



Report from the field
July 11th 2008 / KHRG #2008-F8

Exploitative governance under SPDC and DKBA authorities in Dooplaya District

With largely consolidated control over Dooplaya District in southern Karen State the SPDC and DKBA, as the two dominant (and allied) military forces, operate under a system of coexistence. The local civilian population, in turn, faces exploitative governance on two fronts as both SPDC and DKBA soldiers seek to extract money, labour, food and other supplies from them. Enforcing heavy movement restrictions on top of persistent exploitative demands, local communities are facing deteriorating livelihood opportunities, increasing poverty, and a constriction of educational and health care opportunities. Persistent human rights abuses thus foster the economic pressures fuelling the continuing migration of rural communities in Dooplaya District to refugee camps in Thailand and towards livelihood opportunities at urban centres in Burma and Thailand. This report examines the situation of abuse in Dooplaya District from January to June 2008.

Dooplaya District in southern Karen State has been under heavy military control since 1997. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) operate on the basis of coexistence with some areas more DKBA-controlled and others more SPDC-controlled, but with both groups largely prevalent across the district and allied in their operations. So far this year both groups have been extracting 'rents'¹ from the local civilian population though coerced and uncompensated demands for labour, money, food and other supplies. As a consequence, local villagers have had severe difficulty tending to plantations and agriculture fields and conducting other forms of livelihood activities. This has stifled household income at the same time that local rice and other commodity prices have been increasing.



Due to insufficient funding this school in SPDC-controlled Kyone Doh township has not been able to provide any materials for the students. Students' families have therefore had to purchase all books and other school supplies themselves. [Photo: KHRG]

As an illustrative case, the residents of Ma Yin Gone village in Kyone Doh township (Kru Tu in Karen) have been facing severe difficulties just meeting their basic subsistence needs.

¹ 'Rents' are "commonly defined as the extraction of uncompensated value from others"; Ken MacLean. 2007. "Spaces of extraction: Governance along the riverine networks of Nyaunglebin District," in *Myanmar – The State, Community and the Environment*, Asia Pacific Press, p. 259.

Among the village's 250 households, there are around 150 households which remain dependant on daily wage labour such as planting rubber saplings and weeding rubber plantations in order to meet their subsistence needs. These villagers do not own any farmland or gardens. The remaining hundred or so villagers do have their own farmland or gardens and therefore do not need to worry as much about their day-to-day survival. Ma Yin Gone villagers, like most communities in Dooplaya District, must also meet regular demands for forced labour. In response to economic pressures underpinned by exploitative abuses, large numbers of Ma Yin Gone's poor villagers, both female and male, have travelled to neighbouring Thailand in search of wage labour. With cash earnings, these expatriate labourers have been able to send financial remittances back home to support their families. These remittances have been crucial in meeting daily subsistence needs in the face of continuing SPDC and DKBA demands for labour, money, food and supplies and draconian restrictions on movement. Notwithstanding these remittances, many local residents continue to face severe difficulties in meeting their subsistence needs. One local villager reported in January 2008 that local SPDC authorities forced residents of his village to plant dry season rice crops and castor plants and to do uncompensated construction work. Describing the economic situation in Ma Yin Gone, this villager said that:

"There are about 150 households doing daily wage labour. Some people don't have enough food to eat, so they have to take on daily wage labour for other people such as weeding other people's rubber plantations. They are paid 2,500 kyat [US \$2.10] per day. If they are paid 3,000 kyat [US \$2.52], then they have to bring along their own food. The owners don't provide them with food to eat. There are more poor people than rich people in the village. The people who have farms don't need to worry about their survival. In the past, the Burmese [SPDC soldiers] always arrived in the village so our plantations were always burnt by them. It's for their survival [that villagers migrate to Thailand]. When they get money they can send it to their family. Both men and women have gone to Thailand to work for money. One of the villagers in my village from died AIDS which he got in Thailand."

Forced labour and other extortion

The residents of Dooplaya District face regular demands for forced labour including cutting down and delivering bamboo poles, fabricating and delivering thatch shingles and cutting down and delivering wooden posts, amongst other tasks. These materials are typically used to build or rebuild army camps. In Kyone Doh township, orders for these provisions have recently come from Htun Lin, camp commander of SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #230 in the area south of Kya In Seik Gyi town; Thein Myit Tun, column commander of Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #208; and Zaw Min Pyo, column #2 commander of SPDC IB #63. In order to deliver the specified thatch shingles, bamboo and wood poles, individual villagers have either had to transport the materials by bullock cart if they were in possession of one, or by foot.



Residents of P--- village, Kyone Doh township gather during November 2007 in preparation to cut down trees, cut them into usable poles and deliver them to a local SPDC camp as ordered by local SPDC authorities. [Photo: KHRG]

Some villages in Kyone Doh township were also obliged to send two representatives per village to attend a 'training' session at the end of 2007 held by the Village Peace and

Development Council (VPDC) Chairperson of their village tract and some higher-level SPDC officials. The training dealt with various construction projects related to village development. At the training sessions, the SPDC authorities gave speeches and stated that they would no longer extort money from the villagers nor torture them. Rather, the SPDC officials stated that they would lead the people towards democracy. However, at the end of the training sessions the SPDC official ordered the village representatives to return to their village, collect funds from the local residents and organise the villagers to carry out specified construction projects. The SPDC officials said that they would pay one third of the costs of the construction projects but that the villagers were required to come up with the remaining two thirds of the funds as well as provide the labour. In the case of some projects, it appears that local SPDC authorities paid for the building materials but required that the villagers provide their labour for free.

