



**Report from the field**  
September 19<sup>th</sup> 2008 / KHRG #2008-F13

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## **Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District**

*In SPDC- and DKBA-controlled Pa'an District villagers face regular, and sometimes daily, demands for labour, money, food and other supplies from local military units. With troop rotation ensuring the constant presence of active troops patrolling these areas, villagers are given little respite from the demands which place a constant drain on their time, incomes and food supplies. In addition to forced labour, extortion and arbitrary taxation, looting by soldiers is rife and families face increased and arbitrary fees for their children's education. Such continual exploitation undermines villagers' livelihoods and makes family survival unsustainable, leading many villagers to instead seek more sustainable livelihood opportunities in other areas of Burma or neighbouring Thailand. This report focuses on the situation in Dta Greh township of Pa'an District, detailing incidents which occurred between January and July 2008.*

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The majority of villagers in Dta Greh township of Pa'an District are facing regular exploitation by both the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta currently ruling Burma, and the SPDC-allied military group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). In early August 2008, KHRG reported that troops from these two forces had been actively patrolling the Dawna mountain range (which runs north-south through eastern Pa'an District) between January and June 2008, entering villages, setting up temporary camps and subjecting villagers to forced labour and extortion wherever they went.<sup>1</sup> Newly-received information from KHRG field researchers shows these abuses



This picture, taken on August 27<sup>th</sup> 2008, shows the rubber plantation belonging to DKBA officers Bo Gk'Doh and Maung Chit Thoo near to Chaw Soh village, in which villagers are regularly forced to go and clear the weeds and overgrowth around the rubber trees. [Photo: KHRG]

continued into July 2008 and look set to continue for the foreseeable future with new SPDC troops having been deployed into the area. It is standard SPDC practice to rotate operational troops in Karen State every six months. On July 5<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #565 of Military Operation Command (MOC) #15, led by battalion commander Hlaing Htun Oo and with an estimated troop strength of 50 soldiers, replaced Infantry Battalion (IB) #97 as the force actively patrolling villages to the east of the Dawna mountain range in Dta Greh township. However, although taking a rest from active duty, troops from IB #97 continue to reside in the army camp on Bpoo Loo Htoo hill near to the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Forced Labour and extortion in Pa'an District*, KHRG, August 2008.

Thoo Mweh (Moei) river bank. According to information collected by a KHRG field researcher, LIB #565 will remain active in the area of Wa Mee Gkla village tract for a period of four months and is to be divided between Bpoo Loo Htoo and Bpaw Bpa Hta army camps. As IB #97 has remained in the area, it seems likely that this battalion will become active again after these four months. As troops constantly rotate to ensure patrols in the area continue uninterrupted, villagers receive little respite from the constant demands for forced labour, money, food and supplies from the troops which regularly enter their villages. These demands place an incredible strain on family survival. Civilians in Dta Greh township find they have to put more time and effort into forced labour for local SPDC and DKBA forces than into their own livelihood activities and what little they can earn or produce in their fields in the remaining time is subject to extortion and arbitrary taxation by those same troops.

*“Even though we can’t [don’t have time to] do their [SPDC and DKBA] work, we have to do it. We can’t stay [in the village] without doing their work. We have to work [even] when we are sick. I didn’t see them come and do anything good for the villagers. If villagers asked for medicine, they have to give them something first. If they give [the villager] an injection, the villager has to give them one chicken. If they give tablets, the villager has to give them one chicken. We can’t get anything for free from them. If the villagers didn’t give them anything, they wouldn’t give them medicine. Once, one of the soldiers came and saw that I had long hair and he told me ‘I’ll cut your hair for you’. I didn’t ask him to cut it but I sat [and let him cut it] and after he cut my hair, he asked for three small tins of rice [585 g. / 1.29 lb.] and I had to give it to him.”*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 43), Gk--- village, Dta Greh township (July 2008)

## **Forced labour**

As SPDC and DKBA troops patrol local villages, villagers in Dta Greh township confront regular demands for forced labour of many different forms. In this area, villagers are commonly forced to build houses for the troops and fences around the army camp, to porter military supplies and rations, to collect firewood and water, to cook food for the soldiers and to tend rubber plantations belonging to military officers. For example, on July 25<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC LIB #565 commander Hlaing Htun Oo ordered villagers from Gk--- village to cut bamboo poles, split them into pieces and construct fences for the army camp. This work was particularly dangerous because the area the villagers needed to collect the bamboo from was close to a vehicle road. In order to prevent Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers from being able to ambush their military trucks, SPDC and DKBA battalions often plant landmines along the sides of vehicle roads. Therefore, in this case, villagers were particularly fearful that they would tread on a landmine as they cut the required bamboo, but also feared punishment from the SPDC soldiers if they did not comply and so did as the commander ordered.

