



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## **Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Ler Doh Township, May to July 2011**

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*This report includes a situation update submitted to KHRG in August 2011 by a villager describing events occurring in Ler Doh [Kyauk Kyi] Township, Nyaunglebin District, between May and July 2011. It provides details on human rights abuses committed by Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #345 including: demands for forced labour clearing vegetation around Tatmadaw camps, serving as set tha at Tatmadaw camps, and collecting and delivering building materials and firewood; the imposition of movement restrictions and the requirement that villagers purchase travel permission documents to access agricultural workplaces; arbitrary demands for food and payment; and an order to dismantle field huts. This report also notes that villagers were directly ordered by LIB #345 Captain The Zaw Win not to discuss or report demands for payment, and describes cooperation between public and military sector officials to levy demands for payment. This report also mentions that some villagers have responded to abuses by negotiating with Tatmadaw officers to avoid orders to dismantle their field huts, and by moving to areas beyond consolidated Tatmadaw control to access humanitarian support and pursue livelihoods activities.*

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### **Situation Update | Ler Doh Township, Nyaunglebin District (August 2011)**

*The following situation update was written by a villager in Nyaunglebin 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.<sup>1</sup> This report was received along with other information from Nyaunglebin District, including two interviews and 70 photographs.<sup>2</sup>*

### **Introduction**

In my area, the Tatmadaw<sup>3</sup> commits many different kinds of human rights abuse. Tatmadaw soldiers always demand tax and force villagers to labour. The [November 2010] election

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 Nyaunglebin District will be available on the KHRG website. Until then, KHRG's most recent analysis of the situation in Nyaunglebin District can be found in the recent Field Report, "Livelihood consequences of SPDC restrictions and patrols in Nyaunglebin District," KHRG, September 2009.

<sup>3</sup> 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 military, the Tatmadaw. Many older Karen villagers who were accustomed

changed nothing and, as for the situation here, nothing has changed. The soldiers still force villagers to work for them and demand things from the villagers.

## Forced labour, taxation and demands

In May, Tatmadaw LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #345 ordered the villagers not to build huts on their farms and to dismantle all huts [already established] in the villagers' farms. This has happened in the Ler Doh [Kyauk Kyi] Township area and is causing farming problems for the villagers. The village head discussed [the problem] with the Tatmadaw soldiers and the Tatmadaw soldiers agreed to let the villagers build huts on their farm. However, if the villagers build huts on their farms they have to pay 3,500 kyat (US \$4.55).<sup>4</sup> The villagers have to work on their farms, so they had to agree to pay.

On June 13<sup>th</sup> 2011, Captain Thet Zaw Win of Tatmadaw LIB #345, which is based at the H--- army camp, ordered the villagers from B---, L---, T--- and K--- village tracts to go and repair the army camp [at H---]. Each household had to bring two bamboo poles and two wooden posts. There were 400 households that had to bring the wooden posts and bamboo poles, and ten villagers that had to work for them [as *set tha*] every day at the army camp.<sup>5</sup> The Tatmadaw soldiers did not ask the villagers to work for them in the same way they had before. They asked instead for ten *set tha* to actually stay at their army camp to work for them.

On July 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, Tatmadaw LIB #345 Captain Way Pyo Thu forced the villagers from S---, N---, B--- and T--- village tracts to cut and clear vegetation for them around the O--- Pagoda army camp. The villagers in the area had to clear vegetation that stretched 50 yards out [from the camp perimeter] and it took the villagers five days to finish. Each of the four village tracts had to send 20 villagers every day.

## Taxation and demands

On June 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, the Ler Doh *Myo Lon Mu* [Township Security Director] demanded three chickens from S--- village. This *Myo Lon Mu* always demands food from villagers and when Tatmadaw LIB #345 came and took military responsibility for Southern Ler Doh Township, they made demands on the villagers for a whole month. The villagers cannot raise enough animals [to meet soldiers' demands for food]. Each household has to pay about 3,000 kyat (US \$3.90) each month into a village fund. If they demand a lot of food, the village head has to collect more money, about 8,000 kyat (US \$10.39), from the villagers. Because of this [regular demands for food], the village head has to collect more and more money from the villagers.

On July 21<sup>st</sup> 2011, Tatmadaw LIB #345 Company Commander [Captain] Thet Zaw Win ordered the villagers from K---, B---, L--- and T--- village tracts to buy four [prepaid] cellular phone cards, totalling 150,000 kyat (US \$195). The village tracts decided to divide the cost between them. B--

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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<sup>th</sup> 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this report and informants; however, in order to ensure clarity in this translation, "SPDC" has been replaced with "Tatmadaw" when referring to the state military and with "Burmese government" when referring to the national government.

