



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Report from the Field**

December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2006 / KHRG #2006-F12

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**Forced Labour, Extortion, and Festivities:  
The SPDC and DKBA burden on villagers in Pa'an District**

*In Pa'an District of central Karen State, Burmese authorities impose strict controls on the movements and activities of all villagers while also taking their land, money and livestock, using them as forced labour, and forcing them to join state paramilitary organisations. Muslims are being forcibly evicted from their villages into relocation camps to make way for new SPDC army camps. Simultaneously the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) acts on behalf of the SPDC in many areas, extending the regime's control in return for impunity to exploit and extort from the civilian population. The double burden of forced labour, extortion, restrictions and forced conscription imposed by two sets of authorities takes a heavy toll on the villagers, yet in a cruel irony they are also being forced to give money and unpaid child labour to prepare New Year festivities where the DKBA plays host to foreigners and Rangoon movie stars.*

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This report is based on information gathered in recent months by KHRG researchers in Dt'Nay Hsah township of southeastern Pa'an district, Karen State (see map). This region hosts a strong presence of State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces which operate together to impose control over a population of Karen irrigated and hill rice farmers. The Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) are also present in the area, but armed conflict is low-intensity and very sporadic. Life is extremely hard, however, because the villagers face a heavy combination of demands from SPDC and DKBA authorities. Their land is confiscated by officers of both armies, who then force them to labour without pay on army camps and money-making rubber plantations. Muslim populations are being systematically evicted from their villages into forced relocation sites to make way for expanded SPDC army camps. Threatened with forced relocation and arbitrary detention for any failure to comply with demands, the remaining villagers are forced to plant castor bean to create fuel for the military at their own expense and with no support. Their livestock, food and money are robbed from them, and their daughters can be raped with impunity. They are forced to provide militiamen for the SPDC and soldiers for the DKBA, and then to pay the salaries of these soldiers. And in the midst of this, for the past month they have been forced to provide money and child forced labour so that the DKBA could invite foreigners and Rangoon movie stars to celebrate Karen New Year on December 19<sup>th</sup>. For many villagers, their patience is running out.

## Forced labour and extortion

Villagers in areas throughout Dt'Nay Hsah township are being forced to labour on SPDC-owned rubber plantations established on land previously confiscated from local villages. Jobs include clearing the scrub from around the base of the trees, cutting back branches, clearing new plantation grounds and planting new saplings. All of this work is uncompensated and the rubber is sold off to profit the entrepreneurial military units who control the plantations.



An SPDC rubber plantation in Dt'Nay Hsah township. Villagers are regularly forced without pay to weed the land, clear brush and cut back branches. [Photo: KHRG]

Since early 2006, local military officials from SPDC Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) #547, 548 and 549 have forced villagers to plant castor oil plants (*Cheh Su Pay* in Burmese) on village-owned land lying along roadways, with the intention of harvesting the resulting castor beans, which the SPDC has claimed can be refined for use as fuel for vehicle engines. This is part of a nationwide programme instigated by the top SPDC leadership to reduce Burma's reliance on foreign fuel supplies; throughout 2006 villagers everywhere in the country have been forced to buy and plant castor bushes, tend them and harvest the beans for the military.<sup>1</sup> In most countries castor is grown under controlled conditions because the beans, which are colourful and attractive to children, contain ricin, which is "among the most lethal naturally occurring toxins known today";<sup>2</sup> much more toxic than cyanide, in its pure form as little as 1 milligram can kill an adult human.<sup>3</sup> If a raw castor bean is swallowed, symptoms including abdominal pain, vomiting, and severe, sometimes bloody diarrhoea occur within hours, and death can follow. Villagers in various parts of Burma have reported dizziness, nausea and severe symptoms after they or their children have put one of the beans in their mouth without even swallowing it. Yet the SPDC has issued no information or warnings on how to grow the plant or the risks involved. In Dt'Nay Hsah township, SPDC officers of the three LIBs mentioned above have ordered each village to purchase and plant 20,000 castor bushes.

Villagers have been forced to plant and tend the castor bushes with no assistance or information, and are held responsible for any damage to the plants. In one case, an SPDC soldier told villagers that "If your cows and buffaloes eat these plants, we will kill them!" The protection of the castor plants has thus become a further burden imposed on villagers.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Setting up the Systems of Repression* (KHRG #2006-04, September 2006), pp. 31-36; and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006, Section 3a: Militarisation, violent abuses and 'development'*.

