



Report from the Field
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The Ongoing Oppression of Thaton District: Forced Labour, Extortion, and Food Insecurity

Thaton District suffers some of the heaviest SPDC control of all seven of the Karen districts. Most of the villagers in this region already live under direct SPDC control. In other districts further north where their control is not so extensive, the SPDC is mounting a massive offensive against civilian villagers with the intent of making the situation in those areas more closely resemble that which is already present in Thaton District. Villagers in Thaton District are systematically exploited for forced labour and extortion by all of the numerous armed groups operating in the district. The SPDC and the DKBA stand out as the worst offenders: every year villagers are ordered to serve as porters for the military, repair the roads which now cross the district, and supply vast quantities of bamboo and roofing thatch to the SPDC and the DKBA which is then sold for profit, none of which ever filters back down to the villagers. The villagers are struggling under the relentless demands. Many are no longer able to acquire enough to eat. Yet even under such extreme totalitarian control, troops continue to be moved into the district, further tightening the noose around the necks of the villagers.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo in Karen) District in western Karen State is dominated by the vast floodplain created by the Salween, Yunzalin, Donthami, and Bilin Rivers (see Map).¹ There are few hills apart from those in the northeast of the district and the majority of the region is utilised as open flat rice fields and farmlands. The open terrain of the district affords few areas to which villagers can flee from the oppression that they face at the hands of State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) soldiers or any of their proxy armies. Much of the district has come under increased SPDC Army control over the past ten years to the point where now there are few villages which do not live under authoritarian military rule. Fewer places to hide and the broad extent of SPDC Army control in the district have in combination produced far fewer internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Thaton District than in some of the other districts further north.

Further Militarization

With much of the district already controlled by the SPDC, it is somewhat unlikely that the full-scale military offensive presently being waged against Karen civilians further north in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin, and Papun districts will expand southwards into Thaton District as well. As has been discussed in numerous recent KHRG reports documenting the offensive,² the aim of such attacks is not to eliminate the armed resistance, but rather for the SPDC to exert their authority over areas and people whom they have never been able to effectively control, with the ultimate goal of bringing the entire population under their dominion. Once

¹ Known in Karen as the Khoh Loh Kloh, Bway Loh Kloh, Baw Naw Kloh, and Bu Loh Kloh respectively.

² See for example *Civilians as Targets* (KHRG #2006-C1, May 2006) and *Without Respite: Renewed attacks on villages and internal displacement in Toungoo District* (KHRG #2006-02, June 2006).

the population has been forcibly relocated out of the hill tracts and down to SPDC-garrisoned relocation sites in the plains and along roadways where SPDC Army soldiers can keep close watch over them, the villagers are then exploited for forced labour and extortion to support and maintain continued military rule. This process, however, has already largely taken place in Thaton District. Villages throughout the district have had blanket movement restrictions enforced upon them for the past several years. Anyone wishing to travel beyond their village has to first seek permission and purchase a pass from the local Army battalion. While confined to their villages, the villagers are regularly called upon by any one of the various armed groups operating in the area to provide forced labour, food, money, building materials, and intelligence.³ In this way, Thaton District can be considered as a model for what the SPDC has planned for those other districts to the north: most of the district is controlled by the SPDC, there are relatively few internally displaced persons (IDPs), there is limited armed resistance from the Karen National Union (KNU), and the villagers may be exploited at the whim of the soldiers with impunity. The situation in Thaton District is the desired end product of the current offensive in the north.



A section of the Myaing Galay to Ka Ma Maung car road as it looks between Meh Pu and T’Kaw Po villages in Pa’an township. This road was built with the unpaid forced labour of the villagers. Several rice fields and numerous coconut and toddy palm plantations were destroyed to make way for the road. The villagers who owned these fields and plantations were not compensated for the loss of their livelihoods. [Photo: KHRG]

With so much of the district already suffering under the totalitarian control of the military, there should be no valid reason for the SPDC to further militarise the area. However, KHRG field researchers from the region have reported that since the beginning of the year there has been an increase in the number of SPDC Army battalions operating in the district. On February 6th 2006, soldiers under Light Infantry Division (LID) #44 were moved out of the area and were replaced by six battalions from LID #101. According to a KHRG field researcher, these battalions have never been stationed in Thaton District before and a

³ See: Karen Human Rights Group. *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District*. Thailand: KHRG, January 17th 2006 (KHRG #2006-01).

number of new Army camps have been built, and existing ones repaired, to accommodate them. All of the materials used were demanded from the villagers, who were then ordered to build and repair the camps, work that they have never been paid for. The primary area of operations of these new battalions has been along the partially completed Kyaik Khaw to Ka Dtaing Dtee (in Papun District) car road where it passes through Bilin township between Ta Paw and Kaw Po Koh villages. Infantry Battalion (IB) #254, Column #1 (Soe Pai commanding) have based themselves at Ta Paw; LIB #235 are stationed at Yo Klah; and Columns 1 and 2 of IB #303 (Ko Ko Aung commanding) are based out of Lay Kay, where Brigadier General Maung Maung Ohn, commanding officer of LID #101, has established his temporary division headquarters (see Map).

"They set up their Army camps along the road that links P'Nweh Klah, Ta Paw, Noh Nyunt Oo, Lah Koh, Lay Kay, Yoh Klah, and K'Ter Kee."

