



Report from the Field

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Villagers risk arrest and execution to harvest their crops

The months of November and December which follow the annual cessation of the rainy season mark the traditional harvest time for the agrarian communities of Karen State when villagers must venture out into their fields in order to reap their ripe paddy crops. Across large areas of Toungoo District, however, where the SPDC lacks a consolidated hold on the civilian population, this time of year has become especially perilous as the Army enforces sweeping movement restrictions backed up by a shoot on sight policy in order to eradicate the entire civilian presence in areas outside its control and restrict the population to military-controlled villages and relocation sites where they can be more easily exploited for labour, money, food and other supplies. Displaced communities in hiding thus risk potential arrest and execution by venturing out into the relatively open area of their hill side agricultural fields where they are more easily spotted by SPDC troops who regularly patrol the area. Yet, because of the Army's persistent attacks against covert farm fields, food stores and displaced communities in hiding these villagers confront a severe food shortage which has increased pressure on them to tend to their covert fields despite the risks. As a consequence some villagers have already lost their lives; having been shot by SPDC soldiers while attempting to tend their crops and address their community's rising food insecurity.

Despite the heavy presence of State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military units across Toungoo District (Taw Oo in Karen), the local mountainous terrain and dense forest has served as cover for displaced communities who seek to evade capture and forced relocation by the Army. As a consequence the area has one of the largest displaced populations in hiding out of anywhere in eastern Burma. Those communities already under consolidated SPDC control face rigid movement restrictions which local authorities dictate through written order documents which they dispatch to the village heads of all relevant communities. Between these two groups are those civilians which live on the peripheries of military authority and confront army patrols only intermittently.

Despite order restrictions, many communities in Toungoo District therefore continue to evade military forces; travelling, trading and tending their crops, albeit within an extremely



Local SPDC officials at Gkaw Thay Der, Tantabin District issued these travel permission documents to two resident villagers. The documents allow the villagers to leave the confines of their village for only one week in order to work. Anyone caught outside their village confines without such documents risk arrest and execution. [Photo: KHRG]

perilous context with the daily threat of arrest and execution should they be spotted by army patrols.

This situation has now become even more hazardous as the arrival the regional dry season in November means those villagers dependent on agrarian livelihoods must venture out into the open space of their farm fields in order to reap their paddy crops. As a consequence this time of years marks an increased risk to both life and livelihood. If villagers are unable to harvest their crops they will face even more severe food shortages, malnourishment, poverty and ill health in the coming year. Villagers are therefore risking arrest and execution in order to covertly harvest their paddy. In some areas however, even this risky venture is not possible and in at least one case a local villager committed suicide in the face of continued SPDC restrictions and the resulting food shortages and poverty. The SPDC's policy of directly targeting those attempting to secure their food and livelihood is in blatant contravention to Customary International Humanitarian Law¹ and threatens the health and welfare of tens of thousands of villagers living in this area. This report looks at the risks related to the harvest in the southern Toungoo township of Tantabin.

Restrictions on movement and trade

"The villagers weren't able to go and tend their fields, so their hill fields and flat fields became overgrown with weeds and the paddy plants couldn't grow freely. They didn't have enough food. They had to buy it from the other villages such as Kler La and Gkaw Thay Der but now we can't go to buy food anymore. The SPDC military camps are situated along the way so we can't do anything about it."

