



News Bulletin

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DKBA soldiers attack Karen village in Thailand

After disputes over arbitrary taxation payments and accusations of favouring the KNLA, 40 to 50 soldiers of DKBA Battalion #907 – under brigade commander N’Kaw Mway – attacked the village of Mae Gklaw Kee in Thailand’s Umphang District. Troops shelled the village tract leader’s house, shot at villagers’ houses and then burnt down villagers’ crop storage barns. The Battalion subsequently set up a camp in nearby Gklaw Ghaw village. As SPDC and DKBA troops work together in an effort to take control of the area, villagers face increased restrictions, overlapping taxation demands, and the threat of future attacks and land confiscation.

On Saturday, October 4th 2008, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) officer Bla Nah, under the command of brigade commander N’Kaw Mway, led 40-50 soldiers of Battalion #907 in an attack on Mae Gklaw Kee village in Umphang District of Thailand (only three kilometres from the Burma border). After shelling the village tract leader’s house with a grenade launcher, soldiers shot at the villagers’ houses, shot out truck tyres and then burnt the villagers’ crop stores. After the attack, the soldiers set up camp in nearby Gklaw Ghaw village on the other side of the Burma border in Kawkareik township of Dooplaya District and are now working with nearby Light Infantry Battalions #401 and #407 of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)¹ to place movement restrictions on the villagers.

According to information collected by a KHRG researcher, a combination of factors seem to have led to this attack, with one of the major reasons being a refusal by the villagers (or inability) to pay the full amount of taxes demanded by the DKBA. As Mae Gklaw Kee village is located so close to the border, the villagers regularly travel back into Burma to work in their rented corn fields in the area around Bplah Doh village, close to Gklaw Ghaw village, in Maw Kee village tract of Kawkareik township. The area around Gklaw Ghaw and Bplah Doh villages is largely controlled by Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Battalion #201, but SPDC and DKBA soldiers also operate in the area. Other villages in Maw Kee village tract closer to the DKBA base at Gaw Lay village are largely controlled by the DKBA. Villagers are therefore faced with competing tax demands as the different military groups vie for control of the area.

Corn fields farmed by local villagers have been particularly subject to these overlapping taxation demands. Each local corn field usually produces from 3,000 to 6,000 big tins² of sweet corn per year and sometimes up to 10,000 big tins. Each year, KNLA soldiers demand 10 Thai baht (US \$0.29) for each sack of corn – one sack of corn cobs contains approximately seven big tins of corn – from local farmers (including Mae Gklaw Kee village) or an estimated 4,286 to 8,571 Thai baht (US \$123.86 to \$248.06) for a field with a normal yield. However, in 2007 the DKBA also placed a much higher tax demand on the corn produced by the villagers – demanding eight Thai baht (US \$0.23) for each big tin of sweet corn and 100 baht (US \$2.89) for each big tin of sweet corn seed. For a normal yield, this is

¹ The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is the military junta currently ruling Burma.

² A 'big tin' is a local measurement of approximately 2 litres or 4.5 gallons in volume.

equivalent to 24,000 to 48,000 Thai baht (US \$694.40 to \$1,388.80) per field (not including the tax on corn seed). Struggling to meet the demands of both armed groups, villagers from Mae Gklaw Kee village told DKBA soldiers that they could only afford to pay them three baht per tin, as opposed to the eight baht demanded. In response, the DKBA soldiers simply increased the tax demand for 2008, asking for 15 baht for each big tin of corn, approximately 45,000 to 90,000 baht (US \$1,302.07 to \$2,604.13) for a normal yield field and 150 baht for each big tin of seed. The villagers knew they would be unable to pay this amount following the harvest (which usually starts in October) and, the village tract leader reportedly referred to DKBA soldiers as 'dogs' for placing such demands upon the villagers. This apparently angered commander N'Kaw Mway and prompted him to call for the attack upon Mae Gklaw Kee village. At this time, the villagers had not paid any tax to the DKBA for 2008, as the harvest was not yet completed. A KHRG field researcher also noted the villagers' support of the KNLA as another reason for the attack and the Bangkok Post referred to a 'brawl' between DKBA soldiers and local teenagers from the village in September as another motive for the attack.³

