southwest (see **Papun District map**). Areas which are close to SPDC Army camps are under SPDC control, while in remoter areas SPDC columns have destroyed many of the villages and much of the population lives in hiding beyond their control; in these latter areas the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) has a strong presence. Villagers living near some of the Army camps in all three townships have recently been reporting that they are being summoned for less forced labour, particularly as porters and road workers, because convict labour is now being used and SPDC soldiers themselves are doing much of the local road improvement and repair work. However, villagers are still forced to do unarmed sentry duty at the Army camps, maintain the camps, clear scrub along the roadsides to protect SPDC troops from ambush, and do various other tasks. In the process of doing their road work the soldiers have been destroying villagers' irrigated ricefields and the dikes and canals needed to properly irrigate the crops. Though some SPDC units are not demanding as much money from villagers as before, they still demand so much bamboo and roofing thatch for their camps that villagers complain they have little time for other work. They also continue to loot the villagers' livestock and belongings. Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) units make similar demands and also force the villagers to work in their logging operations. The DKBA and SPDC both use guns to force the civilians to do labour. Meanwhile, plans to build dams on the Salween River along the district's eastern border are already leading to work on new roads and Army camps; these plans ensure that militarisation of the region will continue with its attendant effects on villagers.

Forced Labour and Building Materials

While some forms of forced labour have decreased, SPDC officers still force civilians to stand sentry duty without any weapons. People on sentry duty must also do other work in the

camps and cannot rest. The SPDC officers also force villagers to send reports to them every day using runners, even if there is nothing to report. In Lu Thaw township only two village tracts, Baw Thay Hta and Klaw Hta (a village tract is an area usually including five or six villages), are under SPDC control and the villagers in these two village tracts are forced twice a month to cut and clear scrub and grass in the Army camps and along both sides of the roads near the camps. In January 2005, Light Infantry Battalion #350 Column #1 in Meh Way camp (Dweh Loh township) forced villagers to cut and clear scrub and grass in the camp and just outside the camp perimeter. Also in Dweh Loh township, since January 2005 a column of 50 soldiers from Operations Command #9, Light Infantry Battalion #539, led by officer Tin Maung has been patrolling the area between Tee Tha Blu Hta and Ka Dtaing Dtee. At each village, Tin Maung demands two bullock carts to carry his soldiers' backpacks and bamboo baskets of supplies; villagers must drive these bullock carts to the next village, where two fresh carts are demanded. In this area, villagers living near the Army camps are also forced to use their bullock carts to haul water to the camps. Light Infantry Battalion #539 Column #1, under battalion commander Tun Thein Kyi, entered Tee Tha Blu Hta village and looted the villagers' rice, chickens, ducks, coconuts, sarongs and other clothing, and also cut down the villagers' betelnut trees and destroyed one banana plantation. Also in January 2005, this same military column went to Poh Ma Heh village, where they set up a video system and forced the villagers to go and watch it. While people were watching the movies they stole 16 chickens and 3 ducks from the village. In the same month, troops from Light Infantry Battalion #598 Column 2 (Captain Zaw Min commanding) based at Kay Koh camp ripped down 35 pepper vines growing on the trees belonging to Kay Koh villagers, and took all the peppers. In December 2004 SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #234 (battalion commander Ko Maung Maung Than commanding) in Taung Thon Lon camp ordered every village head in the Baw Kyo valley to report to him their total acreage of irrigated flat rice fields, cash crop plantations, and household gardens for taxation purposes, causing the villagers to fear that they will be forced to pay additional heavy crop quotas or cash taxation to the military.

Just as before, SPDC units in the district demand bamboo and thatch (made with nipa palm leaf) from civilians, who must regularly deliver it to their camps. Villagers use bamboo and thatch to build their own houses, and as these materials degenerate they have to be replaced or patched every year before the rainy season. People usually cut bamboo between November and January (if left later than this, the bamboo can become infected with insects), and make thatch between January and March. Making thatch requires gathering the leaves, making frames from split bamboo, then tying the leaves onto the frame to make a shingle. Most villagers plant *wah klu* bamboo for use in making house floors and walls, because if cut when mature it can last for three years. They plant nipa palm trees in their betelnut plantations, making it easy to access them when they need to make thatch for roofing. This kind of thatch lasts one year if the leaves are cut when mature, but if immature leaves are used it lasts only a few months. The SPDC military and the DKBA demand thatch and bamboo from the villagers who live under their control. People have to give them the *wah klu* bamboo they have planted, cut other bamboo in the forest, and give thatch they have gathered from their plantations. This is hard on the villagers, because now they have to repair or rebuild their own houses as well as any nearby SPDC and DKBA camps. For example, in November 2004 the SPDC Military Operations Commander from Light Infantry Division #44 based in Ka Dtaing Dtee area demanded 550 thatch shingles from Th'waw Ko Law, Dta Hu Law, Tha Ma Kyu and Khaw Klah villages. The villagers had to deliver it to Ma Htaw military camp, then SPDC soldiers took it by truck to Ka Dtaing Dtee to repair their camp there. In December 2004 SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #234 (battalion commander Ko

