



News Bulletin

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Security concerns for new refugees in Tha Song Yang: Update on increased landmine risks

At least 4,862 refugees from the Ler Per Her IDP camp and surrounding villages in Pa'an District remain at new arrival sites in Thailand. Though the fighting that precipitated the flight of many of these refugees in June has decreased, the area from which they fled continues to be unsafe for them to return. This bulletin provides updated information on landmine risks for refugees who may return, or who have already returned, including the maiming of a 13-year-old resident of the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site who returned to visit his village to tend livestock. Refugees face other threats to safe return as well, including widespread conscription as forced labourers, porters and "human minesweepers" by the SPDC and DKBA, as well as forced military recruitment by the DKBA and potential accusation and punishment as "insurgent supporters."

More than 4,862 refugees remain in new arrival sites at Noh Boe, Oo Thu Hta and Mae Salit villages in Thailand's Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province; of these, 2,145 are under 12 years of age. Refugees began arriving in June, following a series of escalating attacks by joint Burma Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces on Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) camps. The camps, belonging to battalions #101, 21 and 22 of KNLA 7th Brigade, were situated near the Ler Per Her camp for internally displaced people (IDPs), in Dta Greh Township, Pa'an District. At the time, the Ler Per Her IDP camp was home to more than 1,200 people, all of whom fled to Thailand along with thousands of people from surrounding villages.



This photo, taken on September 13th 2009, shows the small DKBA camp at Klo Yaw Hta in Dta Greh Township, Karen State, as viewed from near Mae Salit, across the Moei River in Thailand. The brushy area at bottom is heavily mined. [Photo: KHRG]

Fighting has decreased since June 13th 2009, when troops from KNLA 7th Brigade vacated their positions near Ler Per Her. Refugees continued to come to Thailand well after this date, however, citing exploitative abuse by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Army and DKBA. Abuses documented by KHRG include forced labour on military camps, portering supplies and serving as human minesweepers. These abuses continue, as does the widespread forced conscription of soldiers by the DKBA as the group prepares to transform

itself into a government-allied (and, at least partially, government-controlled) Border Guard Force prior to the 2010 election.¹

Though soldiers from KNLA 7th Brigade had placed defensive mines near their camps in the area of the Ler Per IDP camp prior to June, villagers knew their general locations. These mines remained in place after 7th Brigade Battalions #101, 21 and 22 vacated their camps on June 13th. Of more concern to villagers are mines placed by SPDC and DKBA soldiers, who KHRG field researchers report began laying mines in June 2009. The locations of these mines are not known to villagers. Initially, many of these mines were around camps and occupied villages, as well as areas SPDC and DKBA soldiers felt might be used by the KNLA – including villages vacated by refugees now residing in Thailand.

According to six DKBA deserters interviewed by KHRG on September 13th, in August 2009 the DKBA began significantly expanding areas targeted for landmine placement. According to the deserters, newly mined places included a more thorough mining of abandoned villages as well as the western bank of the Moei River. The Moei River serves as the border between Burma and Thailand, and must be crossed by refugees travelling to or from the new arrival sites in Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province.

KHRG has two reports of villagers injured by landmines in the Ler Per Her area since refugees began arriving in Tha Song Yang during June 2009. The first occurred in the first week of July at Wah Mee Gkalah village in Dta Greh Township, Pa'an District. In this case, a man who had been conscripted as a forced labourer by SPDC soldiers at the nearby Gka Teh army camp returned to find his village entirely abandoned. After briefly allowing himself to be recruited by the DKBA, he stepped on a landmine in his village after returning again to see if he could ascertain the whereabouts of his relatives.²

The second confirmed report of a landmine victim in the Ler Per Her area occurred in Meh La Ah Hta village. On September 17th 2009, 13-year-old Saw G--- and three other boys returned to Meh La Ah Hta to tend to buffalo left behind when their families fled to Thailand. According to a KHRG researcher in the area, Saw G--- and his family fled from adjacent Meh La Ah Kee village on June 2nd, and have been living in the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site. Before they fled, the family had unsuccessfully attempted to find a buyer for the livestock because many of the area villages had been abandoned. Saw G--- was subsequently tasked with periodically checking on the buffalo and had returned to the Meh La Ah Hta area two or three times already since June.

