

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

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Toungoo district: Civilians displaced by dams, roads, and military control

Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military junta claims to be implementing peace and development in Karen regions, but civilians in Toungoo District of northern Karen State say they are facing instead brutal treatment aimed at asserting military control. An example of SPDC-led 'development' is a new dam project on the Thauk Yay Ka (Day Loh) river in western Toungoo District. Villagers in the area of this proposed dam say that it has brought a new military access road to their area and that large SPDC military columns now patrol their villages, looting their belongings and forcing them into labour. Security checkpoints along all roads in the area have proliferated, restricting the movements of villagers and extorting heavy 'taxes' on all goods they try to take to market. Increased military presence along the roads has occurred throughout the district, from the Than Daung Gyi – Leit Tho road in the north to the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road in the southeast, and close to 300 acres of villagers' farmland has been confiscated for the establishment of a large military base at Leit Tho in the north. This continues the campaign of control already exposed in KHRG's March 2005 report from the district (see *'Peace', or Control?*, KHRG Report from the Field #2005-F3). SPDC troops burn farmfields and plantations adjacent to vehicle roads for military security, while destroying the villagers' food security. People who have been forced from the hills into SPDC-controlled villages struggle against disease, food scarcity and restrictions on their movement, while those who have chosen to evade SPDC control in the hills must remain mobile to evade SPDC patrols who destroy their rice fields and landmine the pathways. In the relocation villages and in the forests, people are facing a difficult struggle against food scarcity, deteriorating health conditions, and SPDC human rights abuses.

Dam security

The SPDC plans to build a new dam and access road on the Thauk Yay Ka (Day Loh) river just upstream of its emergence from the hills into the plains to flow toward the Sittaung River. This dam will be downstream of Pa Leh Wah and just upstream from Tun Boh village

in the Day Say Hta area (see map). Local people have been told the dam is part of 'development', but they say it will be bad for them because every time the SPDC military junta announces infrastructure projects they confiscate local people's land, demand money and materials, and force civilians to do labour. Local civilians fear that they will be unable to refuse these demands because the SPDC will enforce them with guns. To assert SPDC power in the area and secure it for dam and road construction, an extremely large column of 2,000 SPDC soldiers was sent into the area in May 2005 and patrolled the area between Tun Boh and Pa Leh Wah. This big column was led by Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #599 and Infantry Battalion (IB) #75 (both part of Light Infantry Division #66) along with IB #73. After patrolling for several days they returned to base. In order to continue the heavy military presence, on June 1st 2005 columns from LIB #599 (Battalion Commander Ya Naing Soe and Deputy Battalion Commander Colonel Myint Htay commanding) began constant patrols in the area between Tun Boh and Pa Leh Wah. LIB #599 Colonel Way Yah has been assigned responsibility for protecting the dam construction machinery, and work appears to be commencing. Access to this area is now extremely difficult, so KHRG researchers have been unable to get details on the direct effects of the construction on local villagers thus far.

Road security

Combining forces and enlisting help from local Village Peace & Development Councils in the form of guides and intelligence, LIB #599, IB #75 and IB #73 are now regularly coming and going in the villages around Day Say Hta in order to assert control over the area and protect the dam site. They also stop every vehicle travelling along all roads between this area and Toungoo town. In the areas of Than Daung township west of the Klay Loh river, SPDC IB #124 (based in Bayinnaung military camp at Than Daung Gyi), IB #39, and IB #26 are also checking all traffic along the roads. In western Toungoo District, the SPDC now stops every truck, car, trishaw and other vehicle at multiple checkpoints along all roads, including the roads between Toungoo and Kler Lah, Toungoo and Zayatkyi, roads along the Sittaung riverbank near Toungoo, and the roads to Rangoon and Mandalay. Passengers are also checked on the railway line to and from Rangoon. At these checkpoints, every passenger has their ID checked, they are interrogated and every bag is checked. Civilians in the area say this is a great burden on them and restricts their movements. If the soldiers want something from a passenger they interrogate and intimidate them until they can demand money or other possessions. They arrest everyone who doesn't have an identity card and fine people who are not carrying a pass issued by local military or PDC authorities. The fine is usually 5,000 Kyat. In every village along the vehicle roads, the Army now demands a daily register listing everyone who leaves and enters the village. Small military outposts, each manned by five soldiers, have been established at regular intervals along the railway line in the Sittaung River area.

