



Report from the Field

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**Attacks, killings and increased militarisation in
Nyaunglebin District**

With the dry season in northern Karen State well under way, the SPDC continues to intensify its militarisation of the area. In Nyaunglebin District this intensification has come in the form of an increased troop build-up with the regime deploying new military units, establishing new camps and bases and attacking displaced civilian communities in hiding. Maintaining a shoot-on-sight policy SPDC soldiers operating in Nyaunglebin have shot and killed or otherwise severely injured displaced villagers and destroyed rice storage barns and civilian rice supplies across the district. In those areas more firmly under SPDC control, soldiers have ordered villagers to labour building army camps, porter mortar shells and army rations and repair SPDC-controlled vehicle roads in support of the region's growing military presence. This report looks at the human rights situation in Nyaunglebin District from October to December 2007.

Situated in northeastern Karen State, Nyaunglebin District comprises terrain of mostly forested mountains which descend along the district's western flank into low lying plains abutting Pegu Division further to the west. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) demarcates large areas of western Nyaunglebin District as part of Pegu Division within its official maps of the region. The district has long had a heavy SPDC presence but sustained military occupation has mostly been limited to those areas alongside vehicle roads and in the limited plains. Over the past two years, however, the SPDC has been increasing its military presence in Nyaunglebin District as part of its broader northern Karen State offensive against the civilian population. As components of this offensive the SPDC has been deploying more troops and establishing new bases throughout the district.



This young woman carries her baby slung over her shoulder as she travels through the jungle on October 15th 2007 having fled her home along with fellow Htee Bla Kee villagers when SPDC soldiers deployed around their village. [Photo: KHRG]

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This increased militarisation has directly impacted the mostly rural villagers of Nyaunglebin District from whom local SPDC forces have sought to exploit labour, money, food and other supplies. The villagers of Nyaunglebin District, however, have resisted this exploitation in numerous ways and fled where possible in order to avoid compliance with military demands altogether. As local SPDC personnel are unable to extract labour, money, food and other supplies from those civilians whom they cannot catch, the Army has deemed the entire

population to be legitimate military targets and sought to forcibly relocate all civilians into military-controlled relocation sites. Despite the ability of many villagers to evade this forced relocation the SPDC has nevertheless managed to inter large numbers of civilians at these sites.¹

In November 2007, the SPDC Army deployed even more soldiers to further encroach into the Karen lands of Nyaunglebin District and place the area and the civilian population more firmly under military control. On November 20th 2007, the SPDC sent out a convoy of soldiers comprising 82 trucks carrying approximately 1,600 soldiers and 100 convict porters from Mone town (Moo in Karen) in northern Nyaunglebin District. The convoy set out from Mone town to join up with Infantry Battalion (IB) #60 based out of Tha Bpyay Nyoh at the Tha Bo Ray checkpoint in Mone township along the road from Kyauk Kyi (Ler Doh in Karen) to Pwa Ghaw in northwestern Papun District. This road has served as a primary transportation route for soldiers deployed to frontline areas in northern Papun District and, with its many bases and heavy military presence, a launch point for SPDC patrols into the mountains to the north and south. On November 21st when the convoy met up with IB #60, there were only 70 trucks remaining with approximately 1,400 soldiers; the other 12 trucks and 200 soldiers having remained at camps and bases located along the way. In addition when the convoy arrived they were joined by one truck carrying an estimated 20 soldiers of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which drove from the SPDC's camp at Hsaw Mee Loo to the its camp at Muh Theh camp.

On December 28th 2007, approximately 2,000 SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Division (LID) #33, who had been deployed alongside IB #60 left the area and travelled eastward down the Kyauk Kyi to Pwa Ghaw road passing through the area of Hsaw Mee Loo, Muh Theh, Wa Doh Koh, Bpoh Koh Soh and Mee Ya Htah villages. During their march these same soldiers detained 16 villagers from Hsaw Mee Loo and forced them to carry army rations and mortar shells. Following this move LID #33 took over the Army's operations from the IB #60 base at Tha Bpyay Nyoh eastwards to Muh Theh on the Kyauk Kyi to Pwa Ghaw vehicle road. The rations and mortar shells which the soldiers forced the 16 villagers to carry were sent out to the SPDC army camps at Bpoh Roh Soh, Wa Doh Koh and Mee Ya Htah.