Meh La Ah Hta is relatively far from Ler Per Her – more than three hours to the south on foot, and a much longer trip for villagers travelling slowly by forest paths so that they can avoid SPDC and DKBA patrols. The area around Meh La Ah Kee and Me La Ah Hta villages up to the bank of the Moei River is currently occupied and patrolled by troops commanded by officer Kyaw Nyaing, from Battalion #4 of DKBA Brigade #999. SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #28, led by Zaw Win, also remains in the area, but KHRG researchers report that its soldiers remain mostly at their camps and in villages well under government control.

At approximately 1:30 pm on September 17th, Saw G--- stepped on a landmine. Carried back across the border into Thailand, he was eventually treated in the Mae Sot General Hospital. His

¹ For more details on the way that exploitative abuse in the Ler Per Her area – rather than simply the presence of conflict – has under-pinned villagers' flight and continued desire to stay in Thailand, see "Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang," KHRG, August 2009.

² For more on this incident, see "Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang," KHRG, August 2009.

left leg has been amputated; his right leg is broken badly enough to potentially warrant amputation. It is important to note that the injuries sustained by Saw G---, who is 13 years old, clearly constitute one of the six “grave violations” outlined in United Nations Security Council resolution 1612,³ which called for an end to abuses prohibited under “applicable international law relating to the rights and protection of children in armed conflict.”⁴

Refugees in the new arrival sites that have spoken with KHRG say that the risk posed by landmines continues to make the prospect of a return home frightening. Refugees have also highlighted concern that they will be deemed KNLA supporters and punished accordingly or conscripted as forced labourers to work at SPDC and DKBA army camps, portering equipment and walking ahead of patrols as “human minesweepers.” While some refugees who have spoken with KHRG say that they would like to return home to their villages and farm fields, they have emphasised that they only wish to do so if these concerns are first addressed.

It is not reasonable to expect that the SPDC or DKBA will positively address these concerns in the near future. On September 9th, KHRG reported that refugees at the new arrival sites had permission to stay through the end of the rainy season. While the refugees are currently able to remain at these sites, their position remains tenuous and Thai officials have reportedly made clear that continuing permission is not guaranteed, even through the end of the monsoon. Given the legitimate human rights and security concerns of the newly arrived refugees, as documented by KHRG, any plans for repatriation are, at this time, premature. Most importantly, no plans for repatriation should be advanced without full input from the refugees themselves, and no one should be repatriated against their will.