- a KHRG field researcher

A report by the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) released on May 12th 2006 states that between March 29th and April 16th, a combined column of soldiers from DKBA #333 Brigade and SPDC Army LIB #235 were moving through a number of village tracts in Bilin township, *"attack[ing] and tortur[ing] villagers, burning rice farms, and stealing from villagers"*. FBR states that on March 29th the soldiers burned 13 rice storage barns in Ler Bee Ber village and then on April 14th, opened fire on a group of 15 villagers and burned a villager's farm in Noh Ka Neh village.⁴

A second FBR report dated June 3rd 2006 claims that a number of battalions under Military Operations Command (MOC) #21 have also been active in the area. According to the report, a number of villages in the vicinity of Saw Thu Kee in Kyaikto township have come under attack from a column of soldiers from Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) #56, 223, 237, 276, 601, and 602. The affected villages include Saw Thu Kee, Ger Waw Kee, Meh Nu Kee, Wah Mee Ko, and Ger Per Bu, reportedly displacing over 100 villagers.⁵

In addition to these units under LID #101 and MOC #21 (which are typically used for offensive operations), Thaton District is also normally garrisoned by SPDC Army soldiers subordinate to Southeast Regional Command who usually have several battalions stationed in the district at any one time. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) also has a large presence in the region, particularly in Pa'an township in the east of the district. As stated above, this increased militarization does not appear to be an extension of the offensive further north, but rather part of a persistent trend. For the past several years, the SPDC has been moving more and more infantry battalions into Karen State. The SPDC has long sought to possess complete hegemony over Karen State and everyone residing within it. Their actions have shown that they believe that this can be attained only through increased militarization throughout the region.

⁴ Free Burma Rangers. "Burma Army tortures villagers and burns farms in Thaton District, West-Central Karen State", 12/5/06. Received by email. See www.freeburmarangers.org.

⁵ Free Burma Rangers. "Burma Army attacks displace over 100 villagers in Thaton District, Western Karen State, Burma", 3/6/06. Received by email. See www.freeburmarangers.org.

Forced Labour

Forced labour is ubiquitous in Thaton District; forced labour providing building materials particularly so [see *KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005* and *Photo Set 2005-A* for recent photographs portraying villagers performing forced labour in Thaton District]. The SPDC and the DKBA alike both demand that the villagers regularly supply them with roofing thatch, bamboo, logs, and milled timber. The soldiers typically claim that these materials are to be used to repair their camp or in the construction of a new school or medical clinic, but more often than not they find their way into commercial markets where they are sold for profit, none of which is ever seen by the villagers. Corrupt commanding officers exploit their position of power, exerting their authority over the villagers to expand their own personal fortunes. Villagers are almost never paid while performing forced labour for the military. They are rarely provided with food and must bring their own tools to complete the task at hand. Anyone who falls ill or is injured while performing forced labour is seldom provided with medical care. This includes those who step on landmines.

DKBA units in Thaton District are particularly persistent in their demands, especially in Pa'an township where they are strongest. Every village in the areas in which they operate are ordered to provide the local battalions with between 1,000 and 3,000 shingles of roofing thatch annually. This is in addition to the hundreds of lengths of bamboo that they must also provide each year and the myriad other demands that they must face.

"Villagers not only have to deal with the demands of the SPDC, but also from the DKBA. From each village, the DKBA demands 2,000-3,000 shingles of [roofing] thatch, 2,000 pieces of bamboo and 200 logs. They demand this from every village, every year. The villages that don't have thatch have to pay 50,000 Kyat instead."

- a KHRG field researcher

"On February 2nd 2006, DKBA Headquarters Security Force Commander, Captain Than Htun ordered the villagers of K--- to send 2,000 shingles of thatch to the Law Pu Army camp. They demand the villagers to send them 2,000 shingles of thatch every year."

- Naw E--- (Female, 56), village head from K--- village, Pa'an township

"[SPDC Army] IB #254 established themselves at the Ta Paw Army camp and demanded that the villagers of H--- village send them 100 pieces of bamboo and 300 shingles of thatch to repair their Army camp. The DKBA demanded the villagers send them 2,000 shingles of thatch each year. [These orders were issued] not only to H--- village, but also the other villages nearby."

- Naw N--- (Female, 40), village head from H--- village, Pa'an township

Villagers are also frequently ordered by the SPDC and the DKBA to repair the expanding network of roads that traverse the district. Most of these are unsealed dirt roads which become impassable to vehicles during the rainy season when large sections of the roads are often washed away in the heavy monsoonal downpours. Once the rains cease around October, the soldiers order the villagers to repair and where necessary rebuild the roads. Throughout the year the villagers are also periodically forced to clear all of the trees and scrub from along the shoulders of the roads, increasing the risk of stepping on a landmine. Any time that villagers spend performing forced labour is less time that they have available to work for themselves. The rice harvest, between October and December, is arguably the most critical time of the year when the villagers must spend much of their time in their fields. At this time, however, when the rains have recently ceased, the demands for forced labour are actually increased as the SPDC and DKBA once again call upon the villagers to repair the roads.