<sup>2</sup> Mark A. Hostetler, 'Toxicity, plants – castor bean and jequirity bean'. June 26, 2003: [www.emedicine.com/PED/topic331.htm](http://www.emedicine.com/PED/topic331.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Cornell University, Department of Animal Science, accessed at [www.ansci.cornell.edu/plants/castorbean.html](http://www.ansci.cornell.edu/plants/castorbean.html) on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006.



A collection of young castor plants near the roadside in Dt’Nay Hsah township along which the SPDC has forced villagers to plant them. [Photo KHRG]

“The soldiers told the villagers that these duties were for the development of the village, but as for this ‘development’, I have seen that the villagers have had to do the work and there has been no development or benefit for them.”

- KHRG field researcher (Nov 2006)

On October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006, soldiers from LIB #548 based in the area of Dt’Nay Hsah (Nabu) village demanded 300 logs and 300 bamboo poles from Htoh Gkaw Gkoh village and the same amount from Noh Htee Leh village. From the village of Kaw Nyay they demanded 30 logs and 30 bamboo poles and from other neighbouring villages 30,000 kyat in cash was demanded. The stated reason for this extortion was that it was needed to repair LIB #548’s army camp. While at Htoh Gkaw Gkoh village, the soldiers also confiscated animals belonging to the following people:

	Villager’s name	Stolen property
1	Ma La Kyet	One hen
2	Pa Di Klaw	One cat
3	Naw Say Moe	One cat
4	Pa Kaw Doh	Two chickens
5	Noh Pa La	One hen
6	Nu Meh	One cow

Extortion of food from civilians has become a systematic practice under the SPDC. Villagers living in Dt’Nay Hsah township must provide food for local SPDC military units once a month. On top of this they must provide food for DKBA patrols whenever demanded as well as KNU soldiers.

In October 2006, SPDC officials based in Myawaddy town adjacent to the Thai border ordered village heads from all villages in the Meh Bpleh area to attend a meeting where they ordered them to buy walking tractors<sup>4</sup> at a cost of 100,000 kyat per machine. The SPDC officials displayed these old and worn out machines to the village heads at the meeting and informed them that there was a company based in Pa’an town which was unable to use or sell the tractors, so the villages would be forced to buy them. After viewing the tractors, which must be paid for by March or April of 2007, one village head said “We don’t yet know how we can use those machines after we buy them.”



In the pond shown here villagers from Dt’Nay Hsah township raise fish as a form of insurance against SPDC demands for ‘taxation’. If villagers cannot afford the costs of such demands, they offer to pay the soldiers in fish raised in the communal pond, or sell the fish for money, then restock the pond. [Photo KHRG]

<sup>4</sup> These are long-handled self-propelled (petrol-fuelled) ploughing machines used mainly to plough irrigated rice fields; the operator walks behind the machine.

## Forced relocation and restrictions on movement

During the growing season of late 2006, SPDC LIBs #547, 548 and 549 arranged for the forced eviction of Burmese Muslims living in Dt'Nay Hsah (Nabu) village into a relocation site established next to Kler Dt'Gkoo village. The relocation and removal of Muslim communities in Karen State, either through explicit displacement programs or persistent repression leading to 'voluntary' departure to refugee camps or other areas of Burma, has been a consistent policy of the SPDC and DKBA. In 1997, following the SPDC's capture of most of Dooplaya District from the KNU, the forced exodus of all local Muslim residents was coordinated by Burmese state forces. Mosques were razed, copies of the Qur'an were destroyed and families driven from their homes.<sup>5</sup> The Muslim community of Dt'Nay Hsah, comprised of 200 households, were told that immediately upon finishing their paddy harvest, which occurs in November, they would have to relocate. Even if open land is made available at the relocation site, which is unlikely, these families will have to construct new paddy fields, which are typically built up over generations. The SPDC intends to clear away the Muslim section of Dt'Nay Hsah village and establish a new army camp in its place, large enough to accommodate the families of soldiers and officers.

