



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Hunger Wielded as a Weapon in Thaton District

In March and April 2006, SPDC and DKBA units deliberately targeted and destroyed dozens of hill fields belonging to villagers from three villages in Bilin township of Thaton District in the southwest of Karen State. Burning the fields too early in the growing cycle severely restricts the proportion of the field that can be planted, which in turn limits the size of the harvest. Both the SPDC and the DKBA know this and the burning of these fields represents a systematic campaign of crop destruction intended to obstruct the villagers' access to food and in effect starve them out of the hills. The villagers already suffer from food shortages, and this latest move by the military will only aggravate the situation. The next paddy harvest due in November will be severely reduced as a result, and these villagers will face even more serious food shortages for the coming year.

The rainy season is nearing its end and the paddy harvest is only months away, yet for many villagers living in Bilin township of Thaton District (see map), little consolation is likely to be found in this. For some villagers the harvest this year will be a slim one. In March and April 2006, two combined columns of State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) soldiers razed no fewer than 36 hill fields and a number of plantations belonging to three different villages. The villagers affected will be lucky to harvest enough paddy to feed their families for two or three months. Once this runs out they will be left with no food and few places from which they can acquire any more. The burning of villagers' hill fields has become increasingly common over the past several years in all areas across Karen State. The villagers' fields are purposely targeted to make it progressively more difficult for them to survive in areas beyond direct SPDC control. This report does not represent a complete survey of all fields that have been destroyed by the SPDC or the DKBA, but offers a glimpse of some of the tactics employed by the military to oppress ordinary civilian villagers in their ongoing campaign for control.

Karen hill farmers practice a form of subsistence agriculture known as rotational hill field farming in which a family owns a number of fields, possibly as many as eight, and rotates between them from year to year. Once a field has been used, it is left fallow for a number of years until such time as it is to be used again; traditionally this is a period of eight years. However, in many areas increasing population and SPDC military encroachment have reduced the number of fields available to each family. Military expansionism has pushed many communities closer together leading to greater competition for available arable land. Most villagers now only own three or four hill fields, meaning they must either shorten the fallow period to three or four years or use each field for two consecutive years – in either case, rice yields are reduced.

The cultivation of a hill field is a labour-intensive staged process requiring five months of preparation before the first seed is even sown. In January-February, the villagers conduct the 'forest fallow survey' to determine which of their hill fields to cultivate. Then in February-March, all of the trees, brush and scrub that has grown while the field stood fallow must be

cut down and left to dry for the next couple of months. Once the brush has been allowed to dry sufficiently it is burned, typically in late April or May. The ash from the fire then provides much needed nutrients for the seeds which are sown shortly after the first rains, normally in June.

Burning the brush too soon before it has had the chance to adequately dry out results in an incomplete burn. The uneven burn affects the villagers' ability to cultivate the land in two ways. The first of these is that after a number of years standing fallow many fields have quite sizeable trees growing in them. If burned too soon after cutting these fallen trees are too green to be completely burned and thus after the burn the field remains covered by large logs and branches, greatly reducing the area which can be cultivated. The second is that when burned, the trees and brush provide much needed nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium which are required in the germination process. If these trees do not burn no ash is deposited, adversely affecting the crop. All subsequent attempts at a second burn generally fail.

Over the past several years, in hill areas they wish to depopulate SPDC and DKBA units have been deliberately burning villagers' fields in March and April before the brush has sufficiently dried out. According to a KHRG field researcher, on March 5th 2006 a column of SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #235 column #2 (Zaw Zaw Lin commanding) accompanied by a number of soldiers from DKBA #3 battalion of #333 Brigade (company commander Pu Lee commanding) set fire to seven hill fields belonging to the villagers of Thu K'Bee village in Bilin township. Later that month on March 29th, the same column burned an additional 14 hill fields owned by the villagers of nearby Ler K'Ter village. Then on April 3rd, they burned 15 more hill fields which belonged to the villagers of Ler Po village. A second company of DKBA #3 battalion (Myint Win commanding) burned three banana plantations totalling four acres and a two acre *loh lah* (a type of palm used for making roofing thatch) plantation belonging to the villagers of Thu K'Bee village on March 23rd 2006. Then on April 4th, they burned two hill fields owned by the villagers of Ler K'Ter. Over the period of a month these SPDC and DKBA units had burned a total of 36 hill fields, four acres of banana plantation and two acres of palm plantation belonging to three separate villages (see map for village locations). Karen National Union (KNU; the main Karen opposition group) sources concur with this information except with regard to the dates on which the fields were burned. The KNU claims that the 14 Ler K'Ter fields were burned on March 19th 2006, the seven Thu K'Bee fields on March 27th, and the Thu K'Bee plantations on April 5th 2006.¹

