



Report from the field

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Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Toungoo District

SPDC troops have continued to target internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Toungoo District. Civilians continue to be killed or injured by the attacks while many of the survivors flee their homes and take shelter in forest hiding sites. Some who have moved into SPDC forced relocation sites continue to secretly return to their villages to cultivate their crops, constantly risking punishment or execution by troops patrolling the areas. The SPDC's repeated disruption of regular planting cycles has created a food crisis in Toungoo, further endangering the IDPs living there. This report examines the abuses in Toungoo District from April to June 2008.

Since the end of 2005, civilians and particularly internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Toungoo District have faced the constant threat of State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) attacks. While some villagers have relocated to refugee camps, many others have gone into hiding in the forested mountains and have survived by staying one step ahead of SPDC troop movements. Villagers have organised lookouts to monitor SPDC patrols and some villages have recently held meetings to decide how to best avoid SPDC troops operating in the area.



Fleeing an SPDC attack, villagers from M--- village of Tantabin township, fled through the forest to a hiding site on April 13th 2008, loaded up with as many belongings as they could carry. [Photo: KHRG]



On April 13th, villagers from M--- village fled to the forest after receiving information that SPDC soldiers were active in their area. [Photo: KHRG]

SPDC attacks

Despite designating lookouts for troop movements, civilians living in non-SPDC-controlled areas are still sometimes surprised by the SPDC. Villagers have little time to escape before the SPDC attacks and it is difficult for them to pack their food and belongings. Upon finding

an IDP hiding place or abandoned village, soldiers will generally take whatever they can use and burn everything else.

On April 19th 2008, columns #1 and 2 of SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #706, operating under Military Operations Command (MOC) #4, entered Buh Kee village of Tantabin township. Villagers there avoided the approaching patrol by fleeing to a hiding site in Tantabin township, leaving behind their belongings, including rice, salt, clothes, blankets, and cooking equipment, most of which was then taken by the SPDC. SPDC soldiers had previously attacked Buh Kee village as recently as December 5th 2007, when they burnt down the homes of local residents.¹

In another attack in April 2008 by SPDC forces, Saw T---, an elderly man from See Kheh Der village, lost most of his property: 10 baskets (500 kg. / 1100 lb.) of rice, 10 viss (16.32 kg. / 36 lb.) of salt and 10 viss of fish paste. The cost of the items was estimated to be around 200,000 kyat (approx. US \$170). After his village was destroyed, Saw T--- was forced to flee to a forest hiding site in the mountains with only his daughter to support him. The daughter is now responsible for buying their food from M--- village. She has to walk for three days to get the food and told KHRG:

"My father is very old. Even though I'm a woman, I've already had to carry all the food for two months. I don't have time to relax. The SPDC came and took our rice, salt and fish paste, and now we have nothing. We don't know the reason [why the SPDC took the property]. We had been working to clear the hills and hill fields for planting, but now we dare not go back and check on them."



This picture, taken on May 24th 2008, shows a hill field belonging to residents of Tantabin township before the arrival of the SPDC. [Photo: KHRG]



The same hill field is shown here on June 14th 2008. Due to an SPDC patrol in the area, villagers could not return to work the land and weeds have since overgrown most of the field. [Photo: KHRG]

"The SPDC arrived and became active in the area. They [SPDC soldiers] occupied Hs--- village and were always patrolling. They came once a week and sometimes twice a week."

- Saw K--- (male, 50), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (June 2008)

Although they had begun cultivating newly planted fields in Bu---, B---, H--- and S--- villages in Tantabin township, the villagers had to flee to a hiding site on May 2008. However, once SPDC troops established a camp near the fields, the villagers were again forced to flee into

¹ See, *SPDC troops burn villages and step up operations against civilians in southern Toungoo District*, KHRG, December 2007.

the forest and their crops have since become overgrown by weeds, which will undermine the growth of the plants and thus reduce the villagers' eventual harvest and food supplies.