Since the attack on Mae Gklaw Kee village, SPDC and DKBA soldiers have been restricting the movements of villagers in the area around Gklaw Ghaw village in an effort to take control of the area away from the KNLA. In the past, KNLA soldiers have ambushed and attacked DKBA and SPDC soldiers operating in the area. However, although KNLA soldiers remain in the area, they have not yet attacked the new DKBA camp at Gklaw Ghaw. KNLA soldiers claim that they are currently hesitant to attack the camp at Gklaw Ghaw for fear of creating more problems for the villagers, after a recent spate of retaliatory actions by SPDC and DKBA soldiers against villagers for such KNLA attacks – such as the burning down of corn storage barns in the area.

Villagers in the surrounding area therefore face increased restrictions imposed by the SPDC and DKBA soldiers based at Gklaw Ghaw, as soldiers try to clamp down on any possible communication between villagers and the KNLA. In Gklaw Ghaw village itself, civilians have been forbidden to travel outside of the village, even for work or trade, and have also had their mobile phones confiscated.⁴ Villagers in Mae Gklaw Kee have currently been able to remain in their village with increased security from Thai authorities, but still live with the threat of further attacks and the future of their corn field farming remains uncertain, given the increased troop build-up by SPDC and DKBA forces in the area.

DKBA soldiers have had a record of imposing arbitrary taxation demands upon villagers, with other villages in the area having faced similar problems to Mae Gklaw Kee. In another incident in 2007, DKBA soldiers succeeded in extorting more than the original eight baht per big tin of corn demanded, by pretending that they were also collecting tax for the KNLA. In this way, villagers from Gaw Lay, Htee Ther Lay and Oo Poe Hta villages (all also located in the large Maw Kee village tract in Kawkareik township) were forced to pay ten baht per tin of corn. Villagers have also been threatened with land confiscation for KNLA use of landmines. On October 6th 2008, DKBA Battalion #907 officers Muang Shwe Wa, Kyaw Pa Pu and Bo Kyaw Kyaw summoned village heads from Ler Gaw, Lay Ghaw, Oo Poe Hta, Oo Gray Hta, Wa Mee Hta, Maw Ker Hta and Gaw Lay villages to meet with them at the DKBA army camp in Gaw Lay village, where brigade commander N'Kaw Mway is based. During the meeting, the DKBA officers reportedly told the village heads that if any DKBA soldier in the area should step on a landmine planted by the KNLA, they would take away all of the lands owned by the villagers.

³ "Karen fighters attack village", Bangkok Post, October 5th 2008, accessed at http://www.bangkokpost.com/051008_News/05Oct2008_news12.php on October 9th 2008.