On September 28<sup>th</sup> 2006, SPDC soldiers from LIB #548 called together village heads from all of the village tracts in Dt'Nay Hsah township. The soldiers then said to them, "The villagers whose children have gone to Bangkok [to work] must return to their village and register their names. Everybody must come back without fail. Tell your children who work in Bangkok to come back and get travel documents." The initial registration cost 500 kyat and the required travel document cost 100,000 kyat. This pressure on Karen migrants abroad to return to Burma for registration came following delays in the implementation of a memorandum of understanding signed in August 2006 between SPDC Senior General Than Shwe and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The September 19<sup>th</sup> coup that ousted Thaksin put a hold on the agreement to forcibly repatriate migrant workers from Burma discovered in Thailand without legal work or travel permits for "verification of their nationality".<sup>6</sup> If enforceable, such an operation would enable Thailand to eject workers' families and exert strict controls on which workers would be allowed. It would also open new avenues for extortion by officials on both sides of the border, while also allowing the SPDC to restrict travel in search of work to those seen as compliant with the regime. While allowing workers to travel to Thailand, their families could be held hostage to ensure remittance of heavy 'taxes' which the SPDC demands that all overseas workers pay. At present, the new Thai administration under Prime Minister Surayud Chulanond has so far refrained from enforcing the agreement and so the SPDC may be making its own attempts at domestic controls without the assistance of Thai complicity.

## Attempted rape

On April 9<sup>th</sup> at around 8:00 p.m., fourteen year old Ma M--- from Htee Chwa village was returning home with two female friends from a tutorial session at her teacher's home. Along the way a soldier from SPDC LIB #547 approached and attacked her. Her two friends ran off and informed a man from the village about what was happening. The man then rushed to the scene of the incident and upon arrival the soldier fled. Ma M--- told her aunt about the incident, and this aunt related the events as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the situation of Burmese Muslims see [Easy Targets: The Persecution of Muslims in Burma](#), May 2002 (KHRG #2002-02).

<sup>6</sup> ["Thailand's cynical ploy on Burmese migrant workers,"](#) The Nation, December 12<sup>th</sup> 2006.

"When the man arrived to help Ma M---, the soldier left. When the soldier was trying to rape Ma M---, he punched her in the face one time and pushed her down and he began to rape her and she struggled, and then he punched her again on her jaw so that Ma M--- fainted. When the man arrived he just saw Ma M--- sitting and faint, and her face was swollen but she hadn't been raped yet."

The following week, the swelling on her face lessened but she told her parents that she dared not go to school and she wished to take her own life. Her parents, the village head and her teachers all attempted to comfort her. The villagers also approached SPDC LIB #547 commander Khaing Maung Htway and complained about the soldier. Following this the commander discharged the guilty soldier. Punitive action against military personnel guilty of sexual abuse or rape is rare; officers usually commit such acts with complete impunity, but sometimes impose token punishments on rank-and-file soldiers as in this case. In addition to appeasing the angry villagers, Khaing Maung Htway's discharge of the soldier may have been intended to send a message to his soldiers that rape with impunity is supposed to be an officers' privilege.

Villagers also continue to report periodic sexual attacks against their livestock. Naw N--- from Htee Chwa village reports how in October 2006 another soldier from SPDC LIB #547 sexually assaulted her buffalo. She was going to her field to fetch the animal when she saw an SPDC soldier approaching so she hid in the bushes, and then witnessed the soldier raping the buffalo. The villagers reported the incident to the soldier's officer and he said he would look into it; afterwards they heard that the soldier had been transferred. At the time of the rape the buffalo was already pregnant. Naw N--- says jokingly that after the rape she wondered whether the baby would be entirely buffalo or part human. When the baby was born and she saw it was a buffalo after all, she named it 'Tatmadaw'.<sup>7</sup>

## Forced recruitment

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, SPDC LIB #356 commander Bo Myint Thein ordered villagers up to forty years old from four villages located near Kyo Gk'Lee village, Dt'Nay Hsah township to attend a People's Militia (*pyit thu sit* in Burmese) training. The villages and number of people from each that had to attend were:

	Village name	Number of people
1	Noh Htee Oo Hta	30 villagers
2	Hway Sha	35 villagers
3	Meh Pleh	30 villagers
4	Paw Baw Koh	20 villagers
5	P' Naw Kleh Kee	10 villagers