According to one villager from Pa'an township, the SPDC paid one million Kyat to the DKBA to repair the car road from Myaing Galay and Ka Ma Maung. The DKBA pocketed the money and ordered villagers from the area to do the work. No one was paid for their labour, nor were they given food or provided with tools. The villagers had to provide these things for themselves, all without compensation.

"LIB #104, led by battalion commander Aye Aung, came and settled in the Ta Paw Army camp. On December 10th 2005 they forced the villagers of K--- village to cut and clear the road. They ordered the villagers to cut and clear the road three times a year. It took three days to finish cutting and clearing the road."

- Naw M--- (Female, 46), village head from K--- village, Bilin township

"In December [2005], SPDC LID #44 division commander Zin Min Htun ordered L--- villagers to fix the road. This road starts at Kyaik Khaw and continues to Yaw Shan village. The villagers have to fix this road every year. This year they ordered L--- villagers to repair the road from L--- to N---. It took us four days to finish fixing the road. Each day 40 villagers went to work on the road. Even though the villagers worked for the SPDC, they had to take their own food because they were not given any. The SPDC also didn't give them any money."

- Saw M--- (Male, 42), villager from L--- village, Bilin township

"Since November 10th 2005, DKBA Brigade #333 brigade commander Maung Kyi ordered the villagers of N--- and the other villages nearby to dig the road from W--- to N---. They ordered the villagers to do that once in 2005, but it was the time of harvest, so the villagers were not free to do it for them. On January 20th 2006 they ordered the villagers to do it again. They forced every village to do it. The SPDC said that they would pay them [DKBA] 1,000,000 Kyat to repair the road, but instead they just forced the villagers to do it and didn't give them any of the money or any support. The DKBA didn't give them any tools or any food to eat. The villagers had to take their own tools and their own food while they were working for DKBA."

- Saw L--- (Male, 50), village head from N--- village, Pa'an township

Throughout the year villagers are also ordered to porter loads for the military. Many SPDC or DKBA camps are only accessible on foot, so all supplies must be carried in by porters. Each camp usually receives supplies once a month. This task is generally delegated to nearby villages. The soldiers order the villagers to go collect supplies stored in other camps and carry the heavy loads back to their camp for them without pay or any form of compensation. Some of these loads can weigh up to 25 kilograms (55 lbs.). Villagers who are unable to lift the heavy loads are regularly beaten by the soldiers. Porters are often ordered to walk in front of the soldiers as human minesweepers. Anyone who steps on a landmine is generally left to die. Men, women, and children are often taken as porters. The SPDC and the DKBA do not seem to care who is doing the work, so long as it gets done. If any of the supplies are damaged or lost *en route*, the villagers are forced to pay compensation. During the rainy season when the roads have turned into slippery corridors of mud, trucks are unable to navigate the treacherous roads to bring in supplies. The soldiers then increase their demands upon the villagers to serve as porters.

"On February 23rd 2006, Captain Than Htun and 40 of his soldiers from DKBA Headquarters Security Battalion entered K--- village. On that day the villagers were worshipping. They captured all of the men performing merit-making and took six of them as porters. They were released after two days."

- Saw L--- (Male, 30), village head from K--- village, Pa'an township

“DKBA Headquarters Security Battalion led by Captain Than Htun came into P--- with 40 of his soldiers on February 21st 2006 and ordered the village head to find him 13 porters. The porters have to carry bullets and other things. These 13 villagers had to be porters for three days.”

- Saw M--- (Male, 43), village head from P--- village, Pa'an township

“On February 11th 2006, Captain Aye Aung with 60 of his soldiers from LIB #104 entered E--- village and ordered the village head to give him four guides. They ordered the guides to show them the way, but when they went out of the village they changed it to portering. They gave loads to the four villagers to carry. Each of the villagers had to carry loads that weighed 15 viss [24.5 kgs. / 54 lbs.]. When they reached the next village they demanded guides again [from the village head] and released the E--- villagers.”

- Saw N--- (Male, 40), village head from E--- village, Pa'an township



Villagers in Bilin township performing forced labour on the Kyaik Khaw to Ka Dtaing Dtee car road in January 2006 under orders from camp commander Zaw Min Htun of LID #44. Kindly disregard the incorrect date stamped on the photo. [Photo: KHRG]

Extortion

The extortion of huge sums of money from the villagers is but another way in which the SPDC exploits and seeks to control the civilian population. The assortment of taxes and fees are staggering. As a result of this extortion, most villagers are so impoverished that they are unable to adequately feed their families (see 'Food Security' below).

"When they get money from selling their fruit from their gardens [small plantations], it is taken by the SPDC Army troops, the Pyitthu Sit ['people's militia'], the military police, the Tha Ka Sa Pa ['anti-insurgent group'], or the DKBA. Life under the SPDC is hard. The villagers find some money for themselves, but it becomes money for the soldiers. They want to use the money that they have earned for their families, but it is taken by the soldiers, used to hire porters, or taken as other taxes and fees."

- a KHRG field researcher

Every armed group operating in Thaton District is accountable to the practice of extortion: the SPDC Army, the SPDC civil authorities, the *Tat Htain* ('military police'), the *Pyitthu Sit* ('people's militia'), the *Tha Ka Sa Pa* ('anti-insurgent group'), the DKBA, and the KNU/KNLA (Karen National Union / Karen National Liberation Army).