- Saw M--- (male, 57), O--- village (August 2007)

Since August, SPDC Military Operation Command (MOC) #5 based in Kler La town and operating under the command of Kaung Mya has restricted all trade and transport of rice from Toungoo town to Kler La and Gkaw Thay Der. Previously, residents of Toungoo District have travelled by car and bought rice and other supplies at Toungoo town which lies just across the border in Pegu Division. Loaded up with supplies, these vehicles would then venture back to Kler La and Gkaw Thay Der where they would sell their goods. However, the SPDC has sought to eradicate non-military controlled rural communities in the area by targeting their farm fields and food stores. Supplies freely coming down from Toungoo town can be sold to rural communities and thereby undermine the SPDC's efforts to starve these people out of the hills. Kaung Mya's restrictions thus appear to be an effort to close this loop hole and prevent non-military controlled rural communities in Toungoo from accessing such supplies. This has increased pressure on those communities in hiding to tend small covert hill fields in order to address the increasing military-induced food insecurity. Some displaced households have completely run out of food and have turned to neighbours and relatives for shared provisions. On top of the restrictions on the trade and transport of food supplies from Toungoo town, Kaung Mya has dispatched soldiers to search SPDC-controlled villages where he has barred residents from keeping more than 2 big tins (12.5 kg. / 27.6 lb.) of rice, as excess supplies could potentially be sold off to those communities living outside of SPDC-controlled areas. Any rice in excess of the permitted amount which soldiers discover is being confiscated and taken back to the SPDC army camp.

"We didn't have enough food so we had to buy it from Papun District and Karenni state from such places as M--- and Ht--- villages. We had to go

¹ According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in its comprehensive report on contemporary rules of Customary International Humanitarian Law, "The use of starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare is prohibited." See Rule 53, Volume II, Chapter 17, Section A of *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, ICRC and Cambridge University Press, 2005.

secretly to get there. We had to worry about our security while we were on the trip. We had to go by ourselves. Nobody [no KNLA soldiers] took security for us. If they [SPDC soldiers] saw me along the way they would have apprehended me."

- Saw B--- (male, 53), Gk---village (August 2007)



The villagers from Sha See Boh, Wah Loh and Kheh Der villages were forced to relocate to Taw Gkoo village in 2006. Once there they were not allowed to return to their village to tend their fields or plantations and were moreover not given permission to work in the nearby area. The SPDC oppression gradually made the villagers' livelihoods unsustainable. The villagers therefore chose to escape from life under SPDC control and this picture taken in the third quarter of 2007 shows them on their way to the Thai border, where they hoped to gain entry to one of the refugee camps. [Photo: KHRG]

These restrictions and the constant risk of being shot-on-sight when attempting to buy or harvest food, have led many villagers to flee to refugee camps in Thailand or internally displaced person (IDP) camps on the border. However, for some villagers the compounding abuses have become too much to bear and they have turned to suicide as a way out. For example, in Gkaw Soh Koh village, 54-year-old Saw Tha Gyi, having already lost a leg (a common occurrence in Karen State due to the widespread deployment of landmines and the use of villagers as human minesweepers) and facing the coming months without any remaining food or money, decided to end his own life by hanging himself. The Karen news agency *Kwekalu* also recently reported² the suicide of 18-year-old Saw Poh Dee, a married man from Gklay Soh Kee village. In the rainy season Saw Poh Dee was forced to porter food supplies for the soldiers of MOC #5. During this

forced labour, he was made to act as a human minesweeper at the front of the patrol and consequently lost a leg when he stepped on a landmine. On returning from hospital, he discovered his wife had no remaining rice left to cook for them. Knowing the difficulties he would face without his leg and the situation he and his wife were already facing, he also decided he didn't want to continue his life and hung himself on September 10th 2007. These suicides demonstrate the incredible strain which SPDC abuse is putting on villagers in Toungoo District, despite their continuing efforts to resist this abuse.

Arbitrary arrest and killing

"It was on July 19th 2007, a Thursday, at 2:30 pm. The first person was called Saw Wah Wah, 35 years old, the second one was called Saw Leh Nay Poe, 27 years old, and the third one was called Saw Dee Ku Lu, 20 years old. Three of them died at the same time – none of them could flee from the soldiers, and it happened in Yaw Nee. Among those three people, one person, Saw Wah Wah, had family. There was nobody left in the village [the villagers fled to evade the approaching SPDC soldiers] so the dead bodies could not be burned [cremated], but a week ago the SPDC burnt the whole village so the dead bodies were included in the fire."