Military attacks on displaced civilians

"We must always flee from the soldiers of the SPDC Army. When they arrive in our village, we always lose our time [that is needed] to do our farming. As of now we haven't yet finished doing our farming. We need to collect our paddy from the farm and transport it to the rice storage containers. Before the SPDC military soldiers arrived in my village, they entered into Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin township] and then through Ler Doh [Kyauk Kyi township] and entered into our agricultural fields. When they saw the villagers' rice storage containers, huts and paddy at the farm, they burnt it all."

- Hs--- (male, 57), K--- village (Nov 2007)

Utilising its position at the camps and bases along the roadways of Nyaunglebin District the SPDC Army has dispatched patrols into the surrounding mountains in an attempt to flush out the civilian population which continues to evade the military at hiding sites throughout the area. With the region's dry season now well under way these patrols have become even more persistent. The SPDC patrols deem those villagers who attempt to evade military control and forced relocation as enemies of the State and thus legitimate military targets. As

¹ For photos of the SPDC's large-scale forced relocation programme in Nyaunglebin District see Part 2 of 'forced relocation and forced displacement' in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. Available online at www.khrgh.org/photoreports/2007photos/gallery2007/section1_part2.html.

a consequence the increased military presence in the mountains of Nyaunglebin means a heightened risk of violent attack and village destruction for those civilians seeking to evade relocation and maintain their lives outside of military control. Consequently, high numbers of villagers are constantly on the move throughout the mountains; shifting their location in response to the movements of the SPDC patrols that continue to hunt them down.

"I didn't have a good chance to cultivate my hill field because it was destroyed by the SPDC soldiers. The SPDC Army soldiers are staying near my hill field so I dare not to go back to weed the grass which has grown up in the field."

- Saw M--- (male, 34), W--- village (Oct 2007)



These displaced women travel with their children and personal belongings on October 15th 2007 after having fled from SPDC forces operating around their homes at Htee Bla Kee village. [Photo: KHRG]

"We must always flee from SPDC [soldiers] when they arrive in the village. Some people have to leave their hill fields like me. They dare not to go back to check them. The SPDC Army soldiers were very active in the area where I previously stayed and so I moved here nearly a year ago. I dared not go back to take my food that was [left behind] in my village so I had to borrow food from my friends."

- Saw S--- (male, 50), L--- village (Oct 2007)

Starting on November 1st 2007, SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) #218 and 219 under Tactical Operation Command (TOC) #1 of Light Infantry Division (LID) #11 began patrolling in the areas of Ka Dee Muh Der and Law Gklaw Kee villages located on the border of Kyauk Kyi and Shwegyin (Hsaw Htee in Karen) townships. On November 12th these soldiers looted and destroyed the belongings of villagers living in the area. Among the items destroyed were the rice storage barn of Saw Hs--- which contained 30 baskets of paddy (unhusked rice) and the barn of Saw Ht--- which contained 15 baskets of paddy and 3 baskets of rice. At this time the soldiers also looted the hut of Naw R--- from which they took everything including one musket. Subsequently on November 19th these same soldiers deployed landmines along the irrigation canal of the farm fields located near Ler Wah village while patrolling in the area. Being mid-November the villagers of Ler Wah were in the midst of harvesting their paddy crop and thus the risk of detonating these landmines was, and remains, high.

Killings and survival stories

"Now the villagers are not brave enough to work on their farms as before. The villagers have had to leave their farms with the work half done and flee from the SPDC. Even people in Ler Wah village tract who are staying in their villages [staying together with the village community at a displaced hiding site], they haven't built big houses. They've only built small huts and have stayed at their

farm fields. The SPDC doesn't see us as villagers. They maintain that we are their enemies so when they see us they shoot and kill us all."

- Hs--- (male, 57), K--- village (Nov 2007)

The shoot-on-sight policy which the SPDC maintains throughout those areas of Karen State which it does not firmly control functions in support of the regime's wider objective of depopulating non-military controlled areas and driving all civilians into military-controlled villages and relocation sites. Once effectively contained at such sites the military can more easily enforce demands for labour, money, food and other supplies in support of its troops and army infrastructure. As large numbers of villagers continue to evade relocation and military control the killing of civilians has become a central component of the regime's programme of militarisation.