The premature burning of these fields in March and early April has prevented the villagers of Thu K'Bee, Ler K'Ter, and Ler Po villages from planting crops sufficient to sustain their families. Only the sections of the fields that had dried out and were completely burned could be planted; those other sections of the field which did not burn could not be planted. The amount of paddy that the villagers will harvest from these fields in the coming months will be greatly diminished as a direct result of them being burned by the SPDC and DKBA. As a result of this, these villagers will be faced with severe food shortages in the coming year

Such actions are generally justified by the SPDC as counter-insurgency operations, claiming that the fields are used to feed and shelter soldiers of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA; the armed wing of the KNU). Common allegations heard are that "*the fields belong to 'rebels' and the 'sons and wives of rebels'*", and as such are labelled as enemy targets.

¹ KNU Press Release #22/06, 29th August 2006

² Karen Human Rights Group. "Food Security" in: *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District*. p. 87. (KHRG #06-01, 17/1/06)

“The SPDC and DKBA have been conducting operations in Bilin township. They have been accusing the villagers of helping the KNU by allowing them to hide in their hill fields and plantations, so the SPDC and DKBA battalions burned the villagers' hill fields and plantations.”

- a KHRG field researcher (May 2006)

Even in the cases where these allegations hold some truth, targeting the livelihoods and food supplies of civilian villagers as a means of undermining the armed resistance is inexcusable and is in direct violation of Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (1977). Article 14 of Additional Protocol II explicitly states that: *“Starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited. It is therefore prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless, for that purpose, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, crops, livestock, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works.”*³ While the SPDC has never ratified either of the Additional Protocols, certain articles contained therein are now considered to be customary international law which the SPDC must obey regardless of whether they have ratified the Protocols or not. In March 2005, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) published the report *Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume 1: Rules*, detailing the 161 rules of customary international humanitarian law that are applicable in international and non-international armed conflicts.⁴ Following its release one of the co-authors of the study, Jean-Marie Henckaerts, produced the following summary of the findings in the *International Review of the Red Cross*:

*“Over the last few decades, there has been a considerable amount of practice insisting on the protection of international humanitarian law in this type of conflicts [sic]. This body of practice has had a significant influence on the formation of customary law applicable in non-international armed conflicts. ... Additional Protocol II has had a far-reaching effect on this practice and, as a result, many of its provisions are now considered to be part of customary international law. Examples of rules found to be customary and which have corresponding provisions in Additional Protocol II include: the prohibition of attacks on civilians; ... the prohibition of starvation; [and] the prohibition of attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population”*⁵

While SPDC Army soldiers claim that they are destroying the villagers' fields in the interests of counter-insurgency, the real motive behind this tactic has more to do with targeting the villagers rather than the armed resistance. The systematic destruction of not only the villagers' food supplies, but also their ability to produce food, is a strategy that has long been employed by the SPDC and its predecessor SLORC⁶ and BSPP⁷ regimes. Crop destruction is central to the military's forced relocation program as they attempt to starve the villagers out of hill areas that they cannot adequately control and down into SPDC-controlled villages and relocation sites. Once relocated they can more effectively be exploited as a source of forced labour and extortion in order to support the continued domination of the military.