New Army base at Leit Tho

In Leit Tho town, in northern Than Daung township along the Toungoo-Loikaw road (see map), Major General Ko Ko from Southern Command Headquarters (at Toungoo) ordered the confiscation of over 270 acres (110 hectares) of villagers' land and farmfields, then used it to establish a new military base which he named '603 military town'. This is now a major base of SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #603. This battalion also set up two new satellite camps to extend their control over the area, one at Ngeh Pyaw Daw and the other at Ya Doh, which is along the vehicle road from Leit Tho to Than Daung Gyi (see map). They forced local villagers to set up many small sentry huts along the vehicle road between Leit Tho and

Ya Doh and the villagers must now stand sentry in shifts to protect the road and the electrical poles running alongside it. On May 17th 2005, 23-year-old SPDC soldier K--- fled LIB #603 after being badly beaten by a Non-Commissioned Officer, and confirmed that his battalion had confiscated and occupied “about 300 acres” of land, largely made up of villagers’ cardamom and dogfruit plantations. He passed through Mine Loh village on his way to surrender to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). When soldiers from his battalion came looking for him, Mine Loh village headman Saw N--- fled before they arrived, knowing that he might be tortured for failing to capture and hand over the deserter. The troops pursuing the deserter arrived at Mine Loh on May 22nd, named village headman Saw N--- as a “hardcore Karen National Union man” and burned down his house. On May 29th they returned to Mine Loh village at night, surrounded the house of Saw B--- and ordered everyone to come out. They then entered the house, looted all its contents, and then burned it to the ground. Saw B---’s house was made of hardwood and at current prices it would cost 1,000,000 Kyat to rebuild.

Destruction of villages and livelihoods

The SPDC is using a combination of repressive measures and forced relocations to subjugate villagers in the hill areas of the district. Many villages have been ordered to move to relocation sites along the vehicle roads, and some people have moved to these sites while others have fled into the forests to evade SPDC control. People in both groups face the constant threat of arrest or capture, forced labour, extortion, and killing, and are subject to the systematic destruction of their crops and food supplies. Most villagers in the area grow hillside rice and plantation crops such as durian, mangosteen, cardamom, betelnut and betel-chewing leaf. Every dry season the SPDC military burns back the bush along the sides of the vehicle roads to prevent ambushes and to make it impossible for villagers or resistance forces to cross the road without detection, and in doing this they burn many of the villagers’ plantations and ricefields adjacent to the roads. According to KHRG researchers in the area, 2005 has been the worst year in memory for people living in villages along or near the vehicle roads from Kler Lah to Sho Ser and Bu Sah Kee (see map). The people of villages such as Klay Soe Kee, Kaw Thay Der, Hsaw Wah Der, Thay Ku Der, Ha Toh Per, Sho Ser, Wa Soe, and Thay Keh Lah say that this year they sometimes live in their villages but must often live outside the village. SPDC troops have burned some of their hill rice fields, others have had to be abandoned because they are too visible to SPDC patrols, and their cardamom plantations are almost gone. Many do not have enough rice to eat or money to buy rice. They are forced to rely on finding daily paid labour to get money for food, but they cannot find paid work every day. Some of them have borrowed money or rice from their friends or their families and have fallen deeply into debt. As of June 2005, Karen relief organisations which supply covert aid to displaced villagers had not reached this region yet this year. The situation is now also worsening further north, in northeastern Than Daung township near the Shan State border, with the SPDC now building a vehicle road from Thauk Yay Ka to Htee Tha Saw to consolidate military control in that area as well.