Maung Maung Than commanding) based at Taung Thon Lon camp demanded 150 thatch shingles from each village near the camp. In January 2005, the DKBA's #777 K'Saw Wah battalion led by deputy battalion commander Hla Maung and the SPDC military jointly demanded 50 thatch shingles from each house in Klaw Oo Aw village in Lu Thaw township. In January 2005, Light Infantry Battalion #350 Column 1 led by battalion commander U Y'Khaing in Meh Way camp demanded 900 shingles of thatch, 960 pieces of small bamboo and 95 large *wah klu* bamboo from seven villages in Meh Way village tract. The villagers had to find and cut the bamboo, make the thatch shingles, and deliver all of it to the camp without payment. Meanwhile, U Y'Khaing forced villagers to cut and clear the ground in his camp and around the camp as well. In February 2005 the villagers were still doing this work for him. The villagers have no option but to obey because they are threatened with reprisals otherwise. Between November 2004 and February 2005 the villagers constantly had to provide bamboo and thatch. Then they were forced to work repairing the camps. Now all the military camps in Papun district are ready for rainy season, but the military's activities and demands will never stop. The civilians have to work for SPDC military so often that many complain they have little time left to do their own work.

Logging for the DKBA

To get money to support itself, the DKBA has permission of the SPDC to do a lot of logging in the area between Ma Lay Ler and Wah Mu. Villagers who live in Ma Lay Ler, Meh Way, Meh Cho and Wah Mu village tracts therefore have to do forced labour logging for the DKBA. Villagers have to cut down the trees, haul the logs to the river and then bind the logs into rafts. They then have to pole the rafts down the river, but if the rafts become stuck (as usually happens in the low water levels from February to June) they are forced to haul the rafts through the river or from the riverbanks. On January 25th 2005 a KHRG researcher in the area of the above village tracts heard gunshots and a lot of people yelling along the river. On that day twenty soldiers from DKBA #777 Brigade led by officer Aung Than came to Kwih T'Ma village, took the village headwoman to guide them for two days and ordered her to find 50 villagers to haul the log rafts from Ma Lay Ler to Kwih T'Ma and then down to Wah Mu. They shot and killed three goats and some chickens and looted the villagers' alcohol. No one dared object because they were firing their guns. Aung Than told the village headwoman, ***"If people run away I will fine you 1,000 Kyat for each of them."*** The villagers had to haul the log rafts, but that afternoon the KHRG researcher met five villagers who had escaped. One of them said, ***"Since the DKBA came back here the villagers in Wah Mu, Poh Kheh Hta, Nya Hsa Gaw, Ku Thu Hta, Kwih T'Ma, and Ma Lay Ler villages have to work for them and haul the log rafts by day and by night. They force us and they fire their guns to threaten us. We cannot work for them anymore because we never get a rest. So now we've fled from them to hide in the forest."***

Road Work and Field Destruction

Every year in the dry season the SPDC repairs the roads. They have always used civilians as forced labour to do this, but this year SPDC soldiers have been repairing roads in Papun district themselves. The Operations Commander based in Papun ordered Light Infantry Battalion #434 led by battalion commander Tun Tun Oo to rebuild the car road from Papun to Ka Ma Maung using his soldiers. First they were to level the road with stone, then pave it with tar. The soldiers began gathering stone in the villages between Ku Seik and Ma Htaw along the Yunzalin River (Bway Loh Kloh). On January 11th 2005 a group of them gathered stones from the riverbanks upstream from Ma Htaw army camp beside Th'waw Ko Law and