Starting in January 2008, civilians from 11 different villages in Tantabin township began to meet and discuss how to best evade the SPDC. The villagers settled on separating into small groups and escaping to three different forest hiding sites. When SPDC patrols began attacking villages in the area in April 2008, the civilians fled to these three pre-decided locations and have attempted to live as normally as possible. In one hiding site, the villagers have built an impromptu school for their children, so as not to allow their displacement to jeopardise their children's education.

Insecurity and the food crisis

"We live in the forest, which isn't close to our workplaces. We can't go back to work in the fields. We have 21 households in the village and there used to be 81 villagers. All the villagers had been working the fields. They can't grow enough rice to survive and we have to go to other places to look for rice."

- Saw K--- (male, 50), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (June 2008)

The SPDC military assaults on Toungoo residents have seriously disrupted regular planting cycles, creating a food crisis in the region that further endangers the IDPs living there. Villagers are forced to remain in dangerous hiding places, often going without food for days at a time. It takes several days for villagers hiding in the area to travel and obtain food from M--- village, which has the nearest accessible market. It is an exhausting journey and civilians risk being killed if met by SPDC troops. On 4th June 2008, villagers from H---, T--- and B--- villages went to buy their food at M--- village. While returning home, the SPDC discovered them and began to shoot. The villagers were forced to drop that which they were carrying and flee and the soldiers took the newly purchased food that the villagers had left behind.



One of three pre-planned hiding sites on June 12th 2008.
[Photo: KHRG]

"In the past, we had 35-36 households in the village, but when [SPDC] LID [Light Infantry Division] #88, #66 and #77 set up camp, there were only 24 people and 6 households left. We all farm hill fields, but we can't work them as we had in the past and we cannot cultivate anything. The SPDC troops who are near our village are based out of areas near W--- and B---. They came down and searched for food in the villagers' plantations. They burnt the forest and the fire destroyed the villagers' workplaces [fields and plantations]. They shelled villagers' residences with mortar fire. We can still hear their gunfire. We didn't have enough rice. When the villagers returned to look for food, they found that nothing had been left behind. We have to be porters, [carrying] other people's things in order to get wages. We have a difficult life."

- Saw G--- (male 54), G--- village, Tantabin township (June 2008)



These photos show children from B--- village who fled with their families to shelters that had been built in advance at one of the three hiding sites based at G--- village. Because the children, shown here on June 12th 2008, have had to constantly evade the SPDC, they have been unable to obtain steady educations. [Photo: KHRG]

The current rainy season makes life even more difficult for displaced villagers in hiding. Having few building materials, the villagers are only able to construct small huts, some of which don't have roofs. There are often also not enough blankets and mosquito nets to go around, frequently leaving many displaced villagers exposed to the elements. Many have run out of food and rely on Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forces for stores, as was the case in February 2008 when KNLA Brigade #5 Brigadier Baw Gkyaw Heh distributed rice sacks to struggling villagers living in the three designated hiding sites.

For the first half of this year, villagers have also had to go without financial support from cross-border NGOs that has become a key means for villagers to purchase food. A villager from Toungoo District reported to KHRG researchers that *"In the past, CIDKP [the Committee for the Internally Displaced Karen People] and KORD [the Karen Office of Relief and Development] gave support to the villagers, but this year the village didn't receive this support. The villagers really need help for 2008."* When KHRG staff contacted the staff of KORD and CIDKP, the organizations confirmed that a lack of funding had prevented them from providing relief to the IDPs between January and June of 2008. However, these organisations had planned to restart relief operations in July 2008 with new funds.