- Saw D--- (male, 52), S--- village (August 2007)

² "People have to beg as the situation gets worse in Toungoo District," *Kwekalu*, September 28th 2007. Accessed at <http://www.kwekalu.net/insidenews/insidenews2.html> on November 30th 2007.

Traditionally villagers in Toungoo District farm hill fields and flat fields, or cultivate betel nut, peanut or other plantations for their living. However, as the SPDC imposes ever more restrictions on travelling and trading, villagers have to increasingly put their lives at risk to conduct their livelihood activities. When spotted at their fields or plantations, villagers are either arrested or shot on sight. As a pretext for arrest, villagers are frequently accused of communicating with or being connected to the KNLA, despite obviously working in their fields or plantations at the time. In July 2007, a family of five originally from Ler Gkla Der village but forcibly relocated to Taw Gkoo village returned to their former village to cultivate their betel nut and peanut plantation, accompanied by three villagers from Taw Gkoo. While working on their plantation, all five family members, Saw Meh Dtay, his wife Naw Mah Aye Gkyi, and their children Saw Tar Dtaw Loo, Naw Boh Say and Tee Lee Wee, along with the three Taw Gkoo villagers were arrested and detained by soldiers of LIB #92 from Sha See Boh army camp, accused of contacting the KNLA. All eight were taken to the army camp, where they were subsequently beaten, tortured and detained for eight days. After these eight days, they were sent to Toungoo town where according to a local resident they were then placed in prison. Fellow villagers have not been informed how long these villagers will be held in detention. Villagers are placed in a difficult position – they are aware that if caught outside their village they risk being arrested, but without leaving their village they cannot farm their fields and plantations. As the restrictions placed upon them have already left them with severe food shortages, villagers are often choosing to take this risk.



SPDC soldiers shot dead Saw Nah Dtoo from Kher Der Bpee Koh village, when he broke movement restrictions imposed upon him to sneak back to his home village from the Taw Gkoo forced relocation site to cultivate his cardamom and betel nut plantation. He was shot by soldiers under the command of LIB #541, column #2 commander Yeh Aung on September 20th 2007 while working in his plantation. The villagers were unable to bury the body straight away as the soldiers lay in wait hoping to ambush further villagers coming to find Saw Nah Dtoo, but after one night the SPDC soldiers left and some of the villagers hurriedly buried him, accompanied by KNLA soldiers for their protection. Saw Nah Dtoo was 30 years old and left a wife and two children. *[Photo: KHRG]*

In recent months, SPDC soldiers have been continuing to patrol the Naw Soh to Bu Hsa Kee vehicle road and when they have seen villagers working in their fields along this road they have shot them on sight. On July 19th, SPDC soldiers from LID #88, IB #78 entered See Kheh Der village in the displaced area and immediately shot at three villagers who were in the process of weeding their hill field. The bodies of Saw Dtee Gkoo Lo, 20 years old, and Saw Day Po, 27 years old, were found and buried by their family members, but the body of Saw Wah, 33 years old, was never found. These villagers were killed in a non-SPDC controlled area as any civilians evading SPDC control are regarded as enemies of the State and targeted as such whether or not they have any contact with resistance forces. As the SPDC has become more active in this region, the villagers of See Kheh Der village are finding it increasingly difficult to avoid SPDC patrols and reported to a KHRG researcher that if the situation becomes much more difficult for them, they will have no further option than to flee to one of the refugee camps in neighbouring Thailand.

