



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

October 13, 2011 / KHRG #2011-B37

Toungoo Situation Update: April to July 2011

This report includes a situation update submitted to KHRG in August 2011 by a villager describing events occurring in Toungoo District between April and July 2011. It describes a May 2011 attack on villages and the destruction of paddy and rice stores in the Maw Thay Der area of Tantabin Township, previously reported by KHRG, and relates the following human rights abuses by Tatmadaw forces: restrictions on movement and trade; including regular closure of vehicle roads and levying of road tolls; forced production and delivery of thatch shingles and bamboo poles; forced portering of military rations; and the theft and looting of villagers' livestock. This report also explains how community members share food when confronting food insecurity, and attempt to ensure that children receive education despite financial barriers and teacher shortages.

Situation Update | Toungoo District (August 2011)

The following situation update was written by a villager in Toungoo District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This report was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including, 40 photographs.²

Introduction

When I review the situation in Toungoo District, citizens have had to face many difficulties due to the oppression of the SPDC military government,³ such as movement restrictions, difficulties for villagers' livelihoods, forced labour and rape. These things are still happening, even now.

¹ KHRG trains villagers in eastern Burma to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format, conduct interviews with other villagers and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When writing situation updates, villagers are encouraged to summarise recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important, and present their opinions or perspective on abuse and other local dynamics in their area.

² When these documents have been processed and translated by KHRG and when sufficient information has been compiled and analysed, a full Field Report on the situation in Toungoo District will be available on the KHRG website. Until then, KHRG's most recent analysis of the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the recent Field Report, "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

³ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) and *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) are commonly used to refer to the Burmese government or to Burma's state army, the Tatmadaw. Many older Karen villagers who were accustomed to using the phrase *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) before 1997 continue to use that phrase, even though the SLORC has not officially existed since 1997. Similarly, despite the official dissolution of the SPDC in March 2011, many Karen villagers continue to use the phrase *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) to refer to the Burmese government or to the Tatmadaw; see: "Mission Accomplished as SPDC 'dissolved'," *Myanmar Times*, April 4-10 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the researcher and informants, and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this report.

Villagers in the area can live [here], but they have to live with worries, fears and insufficient food, so they have to share food with each other.

Villagers' occupations

Villagers in Toungoo District cultivate plantations and hill fields for their livelihoods. There are two types of villagers in Toungoo District. Most villagers within areas controlled by the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw] either cultivate plantations or drive motorcycle taxis. The plantations are of cardamom, betelnut, coffee, durian and mangosteen. The villagers who do not live within areas under SPDC Army control cultivate hill fields and cardamom plantations. This year, we saw that the villagers who cultivate hill fields faced problems burning their hill fields, because of the abnormal weather which caused a big problem for their work. Some people could burn their fields and they could work in their fields [without problems].

Most villagers within areas under SPDC Army control cultivate plantations for their livelihoods. Year after year, we can say that villagers who cultivate plantations for their livelihoods do not do well. The plantations do not provide sufficient fruit because of the abnormal weather. This year, in 2011, the plantations like durian and mangosteen provided less fruit [than in previous years]. This causes a problem for villagers to sell [the fruit] in order to buy food. Moreover, motorcycle drivers always face toll collections by the SPDC Army on the road. There are seven [major] checkpoints of the SPDC Army on the vehicle road from Kler La [Bawgali Gyi] to Toungoo [town]. A motorbike has to pay 500 kyat [US \$0.60]⁴ at each checkpoint. On July 9th 2011, SPDC Army MOC [Military Operations Command] #9 which is based in the Kler La army camp closed the road from Kler La to Toungoo, so motorbike taxi drivers faced serious difficulties. When the SPDC Army closes the road, villagers in the area face problems to trade, and cannot sell produce from their plantations.

Villagers within SPDC Army controlled areas have to face oppression [by Tatmadaw forces] in many ways. They complain about all the work that they have to do.

SPDC Army activity and forced labour

In Toungoo District, villagers always face [demands for] forced labour from the SPDC Army. On July 6th 2011, SPDC Army LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #539 from Klaw Mi Der [Yay Dta Gone] army camp, led by Saw Lay Tun, forced four Burmese village women, and 26 Burmese men and 15 [Karen] villagers from Maw Pah Der village to go and carry rations from Klaw Mi Der to Bpeh Leh Wah army camp. On April 8th 2011, SPDC Army soldiers from LIB #539, based in Klaw Mi Der army camp, forced Klaw Mi Der, Ler Kla Der, [Hoo Moo Der] and Burmese villagers to go and carry rations. There were 23 men and 24 women from Klaw Mi Der village; one man and woman from Ler Kla Der village; five men and nine women from Hoo Moo Der village and three Burmese men. The SPDC Army rations that villagers had to go and carry were 40 sacks of rice [1,920 kg. / 4,224 lb.],⁵ five tins of cooking oil, and 200 cans of meat. Villagers had to carry these from Klaw Mi Der army camp to Bpeh Leh Wah army camp.

On April 11th 2011, SPDC Army soldiers from IB [Infantry Battalion] #73, based in Yay Shah army camp, forced Shah See Bo, Yay Shah, Zee Pyu Gone and Taw Gkoo villages to provide building materials. Shah See Bo village had to provide 200 thatch shingles and 50 bamboo poles; Yay Shah village had to provide 500 thatch shingles and 50 bamboo poles; Zee Pyu

⁴ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the fluctuating informal exchange rate rather than the government's official fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1. As of October 6th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 830 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

⁵ Unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One sack is equivalent to 31.35 kg. / 69.12 lb. of paddy or 48 kg. / 105.6 lb. of husked rice.