On November 15th 2007, SPDC soldiers from LIBs #218 and 219 shot and killed Saw Ler Gkay, a 28-year-old Karen villager from K--- village in Gkwee Lah village ward, Kyauk Kyi township. Although Saw Ler Gkay was a civilian, the SPDC deemed him a legitimate military target because he was in an area that was not firmly under military control. The soldiers shot him dead. Saw Ler Gkay was married and had three children between the ages of three months and six years. Now that he is dead his surviving wife will face increasing difficulties in supporting her children and herself. The following is an account of the killing as told to KHRG by Saw Ler Gkay's father, 57-year-old Saw Hs--- in November 2007.

"Before they arrived at the farm they shot and killed one person and when they arrived at the cultivation area they shot and killed another person. It was the same military group [which shot both people]. The name of first person who was killed by the SPDC was Saw Htoo Ghay and the name of the second was Saw Ler Gkay. He was my child and a villager like me. He was the eldest [of his siblings] and 28 years old. He had a family and also had three children. His eldest child was six years old and the youngest one was three months old. Now his wife can't do anything so I have to look after her. He was shot when he came back from his hillside agricultural field. All of the things which he had brought with him were taken by the SPDC Army soldiers. At that time, he was coming with his two friends. He was walking ahead of his two friends so the SPDC saw him and shot him. Unluckily the bullet hit his neck so he died immediately."



28-year-old Saw Ler Gkay whom SPDC soldiers from LIB #218 and 219 shot dead on November 15th 2007. The soldiers subsequently looted his body; taking away all the possession he had on him. Saw Ler Gkay's corpse is shown here the day after his killing on November 16th. [Photo: KHRG]



The surviving family of Saw Ler Gkay (shown in the photo to the left) whom SPDC soldiers killed on November 15th. Saw Ler Gkay's death widowed his wife and three children; the oldest aged six and the youngest only three months old. His surviving wife now faces the difficult task of supporting her children without the contribution of her husband's labour. [Photo: KHRG]

Saw Ler Gkay was not the first of Saw Hs---'s family members to be killed in this way. As Saw Hs--- further related during his interview with KHRG, soldiers of the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) killed his wife and daughter in 1990 when they,

"Attacked my village and shot at us in my farm field while I was harvesting my paddy plants. We were shot at by the SPDC soldiers immediately so we didn't have time to care for each other. At that time one of my children was just three months old. She was lost and my wife also died. One of my relatives found the body of my wife."

In a separate incident where the targeted villager was able to get away, SPDC soldiers operating in the area of Htee Gklah Kee village, Shwegyin township attacked Naw Th--- Paw on October 9th; firing rifles and shelling her from a distance with mortars. Although suffering injuries to her right arm and left leg Naw Th--- managed to escape with her life. In the following account related to KHRG on October 19th, Naw Th--- describes the incident in her own words.

"The SPDC [soldiers] shot me over one week ago already. They shot and injured my right arm. It didn't injure my bone. The SPDC shot me, when I was in my hillside farm house. At the time when they shot me there were five people. There were two people who were injured and the other was my Aunty. When I was injured I couldn't walk, I just crawled on the ground. I also wounded my leg. I don't know how I wounded my leg. I know only that I got a pain in my leg and it became twisted. When it became painful I stopped running and the SPDC shot at me from behind and they also fired mortar shells one or two times.



16-year-old Naw Th--- recovers on October 19th after having fled through the forest from SPDC soldiers who shot her in the arm. [Photo: KHRG]

I wasn't able to catch up with the people who were running ahead of me. I just stayed alone in the forest. I couldn't run very far; only a short distance and my brother came back and found me the next day. I had to sleep one night in a stream in the forest and my arm was bleeding a lot. Also the rain was falling and I had to sleep in the rain and I felt cold and I also got dizzy and I couldn't get any rice. The SPDC first shot at me at 8:00 and early the next morning my brother came back and found me."

In a previous incident on October 9th 2007, SPDC soldiers from LIB #217 attacked Naw T--- and three other women while they were gathered together at a hut on their farm field at Htee Bla village, Shwegyin township. Naw T--- explained the incident to a KHRG field researcher on October 12th 2007. The following is her account of the shooting and subsequent events.