The context of displacement as well as the food insecurity and threats to their lives which communities in Tantabin township currently confront have been shaped by specific earlier SPDC attacks and attempts at forced relocation. Going back to April 2006, for example, SPDC LID #66



A villager from See Daw Koh village had previously been shot by an SPDC soldier and had survived for some time with a bullet remaining in his stomach. However, this bullet had caused him much pain and so the picture above shows a Karen medic surgically removing the bullet on October 18th 2007. [Photo: KHRG]

the moment they have arrived. On July 5th 2007, soldiers of SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #30, based in Htee Loh village and also active in Poh Moh Khee village, shot at some of these returning villagers. SPDC soldiers shot at 25-year-old Saw Sha Poh Tha, who had left from Sha See Boh relocation site and tried to escape and run back to his former village. While not initially killed in the shooting he was nevertheless caught by SPDC soldiers when he arrived back in his village and then taken to Tantabin town. The villagers were unaware of his fate. Another villager, 65-year-old Saw Poh Tay, from Myee Loh village, whom SPDC soldiers also shot when he returned to tend his crops died immediately from the bullet wound. Following these shootings, at least four other villagers were arrested and ordered to follow the soldiers on foot to Tantabin town. The fates of Saw Leh Kwa, his wife Naw Mu Ru and his daughter Naw Ma Saw Saw from Tar Pa Khee village, along with 28-year-old Naw Mu Tu, daughter of the deceased Saw Poh Tay, are still not clear and the villagers fear that these individuals were also killed. However, in August 2007, one KHRG researcher reported that he had received information via radio message, that these villagers had instead been sentenced to seven years in prison.

tried to force villagers from Taw Gkoo, Kher Der, See Kher Der, Sho Bper, Sha See Boh, Ler Gklar Der, Wah Soh, Gkaw Thay Der, Myee Loh and Tar Bpar Kee villages to move to the Sha See Boh relocation site, but aware of the exploitation they would face at the relocation site, many of the villagers chose instead to flee their village to other villages in the plain area (*Bper Hti* in Karen), to the jungle or to refugee camps in Thailand. Since that time those villagers who remained in the plain area and those who relocated to Sha See Boh have been occasionally able to return to tend their plantations. SPDC soldiers, knowing that the villagers need to return for this purpose, have laid in wait at villagers' plantations shooting the villagers on sight the

"We dared not to go out at the time when the soldiers were acting as sentries for their security. Last month, they caught five villagers and sent them to Toungoo prison, including a 15-year-old boy named Paw Lee Ka, and Hta Taw Lu, who was 28 years old and single. Among those people [they arrested] the eldest person was 55 years old."

- Saw P--- (male, 38), W--- village (September 2007)

Conclusion

"Now we also can't buy rice in Kler Lah and Toungoo [town], because they have blocked our way there. If we run out of food, we don't yet know ourselves what we will have to do... Now we have to eat rice porridge. We need our siblings to help us as they can."

- N--- (male, 27), K--- village (September 2007)



Displaced villagers from Saw Tay Der village take a rest in Baw Leh Der on October 20th 2007 before attempting to cross the Baw Leh Der car road. Crossing roads places villagers at high risk of being shot on sight due to the necessity of leaving the protective shelter of the trees and coming out onto the open road, which has often been cleared of brush on both sides to make it even more difficult for villagers to evade SPDC patrols. The villagers had to take this risk in order to reach one of the refugee camps in Thailand. [Photo: KHRG]

refugee camp in Thailand.

"I think that the situation here will get worse and worse. For me, I don't know yet where I will have to go to find a hiding place..."