Gk--- village faced further demands from commander Hlaing Htun Oo throughout July to porter military rations between army camps. No food was provided during this labour and no wages were provided to compensate villagers for the time they lost, during which they were unable to work in their fields or carry out daily wage labour. In this incident, villagers once again had to be afraid of landmines en route to the camp and also of possible abuse by soldiers overseeing the labour. The table below shows three incidents in which commander Hlaing Htun Oo forced villagers from Gk--- village to porter military rations:

Date	# of villagers	Village name	Details
July 19 <sup>th</sup>	4	Gk--- village	Villagers forced to carry rice between Kler Day and --- army camps.
July 24 <sup>th</sup>	4	Gk--- village	Villagers forced to carry rice between Bpoo Loo Dtoo and --- army camps for an entire day.
July 28 <sup>th</sup>	2	Gk--- village	Villagers forced to carry rations including salt, chilli and seasoning powder from Kler Day army camp to --- army Camp.

Even for what may seem like very simple chores, SPDC and DKBA soldiers have forced villagers to go to their army camps to carry out tasks. Civilians who live in villages close to army camps are particularly subject to such forced labour. Gk--- village, the same village subject to forced labour demands from the SPDC in the examples above, has also faced demands from the DKBA for villagers to be provided everyday to carry out chores at the army camp, such as collecting firewood, carrying water, cooking rice and other food for the soldiers and clearing and cleaning the camp compound. From July 1<sup>st</sup> 2008, DKBA #555 camp commander Pah Gka based at Bpaw Bpa Hta army camp demanded that the village head of Gk--- village send one villager to the army camp to act as a *set tha*<sup>2</sup> and carry out these tasks every day while the soldiers were based at Bpaw Bpa Hta. The soldiers planned to remain at Bpaw Bpa Hta for two months. Villagers who were appointed for this forced labour but did not attend were fined 100 Thai baht (US \$2.91) each by commander Pah Gka.

*“Villagers have to cook rice, carry water and collect firewood for them [DKBA soldiers]. Only occasionally do they cook rice for themselves. Mostly they asked villagers to cook it [for them]. When they [the soldiers] need something, they ask the villagers to go to K--- village. Yesterday I went [to K--- village] and I had to collect money from the villagers who didn’t go for sentry duty in their camp.”*

- Saw Bp--- (male, 30), Gk--- village, Dta Greh township (July 2008)

Local DKBA officers further force villagers to work in their rubber plantations for the officers’ own profits. For example, DKBA Battalion #999 commander Pah Nwee has ordered villagers to work for him in his rubber plantations in the area of Day Nya Lay Kaw Htee to the east of the Dawna mountain range in Dta Greh township on a number of occasions. This forced labour has involved many tasks including clearing overgrowth in the plantations, fertilizing the rubber plants and collecting and cutting bamboo into pieces to make stakes to drive into the ground and tie to the plants in order to make the rubber plants more stable. Villagers have not been paid for the labour and have typically not been provided with any food and have had to bring their own tools and materials. Villagers that have not carried out the forced labour as demanded have had to pay a fine, in either pork or money. The table below lists occasions in between May and July 2008, when DKBA commander Pah Nwee ordered villagers to work in his rubber plantations.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘*Set tha*’ is a Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger at army camps but also involves other tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

Date <sup>3</sup>	Villages	# of villagers	Tools and materials villagers were required to prepare and bring	Further details
May 29 <sup>th</sup>	T--- village	29	22 mattocks, 340 pieces of ready-cut bamboo (to make rubber plants stable)	7 women, 22 men
	P--- village	21	5 mattocks, 315 pieces of bamboo	10 women, 11 men
	Gk--- village	5	2 mattocks, 80 pieces of bamboo	All men
	O--- village	6	3 mattocks, 2 knives, 110 pieces of bamboo	2 women, 4 men
June 3 <sup>rd</sup>	P--- village	29		
	T--- village	30		
	G--- village	16		
	To--- village	?		
	Te--- village	?		
June 4 <sup>th</sup>	T--- village	30	11 mattocks	16 women, 14 men
	To---, Te--- and G-- - villages	12	11 mattocks	1 woman, 11 men
July 24 <sup>th</sup>	P---, R---, G---, Gk-- - and W--- villages	120	60 mattocks, 60 knives, fertilizer	
July 25 <sup>th</sup>	T--- village	34	34 mattocks	
	Dt--- village	7	2 mattocks	
	Ht--- village	27	17 mattocks	