"I have four children. My eldest child is 30 years old and the youngest is 10 years old. SPDC shot me on Tuesday October 9th 2007. This group of SPDC [soldiers] came from Bplaw Soh. I don't know the battalion number but they shot me at my hill field. I can't count how many times the SPDC has attacked us. They have been attacking us since [the start of] the four cuts policy. It has been many times already and sometimes we haven't been able to take anything with us. This time they shot and injured me on my buttocks while I was running to escape from them. They shot me at close range beside my hillside farm field hut. When they were next to the farm field, they called to us and we ran and they fired. At that time there were four women and one was injured. We were only women. I don't know why they shot at us. Also,

there were about 20 to 30 soldiers in the group. When I was injured they came up to me and took many photos of me. They said their group was named Ma Thein Nyunt.² They spoke only Burmese and one or two could speak Karen. They were shouting a lot. They questioned me only in Burmese. They asked me 'Do you have guns?' and I told them that I didn't have any guns and they took all my belongings. They took my four pots, six dishes, a hundred thousand kyat and shirts and blankets. I hadn't bought anything with that money yet but they took all that money and I have nothing left with which to buy rice. They also shot and injured another woman named Naw M---. She is 30 or 20 years old [other villagers reported the girl was 16]. She was at another hill field. They [SPDC] ate all our chickens and a pig. After they shot and injured me they didn't give me any medicine and I don't think that they will give any medical treatment for my wounds. I asked them to shoot me dead, but they said they wouldn't. I couldn't look at them. When they shot, I just fell down under my hut. When they left I couldn't do anything because I couldn't move. I just lay down and in the daytime it was very hot and I could take off my shirt and cover my wound but in the evening time the rain fell. I thought to myself that I would die at this time because it very cold. They didn't even put me in the hut. They just left me at the place where I fell down. When dusk came people went there and I shouted for help."



55-year-old Naw T--- from Ht--- village, Shwegyin township receives medical treatment on October 12th 2007 following an attack on her field hut by SPDC soldiers from LIB #217. Naw T--- managed to escape with her life but severe injuries to her knee and buttocks mean that she has so far been unable to walk or even stand. [Photo: KHRG]

Forced labour and other demands

"Last rainy season the SPDC demanded forced labour. They asked us to clear the road and dig up stones to refill the holes on the road and after we finished clearing they let us go. They didn't give us any payment. They asked for something to eat from us. They demanded it through the village head. We had to get up early in the morning and have breakfast and go straight to the workplace. At about eleven o'clock we came back [to the village] and started [working] again at 1:00 pm and at 4:00 pm we returned [to the village]. We had to work very hard because we worried that they would scold and beat us. They always followed us along during our work period. The oldest people who went there were between 50 to 60 years old. I am 55 years old and still I must go and work for them. All of us of different ages go. Young and old, men and women, boys and girls, we all go."

- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village (Sep 2007)

² It is not clear why the soldiers would have referred to themselves in this way. Ma Thein Nyunt is a women's name in Burmese and such monikers are not generally used by SPDC troops operating in Karen State.

In those areas of Nyaunglebin District under consolidated or even partial SPDC control, the Army has been enforcing demands on the civilian population for labour, money, food and other supplies with which to support military personnel and the overall programme of militarisation. On October 10th 2007, for instance, soldiers from LIB #378 and LIB #599 under the command of MOC #9 combined forces and came and set up at Ler Gklah village, Htee Gkee Hta village and Doo Doh Soh village, Mone township. Two days later on October 12th, 50 SPDC soldiers from LIB #599 under Battalion Commander Dtay Boh Aw initiated construction of a new office at Bpa Deh Gkeh. However, in order to be able to build this office these troops ordered the villagers of Tat Gone village group a month later on November 13th to deliver 100 bamboo poles, 150 thatch shingles and send 70 people to build the office along with 10 villagers from Gkaw Bpyeh village whom they also ordered to complete the construction of the army camp for them 'without fail'. The following day on November 14th the same soldiers from SPDC LIB #599 ordered 100 villagers from Naung Boh village group, Mway Dwin village group and Mee Dteh village group to labour on the construction of a new office building at an SPDC camp in the Bplaw Pa Htaw area on the Mee Wah Loh River in Mone township. Also on November 14th SPDC personnel from LIB #599 ordered 50 villagers each from Myaw Oo, Bpaw Bpee Der, Aung Chan Tha, Htee Dtoh Loh and Mee Dteh Dtaung villages to build a new army camp in the Tha Kyah Daung area and for each village to bring with them 7 bullock carts and 500 bamboo poles. Thus a total of 250 villagers bringing with them 2,500 bamboo poles and 35 bullock carts came to partake in the forced labour building the new army camp at Tha Kyah Daung. During the construction of the SPDC army camps at Bplaw Pa Htaw on November 14th one villager by the name of Saw P--- stepped on an SPDC landmine and although severely injured did not die. In response, the local SPDC personnel ordered each of the five villages engaged in building the Tha Kyah Daung camp to provide 50,000 kyat on November 15th. The 250,000 kyat demanded from the villagers was to be used as compensation for Saw P--- even though responsibility for deploying the landmine lay with the SPDC troops.