"We collected money from the villagers when we carried out the village development project. Now I've already led the villagers to rebuild the bridge in our village. Everyone was required to participate in the work."

- U W--- (male, 48), secretary of P--- village, Kyone Doh township (Jan 2008)

"We have had to build a bridge each year [of the past two]. We named the [newest] bridge P---. We were forced [to build it] by the SPDC. We had to build it with wood and the other one was built with steel. They didn't give us any payment for it [the labour]. We didn't need to pay for the cost [of the building materials]. They [the SPDC] spent money on it. If anyone was not free or got sick, he or she could ask someone from their family to go to do the loh ah pay² [forced labour]. We didn't need to bring our food along. Before we went to the loh ah pay [forced labour] place we ate our breakfast in our home, because the place was not so far from our village."

- U S--- (male, 50), M--- village, Kyone Doh township (Jan 2008)



On August 12th 2007 deputy commander Thoo Rein Win of SPDC LIB #202, based at Htee Hoo Than camp, ordered local villages including Sin Ka, Koo Nee and Tha Mein Doh villages to build a vehicle road from Htee Hoo Than to southern Kya In Seik Gyi town on August 15th 2007. The villagers also had to build a small bridge, shown here in November 2007, so that vehicles could cross a local river. [Photo: KHRG]



In another incident, deputy commander Thoo Rein Win of LIB #202 forced local villagers to build this bridge over Mee Htan Yan river. This picture was taken in November 2007 when the villagers had not yet completed the construction of the bridge shown in the background. [Photo: KHRG]

On March 3rd 2008, column #2 commander Zaw Min Pyo of SPDC IB #63 ordered villages in Kyone Doh township to produce and deliver thatch shingles, bamboo poles and wooden poles to his army camp. The amounts demanded were as follows:

² *Loh ah pay*; A Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour; although traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects.

#	Village name	Thatch shingles	Bamboo poles	Wood poles
1	T--- village	950	950	-
2	W--- village	200	-	33
3	T--- village	500	50	-
4	B--- village	200	100	20

Being under consolidated military control, SPDC officers also regularly demand that local villagers in Dooplaya District pay arbitrary 'taxes' on small-scale trade and agriculture. For example, SPDC commander Chan Nyin Aung along with 8 soldiers entered Kyo Kweh village of Kyone Doh township and demanded 4,000 kyat from each saw mill owner before departing the village on March 16th 2008.

Also, according to *Kwekalu*, a Karen-language news agency, on June 2nd 2008, soldiers from DKBA Battalion #907 clashed with KNLA soldiers from a security column of Battalion #18 at the edge of Aw Ler village, in Dooplaya District. Two DKBA soldiers died and one was hurt. Following the fighting the DKBA soldiers reportedly forced the villagers to pay them compensation money totalling 700,000 kyat [US \$588.23]. The next day on June 3rd, following orders from DKBA officer Na Khan Mway, soldiers from DKBA Battalions #907 and #999 burnt down 18 houses in Gkya Gka Wa village.³

Restrictions on movement

Restrictions on movement are kept in place across large areas of Dooplaya District largely on the pretext of 'counter insurgency' operations but functioning primarily as a means to prevent villagers from evading the many extortionate demands placed upon them. Restrictions on movement also have the secondary effect of inhibiting small-scale trade and travel outside of village confines to forests or agricultural fields in order to address livelihood needs.

As an example, the residents of villages in the area of Noh Poe village in Kawkareik township currently face heavy movement restrictions, having been accused of acting as spies for the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Local DKBA personnel have claimed that the villagers of Noh Poe have delivered information to KNLA soldiers and, on these grounds, have enforced movement restrictions. The residents of Noh Poe depend for their livelihood on opportunities available outside of their village confines, including foraging for wild food in the surrounding forest and cultivating hillside paddy fields. However, in order to enforce movement restrictions around Noh Poe village, DKBA soldiers have deployed landmines around the village and continue to patrol the area, making it virtually impossible for villagers to carry out these essential livelihood activities. These restrictions on movement, in combination with the increasing price of rice, mean that many Noh Poe villagers are facing impending food insecurity that will continue at least into the near future. One villager from the area describes the community's situation below:

"My occupation is hill field farming, but at the moment we're not able to work on our hill fields because landmines have been planted along the path and around our village. Now in my village villagers are facing so many difficulties that I don't know how to describe it. Villagers haven't been allowed to go outside of the village since last month [April 2008]. Last year the livestock which the villagers sold in my village was very cheap, because if they didn't do like this [keep the price low] when the DKBA came, they [the DKBA soldiers] shot the villagers' livestock dead and ate them without paying any compensation. So villagers thought that something was better than nothing so they did like that [reduced the price]. At the moment, the cows and