SPDC Army soldiers exact whatever so-called taxes they can from the civilian population. Whenever SPDC Army troops enter a village they demand that the villagers provide them with food. Quite often, villagers are arbitrarily arrested on the charge that they are KNU members or because they have family in the KNU simply so that the soldiers can extort money from them. The *Tha Ka Sa Pa* ('anti-insurgent group') also capture villagers so that they can demand money from them before releasing them. According to a KHRG field researcher, *"they are just like a big gang of bandits. Sometimes they beat and torture the villagers until they give them 30-40,000 Kyat before releasing them"*.

The DKBA also commonly uses similar tactics. On January 18th 2006, Captain Than Htun of the DKBA Headquarters Security Battalion tortured a 44 year old woman from Pa'an township because her son-in-law is a Captain in the Karen National Liberation Army. Captain Than Htun demanded that she turn over her son-in-law or pay one million Kyat within three days time. He told her that if she failed to produce either her son-in-law or the money, he would kill her. The woman's son-in-law learned of this and in turn threatened to kill Than Htun's family in retaliation should she be harmed. Than Htun then reduced his demand to 150,000 Kyat. Shortly afterwards, on February 2nd 2006, Than Htun employed identical tactics in a neighbouring village. In this case, a 41 year old villager was tortured and had 100,000 Kyat extorted from him because his son was also a soldier in the KNLA. Three years prior to this, Captain Lweh Say, also of the DKBA, demanded 500,000 Kyat from the same villager for the same reason.

According to a villager from Pa'an township, the locally notorious DKBA commander Captain Moe Kyo has created his own drama troupe that occasionally travels to villages to perform. Each of these performances costs the village 100,000 Kyat, regardless of whether they go to watch the show or not. Fearing his proven track record for brutality, no one dares speak out against him.

"DKBA Captain Moe Kyo created his own drama which he called 'Moe Kyo's Drama'. Sometimes this drama group would come and play in the village. Whenever they came and played in any village, the village had to give them 100,000 Kyat. Whether the people went to watch or not, they have to pay him. Moe Kyo is notorious for murder, so people are afraid of him."

- Saw L--- (Male, 50), village head from N--- village, Pa'an township

The *Pyitthu Sit* ('people's militia') has continued to forcibly recruit men from most of the larger villages in Thaton District to join their ranks. Any village that does not wish to join them must pay the SPDC 80,000 Kyat per year.

"The SPDC has established Pyitthu Sit in many of the larger villages. They force four men from each village to join. Every village has to join the Pyitthu Sit and if a village does not want to join, it has to give 80,000 Kyat to the SPDC every year. The SPDC gives them training and weapons and places them in the villages. They are given responsibility to send messages to the SPDC and act as guides for the soldiers. The Pyitthu Sit is not paid by the SPDC, so the villagers have to give them food and build houses for them to stay in. The SPDC demands bamboo, wood, and [roofing] thatch for their families from the villagers. They also demand five baskets [125 kgs. / 275 lbs.] of rice for the wives and children of the Pyitthu Sit."

- a KHRG field researcher

SPDC authority is often exerted through the local-level administrative bodies known as Peace and Development Councils (PDCs). These exist at all levels: state/division, district, township, and village. Many of the civil officials holding these posts are just as corrupt as the military officers. Each level of this administrative structure also exacts its own taxes from the civilian population. In addition to all other extortion that the villagers must pay, they must also give 60,000 Kyat to the Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) per year. A further 15,000 Kyat must go to the Health Department, and another 2,000 Kyat to the Education Department. These are in addition to the amounts demanded from villagers by other civil authorities and military units.

"There are many different Peace and Development Councils organised by the SPDC. Each level of the Council collects taxes from the villages. The chairperson of the Township [Peace and Development] Council demands 20,000 Kyat from every village each year. They also demand money from the villagers for celebrations and 'special district days'. The villagers must pay 20,000 Kyat for the celebration of their 'district days' and 20,000 Kyat for the celebration of their 'special days'. The total amount of money that the villagers must pay to the SPDC each year is 60,000 Kyat; this is only for the [Township Peace and Development] Council. The villagers must also pay money to the Education Organisation and the Health Organisation. Each village has to pay 15,000 Kyat to the Health Organisation and 2,000 Kyat to the Education Organisation every year."

- a KHRG field researcher

Every checkpoint along the roads that villagers must pass through also demands a fee. The road from Kyaik Khaw to Ka Dtaing Dtee (in Papun District) is presently patrolled by soldiers from LID #101, while the Myaing Galay – Ka Ma Maung road is largely controlled by the DKBA. Each of these groups demands money from the villagers before they allow them to pass. The military police also collect taxes. They too man checkpoints along the roads, as well as in ports and railway stations, demanding 500 Kyat from everyone who wishes to pass.

"Mostly, the military police set up on the car roads, railway stations, and ports to collect taxes. They also collect 'alcohol taxes' in the villages. Even if a village does not make or sell alcohol, they have to pay 20,000 Kyat to the military police every year. Whenever the villagers travel anywhere, they order the villagers to show them their ID cards and pay 500 Kyat before they can pass the checkpoint. Even if they have their ID cards, they still have to pay them 500 Kyat."