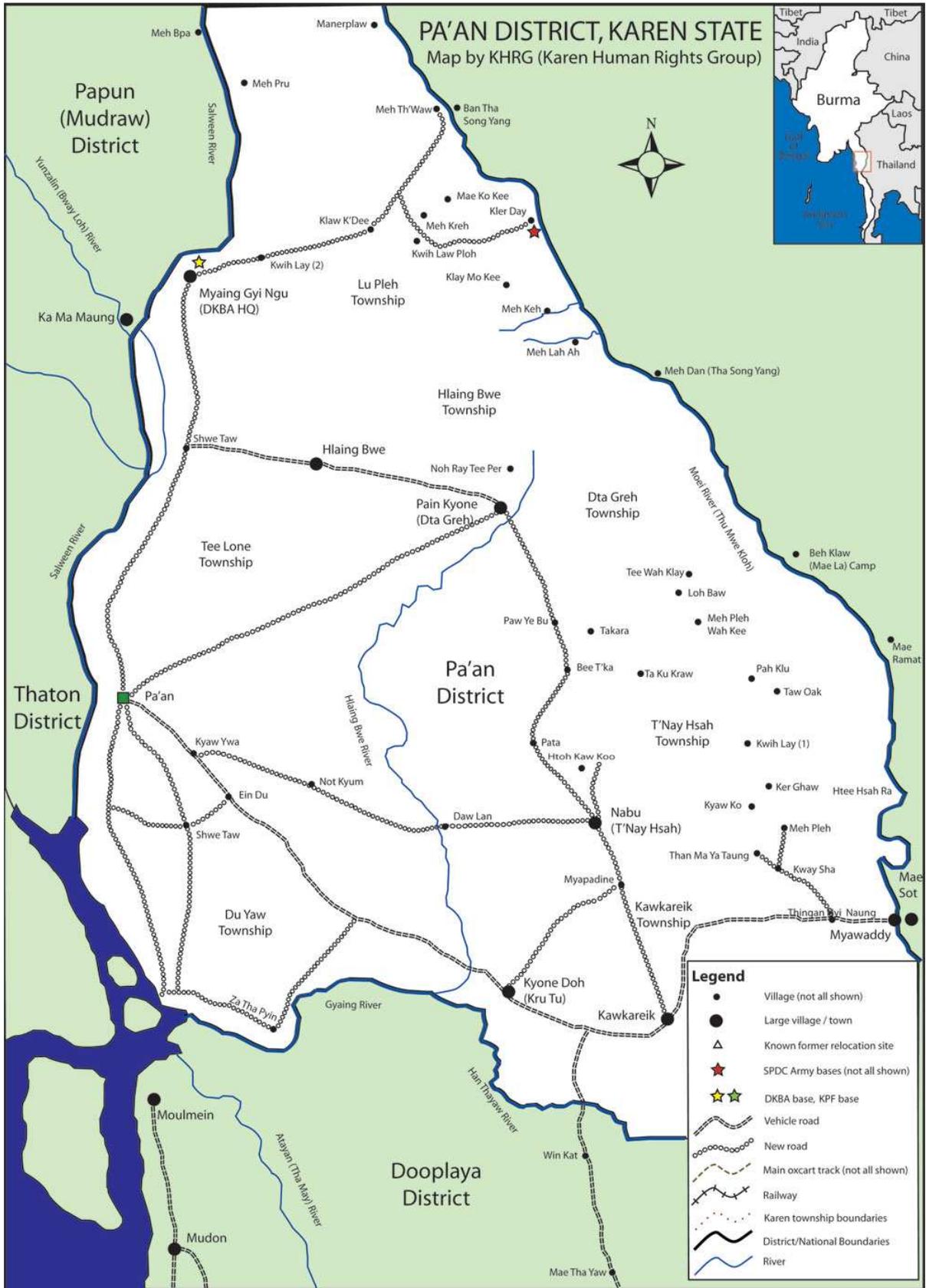
For more information on the impact of the SPDC and DKBA on villagers in Pa’an District, see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- Abuse in Pa’an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang (KHRG, August 2009)
- Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa’an District (KHRG, June 2009)
- Update on SPDC/DKBA attacks at Ler Per Her and new refugees in Thailand (KHRG, June 2009)
- Over 3,000 villagers flee to Thailand amidst ongoing SPDC/DKBA attacks (KHRG, June 2009)
- Over 700 villagers flee to Thailand amidst fears of SPDC/DKBA attacks on a KNLA camp and IDP camp in Pa’an District (KHRG, June 2009)
- Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa’an districts (KHRG, May 2009)
- Extortion and restrictions under the DKBA in Pa’an District (KHRG, March 2009)
- Insecurity amidst the DKBA - KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa’an Districts (KHRG, February 2009)
- Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa’an District (KHRG, September 2008)

Recent photos from the area are presented in KHRG Photo Gallery 2008 and KHRG Photo Gallery 2009. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>

³ “UN Security Council establishes monitoring and reporting system to protect children affected by armed conflict,” UN Security Council Press Release, July 2005.

⁴ Resolution 1612 (2005), UN Security Council, July 26th 2005.



Karen Districts



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