



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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Nyaunglebin Situation Update: August to October 2011

This report includes a situation update submitted to KHRG in November 2011 by a villager describing events occurring in Ler Doh Township, Nyaunglebin District between August and October 2011. The report describes the an incident of forced labour in which villagers were forced to clear undergrowth from a palm oil plantation at IB #60 military headquarters, as well as arbitrary demands for villagers to provide money, firewood, wooden logs and food to Tatmadaw troops. The villager who wrote this report notes that governmental administrative reforms at the village tract level have resulted in increased demands for payment from civilian officials at a time when flooding in flat areas of paddy cultivation adjacent to the Sittaung River at the end of the 2011 monsoon has substantially impacted villagers' food security. The villager also raises local communities' concerns regarding the proposed construction of a dam on the Theh Loh River; and requirements that civilians provide guarantees that non-state armed groups will not attack Tatmadaw troops, which villagers fear will lead to reprisals from Tatmadaw soldiers if fighting does occur. This report also documents several ways in which villagers in Ler Doh Township have responded to abuses, including the formation of Mu Kha Poe village security groups to monitor Tatmadaw troop activity and warn other community members of incoming Tatmadaw patrols and attacks;; and cooperation with other villagers and with local community-based aid groups to secure food support, communication equipment, education materials and medical treatment.

Situation Update | Ler Doh Township, Nyaunglebin District (August to October 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.¹ This report was received along with other information from Nyaunglebin District, including six interviews and 156 photographs².

human rights abuses committed by the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]³ have decreased in Ler Doh [Kyauk Kyi] Township, but there are a few human rights violations still caused by the SPDC

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 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 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.

³ The villager who wrote this report used the term *Na Ah Pa* (State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) to refer to Burmese military authorities. Many Karen villagers continue to use the phrase *Na Ah Pa* to refer to military or civilian government officials, despite the official dissolution of the SPDC in March 2011; see: "Mission

Army. Villagers also face problems because of abnormal weather. Because of these issues, villagers have faced many problems. For the villagers who live in mountainous areas, there was a lot of SPDC Army activity in the area in 2010, so villagers have faced a food crisis this year [in 2011].⁴ For the villagers who live within SPDC Army-controlled areas, three months of flooding affected many paddy fields, destroying the paddy. About 3,000 acres (1,214 hectares) of paddy fields were flooded.

SPDC Army battalions and locations

The SPDC Army [units] that operate in Ler Doh Township are LID [Light Infantry Division] #101 and Southern Command Headquarters units IBs [Infantry Battalions] #60, #57 and #53, and LIBs [Light Infantry Battalions] #351, #264, #439, #435, #430 and #439. These army units operate in the *bplaw* [flat and treeless, or plains] area, and there are a few kinds of human rights violations that have decreased compared with the past. The government changed their administrative [structure] a little to include civilian government [officials]. They appointed administrators in each village tract and these administrators collect money from villagers, causing a big problem for villagers.⁵

Villagers' situation in mountain areas

In 2010, there were a lot of SPDC Army operations in mountain areas. This year, villagers faced a food crisis, so the villagers reported this to the KNU [Karen National Union] and the KNU will have to arrange food for the villagers so that the villagers can stay and survive in the area. The villagers do not want to leave their homes.

Accomplished as SPDC 'dissolved',” *Myanmar Times*, April 4-10th 2011. Similarly, older villagers may still use the phrase *Na Wa Ta* (State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC) to refer to the Burmese government, even though the SLORC has not officially existed since 1997. As the term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this report, “SPDC” has therefore retained in the translation of this report.

⁴ In early 2010 KHRG reported that approximately 2,000 villagers in central Kyauk Kyi (Ler Doh) Township fled a series of Tatmadaw attacks between January 17th and March 26th 2010, following the establishment of a new Tatmadaw camp in Kheh Der village tract. Two reports published by KHRG document the killing of five villagers, the burning of eleven houses, and the deployment of landmines in abandoned villages by Tatmadaw forces. This type of displacement often results in intense food shortages for villagers, as access to previously-cultivated agricultural land is denied. For more on these attacks, see: “Attacks and displacement in Nyaunglebin District,” KHRG, April 2010 and “Attacks on displaced villagers in Nyaunglebin District,” KHRG, January 2010. For more on food shortages that result from attacks on villagers in hiding, see “Starving them out: Food shortages and exploitative abuse in Papun District,” KHRG, October 2009 and *Food crisis: The cumulative impact of abuse in rural Burma*, KHRG, April 2009.