Killings

Many Toungoo IDPs have had to make difficult decisions about their futures. Some villagers who had attempted to make a living in the plain areas have been unable to find jobs and are constantly conscripted into forced labour by SPDC forces. As a consequence, many of these villagers surreptitiously return to the mountains to cultivate crops and risk being discovered by SPDC troops. If discovered, they will be conscripted into forced labour, shot on sight, or detained and executed. Such an incident occurred on May 20th 2008, when soldiers attached to LIB #370 – based out of Gkaw Thay Der village – arrested Saw Gkaw Gkoh, a 40-year-old man from Ya Thay



This photograph, taken on March 26th 2008, shows the skeleton of 30-year-old Saw Bpler Po. Saw Bpler Po was arrested by SPDC soldiers when returning from his plantation field in Tantabin township and killed on Nov 27th 2007. [Photo: KHRG]

Gkoh village who was travelling to his mountain plantation. The soldiers didn't question him but instead ordered a soldier to escort him to the military camp, where SPDC officers Tun Win and Min Zaw, ordered his execution. Another example is from May 22nd 2008, when soldiers from Military Operations Command (MOC) #21, which were patrolling the area surrounding Gkaw Thay Der village, arrested Saw Gko Gkoh, a 42-year-old man from Glay Kee village who had lived in the flatlands and was discovered while tending to his mountain field near Gkaw Thay Der. Soldiers arrested him and took him away. Local villagers believe that he was executed, although they have been unable to find his body.

The above examples are just some of the many incidents of killings which have been reported to KHRG this year. Below is a list of villagers injured or killed in Toungoo District between April and May 2008 alone:

#	Date	Name	Age	Village	SPDC personnel responsible	Details
1	April 1 st	Saw Gka Rer Bper	45	Huh Muh Der	Huh Muh Der	Killed
2	April 8 th	Saw Tar Krit Krit	38	Kler La	MOC #10, operating out of Kler La and led by Ko Ko Lat	Killed between Kler La and Ler Koh villages at 8:00 am
3	May 20 th	Saw Gkaw Gkoh	40	Ya Thay Gkoh	LIB #370	Killed
4	May 22 nd	Saw Gko Gkoh	42	Gklay Kee	MOC #21	Killed
5	May 23 rd	Saw T---	27	Yer Loh	IB #47	Arm injured at 4:20 pm.
6	May 23 rd	Naw G---	60	Yer Loh	IB #47	Leg injured at 4:20 pm.

Conclusion

"When the SPDC doesn't come, we work very well. When the SPDC comes, we have to stop working and flee to the forest. Sometimes we can't even work for one week. Then they [SPDC soldiers] enter into our workplaces and eat our plants and destroy our belongings. If they arrive during the dry season, they burn the forest and the fire destroys our crops and plantations."

- Saw D--- (male, 60), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (June 2008)

The SPDC continues to pressure villagers by building military camps on or near villagers' cultivation areas and forcing them to abandon their farms and fields. Civilians who decide to secretly return to their crops risk being discovered and killed. In the face of encroaching SPDC Army units and the threat of living under their control – meaning a life of forced labour and other forms of extortion – many villagers in Toungoo District choose instead to flee into the forest. A food crisis has emerged from this instability and the villagers capable of evading capture or execution by the SPDC are now threatened with malnutrition and potential starvation. Furthermore, by actively destroying villagers' food stores and farm fields, the Burma Army hopes to starve villagers into leaving their hiding sites and submitting to a life under SPDC control in the plains. Nevertheless, villagers continue to weigh their options and often still choose to evade control and resist abuse, remaining close to their homelands for as long as possible.

"We hope the situation becomes peaceful and that the SPDC collapses so that we can stay and work our fields peacefully. [Then] our work will be

better, our standard of living will be higher. All of the villagers, we long and yearn for peace."