³ The full text of the Protocol is available on the website of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/94.htm>

⁴ Henckaerts, J.M, & Doswald-Beck, L. *Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume 1: Rules*. London: Cambridge University Press, March 2005

⁵ Jean-Marie Henckaerts. “Study on customary international humanitarian law: A contribution to the understanding and respect for the rule of law in armed conflict”, in: *International Review of the Red Cross*. P. 188, Vol. 87, No. 857, March 2005. Accessed on the World Wide Web at: [http://192.91.247.98/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/review-857-p175/\\$File/irrc_857_Henckaerts.pdf](http://192.91.247.98/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/review-857-p175/$File/irrc_857_Henckaerts.pdf)

⁶ State Law and Order Restoration Council; the former name of the SPDC as it was known from September 1988 to November 1997

⁷ Burma Socialist Program Party; the military regime ruling Burma from 1962 to September 1988

The villagers of Thaton District (and indeed of all Karen regions) already suffer greatly from food shortages. The deliberate and systematic destruction of their food supplies and livelihoods only edges them closer to the brink of starvation. KHRG field researchers have previously estimated that only a quarter of all villagers living in Bilin township of Thaton District are able to produce or acquire enough food. The relentless targeting of civilian food supplies and fields since that time has only exacerbated this problem, leaving even fewer villagers who are able to produce or obtain enough food.⁸

The current situation facing villagers in Thaton District is such that most do not have enough food to eat. In some areas, less than a quarter of the population can now say that they have enough food to feed themselves. The villagers' scant rice supplies have already been stretched as far as they can go, yet it seems that neither the SPDC nor the DKBA sees this as reason to cease targeting their livelihoods and food supplies. The coming harvest is unlikely to provide many villagers with much in the way of a crop. The deliberate and systematic burning of villagers' fields and plantations is calculated to create conditions of life under which it would be impossible to survive in order to force villagers to move out of the hills and remoter regions and into SPDC garrisoned areas. As food shortages affect more and more villagers, fewer villagers are going to be able to turn to their friends and family for help. The options facing the villagers of Bilin township are few. Very little outside aid reaches the area and the villagers are largely left to rely on their own resourcefulness. However the slow war of attrition waged against Karen civilians is gradually eating away at the villagers' ability to respond to and mitigate the effects of the human rights abuses to which they are subjected.

This deliberate and systematic destruction of civilian food supplies and livelihoods is being conducted in direct contravention of Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, which the SPDC is obliged to obey under customary international humanitarian law. Such practices must be immediately and completely stopped. The perpetration of these and other abuses not only justifies the recent addition of Burma to the agenda of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), but demands urgent and meaningful action from the UNSC and other international bodies. UNSC Resolution 1674 (2006) which was adopted on April 28th 2006 clearly states that the targeting of civilians and the systematic perpetration of human rights violations may constitute a threat to international peace and security and therefore fall within the UNSC's jurisdiction for action:

*"The Security Council, ... Notes that the deliberate targeting of civilians and other protected persons, and the commission of systematic, flagrant and widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in situations of armed conflict, may constitute a threat to international peace and security, and, reaffirms in this regard its readiness to consider such situations and, where necessary, to adopt appropriate steps"*⁹

The situation in Thaton District and throughout Karen State meets the conditions set in this resolution, but whether any action is forthcoming remains to be seen. In the meantime, the villagers will have to continue their struggle on their own.

⁸ Karen Human Rights Group. "Food Security" in: *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District*. p. 82. (KHRG #06-01, 17/1/06)