## Extortion

On top of demands for forced labour, SPDC and DKBA troops regularly extort money, food and supplies from civilians in Pa'an District. In Dta Greh township, villagers report that it is the DKBA soldiers, especially, who place such demands upon villagers. Furthermore, if commanders want to raise further funds or collect more supplies from the villagers, they develop a plan for arbitrary taxation, which is normally nothing more than further extortion in disguise. For example, on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2008, DKBA Battalion #999 operation commander Gkya Aye decreed that villagers in T'Moh village tract would have to pay a tax on each motorboat they owned. He did not show the villagers any documentation for this tax or tell the villagers what the money would be used for, but simply forced the villagers to pay it. The table below shows a breakdown of how much money commander Gkya Aye was able to make from his taxation effort:

#	Name	Village	Amount (kyat)
1	Saw E---	W--- village	25,000
2	Saw G---		25,000
3	Saw R---		25,000
4	Saw M---		25,000
5	Saw P---	T--- village	25,000
6	Saw Ma---	Dt--- village	25,000
7	Saw N---		22,000
<b>Total</b>			<b>172,000</b>

Similarly, on June 30<sup>th</sup>, DKBA Battalion #999 company #2 second in command Pah Dtoh Heh based at Pah Ee Gkyo army camp demanded money from motorboat owners in T'Moh

<sup>3</sup> The incidents from June 2008 listed in this table were previously reported in the report *Forced Labour and extortion in Pa'an District*, KHRG, August 2008, but are provided here with more details.

village tract, as shown in the table below. In this case, the commander was able to extract even larger ‘taxes’ from the villagers.

#	Name	Village	Amount (kyat)
1	Saw M---	T--- village	100,000
2	Saw T---		100,000
3	Saw D---		100,000
4	Saw G---		100,000
5	Saw E---	W--- village	100,000
6	Saw Ma---		100,000
7	Saw Gk---		100,000
8	Saw Gky---		100,000
9	Saw P---	G--- village	50,000
10	Saw N---	Dt--- village	50,000
11	Saw H---		100,000
12	Saw Pa---	R--- village	100,000
13	Saw L---		100,000
14	Saw K---	K--- village	100,000
<b>Total</b>			<b>1,300,000</b>

In other cases demands are simply issued to provide money, food and supplies to the army camp within a specified period of time or immediately when soldiers visit the village in person. Gk--- village, the subject of both SPDC and DKBA forced labour demands in the examples above, also faced this kind of extortion. DKBA Battalion #555 camp commander Pah Gka demanded the following items from Gk--- village during July:

Date	Village	Items demanded/extorted	Further details
July 5 <sup>th</sup>	Gk---	One viss (1.63 kg. / 3.6 lb.) of chicken.	Told if they couldn't give the chicken, they would have to give 100 Thai baht (US \$2.91).
July 6 <sup>th</sup>	Gk---	One viss of chicken and one bowl (1.56 kg. / 3.45 lb.) of sticky rice.	
July 10 <sup>th</sup>	Gk---	One viss of chicken and one bowl of sticky rice.	
July 15 <sup>th</sup>	Gk---	One bowl of chilli and one-two viss of fruit and vegetables.	

Moreover, while SPDC and DKBA officers issue demands to the villagers through village heads, visiting soldiers often loot villagers' belongings as they pass through villages. This is due to the fact that local military units have been required to follow a policy known as 'living off the land' and have thus relied on looting or extorting food, money and other requirements from the local civilian population. The examples above show that villagers in Dta Greh township face regular, and in some cases daily, demands and exploitation not only from two different armed forces, but also from different levels within those same forces. For villagers already living subsistence lifestyles as farmers or day labourers, these demands and abuses combine over time to undermine villagers' livelihoods and make it very difficult for villagers to find sustainable methods of survival in their home areas. Although wishing to stay in their home villages, these abuses have led many villagers to migrate to other areas of the country or into Thailand in order to find work where they can earn higher incomes and send remittances to their families, knowing that these remittances will also be subject to tax and extortion by the military.