Dta Hu Law villages, and piled the stone in the flat ricefields belonging to five villagers without asking their permission, then sent the stones to Ma Htaw camp by truck. On January 14th they started bulldozing a road route alongside Ma Htaw village, straight through the flat ricefields of many villagers and all the way upriver to the place where they had gathered the stones. Another group collected stones in T'Dwee Koh and Khaw Kla villages downstream from Ku Seik, which were then sent by truck to Ku Seik army camp. In April they began bulldozing a road directly through the ricefields from Ku Seik to the place downriver where they had gathered the stones. The bulldozer destroyed many irrigation dikes in the rice fields and also destroyed the water intakes of the villagers' irrigation ditches. Moreover, some of the stones taken by the soldiers had been placed to control the intake into the irrigation ditches, and they also took stones from the dam in the Bilin River which the villagers use to control irrigation for the entire area. This year they didn't force the villagers to collect the stones, yet they still abused the villagers by ruining their fields and irrigation without consulting them at all. One villager complained that, *"In previous years, they piled stone in our flat fields and then didn't take all the stones, so when we prepared the field for planting we had to remove all the stones they had left before we could plough. If we hadn't done that we could not have used the field for planting. Now we worry that our irrigated flat rice fields will be destroyed, and we know that the soldiers are never going to repair this damage for us."* [photos documenting this can be seen in **Photo Set 2005A, Section 7.1: Destruction of Crops and Livelihoods.**] The villagers have no way to prevent the soldiers from behaving this way. If they keep complaining, the soldiers threaten the villagers with their guns. As another villager said, *"If these soldiers continue to collect the stones from the dam, the dam will be destroyed. If the dam is destroyed we are going to face a problem irrigating our flat fields and we will have to repair the dam to get enough water to irrigate the fields again."* The dam was built by local villagers long ago to prevent floods and provide water for irrigation, and strengthened over the years. First they laid bamboo and logs in the river and piled stones and sand on top. Over the years as the stones and sand settled, the dam became stronger and harder. The dam allows rice to be grown in the flat fields throughout the surrounding area. If the SPDC soldiers continue to take stones from the dam to build their road and to bulldoze roads through the villagers' flat fields, the farmers who live between Ma Htaw and Ku Seik will lose much or all of their harvest. Yet the work goes on. One villager from Ma Htaw told a KHRG researcher, *"This hot season [March to May 2005] the SPDC military has ordered us to load their trucks with stones many times without payment."* Through its actions the SPDC military is almost ensuring that villagers in the area will face a food shortage.

The Salween Dams

Villagers in eastern Papun District are gradually becoming aware of the plans to build several dams along the Salween River, which forms the border between the district and Thailand, to generate hydro power and divert water to reservoirs in wealthier Thailand. The plan is a joint venture between the SPDC and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), and SPDC officers have told civilians in Papun district that "if people make the dams you will get electricity and it will be useful for you." To the contrary, experience throughout Burma demonstrates that electricity from dam projects only goes to Army camps and towns, not to nearby villages, and in this case much of the power is to be sold to Thailand. The SPDC has already established new Army camps along the river to secure the area, leading the villagers to believe that if the dams are constructed they will be forced to move closer to the SPDC camps where they can be used for forced labour. The dams would also flood out or cut off large areas where SPDC control is very weak and the KNLA is strong. Through the efforts of