The militia training began on August 3<sup>rd</sup> and lasted for ten days. The officers organising the training told the villagers that even more people would have to participate in upcoming trainings for the Myanmar Fire Brigades and Myanmar Red Cross. They then ordered 100 villagers to come from Htee Wah Blaw village tract for each of these two trainings. Villagers reported that SPDC officers told them that the aims of the *pyit thu sit*, Auxiliary Fire Fighters and Myanmar Red Cross trainings were: village security, support for the village, village development, and support for SPDC soldiers. The SPDC considers the Auxiliary Fire Brigades and the Myanmar Red Cross as auxiliary paramilitary forces.<sup>8</sup> In a recent SPDC

<sup>7</sup> Official name of the Burmese armed forces.

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*. 2002, Norwalk: Eastbridge; p. 81.

press statement these organisations were assigned the mandate to “*crush the destructive elements who have encroached upon perpetuation [sic] of the sovereignty.*”<sup>9</sup>

On January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006 Maung Chit Thoo, Battalion Commander of the DKBA #999 Brigade Special Battalion based at Gkoh Gkoh, ordered the villagers of Meh Bpleh region in Dt’Nay Hsah township to provide recruits for his army. Representatives of several village tracts had to go to the meeting and listen to him speak about how many people in each village tract must join the army. There are nine village tracts in Meh Bpleh area. From Meh Bpleh and Way Sghah village tracts he demanded money in lieu of recruits, but the other village tracts were ordered to provide villagers as recruits. If those chosen from each village were unwilling or unable to join, they were told to pay someone to take their place; but that person must be from their own village, not from anywhere else. Because of this forced recruitment order some of the young men of Gker Ghaw village in Gker Ghaw village tract joined the Buddhist monkhood as monks and novices to evade conscription. Some other villagers said, “*If we really must join the DKBA military, we’d better go to join the KNU military instead.*”

Commander Maung Chit Thoo gave the villagers a deadline of April 25<sup>th</sup> 2006 and he told the village heads, “*If you haven’t sent me the villagers by this day, ask your wives to wrap up packs for you and come to me.*” The village tract heads and village heads were sure that if this occurred they would become his hostages until their villages provided the recruits. As the deadline came closer and closer, several of the village tract and village heads said they couldn’t sleep. In previous years they were ordered to send recruits to join the DKBA for a period of three years, but now in 2006 the DKBA specified that these recruits would have to join the military for 7 years. Villagers in Htee Wah Blaw village complained to KHRG that only last year they had been ordered to send six recruits for three years, and they had sent three people. These people still have two more years to serve in the DKBA. The villagers objected that instead of waiting until these people completed their three-year term, the DKBA is already demanding more. This has already happened to them three times. The villagers previously forced to join haven’t been freed yet, but now more villagers have to go and join them already. The Htee Wah Blaw villagers also complained that they have to pay each recruit 15,000 Thai baht per year as a salary or as compensation for being selected to fill the village quota; with three villagers already serving as conscripts and three more now demanded for a seven year term, the financial burden on the villagers will be too heavy. The village tract and village heads were worrying a lot because of this and one village tract head told KHRG, “*Why did the villagers have to elect me to become the village tract head? I am really tired of things like this.*” In the meeting, some village heads had asked Maung Chit Thoo why he needed to force the villagers to join his military. Then he answered and said, “*If the SPDC attacks us, we will also attack them so we are collecting more soldiers.*” The village heads didn’t dare to say anything more in front of him, but when they came out of the meeting they said to each other that there is no way the DKBA will shoot at the SPDC because they are always going around together with the SPDC. In the end, Htee Wah Blaw village and most other villages had no choice but to give Maung Chit Thoo the forced conscripts he demanded.

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<sup>9</sup> “Information Sheet,” Myanmar Information Committee, accessed at: [www.myanmar-information.net/infosheet/2005/050809.htm](http://www.myanmar-information.net/infosheet/2005/050809.htm) on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

## Health

Malaria is the most common health problem in Dt'Nay Hsah township. In Htee Wah Blaw village for example, at least 40 people have died from malaria over the past few years, most of whom have been under eight years old, and villagers say that this year the incidence of malaria has grown much worse. Villagers who get sick typically go to local KNU clinics. Although the KNU provides medicine for these, villages must register such clinics under the SPDC which then claims that they are provided and supplied by the government. Alternatively, some villagers seek treatment at SPDC clinics located in towns and larger villages. The high cost of treatment and medicine provided at these, however, are prohibitively expensive for most villagers. According to some villagers tuberculosis, although present, has yet to become a common illness in Dt'Nay Hsah township.