Relocation sites and roadsides

People in the relocation sites along the roads receive no supplies or support from the SPDC, no health clinics or schools, yet they must live under SPDC control while facing regular demands for forced labour, money, bamboo and livestock. They live in fear of arrest or abuse and without sufficient services or livelihood opportunities. They are short of food, yet they are not allowed enough time or resources to support their families. Most existing villages

along roads have been allowed to remain in place, but restrictions placed on people's access to their fields, fences controlling their entry and exit, and the demands for forced labour, money and goods levied on them make their lives very similar to those of people in relocation sites; in fact, these villages are used as relocation sites for people from the surrounding hills.

In Tantabin (Taw Ta Tu) township, SPDC IB #48, IB #92, and LIB #440 are operating among the mountains and along the roads which go into the mountains. They force villagers to carry their loads and guide them, and commandeer people's trucks to carry their supplies without compensation. On February 23rd 2005, IB #60 column commander Colonel Hlaing Tint accused 42-year-old villager Saw T--- from K--- village of working for the KNU and fined him 100,000 Kyat. Colonel Hlaing Tint also forced the villagers to carry sacks of beans for him without payment, then claimed that some of the beans had disappeared in transit and fined the villagers by making them buy a tarpaulin for him at a cost of 12,000 Kyat. On March 14th 2005, SPDC IB #48 forced six villagers from Kaw Thay Der to carry rations to Naw Soe military camp without payment. Each villager had to carry 16 kilograms (35 lb.), and among the six villagers carrying were a 56-year-old woman and a 14-year-old girl. It took them a whole day to deliver the loads and return to their village, and they had to supply their own food. On April 14th 2005, officer Mo Kyaw Thu of SPDC IB #92 (Colonel Pyo Way Hla commanding) forced seven villagers from Klay Soe Kee to carry Army rations to Dee Tha Daw Ko, a hilltop Army post, without payment. Each villager had to carry 24 kilograms (52 lb.). On May 11th 2005, the village head of K--- village received a written order from Captain Thu Ra of Company #4, SPDC IB #108 (Colonel Zaw Lin commanding) demanding his presence at the Army camp the following day. The letter was accompanied by a bullet, meant as a threat on his life if he failed to comply. The village head did not go to the camp, so the Battalion sent troops to the village and they looted the villagers' rice, chickens, and all other valuables they found there. On May 16th 2005, SPDC IB #92 Company Commander Mo Kyaw Thu once again forced six villagers from Klay Soe Kee to carry rations to Dee Tha Daw Ko camp on the hilltop, again without payment. Some of the people who were to take their turn for this forced labour dared not or could not go, so they had to hire others to go in their place for 1,000 Kyat per person. On May 21st 2005, officer Zaw Myint from IB #92 was travelling from his camp at Pi Mu Koh (at the Karenni State border) to Kler Lah, and arrived late in the evening at Klay Soe Kee village. When he saw a villager with a truck arrive, he forced the villager to drive him the rest of the way to Kler Lah the same night without payment.

Civilians living in relocation sites have to live in poor and simple huts, because SPDC troops have usually burned or destroyed their wooden houses in their village, and they receive no assistance in moving to the relocation site nor building materials once they get there. Instead, once they are in the relocation site the military demands bamboo and other building materials from them. In May 2005, the SPDC military operations commander in Kler Lah camp ordered villagers in Kaw Thay Der village/relocation site to send 250 bamboo posts, each 12 cubits (5.5 metres/18 feet) long, for use in his camp. Instead of gathering bamboo to build or improve their houses, the villagers must gather it for the military and then go to help the military to build and maintain the Army camp. The villagers say that this is particularly disheartening because they are already depressed about the state of their own homes and facing a food shortage. On May 16th 2005, officer Kyi Win of SPDC IB #48 forced the Kaw Thay Der villagers to do building work at another Army camp, this time at Naw Soe. On May 26th 2005, Shan Si Po and Yay Shan villages received orders to cut 500 bamboo each and deliver it to the IB #73 base at Zayatkyi.