- a KHRG field researcher

The KNU also demands money and rice from the villagers in Thaton District. According to a KHRG field researcher, the KNU demands 500 Kyat and five tins [62.5 kgs. / 138 lbs.] of rice from every household in the areas in which they are able to operate. While they are somewhat limited from operating in all parts of the district, they do have a presence in all four townships. It is largely within the bigger towns and along the roadways or rail line that they are not able to maintain a presence. Most other areas are subject to these demands. Unlike the SPDC, however, KNU authorities tend to be more patient when villagers are unable to pay the full amount.

“The KNU and the KNLA ask for five tins [62.5 kgs. / 138 lbs.] of rice and 500 Kyat from each household [per year]. If the villagers don’t have all of the money, they give as much as they can.”

- a KHRG field researcher

Food Security

A primary concern for many villagers now is in regard to food security. Most villagers who have been interviewed by KHRG have stated that they do not have enough food supplies to feed their families. Heavy rains and flooding across the district again last rainy season damaged the rice harvest, as it has done annually for the past several years. Many villagers were only able to reap a small harvest and as a result many are now without enough food to see them through to the next harvest in October-December.

To supplement what little rice they can grow, a lot of villagers grow small cash crops such as soybeans, sesame, chillies, taro, dogfruit, or sugarcane. The harvests from these crops are sold at local markets either within their own or in neighbouring villages with the money raised then used to buy rice. However the costs of basic goods and staple foodstuffs are increasing rapidly. According to a KHRG field researcher from the region, the prices of basic goods have increased by 50 percent since the beginning of 2006. A tin [12.5 kgs. / 28 lbs.] of rice now costs villagers 3,500 Kyat, while in March 2003 the same volume of rice only cost approximately 2,500-2,800 Kyat.⁶

“Even though they are farmers, they haven’t been able to get much rice because the water flooded and covered their paddies. Most villagers planted beans and sesame and would buy rice outside the village after they raised some money from selling the beans and sesame. In 2006 the villagers must buy a tin [12.5 kgs. / 28 lbs.] of rice for 3,500 Kyat. This is more expensive than in other years. The prices of food and other goods have increased by 50 percent in 2006. The villagers have found it very difficult to buy enough food for their families because the value of their money is decreasing.”

- a KHRG field researcher

Costs are being driven up nationally by the rapidly increasing inflation rate arising from the recent 1000 percent pay increases for SPDC officials and the SPDC’s unrestrained printing of money to cover this expense, and also more locally by the broad restrictions being imposed upon villagers by the SPDC and the DKBA. For the past few years, both the SPDC and the DKBA have been enforcing blanket movement restrictions upon villagers in Thaton District. Villagers have been prohibited from leaving their village or travelling to their fields for fear that they may contact the resistance. At times these restrictions have been relaxed

⁶ In a previously published report, KHRG noted that one basket [25 kgs. / 55 lbs.] of rice, comprised of two tins, cost 5,500 Kyat in Bilin township in March 2003. One tin therefore cost approximately 2,750 Kyat; see “Food Security” in *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District* (KHRG #2006-01).

and villagers have been permitted access to their fields and plantations, albeit with limitations. They have not been allowed to sleep overnight in their field huts, nor have they been allowed to take any packs of rice with them when they have gone. To enforce these restrictions and to make it easy to conduct spot checks and raids on villages, many people in Thaton District have in recent years been forced to fence in their entire village, allowing only two gates for entry and exit. People living in outlying sections of the village are ordered to destroy their houses and move into the central fenced enclosure. Such movement restrictions have presented the villagers with huge problems and severely limited the amount of food that they are able to produce. By not being permitted to spend the night in their fields, the villagers cannot protect their crops from being eaten by wild animals and birds that come to eat the crop as it ripens. Consequently, much of the harvest is eaten or trampled by the wild animals. Not being allowed to take any food with them when they do go to their fields and plantations serves only to further limit the length of time that they are able to spend producing a crop.

At present, such restrictions have once again been renewed upon the villagers of Thaton District. Since the beginning of the year, SPDC soldiers under LID #101 and DKBA soldiers from #333 Brigade, #999 Brigade, and the Central Security Battalion have been working together to reinstate and enforce these restrictions. According to a KHRG field researcher, the DKBA was paid a sum of 600 million Kyat by the SPDC in return for their assistance. This amount, however, seems a little high. At current market exchange rates this is an equivalent of half a million dollars.⁷ It is far more likely that this figure is closer to six million Kyat. Villagers are not permitted to leave their villages without permission and must return to their villages before nightfall whenever that permission is granted. Once again, they are not allowed to sleep overnight in their field huts, and have been told by the soldiers that anyone caught outside their village after dark will be shot.

Added to this are limitations upon the volume of rice that villagers are allowed to buy. Villagers are presently only permitted to purchase eight bowls [12.5 kgs. / 28 lbs.; also referred to as one tin] of rice at any one time. This volume of rice is sufficient to feed one adult villager for approximately three weeks. Obviously, this decreases rapidly if they also have a family to feed, as most villagers do. Should a villager risk buying more than the allotted one tin of rice and be caught, all of the rice that they are carrying is confiscated by the soldiers and they would most probably be arrested, tortured and ordered to perform forced labour. The SPDC fears that any surplus rice acquired by the villagers will then be given to the KNU. This contention, however, seems somewhat unlikely as any excess food would be better employed to feed their own children rather than give it to the resistance.