³ "Karen separated group [DKBA] burnt down 18 households," *Kwekalu*, July 18th 2008.

buffaloes also step on the landmines every day. Now the villagers have to live in the village and can't do anything. [They] just sit around and look at each other in the face. We can start our hill field cultivation after they [the DKBA soldiers] leave and take out all of the landmines that they have planted, but we don't know when they will depart. Now the roads are covered with weeds and bushes. On a previous day, one of the DKBA soldiers stepped on a landmine and lost one of his legs while he was trying to find the location of some KNU [KNLA] soldiers. When DKBA soldiers see anyone outside of the village they accuse them of being a spy for the KNU and of having contact with the KNU. They force the villagers to be porters and they forced 50 villagers from villages such as Noh Poe, Htee Moo Hta and Meh Ker Neh [to serve as porters], because if they go without porters the KNU [KNLA] soldiers can attack them. But if they go with the villagers the KNU [KNLA] soldiers can't attack them. If KNU soldiers attack them the villagers will face problems and most of the victims will be villagers. Villagers also have to do loh ah pay [forced labour] every five days. If they don't go, then they have to pay 20,000 kyat [US \$16.80] for three days [to avoid forced labour duty for three days]. For the loh ah pay [forced labour] the villagers must cook for the DKBA soldiers, travel with them and follow them wherever they go. The DKBA soldiers also demand rice from the villagers. Each house has to give three big tins [48 kg / 105.6 lb] of rice to them. There are more than 200 houses in my village."

- Naw K--- (female, 40), --- village, Kawkareik township (May 2008)

Health and education

The persistent forced labour and arbitrary taxation along with restrictions on movement, described above, have served to devastatingly undermine rural livelihoods in Dooplaya District, worsen poverty, exacerbate the region's humanitarian crisis and reduce educational and health care opportunities. Speaking about the health situation in Dooplaya District, one KHRG field researcher operating in the area reported that:

"If you have money, you can get medicine. For the villagers who have enough money, they can get medical treatment in the hospital. For the villagers who don't have enough money, the situation is very bad for them to the point of dying, and some cannot avoid death. Some areas have been able to receive donations of medicine, but some have not been able to get anything."



These pictures, taken in December 2007, show a library built by villagers in Kyone Doh township as ordered by local SPDC authorities. In the photo above right, the empty interior of the library illustrates the lack of substantial support for development in favour of visible yet largely useless infrastructure which dominates the current SPDC development agenda. At an obligatory meeting of regional village heads, local SPDC authorities ordered that each village construct a clinic, library and school in their village for which SPDC authorities would provide a third of the required construction costs. The villagers were obliged to cover the remaining constructions costs, provide the necessary labour and then decide if they wanted (and were able) to pay for any actual supplies. [Photo: KHRG]

In regards to education, many parents in Dooplaya District have been facing severe difficulties financing their children's basic education. The course fees for one student in middle school amount to 50,000 kyat [US \$42]. On top of this, students must also pay money for sports fees, teachers' donation fees and other intermittent school expenses. As a consequence, some children have sought educational opportunities in neighbouring Thailand in both refugee camps and in schools for the children of migrant workers where school fees are largely waived.

"In regards to this issue [school funding], we will collect money from the villagers and now we plan to collect money from them, but we've divided the villagers into levels [based on their financial means]. Each of the villagers in the first level has to pay 60,000 kyat [US \$50.42]. For the second level, each person has to pay 40,000 kyat [US \$33.61] and for the third level it is 20,000 kyat [US \$16.80] each. This money will be used for the school. Some people cannot give [money] as we ask, but we don't force them to give. We also give them time to pay it later. We estimate that we will receive 200,000 kyat [US \$168] from the villagers. When we have a festival in the village we also collect money from the villagers, it depends on them. We don't force them to give to us".

- U S--- (male, 48), secretary of P----village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2008)

Conclusion

Living under the rule of both SPDC and DKBA authorities, villagers in Dooplaya District face persistent exploitation on two fronts. As a consequence of regular demands for labour, money, food and other supplies in combination with restrictions on movement, many villagers are facing collapsing livelihoods, increasing poverty, declining educational opportunities and worsening health conditions. Many villagers have responded by travelling to Thailand in search of medical treatment, educational opportunities, employment and personal security. So long as the pattern of exploitative local governance in Dooplaya District continues, this interconnected trend of livelihoods vulnerability, poverty, worsening humanitarian conditions and migration can be expected to continue.

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

- *SPDC soldiers arrest and kill villagers on allegations of contacting KNU/KNLA* (KHRG, January 2008)
- *Forced labour, extortion and the state of education in Dooplaya District* (KHRG, October 2007)
- *State repression and the creation of poverty in southern Karen State* (KHRG, February 2007)
- *Setting Up the Systems of Repression: The progressive regimentation of civilian life in Dooplaya District* (KHRG, September 2006)

Photos from Dooplaya can be seen in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*, *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006*, *KHRG Photo Gallery 2005* and *KHRG Photo Set 2005A*, available on the KHRG web site (www.khrg.org).

Karen Districts



© Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005

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