Infantry Battalion #73 then visited Shan Si Po village on June 2nd 2005, led by officer Aung Kyaw Myint. This time he demanded that they hand over 10,000 Kyat in cash and one *viss* (1.6 kg./3.5 lb.) of chicken. This would not be a huge amount in better times, but when villagers already face so many demands on their resources and their time by the military such small amounts are crucial to their survival. The villagers complain to KHRG researchers that though they are farmers, the SPDC military hates them and treats them as the enemy. If they go to sell their crops in town, the SPDC troops posted along the road tax them or demand extortion money along the way. If they cannot pay on the spot, they either have to pay a larger fine later or they are sent to jail. In the area surrounding the Toungoo military parade ground officer Po Than of IB #73 was in charge of security, and one night he took a column of soldiers to check local houses for overnight guests (villagers are supposed to register any guests with local authorities, and can be arrested for failing to report an overnight guest). At each house they asked the family to come out and then entered to check for unregistered guests, but when they saw money or valuables in the house they stole them. The householders later mounted a protest about this, and in this case IB #73 was replaced by LIB #439 in the local area. Such responses are extremely rare, however, and SPDC troops throughout Toungoo district are generally free to loot, steal and extort from villagers with complete impunity.

Villagers in hiding

The burning of houses, ricefields and plantations and other abuses have led many villagers to leave their villages for a life in hiding beyond SPDC control. Most people from Law Bee Ler, Si Kheh Der, Bu Hsa Kee, Ta Kwee Soe, Per Ko and May Daw Ko villages now live displaced in the forest, and SPDC forces burn or destroy their hill fields and plantations whenever they find them. Working hill fields requires significant time and security, but when they have to regularly evade SPDC patrols most people can only produce enough rice each year to last them for three or four months. To supplement this they need to find paying labour or grow less land-intensive cash crops like cardamom. These activities are also under threat, however, and most people are finding survival more and more difficult. On February 20th 2005, Captain Pyo Way Hla of SPDC IB #92 burned cardamom fields belonging to displaced villagers, then on March 15th and April 18th he burned many more cardamom fields while burning back the scrub alongside the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee vehicle road. On February 25th 2005, troops from LIB #48 (battalion commander Maung Maung Win and deputy battalion commander Thet Naing commanding) deliberately burned the cardamom plantations of nine villagers from Ku Ler Der village. The same day they looted everything from the house of Law Bee Ler villager Saw T---, even his pots and plates, then burned off his fallow hillside ricefield (making it unfit to plant for the entire year) and his cardamom plantation. Saw T--- told a KHRG researcher this is the third time this has happened to him.

Most displaced villagers in the area say food security is their most urgent problem. Some people try to earn money by gathering wild honey and trying to sell it so they can buy rice. However, some of the places where they can find honey are close to SPDC military camps, in areas where others have already been killed by SPDC mines rigged to tripwires, and where they also face the risk of being ambushed by SPDC snipers or patrols. Some people fish with nets or with grains of rice on hooks, whether for food or to sell the fish to buy rice. Fishing, however, is also a risky enterprise because many villagers have been shot by SPDC troops while fishing, and riverbanks are SPDC soldiers' favourite place to plant landmines. In March 2005 Bu Hsa Kee villager Saw Leh Ku, age 32, was shot and killed by a soldier from SPDC IB #48 (Maung Maung Win commanding) while he was fishing, and in May 2005 the

same soldier shot and killed Ta Kwee Soe villager Saw Eh Htoo when he went to catch fish. The frequent repetition of such incidents demonstrates that SPDC forces are routinely and deliberately sniping at unarmed villagers.

Health

The unstable living conditions of displaced villagers make them particularly vulnerable to disease and health problems, particularly for children, pregnant and nursing women and the elderly. Many are living on the ground in unhygienic conditions, exposed to mosquitoes, insects, leeches, parasitic worms and various types of infection. The scarcity of food and lack of a varied diet leads to malnutrition and vitamin and mineral deficiencies, complicating illnesses and causing weakness and depression. The most prevalent complaints are malaria, common colds, respiratory infections, digestive problems, worms, diarrhoea, dysentery, skin infections, vitamin deficiencies, dizziness, fatigue, and depression. These are all preventable with basic medicines and improved diet, but the villagers have little or no access to these and can only get medical supplies if mobile Karen medical teams pass through their area, an infrequent and unpredictable event. The villagers use their own herbal medicines and sometimes these work, but for many ailments they are insufficient. Villagers living in SPDC-controlled relocation sites suffer most of the same problems, but the SPDC provides no medical assistance whatsoever.