On December 1st SPDC soldiers from LIB #377 of MOC #9 based in Mone township entered Kwee Doh Koh village tract and looted the following items from local villagers.

#	Villager's name	Items looted
1	Saw Ht---	1 viss of salt, 2 pots, 1 kettle, 2 cups, 2 packs of tea, 2 pikes, 2 mattocks, 6 plates, 2 big packs of seasoning, 6 baskets of rice, 1 frying pan, 1 big gas container, 20 new shirts, 5 new blankets, 15 new male sarongs, 5 new female sarongs and 1 viss of chilli
2	Saw Gk---	50 viss of salt and 1 container of engine oil
3	Saw H---	9 big tins of rice, 2 pots, 15 plates and 2 saws
4	Naw B---	15 viss of salt

On December 7th 2007, SPDC soldiers from LIB #299 ordered Myaw Oo, Aung Chan Tha and Bpa Bpee Der villages to supply eight bullock carts each along with three to four people as labourers to transport army rations to the SPDC camp at Gkwee Doh Koh. Despite the order, however, the villagers would not comply and the SPDC officers were forced to back down and change the demand to 500 bamboo poles instead. Although 500 bamboo poles is also a heavy payment, the villagers scored a small victory in forcing the retraction of the initial demand. Two other villages, however, were not able to garner the same concessions. From these villages of Dtoh Loh and Mee Daing Daw SPDC LIB #299 ordered and received for the transportation of rations to Kwee Doh Koh army camp 12 and 6 bullock carts respectively.

At Lay Baw Koh Kaw Htee village, which contains 29 homes and 45 people and lies on the border of Kyauk Kyi and Shwegyin townships, SPDC soldiers operating in the area looted the following property on November 19th 2007:

#	Items looted
1	21 machetes
2	14 male sarongs
3	38 female sarongs
4	75 shirts
5	7 pairs of trousers
6	14 baskets of paddy
7	3 mosquito nets
8	12 viss (19.6 kg. / 43.2 lbs) of salt
9	1 clay pot full of gold
10	1 radio
11	8 cups

Conclusion

As the SPDC expands the military build up in Nyaunglebin District and other areas of Karen State, the options for the local civilian communities increasingly constrict. The regime continues its diplomatic maneuvering with the United Nations against a backdrop of dwindling international interest in the situation following the September protests and a worsening situation for the villagers in Karen State. Ongoing oppression of the civilian population in those areas already under SPDC control and attacks against those civilians who work to evade such oppression suggest no likelihood of dissipating without a significant change in the current domestic or international climate. No observer will be able to plausibly act surprised as the coming months see continued flight, displacement and refugee flows.

"If the SPDC continues ruling the country the people like us will face only terrible things. When the SPDC soldiers see the villagers they kill them."