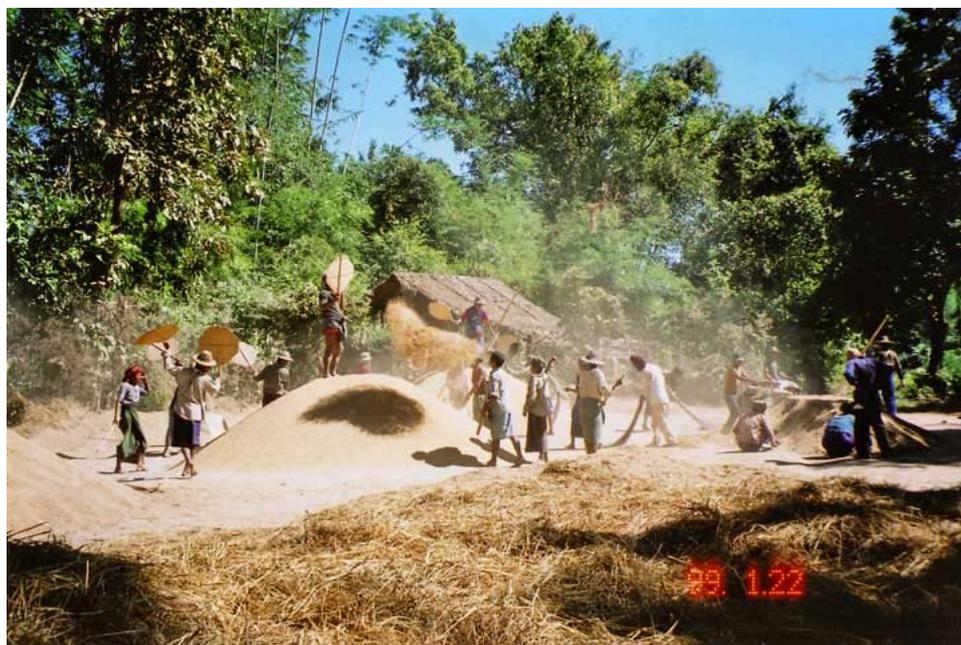
“The SPDC hired DKBA soldiers as security for their blocking operations for 600,000,000 Kyat. LID #101 with its six battalions, along with DKBA #333 Brigade, #999 Brigade, and one unit from [DKBA] Central Security Battalion are working together to block the villagers. The SPDC and the DKBA are cooperating with each other in Thaton, Pa’an, Kyaikto, and Bilin townships to implement the restrictions. They have restricted the villages and have laid landmines near the [fresh water] springs in the mountains and at the places of the villagers’ livelihoods. Whenever the villagers go to their fields, they do not allow them to take rice with them or to sleep in their field huts overnight. They told the villagers that if they saw anyone in their field huts at night, they would consider them as their enemies and shoot them. They are still doing this now so the villagers cannot plough their fields.”

- a KHRG field researcher

⁷ As of June 30th 2006, US\$1 = 1,325 Kyat

“The villagers are faced with many problems in buying food. It has become much more difficult because the SPDC and the DKBA have been restricting the villagers and blocking the sale of rice and food. One person is only allowed to buy eight bowls [12.5 kgs. / 28 lbs.] of rice. If they [SPDC] catch a villager with more than eight bowls of rice, they would confiscate all of it.”

- a KHRG field researcher



Villagers from Bilin township working together to thresh and winnow their paddy in preparation for storage. Most villagers in the district now suffer heavily from food shortages. Adverse weather conditions over the past few years have resulted in reduced harvests and the constant demands of the SPDC and the DKBA grossly limits the amount of time that villagers have available to work their fields. Kindly disregard the incorrect date stamped on the photo. [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers living within the boundaries of Thaton District are not the only ones to endure these movement restrictions. Karen villagers living further northwest in Pegu (Bago) Division are also suffering under movement restrictions imposed upon them by the SPDC. On March 28th 2006, villagers in Pegu Division were also issued orders to confine themselves to their villages by what was referred to by one villager as “an SPDC official”. While it is presently unclear who this is a reference to, it seems possible that it could be the commanding officer of Infantry Battalion (IB) #59 who was responsible for implementing the order. Many villagers in this region however, have built their homes in their fields or plantations rather than in centralised villages. All of these homes lying outside the village were ordered to be dismantled and relocated to within the boundaries of the village within 15 days. Quite a number of these homes are reportedly constructed of concrete or timber, some of which consisted of two or even three stories. Those who owned houses built of concrete were unable to dismantle their homes and instead were forced to abandon them. It is not yet known if these restrictions were targeted solely at Karen villagers or at all peoples living in the area. The area is also home to many people of the Burman and Mon ethnic groups and KHRG has not yet been able to ascertain if members of these ethnic groups are also being pressured.

“The SPDC has not only restricted the villages in 1st Brigade [Thaton District], but also in other areas of Burma. Farmers in Bago [Pegu] Division aren’t allowed to go to their fields or farms. They have also been forbidden by the SPDC. They ordered the villagers to stay in their villages, but some of the people have built their homes in their fields and farms. Some of these houses built in the fields are two stories. Some are made of concrete and some are made of wood. Some of these villagers would stay in their farms and spend most of their time there. They were very upset when the SPDC ordered them to dismantle their homes. It had cost them a lot of time and money to construct such nice and big houses, but then the SPDC ordered them to pull them down.”