Gone had to provide 500 thatch shingles and 50 bamboo poles; and Taw Gkoo village had to provide 50 thatch shingles and 30 bamboo poles. These villages had to deliver these building materials to Yay Shah army camp.

On April 21st 2011, SPDC Army soldiers from LIB #539 who are based in Hs--- army camp demanded 300 thatch shingles from Play Hsa Loh village, 200 thatch shingles from Ya Loh village, 250 thatch shingles from Plaw Baw Der and 250 [thatch shingles] from Lay Ho Law Paw Pa village. Soldiers from SPDC Army IB #73, who occupy Shah See Bo army camp, forced Shah See Bo villagers to go and carry rations from Ta Bpay to Shah See Bo army camp.

SPDC Army soldiers from LIBs #376 and #541 entered the Maw Thay Der hill field area on May 15th 2011 to rotate with LIB #278⁶ and LIB #380, based out of the Naw Soh and Buh Sah Kee army camps. Villagers in the hill field areas had to flee into the jungle and faced many difficulties. After they fled, the SPDC Army soldiers entered villagers' hill fields and burned down villagers' huts, food stores of paddy and rice, and destroyed everything.⁷ Villagers whose huts were burned down by the SPDC Army soldiers are Saw S--- (30 years old) with five baskets of paddy [104.5 kg. / 230.4 lb.]⁸ lost; Saw P--- (55 years old) with five baskets of paddy lost; and Saw K--- (56 years old) with five baskets of paddy lost and all of [his] pots and plates, too. Saw C--- (55 years old) lost five baskets of paddy and all of his pots and plates. Saw G--- (52 years old) had 12 baskets of paddy [250.8 kg. / 552.96 lb.] destroyed by the SPDC Army soldiers. This attack poses a big problem for the villagers because their main food supplies were destroyed. As for Saw A---, the SPDC Army soldiers took six [of his] chickens and three ducks.

On July 1st 2011, SPDC Army soldiers from LIB #539 which is based at Hs--- forced villagers from Hs--- and Ba--- villages to make and send 50 thatch shingles. This is forced labour that villagers face. On July 9th 2011, an SPDC Army commander under MOC #9, based in Kler La, had the vehicle road from Kler La to Toungoo [town] closed. The SPDC Army closed the vehicle road and villagers who live in Gkaw Thay Der [Yay Tho Gyi] village tract, around Gklay Loh and Maw Nay Bpwa, face livelihood problems related to [reduced] trade. The main problem they face is that prices go up [when the road is closed].

Education

For the education situation in the Toungoo District area, there are many difficulties for children to get an education. To be able to enter school, a student has to pay a school fee and other fees that cost a lot. As we know, seven percent of the [Burmese] government's national budget is used to support education. The Burmese government spends more money on military equipment. Children who study in Burma and graduate primary and middle school have no qualifications, so they face problems when they go to high school. Higher fees have to be paid when students go to high school. Students in the ninth and tenth standards have to pay for and go to private tutoring because, if they do not, they cannot keep up with their lessons. There are many problems that students have to face and the costs for students to get an education and to be able to go to school [are high].

⁶ Although the villager who wrote this update specified "LIB #278" in Arabic numerals, he was likely referring to LIB #378. LIB #378 operates under MOC #9, as do LIBs #376, 380 and 541 mentioned by the villager above. Infantry Battalion (IB) #278, however, operates under MOC #14 in southern Shan State; see: *Protracted Displacement and Chronic Poverty in eastern Burma / Myanmar*, Thailand Burma Border Consortium, November 2010, p. 65. Note that the numeral used in Karen and Burmese for the number "3" closely resembles the Arabic numeral "2", which may lead to confusion when transcribing numbers.

⁷ This incident was previously reported by KHRG on June 2nd 2011; see: "Joint Tatmadaw patrol burns field huts and seed stores, displaces six villages in Toungoo District", KHRG, June 2011.

⁸ Unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One basket is equivalent to 20.9 kg. / 46.08 lb. of paddy or 32 kg. / 70.4 lb. of husked rice.

Karen people living in the mountainous regions encourage and support their children to go to school and to read and write. For some parents who do not have strong feelings about sending their children to school, later we see that their children grow up and become bad people.

“Our school is a primary school and has 150 students. There are four teachers; two are male and two are female. There are 50 students in the kindergarten class. It is not easy to teach them with one teacher. I requested the education department [to send teachers], but they sent none to us. We can do nothing. When I saw the village head, I asked for help from him. He discussed with villagers, and they made agreements and sent us a female teacher. We see that the Burmese military government has no motivation in education, so we will have to work together for our children to be able to go to school.”

-School teacher, Wo--- village, Tantabin Township, Toungoo District

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

- *Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011* (July 2011)
- *Toungoo Situation Update: April 2011* (June 2011)
- *Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011* (June 2011)
- *Toungoo Interviews: November 2010 to April 2011* (June 2011)
- *Joint Tatmadaw patrol burns field huts and seed stores, displaces six villages in Toungoo District* (June 2011)
- *Toungoo Incident Reports: March and April 2011* (May 2011)
- *Toungoo Situation Update and Interviews: May 2010 to January 2011* (May 2011)