<sup>4</sup> 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 November 15<sup>th</sup> 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

<sup>5</sup> *Set tha* is a Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases and serving as a go-between to deliver orders from army officers to village heads, but also involving other menial tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

- village tract had to give 50,000 kyat (US \$64.94). K--- village tract had to give 30,000 kyat (US \$38.96). T--- village tract had to give 20,000 kyat (US \$25.97) and L--- village tract had to give 50,000 kyat. This commander, after he demanded and took the money, did not allow the villagers to talk about or report [what had happened].

On July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011, Company Commander [Captain] Thet Zaw Win based at H--- camp ordered villagers to procure 1,500 [empty] fertiliser bags to build the army camp's defences. He ordered [villagers from] L--- and B--- village tracts to deliver these and to build the army camp defences.

At the same time [July 22<sup>nd</sup>], each household in T--- village tract and K--- village tract was ordered to give the Tatmadaw [LIB #345] one load of firewood every day and whenever they [villagers] came to the H--- army camp. There are 200 households [in T--- and K--- village tracts combined].

On July 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, Z--- Camp Commander Kyaw Kyaw Zin ordered villagers to bring firewood. Every household in A---, C--- and G--- villages had to provide one load of firewood to the camp.

## **Life under Tatmadaw control**

Even though the [November 2010] election brought change, the Tatmadaw soldiers still come into villages and their relationship with villagers has not changed. They demand more and more money from villagers. The demands for money from the Township Administrative Officer come through the Village Tract Administrator. They [civilian officials] meet together with Tatmadaw LIB #345 every 15 days.

## **Villagers' situation**

The villagers who live in the hill areas are now facing food shortages because last year, in 2010, the Tatmadaw came and attacked their villages, burning down the villagers' houses and destroying their food supplies. The villagers did not have the chance to work on their hill farms regularly, so they have food shortages this year.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, and because [villagers] under Tatmadaw control do not have jobs to do, some villagers have moved closer to areas where they can receive help from the organisations [from Thailand providing cross-border support]. So they have moved closer to hill areas to look for work and to catch fish to sell.

When villagers [in Tatmadaw-controlled areas] want to travel they need to ask permission from the Tatmadaw soldiers. Tatmadaw soldiers allow the villagers travel because they can demand [payment for travel permission]. Farmers also have to pay money in order to work on their farms without disruption.

## **General information**

In May, Tatmadaw LIB #264 at I--- army camp demanded money for each villager's farm hut. Villagers had to give 2,000 kyat (US \$2.60) per farm hut. The Tatmadaw soldiers give villagers the chance [to work and travel] because they can demand money from villagers and force villagers to work for them. They allow villagers to move around and work without disruption because they get money from them.

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<sup>6</sup> While the KHRG researcher who wrote this report did not specify the timeframe of the attacks to which he was referring, KHRG has previously reported that approximately 2,000 villagers in central Kyauk Kyi [Ler Doh] Township fled a series of attacks in which five villagers were killed, eleven houses burned and landmines planted in abandoned villages between January 17<sup>th</sup> and March 26<sup>th</sup> 2010, following the establishment of a new Tatmadaw camp in Kheh Der village tract, See "Attacks and displacement in Nyaunglebin District", KHRG, April 2010 and "Attacks on displaced villagers in Nyaunglebin District", KHRG, January 2010.

The Burmese government's primary school in E--- village sent a funding request to UNICEF and received millions [of kyat] to buy supplies and students' books. However, for the transportation of the books, they [the Burmese government]<sup>7</sup> demanded that the students' parents pay more than the books would have cost if they had bought them themselves.

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

- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw Sa---, May 2011," (August 2011)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw My---, May 2011," (August 2011)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw Ka---, May 2011," (August 2011)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw Th---, May 2011," (August 2011)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw S---, May 2011," (July 2011)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw P---, May 2011," (July 2011)
- "Nyaunglebin Interviews: May 2011," (June 2011)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010-B*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khr.org>.

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<sup>7</sup> While the villager who wrote this report did not mention any specific actors in the Burmese government, other unpublished information received by KHRG from the same villager suggests that, with regard to this incident, he is referring to the Kyauk Kyi [Ler Doh] Township Education Coordinator within the Burmese government's Education Department.