⁵ The same villager who wrote this report also submitted an earlier account to KHRG in August 2011 in which Village Tract Administrators are described as meeting with local Tatmadaw officers every 15 days to coordinate demands for money from local villagers; see: “Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Ler Doh Township, May to July 2011,” KHRG, November 2011.



According to the villager who wrote this report, this photo was taken on October 12th 2011 in the Sweh Dtee Bplaw area of Ler Doh (Kyauk Kyi) Township. The photo shows two bags of paddy seed that had begun to sprout prematurely after being contaminated with floodwater from the Sittaung River during the 2011 rainy season. [Photo: KHRG]



The six photos above were taken on October 23rd 2011 in the Ah--- area of Kheh Der village tract. According to the villager who wrote this report and took these photos, the photos document the Karen National Union (KNU) delivering rice supplies by boat to Kheh Der villagers. KHRG reported in 2010 that a series of attacks between January 17th and March 26th 2010 following the establishment of a new Tatmadaw camp in Kheh Der led to the displacement of at least 2,000 villagers, restrictions on access to previously cultivable land and subsequent food shortages. In the photos above, villagers from Kheh Der village tract are shown carrying rice supplies from the KNU boat. [Photos: KHRG]



The photos above were taken on October 25th 2011 and show the Ler Doh Township *Bp'Doh*, or Chairman, and some of the villagers who portered rice supplies delivered on October 23rd separating rice for distribution to villagers in Kheh Der village tract and Kwee La Der village tract. [Photos: KHRG]

In the beginning of 2009, villagers in T--- village tract organised and established a group of young people who can *leh gkeh gkay gkeh* [endure strenuous work] and track SPDC Army movements for them so they can work freely. In 2010, the group received more members. There are over 40 people in the group and they call their group *Mu Kha Poe* ['angel' in Karen]. These villagers bring guns with them on their patrols, but the guns they bring are not machine guns; they are guns for shooting animals [hunting muskets]. They resist the SPDC Army and they asked for guns from the organisation⁶ and were allowed to carry the guns. Villagers established *Mu Kha Poe* to provide security in the whole village tract for villagers to be able to work freely. Each member of *Mu Kha Poe* has to spend five days on duty and can then resume their normal village lives [until their next period of duty]. They gather all members [of *Mu Kha Poe*] and provide security in the village tract when there are SPDC Army activities in the area.⁷

Now [organisation censored for security] supports them with walkie-talkies for communication. So they have good communication between each other during their patrols and when they search out signs of the SPDC Army. [If they see Tatmadaw soldiers] along the paths on which SPDC Army troops head to the villages, they fire a gun to alert the villagers. Then villagers in the village flee into the jungle. Villagers do this to protect themselves.

Villagers' situation in areas under SPDC Army control

Villagers who live under the control of the SPDC Army are faced with forced labour, demands for money and different kinds of restrictions.

On September 9th 2011, Battalion Commander Khin Htun of IB #60 ordered ten villagers of N--- and 15 villagers from A--- to go and clear [undergrowth] in the palm oil plantation at IB #60 Battalion Headquarters. It takes one hour to walk from the villages to the camp. *Bo*⁸ Khin Htun came and took three *pway* [Burma Ironwood trees]⁹ from an N--- villager that the villager

⁶ The villager who wrote this report did not specify the organisation to which he was referring, however based on the context, it is probable that he was referring to the Karen National Union (KNU) or the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

⁷ For more information on civilian strategies employed to facilitate information-gathering on Tatmadaw patrol movements in response to the threat of abuse, see "Tatmadaw attacks destroy civilian property and displace villages in northern Papun District," KHRG, April 2011; *Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State*, KHRG, August 2010.

⁸ *Bo* is a common prefix used to refer to a military officer without necessarily signifying his rank.

⁹ Burma Ironwood, or *xylia xylocarpa*, is a flowering tree that produces edible seeds, commonly eaten uncooked. The tree is known as *Pway* in Karen and *Pyinkado* in Burmese.

planned to use for electricity poles. Then this commander [Khin Htun] also took 30 pieces of two-by-three inch and two-by-four inch lumber from loggers named Saw A---, Saw G--- and Saw H---. The commander did not ask permission from these villagers when he took these villagers' wood. He just took what he wanted. The N--- village head, Saw Kl---, gave me this information.

The wives of soldiers from IB #60 under the command of *Bo* Khin Htun, have to go and attend military training in Tw---. For this training, *Bo* Khin Htun demanded firewood from N--- and A--- village. Each household had to provide a bundle of firewood, put it in bag and store it beside the vehicle road. There are 100 households [between these two villages combined]. Once a year, these soldiers' wives go and attend training in Tw---.