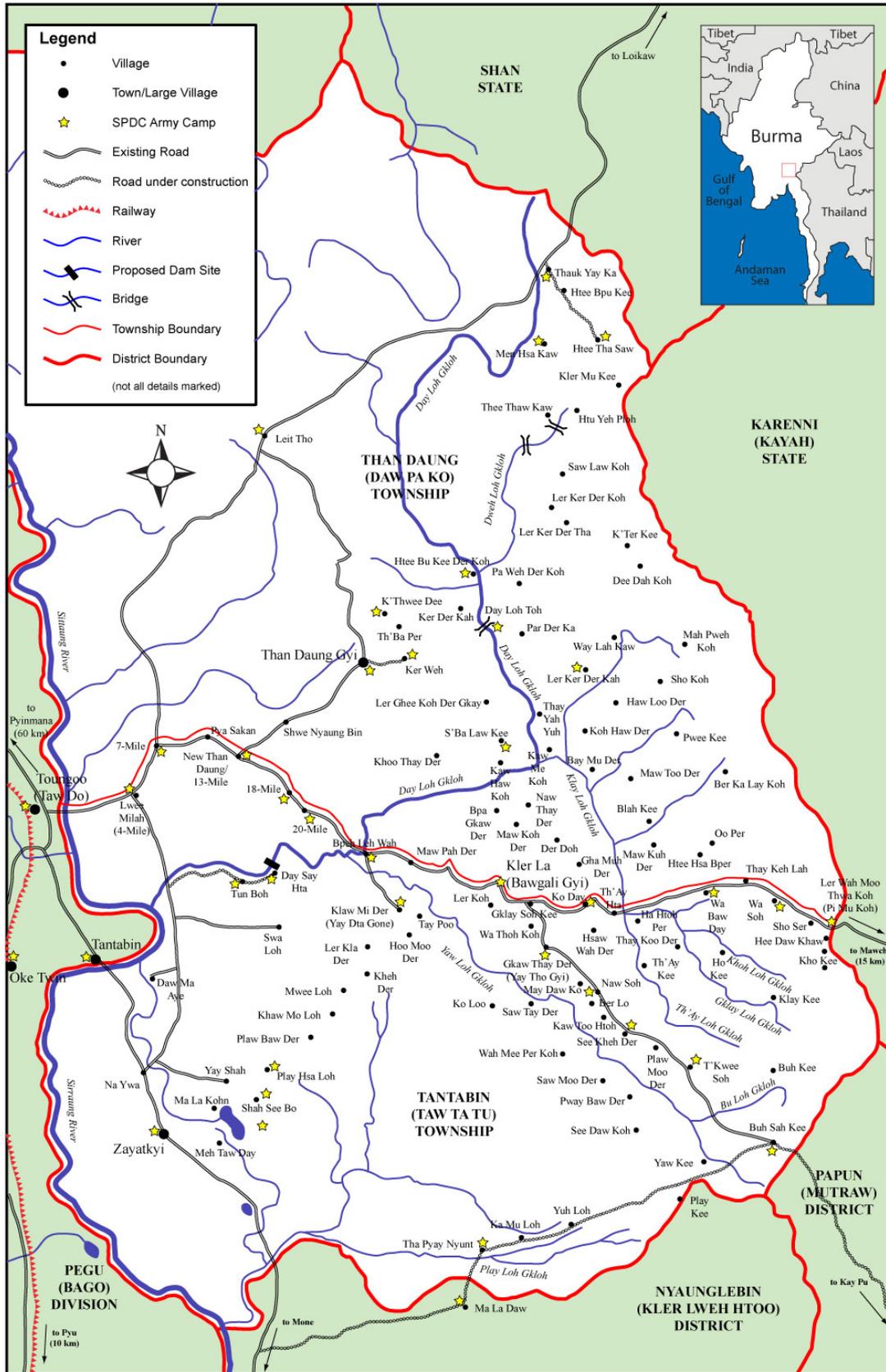
- Naw M--- (female, 48), S--- village (August 2007)

Further background on the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- *Landmines, Killings and Food Destruction: Civilian life in Toungoo District* (August 2007)
- *Provoking Displacement in Toungoo: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks* (May 2007)
- *Bullets and Bulldozers: The SPDC offensive continues in Toungoo District* (February 2007)
- *One Year On: Continuing Abuses in Toungoo District* (November 2006)
- *Toungoo District: The civilian response to human rights violations* (August 2006)
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (July 2006)
- *Without Respite: Renewed Attacks on Villages and Internal Displacement in Toungoo District* (June 2006)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



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Karen Districts



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