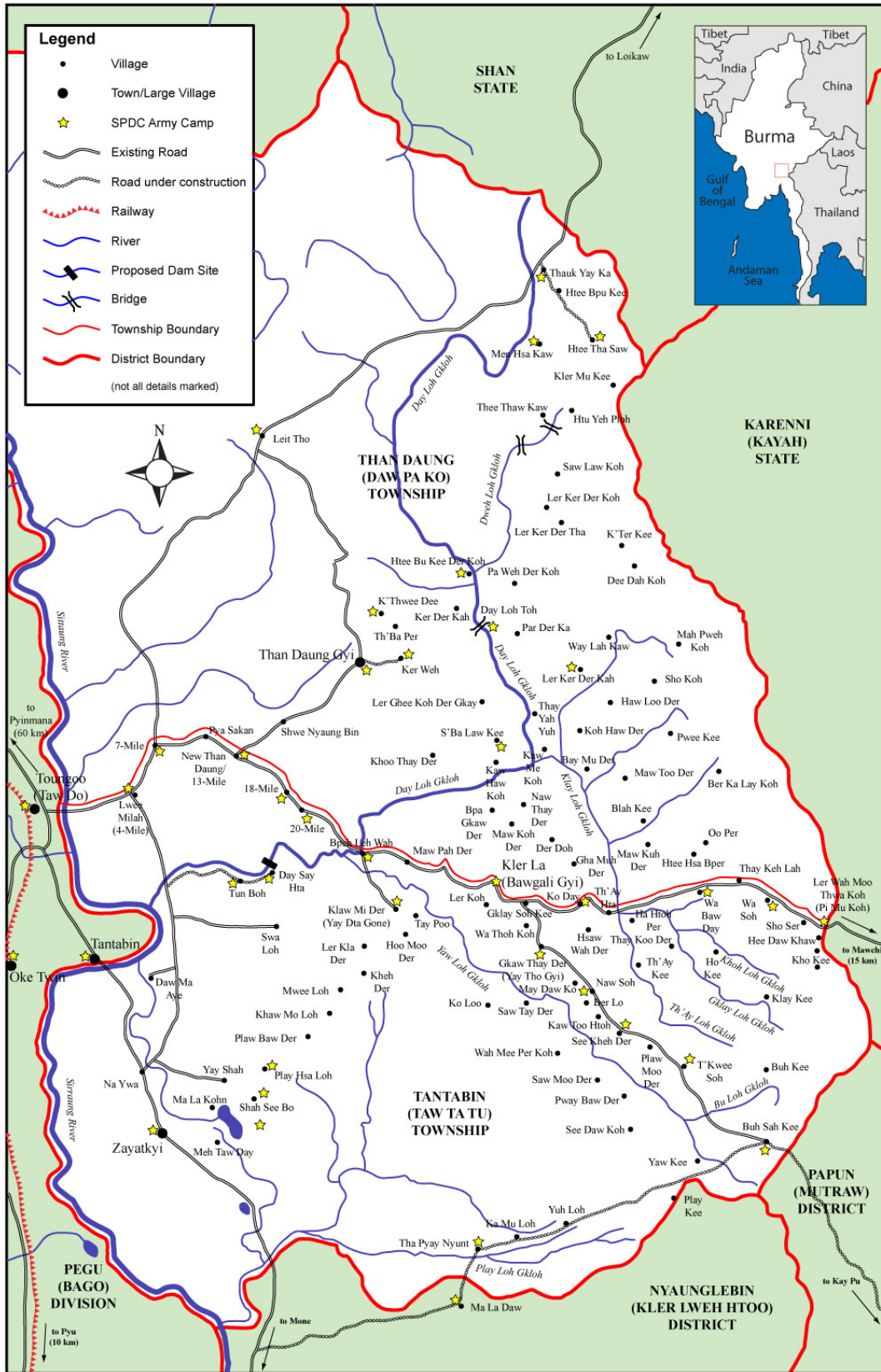
- Saw D--- (male, 60), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (June 2008)

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

- *Attacks, forced labour and restrictions in Toungoo District* (July 2008)
- *SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District* (March 2008)
- *Militarisation, violence and exploitation in Toungoo District* (February 2008)
- *SPDC troops burn villages and step up operations against civilians in southern Toungoo District* (December 2007)
- *Villagers risk arrest and execution to harvest their crops* (December 2007)
- *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)

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.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