On September 9th 2011, LIB #345, based in Payalinko, demanded ten durians from T--- village. The T--- village head had to organise to provide the durians for them. This village head told me about this issue. The military administrator who lives in Ler Doh Town also demanded 1,000 kyat (US \$1.30)¹⁰ from each household. People who live in Ler Doh Town also have to pay 1,000 kyat fee for militia [salaries]. So people who live in Ler Doh Town have to pay 2,000 kyat (US \$2.60) every month. Saw C---, a villager who lives in Y--- section [of Ler Doh Town] told me about this information. The SPDC Army units active in Ler Doh Township forced village heads in Ler Doh Township to sign a guarantee that the KNLA will not to come and attack them. The SPDC Army units always give villagers trouble after fighting has happened, which poses a problem for villagers.

In *bplaw* [flat and treeless, or plains] areas, the Sittaung River flooded for three months, so many paddy fields were destroyed and villagers now face serious difficulties related to their future livelihoods. Many houses and villages were flooded, but there is no support. Villages that were flooded are: Tha Say, Kyun Gyi, Hinthai Wei, Lay Bin Weh, Weh La Daw, Noh Ghaw, Htaik Htoo, Saw Mu Thel, Taw Lu Koh, Noh Poe, Po Lo Noh Soe, Bpa Ta Lah, Sweh Dtee, and Su Kin Tha Yan. These villages were flooded for three months, so villagers in these villages have been without places to stay and food to eat. There is no support for them, so this has become a big problem for the villagers. The flooding started in August and continued into October. Many paddy fields were destroyed.



¹⁰ 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 29th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.



The photos above, taken on October 12th and 16th 2011, show damage to paddy fields in the Weh Lah Taw and Sweh Dtee Bplaw areas proximate to the Sittaung River, which flooded between August and October 2011. [Photos: KHRG]



These photos, taken on October 16th 2011 in the Weh Lah Taw area, show villagers inspecting flood damage to paddy fields when water from the Sittaung River receded after three months of flooding. According to the villager who wrote this report and took these photos, the destruction of paddy crops and seeds as a result of flooding has raised villagers' concerns for their food security during the coming year. [Photos: KHRG]

Health

Villages do not get [have access to] good health care. In mountain areas of T--- village tract, there is one Back Pack [Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) mobile clinic] and there is the M--- clinic in the H--- [area]. P--- village tract receives health care support whenever they can get it. Villagers in flatland areas in the SPDC Army-controlled areas do not receive health care support. They do not have clinics in their villages. They have to go and buy medicine in Ler Doh Town. They can not get medical treatment if they do not have money. Even if they go to a public hospital, if they do not have money, they will not get treatment. In *bplaw* [flat and treeless, or plains] areas, [some villages] receive medical treatment from Back Pack and other villages receive medical health care when FBR [Free Burma Rangers] comes to their area. They never get [health care] from the [Burma] government.

Education

Children do not receive a good education because their parents are poor and cannot send their children to school. Children who should go to school cannot go to school. Children [also] cannot go to high school if their parents do not have money. Now, school teachers do not teach well. Students have to hire *kyu sin*, *wai kyu sin* or *shell wai* [different types of private tutors]. There are many types of *kyu sin*; to hire the *wai kyu sin*, students have to pay 50,000 kyat (US \$64.94) per month and for the *shell wai*, they have to pay up to 100,000 kyat (US \$129.87). So students who do not have money cannot get a higher education. Villagers in *bplaw* [flatland] areas cannot

send their children to school and this has become a big problem. Free education is also not provided for the lower standards [primary and middle school]. Poor families who do not have enough food cannot even send their children to primary and middle school. Children who should go to school cannot go to school; they have to work with their parents.

For the mountain areas, [children] get free education as much as possible. They get support, like notebooks, from the KED [Karen Education Department]. Some parents do not have enough food, so they ask their children to work with them. Those children cannot go to school.

Burmese government projects

The Burmese government built a dam on the Khay Loh [Shwegyin] River and many places were flooded [due to the dam]. Now they will build another dam on the Theh Loh River. They plan to build the dam in 2012. Villagers [in the area] worry for their future lives. If the dam is successfully built, villagers will face difficulties related to travel, places to live and their livelihoods.

Villagers' strengths

Even though villagers face problems, they gather together and work together, so they can do as much as they can to secure their livelihoods related to food and travel. They do not feel sad and disappointed even though there are problems. They try and work hard so they can get by year after year.

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

- "Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Ler Doh Township, May to July 2011," (November 2011)
- "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)

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.khrg.org>.