- a KHRG field researcher

“On March 28th 2006, an SPDC official ordered the people in Pegu Division that every villager must stay in their village. The people were not allowed to stay in their farms or fields. Some of the villagers stayed in their farms most of the time and had big concrete or wood houses. Some of these houses had three stories. Some of the villagers had built their homes on their farms and stayed there. Now the SPDC has ordered them to dismantle their houses and move back into the village. IB #59 ordered the villagers to complete dismantling their homes on their farms within 15 days. They said that anyone they found sleeping in their hut or their house on their farms or in their fields would be in a lot of trouble. Those who did not dismantle their houses and return to the village would also be in trouble. The villagers couldn’t understand why they were ordered to do this. Some of the villagers thought that it must be because they were afraid that more villagers would rebel against them. The villagers couldn’t do anything except obey their orders. They were afraid so they had to move to the village as they were ordered. When some of these villagers moved into the village they did not have any rice to eat so they had to work for daily wages [as manual labourers] so they could buy food. These villagers are now facing a food shortage.”

- Saw H--- (Male, 54), Karen villager from A--- village, Bago (Pegu) Division

Factors Affecting Health

Basic health care is hard to come by for villagers in Thaton District. There are very few medical clinics in the area that villagers can access when they fall ill, although gaining access to a clinic is often not the problem. Many clinics are inadequately stocked with medicines, and often those that they do have are either of little or no use, or are prohibitively expensive. Many villagers thus employ traditional herbal remedies to cure themselves, though sadly, many of these treatments are unable to treat the causes of the illness. As a result, the sickness persists untreated and in the worst cases, villagers die of otherwise easily treatable illnesses such as dysentery, diarrhoea, or influenza, in addition to more serious illnesses like malaria, dengue fever, and tuberculosis.

Few villagers have enough money to seek medical care in the larger towns where there are hospitals, but for those who do, there are SPDC-run hospitals in Thaton, Bilin, Pa'an, Ka Ma Maung, and Moulmein. The costs at these hospitals are high enough to keep most villagers away. According to a KHRG field researcher, these hospitals insist that patients only use medicines that have been bought from their own dispensaries. Anyone who asks the medical staff at these hospitals to administer medicines that they have purchased elsewhere are refused service. The prices in SPDC-controlled dispensaries are generally grossly inflated, although for the villagers who seek treatment in these hospitals there is little other alternative.

“There aren’t any clinics or hospitals for the villagers. When people get sick they buy medicine and treat themselves. Sometimes people use herbal medicines too. The people who get very sick go to the hospital in town. They have doctors and nurses there. If the villagers want to recover they have to take a lot of money with them. If they don’t have any money, they [the medical staff] don’t try to do their best for them. At the SPDC hospital they have their own dispensary. They do not allow people to buy medicine from other shops. The people who go to their hospital have to buy medicine only in their dispensary. It is not easy for the poor villagers to go to the hospital in the town.”

- a KHRG field researcher

Precious little outside assistance is available to the villagers. According to a KHRG field researcher, Karen relief organisations have never been to Pa'an township to dispense medicines to the villagers living in that area. SPDC and DKBA activity in the area is extensive and the relief organisations are unable to gain access to the region. He also claims that many of the villagers in this township have never even heard the name “Backpack” before, referring to the Backpack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT); one of the more prolific Karen medical organisations.⁸ These villagers are largely left to fend for themselves. Villagers in some areas are able to seek medical care from KNLA medics, although this, like receiving treatment from the independent health organisations, must be done in secret for fear of retribution by the SPDC or the DKBA.

“[Karen] health workers have never come to Pa’an township. It isn’t easy for the Backpack [Health Worker Teams] to go there. The villagers in this area have never received free medicine from any organisation. The villagers there have never even heard the name ‘Backpack’ before.”

- a KHRG field researcher

⁸ The BPHWT are able to access and distribute medicines to villages and internally displaced communities in Bilin township, as are a handful of other Karen relief organisations.

Conclusion and Further Reading

The present human rights situation for civilian villagers living in Thaton District is dire. Forced labour in all its forms continues to be practiced with alarming frequency and absolute impunity by numerous different armed groups operating in the area. Reports coming out of the district present no indication that these practices will to cease or even improve in the foreseeable future. It can be expected that villagers will continue to be ordered to porter loads for the military, build and repair their camps and access roads, and supply them with vast quantities of building materials. Theft and extortion also show no signs of letting up. All of these abuses are only likely to increase as the SPDC continues to militarise the district with ever more battalions. These factors, along with the continuing restrictions placed on their movements and all their activities, are severely threatening the villagers' food security. Many of the villagers living in this region suffer from food shortages, and the increasing costs of living are only serving to exacerbate this problem.

The terrain of the district is far too open to afford many places for villagers to hide from the demands of the soldiers, while for those who choose to flee to a refugee camp in Thailand, the extensive militarization of the district makes it difficult to access safe passage to the border past the SPDC and DKBA patrols. Even if they should make it to the border, there is still the very real possibility that they will be refused entry and turned back at gunpoint by Thai authorities because they are not 'fleeing fighting'; a narrow condition set by the Thai government for accepting refugees. Many villagers thus have little other option but to remain in their villages where they must continue to survive as best they can with little or no outside assistance.