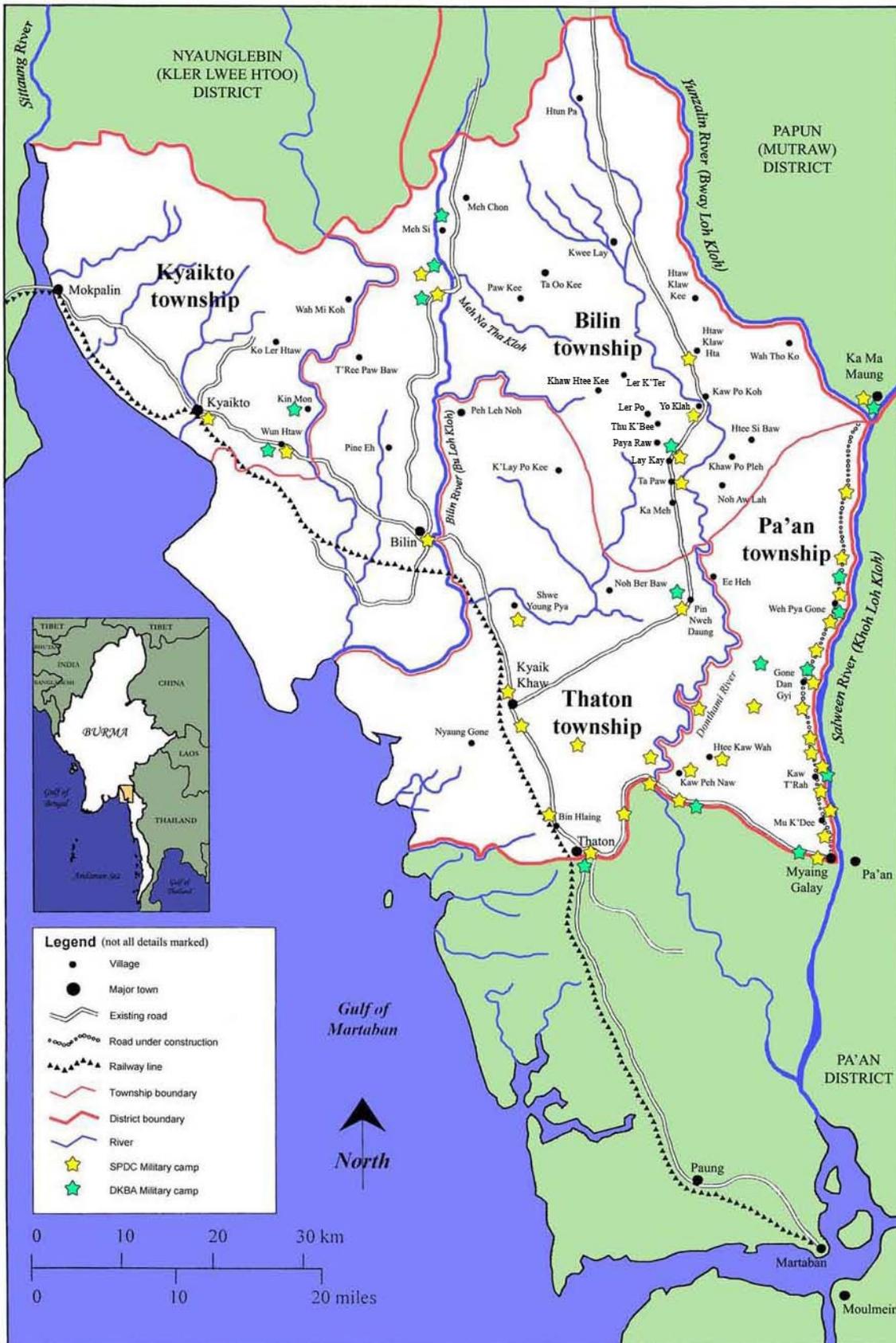
⁹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1674 (2006). Accessed on the World Wide Web through the UNSC website at: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/331/99/PDF/N0633199.pdf?OpenElement>

For more information on the situation in Thaton District or the SPDC's crop destruction campaigns, see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *The Ongoing Oppression of Thaton District: Forced Labour, Extortion, and Food Insecurity.* (KHRG #2006-F5, 7/6/06)
- *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District.* (KHRG #2006-01, 17/1/06)
- *Thaton District: Continued Consolidation of SPDC and DKBA Control through the use of Forced Labour, Extortion and Movement Restrictions.* (KHRG #2005-F2, 21/2/05)
- "The Rice Cycle" and "Crop Destruction and Food Shortages" in: *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts.* (KHRG #2001-03, 22/10/01)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2005* (KHRG #2006-P1, 6/4/06) and *KHRG Photo Set 2005-A* (KHRG #2005-P1, 27/5/05). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



Karen Districts