A young girl from Dt'Nay Hsah township suffering *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria, the most fatal strain of the disease. [Photo KHRG]

## Karen New Year

This year the first day of the traditional Karen New Year fell on December 19<sup>th</sup>. Prior to the celebrations, villagers hurry to finish their harvests with the help of family and friends. Those already finished prepare rice alcohol which they share with those working out in the fields. However, with the expansion of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the annual New Year festival has become a strain on villagers. The DKBA, intent on holding as large a festival as possible at its various bases, orders local villagers to supply labour, food and money for the occasion. This year the DKBA began preparations a month ahead in November for the New Year celebration, by sending orders to villages in the Meh Bpleh area to each send 100 adolescents, either boys or girls, to work on preparations for the occasion. Some villages did not send the full number demanded and DKBA officers therefore reprimanded them. According to one villager living in the area,

*"In the village we don't have time to celebrate the arrival of the new year because right now we have to finish our harvest and we have to send our children as well to help them [the DKBA] so it has become a big problem for us."*

Another villager told KHRG,

*"New Year is for all Karen people, but these lengthy preparations are creating problems for us. If they just prepared for one week that would be easy for us. Most of the village youth don't want to go, because when we go to help them we don't have money to buy anything to eat there. Right now villagers need to work in the paddy in the daytime and take a rest in the night time so that the harvest can be finished soon."*



Distilling rice alcohol. At this time of year Karen people distill alcohol and have some after finishing work in the fields, and also serve it to their friends who helped them in the fields on the harvest. [Photo: KHRG]



A villager transports harvested paddy to his paddy storage barn. They now have insufficient time for the harvest because of forced labour, including labour on preparations for DKBA New Year festivities. [Photo: KHRG]

One of the biggest DKBA celebrations occurs at the DKBA base of Gkoh Gkoh, a village on the Thu Mweh river which borders Thailand. This year several Burmese movie actors and singers were brought from Rangoon to perform at the event. They were transported through Pa'an district in a police car with flashing light, accompanied by a heavy SPDC military guard in trucks preceding and following them. Villagers at the event told KHRG that each village near Shwe Gkoh Gkoh had been forced to pay 50,000 kyat to help finance the celebration in addition to the forced labour the hundreds of adolescents from these villages have been ordered to provide since November. Despite these conditions, many Karen refugees returned from Thailand to the festival in the hope of seeing and hearing the famous singers. Ironically, the event (as in most recent years) was also attended by many foreigners, including media, tourists, and people who work as part of the refugee and migrant aid community on the Thai side of the border. Apparently considering it 'cool' to celebrate Karen New Year at a DKBA base in Karen State, most of these people took part in the celebration oblivious to the burdens that had been imposed on local villagers so that the DKBA could host them.