Children and education

In this situation children suffer from their higher vulnerability to disease and malnutrition, but also in other ways. Even at a young age, they already understand that SPDC soldiers will kill them if they are seen in 'cleared' areas. Because of the food shortage, older children are often sent to the SPDC-controlled villages to try to borrow or buy rice while their parents care for the smallest children in the forest. Groups of children aged 9 to 12, accompanied by a few adolescents or adults, have to dodge SPDC soldiers and landmines for walks of up to two days, then secretly enter villages and relocation sites to try to get a half-tin (8-10 kg./18-22 lb.) of rice to carry back to their families. If they don't dare to go, their families will go hungry.

Relocation sites are not provided with schools unless the villagers manage to run their own informal school. Most villagers in hiding set up small schools in the forest for their children, but students can only attend these when they aren't busy helping their parents. The teaching has to stop whenever SPDC troops are active nearby or when the villagers have to scatter to avoid capture. Some children have to walk an hour or longer over mountains to reach these schools. Many are orphans and must work to support their grandparents or extended families. The combination of all these factors means that most displaced children can only study for a total of a few months each year, and as many of half of them never get to study at all. The villagers cannot afford to buy adequate school supplies or hire teachers, so the children are taught by village volunteers. The parents try to compensate the teachers with some rice or by helping with work in the teachers' fields. Despite the difficulties, both teachers and parents are determined to continue some form of schooling, both to ensure their children grow up literate and to retain a sense of continuity and community. If the SPDC really wants peace and development as its rhetoric claims, it would leave the civilians to work their hill fields and plantations and stay in their villages in peace, rather than harassing them, forcing them to relocate and sniping at them in the hills. It would assist the villagers to set up education for

their children, rather than issuing only orders and demands and burning any schools which the villagers establish without state permission.

Conclusion

The survival of villagers in Toungoo District is becoming more and more endangered, and many say that this year is the worst year of SPDC abuse they can remember. The villagers are tired of spending their lives having to choose between submission to SPDC orders and abuse or fleeing Burmese soldiers and surviving poorly in the forests. One Karen villager in the district told a KHRG researcher,

“The SPDC never provide education and never solve our problems. Instead of helping us, they produce the problems and we are driven into a backward existence. They always burn people’s houses, loot people’s things, torture people, kill people, and force people to do labour. Every year in the hot season they burn people’s cardamom plantations and hill fields, when the hill fields still need to dry before being burned off [*by doing this, the soldiers ensure that the field does not burn off properly so it cannot be planted at sowing time*]. Each year we try again to plant our cardamom and prepare our hill fields, but they destroy them by and by. Even now when we are in big trouble with a food shortage they still demand money and food from us. We go to the KNU for help so we need to help them in return [*e.g. by carrying supplies or providing intelligence*], but we can’t dare help the KNU because if the SPDC finds out about it they kill us. It will be very good if the SPDC military disappears, because they are the ones who make us starve.”

Further Reading

This report is drawn from a situation summary written by a KHRG field researcher in Toungoo District. For further background on the situation in the district, see *‘Peace’, or Control? The SPDC’s use of the Karen ceasefire to expand its control and repression of villagers in Toungoo District, Northern Karen State* (KHRG Report from the Field #2005-F3, 22/3/2005), and the KHRG report *Enduring Hunger and Repression: Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District* (September 2004), which gives a comprehensive picture of village life in the district based on close to 200 interviews. Recent photos from Toungoo District are presented in KHRG *Photo Set 2005A*, released in May 2005. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site (<http://www.khrg.org>).