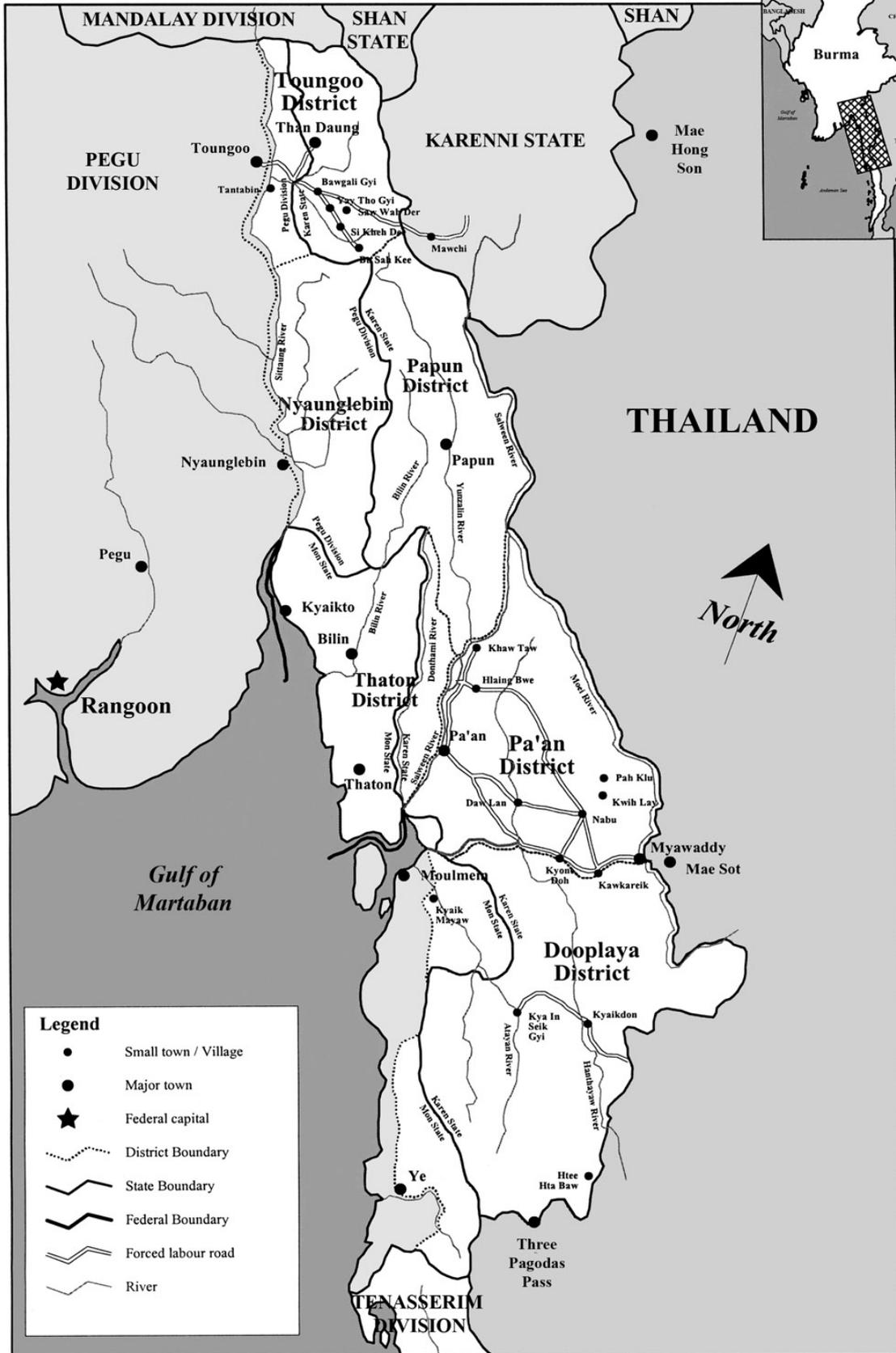
local NGOs villagers on both sides of the border have increased their awareness of the potential environmental, economic and political effects of the project, and many of them want to stop the dams. However, since February 2005 a Thai company has been surveying to build a road along the Thai side of the Salween from Meh Yeh Hta north to Weh Gyi (one of the dam sites), a forested area where there has never been a road, and to rebuild the road which used to exist from Mae Sam Lap (which is connected by road to Mae Sariang) north to Meh Yeh Hta. They will use this road for transportation and security. In Papun district, last year the SPDC military began working on a road from Kaw Pu (Kaw Boke), where there is an Army camp connected by road to Papun, to Thaw Leh Hta, on the Salween directly opposite Mae Sam Lap. This would establish a communication and transportation link from Papun across the border to Mae Sariang. The SPDC brought convict porters from the towns to clear landmines and clear a route for the road, but this year when they began bulldozing the route near Kyauk Nyat the bulldozer hit a landmine at the Kaw Thay Roh river and all work stopped. Work is expected to resume once the bulldozer is repaired or replaced.

Conclusion and Further Reading

Though the burden of forced labour has lessened for some villagers in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun district, they are still forced to do enough labour for the SPDC and DKBA to make it difficult to adequately pursue their own livelihoods. Moreover, many find these livelihoods seriously threatened by the arbitrary and unnecessary destruction of their fields, irrigation systems and plantations committed for the sake of improving roads and Army camps. Villagers are not consulted or even warned regarding any of this work, and if they protest they are threatened at gunpoint. It is now May, and within the next month villagers will be ploughing their fields in preparation to plant the year's rice crop. For many of them, however, their fields are still littered with stone left by SPDC troops, or they are buried under a bulldozed road, their irrigation dikes have been flattened and their dams dismantled. Their livestock and fruit has been looted, and they have had to provide so much bamboo and thatch that they are unable to repair their own houses in preparation for the rains. And still they are forced to work for the SPDC and DKBA. Villagers say that despite the food shortages they can survive, but they are deeply angry and despair for the future of their children – because if the abuses, the impunity, and the institutionalised blindness to their needs and their protests continues, they are certain their children will grow up to face the same problems or even worse. Their children are missing out on an education, and the land they stand to inherit is being taken away.

For further background on the situation in Papun District, see *KHRG Information Update #2004-U2: Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (September 2004), *KHRG Information Update #2002-U3: Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (April 2002), and *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (October 2001). See also photos from the area in *Photo Set 2005A* (May 2005) and *Photo Set 2002A* (December 2002).

Districts of Karen State



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

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

Papun District