## Conclusion

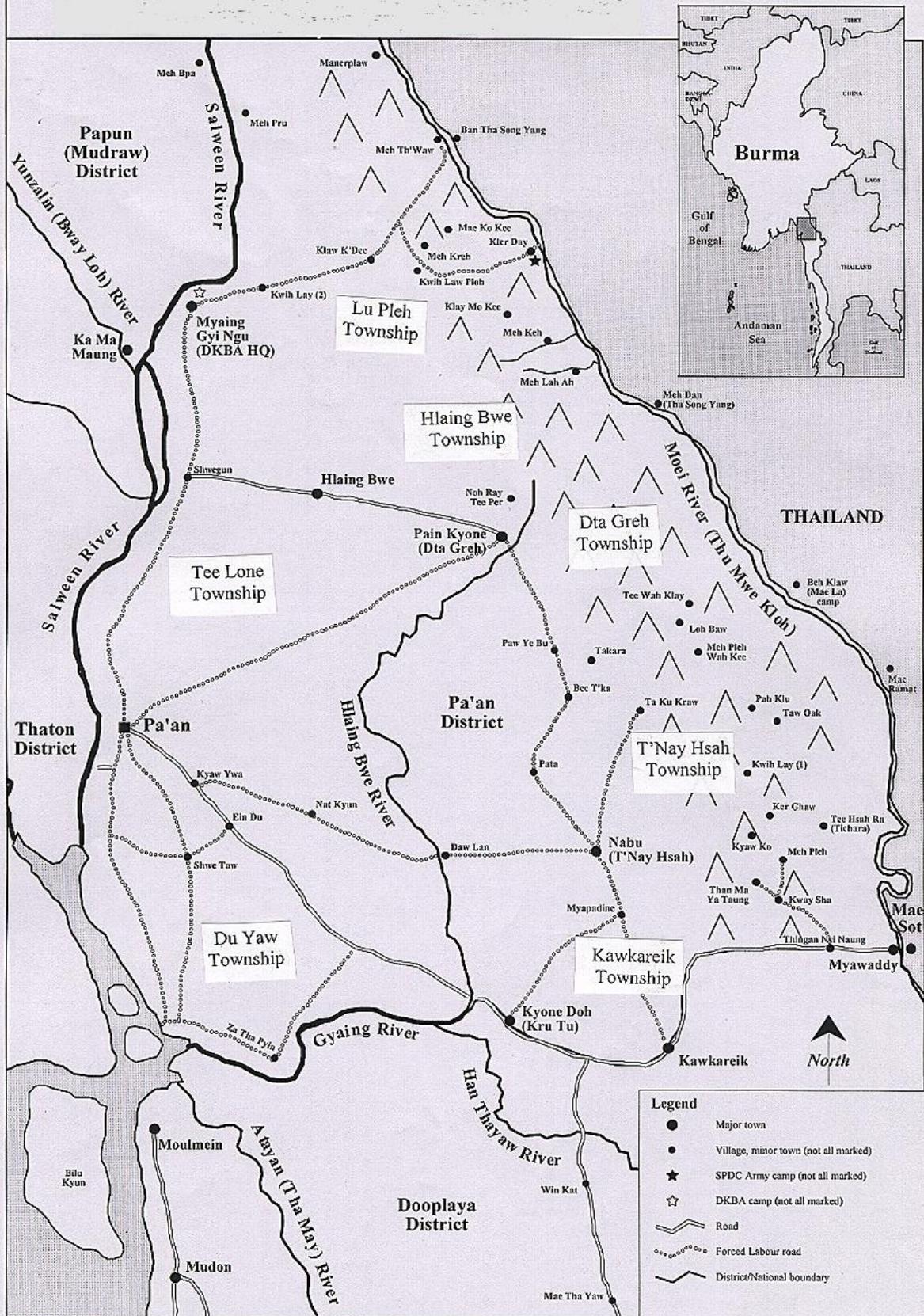
Despite the lack of any intense armed conflict in southeastern Pa'an District, villagers' survival is becoming more and more difficult under the combined burden of SPDC and DKBA demands. Their land can be confiscated at the whim of the military, and they are used as forced labour on that land, on local infrastructure and on the money-making projects of military officers. Their money, food and livestock are extorted from them until they no longer have enough food to survive, and health and education suffer severely as a result. Violent abuses continue to be committed with impunity. Adding insult to injury, they are then forced to join and support the training of SPDC paramilitary organisations, provide forced recruits to the DKBA military, and provide labour, money and materials so that the DKBA and SPDC can put on festivals to show the outside world how 'happy' the villagers are under military rule. Though the villagers do what they can to evade full compliance with all of the demands placed on them, the combined presence of the SPDC and DKBA gives them very little room to move.

For more information on the situation in Pa'an District see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *Pa'an District: Land confiscation, forced labour and extortion undermining villagers' livelihoods.* ( KHRG #2006-F1, February 2006)
- *Pa'an District: Food security in crisis for civilians in rural areas* (KHRG #2005-B3, March 2005)
- *Forced Labour and the DKBA in T'Nay Hsah Township, Pa'an District* (KHRG #2005-B2, February 2005)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (KHRG #2006-P1), *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>.

# Pa'an District



Scale: 1:650,000 / 1 cm to 6.5 km / 1 inch to 10.3 miles  
 Map by KHRG (Karen Human Rights Group)

# Karen Districts



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