*“When they [SPDC soldiers] enter the village, their officers demand things through the village head and their followers [soldiers] loot the villagers’ animals and things. Even though they [the soldiers] said they didn’t loot [the villagers’] things, after they left, every villager had lost one or two chickens every time.”*

- Saw Dt--- (male, 50), Ht--- village, Dta Greh township (July 2008)

## Education

In SPDC-controlled areas of Karen State, such as Dta Greh township, villagers also face higher costs for their children's education, as well as a state-managed curriculum barring the teaching of any Karen languages. Although, the SPDC provides some teachers for these schools, villagers are typically required to supplement these teachers' SPDC wages with rice and other foods and pay for any transportation expenses they might have. Moreover, the SPDC provides relatively few teachers and the villagers' must recruit the rest of the teachers themselves, supporting them with both wages and food. It seems in some cases villagers are expected to provide support for SPDC teachers, even if those teachers do not teach in that village's own school. At 9:00 am on January 11<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC LIB #339 battalion commander Naing Win called a meeting at Thay Maw Gkoo village to discuss the payment of salaries for the 10 SPDC teachers based in Thay Maw Gkoo and Wa Mee Gkla village tracts in Dta Greh township. LIB #339 deputy battalion commander Htin Tha informed the villagers that for 2008, the SPDC would not give these teachers wages, but instead the students would be responsible for the salaries of the 10 teachers. Even though these 10 teachers in fact only taught at two of the local schools, Thay Maw Gkoo and Gkeh Dteh village schools, 14 schools were to provide the salaries for the teachers, as listed in the table below:



The children pictured in this photograph, taken on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2008, are learning to read and write S'gkaw Karen language at Ler Per Her IDP site. Prior to their arrival at Ler Per Her, these children attended an SPDC-controlled school at B--- village where teachers were forbidden to teach any Karen languages. These children are now finding themselves having to work hard with their S'gkaw Karen language studies, in order to catch up with their peers. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Even though these 10 teachers in fact only taught at two of the local schools, Thay Maw Gkoo and Gkeh Dteh village schools, 14 schools were to provide the salaries for the teachers, as listed in the table below:

#	Schools responsible for SPDC teacher salary payments
1	Thay Maw Gkoo primary school
2	Gkeh Dteh primary school
3	Gk'Noh Hta primary school
4	Gon M'Nee primary school
5	Gkyaw Gkay Hta primary school
6	Waw Gkyaw primary school
7	Wa Mee Gkla primary school
8	Htee Gk'Haw primary school
9	Sih Po Kee primary school
10	Meh La Ah primary school
11	Meh La Ah Hta primary school
12	Bpwah Bpwah Lay primary school
13	Gklay Po Gklo primary school
14	Gklay Moh Kee primary school

In each of the schools listed, each student would have to make a one-off payment of 20 Thai baht (US \$0.58)<sup>4</sup> to cover the salaries of the SPDC teachers and additional payments for any travel costs these teachers incurred. These costs are additional to the usual school fees that the students' parents are already expected to pay. As costs for education in SPDC-controlled areas are so high and children cannot learn any Karen languages, many parents instead choose to send their children to refugee camps in Thailand or to Internally Displaced Person (IDP) sites along the border in order to continue their education. Some families flee SPDC-controlled areas together for this reason, combined with the burden of other demands, and many older children also personally choose to migrate elsewhere for their education.

## Conclusion

As seen in the above examples, local SPDC and DKBA military units have made countless demands for labour, money food and supplies from the villagers in Dta Greh township. Whether in the form of forced labour, extortion, arbitrary taxation, unjustifiable education fees or outright looting, demands and exploitation are meted out from up and down the ranks of the two forces and often on a daily basis for some villages. Such demands deplete villagers' time, money and food supplies and over time combine to undermine villagers' livelihoods and ultimately make life unsustainable for villagers trying to remain in their home areas. Many families have therefore chosen to migrate to other areas of the country or cross the border into Thailand to gain access to services or education for their children in IDP sites or refugee camps, or to find opportunities for more sustainable livelihoods.

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

- *DKBA soldiers burn down Ler Bpoo village, Pa'an District* (August 2008)
- *Forced labour and extortion in Pa'an District* (August 2008)
- *Update on the KNU/KNLA-PC: Statements by a deserter and a 'retiree'* (July 2008)
- *Child soldiers recruited to support expansion of the KNU-KNLA Peace Council* (May 2007)
- *Forced labour, extortion and festivities: The SPDC and DKBA burden on villagers in Pa'an District* (December 2006)
- *Pa'an District: Land confiscation, forced labour and extortion undermining villagers' livelihoods* (February 2006)

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 web site at <http://www.khrq.org>.

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<sup>4</sup> Although US \$0.58 may seem like a small amount to readers of this report, it is a large sum of money for villagers who, according to a KHRG researcher in Pa'an District, do not earn more than 2,000 kyat (US \$1.63) for a day of daily wage labour, working in another villager's field or collecting firewood for example, and moreover are rarely able to find work every day.



# Karen Districts



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