- Saw S--- (male, 50), L--- village (October 2007)



Htee Bla Kee villagers travel through the forest on October 15th after having previously fled from SPDC troops. [Photo: KHRG]

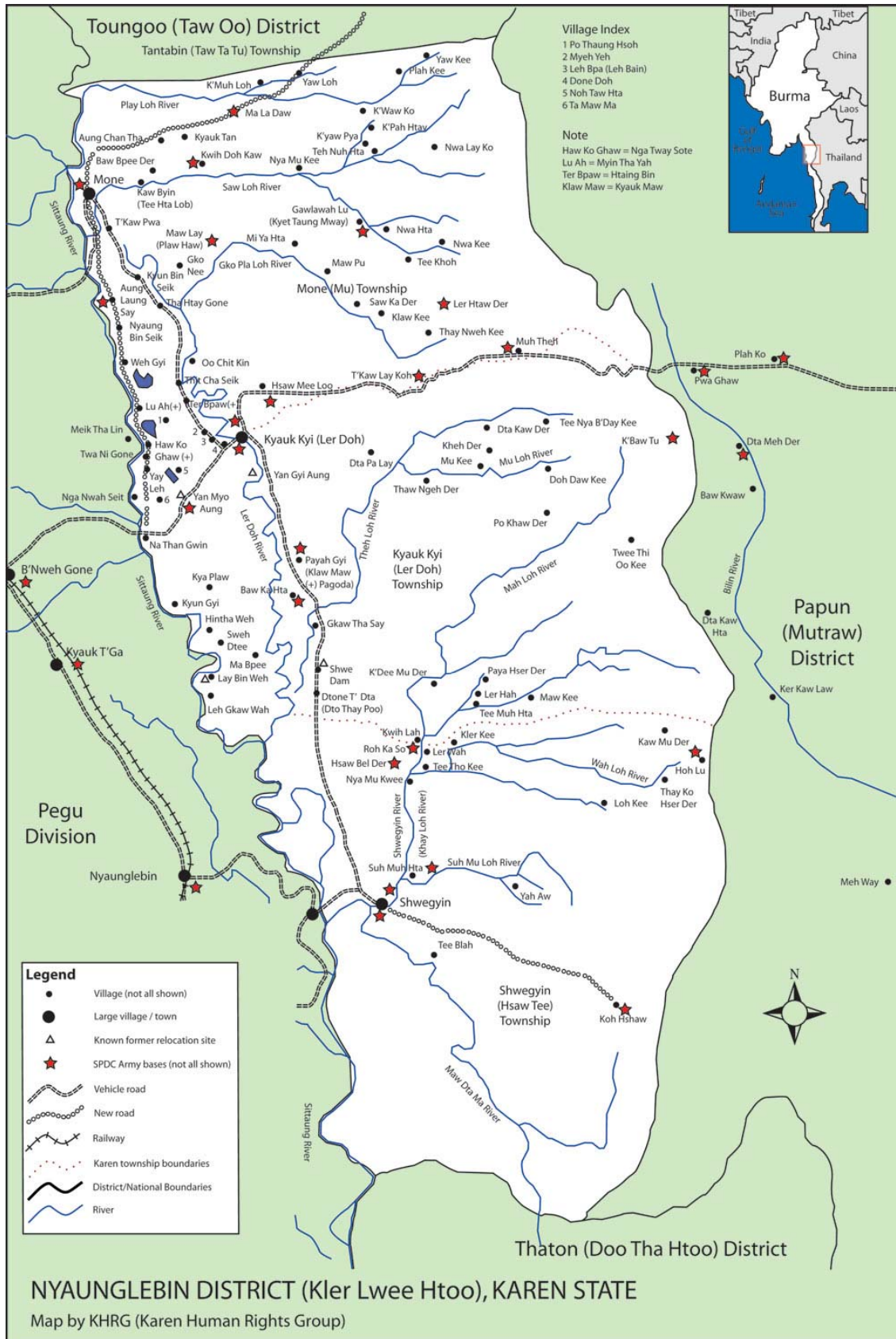


Having learnt that the SPDC patrol is heading this way Gk'Dee Muh Der villagers have prepared their loads on November 11th 2007 before they move on. [Photo: KHRG]

For background on the human rights situation in Nyaunglebin District see the following reports:

- *SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response*, (KHRG, September 2006)
- *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005 – 2006 Northern Karen State Offensive* (KHRG, August 2006)
- *Forced relocation, restrictions and abuses in Nyaunglebin District* (KHRG, July 2006)
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (KHRG, July 2006)
- *SPDC operations in Kler Lweh Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District* (KHRG, April 2006)
- *Attempted rapes and other abuses in northern Karen Districts* (KHRG, March 2006)
- *SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians* (KHRG, January 2006)
- *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (October 2001).

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Papun District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* (September 2007) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (March 2007). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.



Karen Districts



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