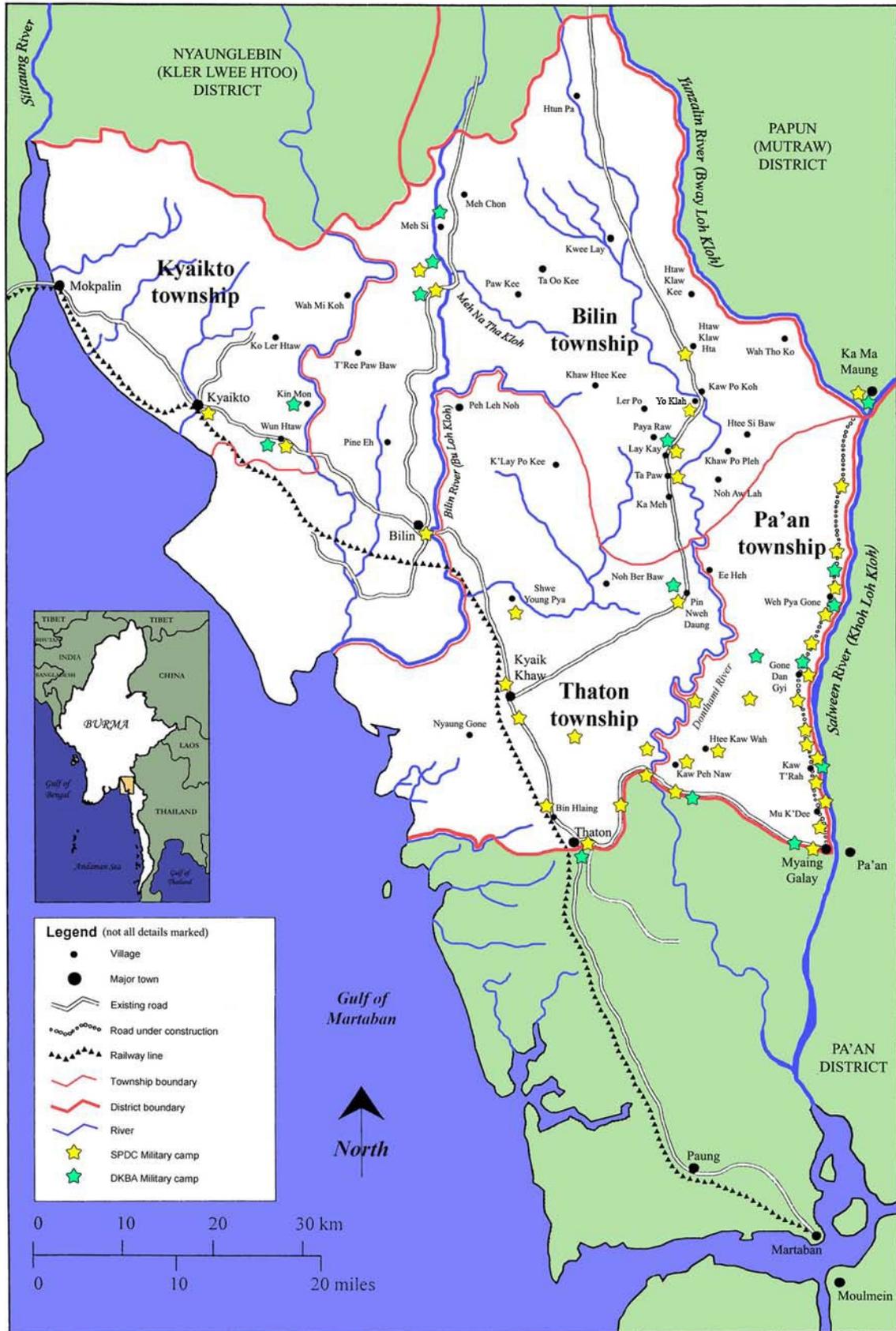
Villagers from K--- village in Bilin township performing forced labour for the SPDC. These villagers were ordered by LIB #3 battalion commander, Thu Aung Zaw to porter rations to the SPDC Army camp at Kaw Heh village. This photo shows the villagers dividing the load up between themselves. Kindly disregard the incorrect date stamped on the photo. [Photo: KHRG]

Additional background information regarding the human rights situation in Thaton District can be found in the following previously published KHRG reports:

- Karen Human Rights Group. *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District*. Thailand: KHRG, January 17th 2006 (KHRG #2006-01).
- Karen Human Rights Group. *Thaton District: Continued Consolidation of SPDC and DKBA Control through the use of Forced Labour, Extortion and Movement Restrictions*. Thailand: KHRG, February 21st 2005 (KHRG #2005-F2).
- Karen Human Rights Group. *Thaton District: SPDC using violence against villagers to consolidate control*. Thailand: KHRG, March 20th 2001 (KHRG #2001-U2).
- Karen Human Rights Group. *Caught in the Middle: The Suffering of Karen Villagers in Thaton District*. Thailand: KHRG, September 15th 1999 (KHRG #99-07).

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.khrq.org>.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



Karen Districts