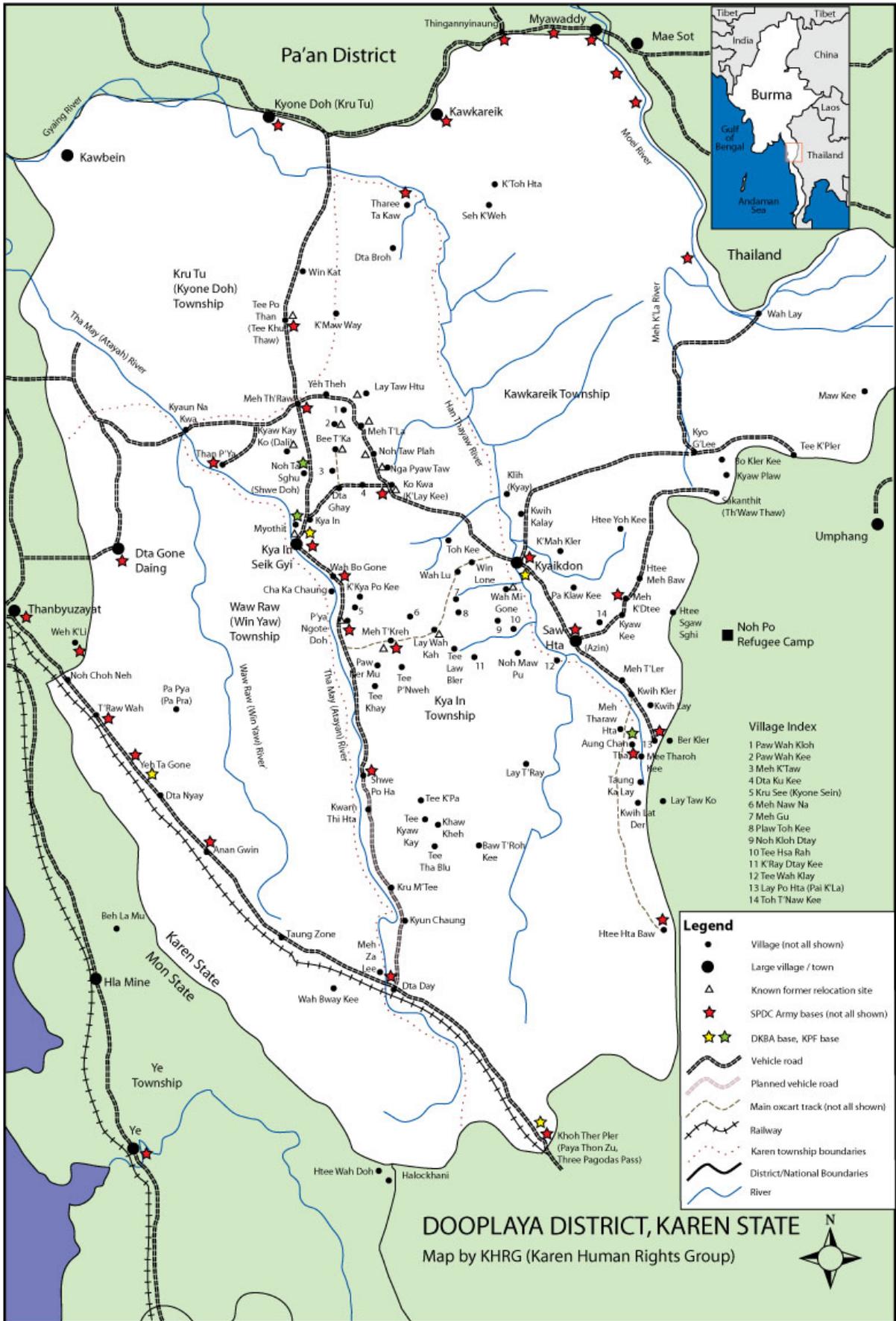
⁴ Villagers were previously able to use Thai mobile networks to communicate with other villages in the area and in Thailand due to the proximity of the border, but are now unable to do so.

With money to be gained from agriculture, logging, mining and taxes upon villagers, the DKBA and SPDC are keen to gain control of this border area. As the various armed groups vie for control of village tracts on both sides of the Thai-Burma border (in Dooplaya District on one side and Umphang District on the other), villagers face competing demands for taxation on their crops, increased restrictions on their movement and communication, and the increased threat of attacks and land confiscation by the SPDC and DKBA.

For more information on the situation in Dooplaya District and the human rights abuses involved in DKBA and SPDC control in other areas of Karen State, see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *DKBA bans alcohol consumption to justify human rights abuses in Pa'an District* (October 2008)
- *Villagers responses to forced labour, torture and other demands in Thaton District* (October 2008)
- *Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (September 2008)
- *Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (September 2008)
- *DKBA soldiers burn down Ler Bpoo village, Pa'an District* (August 2008)
- *SPDC and DKBA order documents: October 2007 to March 2008* (August 2008)
- *Exploitative governance under SPDC and DKBA authorities in Dooplaya District* (July 2008)
- *SPDC soldiers arrest and kill villagers on allegations of contacting KNU/KNLA* (January 2008)
- *Forced labour, extortion and the state of education in Dooplaya District* (October 2007)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG website at <http://www.khrq.org>.



Karen Districts



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