



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, August 2011

This report includes a situation update submitted to KHRG in August 2011 by a villager describing ongoing abuses occurring in Thaton Township in 2011, including frequent demands for forced labour from six villages, for villagers to serve as guards at a Tatmadaw LIB #218 camp, and for payments in lieu of forced labour. It outlines some difficulties faced by civilians in pursuit of their livelihoods, including the negative impact of forced labour demands, the lack of employment options available for villagers attempting to support their families and the destruction of paddy crops caused by flooding during the 2011 monsoon. It details restrictions on access to healthcare, specifically the high cost of medical treatment at government clinics and the denial of access for healthcare groups, and also expresses villagers' frustrations at obstacles to children's education caused by the need for children to work to support their families and the prohibitive costs of school attendance and supplies.

Situation Update | Thaton Township, Thaton District (August 2011)

The following situation update was written by a villager in Thaton 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 Thaton District, including 13 interviews and 138 photographs.²

Thaton Township situation in 2010 and 2011

In the period between 2010 and 2011, there have still been a lot of human rights abuses that we have seen in the Township. If we look back, there have still been a lot of problems and abuses related to health care, education, villagers' livelihoods and the use of forced labour by the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw].³

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 In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern Burma, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. As companion to this, a redesigned website will be released in 2012. In the meantime, KHRG's most recently-published field information from Pa'an District can be found in the report, "Thaton Interview: Naw L---, February 2011," KHRG, January 2012.

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:

Forced labour

The SPDC Army units that are located here are always active in Thaton Township. The SPDC troops that come from headquarters are from LIB #218 under LID #11. This year, there has been a lot of abuse of villager's rights from the SPDC Army soldiers based at Wee Raw army camp. From 2010 until now, the villagers from Shwe Young Pya village tract in Thaton Township have had to work for the SPDC Army every day. The villages that always have to perform forced labour are: Lah Aw Kher (A'Way Gyi), Kyar Ta Raw (Zee War), Shwe Young Pya, K'Law Kher (Ka Law Aye), M'Ya Gko, and Mee Chaw Eh.⁴

Before the end of 2010, the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] went and destroyed the pipeline⁵ at the Wee Raw army camp and so now the SPDC Army soldiers have forced the villagers from the Shwe Young Pya village tract to build a fence along the pipeline. Furthermore, the villagers have been told to guard the pipeline for them every day. The villages that are far from the Wee Raw army camp, such as K'Law Kher, Ma Ya Gko and M'Chaw Eh villages, each have to pay 35,000 kyat (US \$45.45) per month if they do not go and guard the pipeline. They have to give this money [to the Tatmadaw soldiers] every month. They do not have time to do their own jobs.

Civilians' livelihoods

There are 13 village tracts in Thaton Township. Most of the civilians are Karen and they work as [paddy] farmers or plant [cash crops] in plantations. As they are farmers and cultivate plantations, they always have to face problems with the weather and from forced labour. Even though the civilians try very hard to overcome the many difficulties they face, very few people get enough food for a year. There are a lot people who do not get enough food. Mostly they cultivate plantations and do jobs for daily wages in order for their families to get enough food. Some [villagers] sell bamboo to people to fence their plantations. Some families [still] do not get enough food, so the young parents have to leave their babies with their grandmothers while they look for jobs in other places to earn money for their families' survival and to be able to afford enough food. Some parents are too old [to look for work], so they allow their children to go and work in other places so that their families can buy food. All of this shows that the main problem in our area and in our country is that there are no jobs that have suitable salaries for villagers.

There have been many problems for villagers who farm or work in plantations. The weather was not good, so they faced extra difficulties. Previously, in 2010, it rained at the time when the paddy crops needed to be harvested, so some paddy was destroyed. This year [2011] in June, farmers planted paddy seeds, but when the young paddy was growing, it rained and the fields flooded, so a lot of young paddy plants died because they were under water for many days. This caused many problems for villagers. This year, some people who cultivated hill fields, also could not burn their fields because it rained at the time that they [normally] burn their fields. The fields that they could not burn still had a lot of grass. They could burn only half [of the grass] so they tried to cut the rest.

Because there was no way villagers could find jobs for their families and get food, some people worked for daily wages so they could afford food. These daily wage jobs involved weeding other people's gardens and planting paddy for other people. In one day, they could earn 2,500 kyat

"Mission Accomplished as SPDC 'dissolved'," *Myanmar Times*, April 4-10th 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this report and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this report.

⁴ Burmese names for Karen villages included here in brackets where provided by the villager who wrote this report.

⁵ The villager who wrote this report did not specify what utility the pipeline provides at Wee Raw camp.

(US \$3.25)⁶ and the highest amount [they could earn] was 3,000 kyat (US \$3.89). In some families, parents who have children that can look after cows and buffalo did not send their children to school anymore because they asked them to work and look after other people's cows and buffalos instead. This makes us feel bad as it destroys the children's right to an education. All parents know this feeling very clearly. Because of the families' problems and because the SPDC government owns the schools and makes the villagers pay a lot for school fees, the rights [to education] that the children should have are lost.

Civilians' health

In the Township, there are many villagers who are experiencing health problems. They need a lot of medicine. There are not any KNU [Karen National Union] clinics, but there are a few SPDC clinics. Buying medicine from the clinics that the SPDC established are very expensive, so none of the villagers who are sick can go. Because they do not have money to cure their diseases, they are always looking forward to the arrival of [a mobile medical team]. They [the medical team] faces many problems and so those medics only arrive two times a year because the SPDC Army does not give them permission [to operate in the area].

Some other villages have medics who are certified by the SPDC government. These medics have government certificates, but they do not have any medicine for the villagers. To treat people in the villages, they have to go into towns to buy medicine from the pharmacies. They then have to bring it back and treat the villagers, which the villagers have to pay for. This medicine costs a lot, but if they go to the SPDC government clinic, it costs even more, so they use the medics in the villages. In the village one 500ml (16.91 oz.) bag of saline solution can cost 70,000 kyat (US \$90.90). If there is a serious illness that they cannot cure in the village, they go to the hospitals in the towns of Thaton or Pa'an. If people who are ill have to go to town for treatment it can cost millions of kyat. Because of this, there is a need for the SPDC and the KNU to build clinics for villagers in their own village so that in the future the young children will have the right to health care.

Education

If we look at education in Thaton Township in 2011, there have been many problems and also a lot of abuses against the children's rights [to education]. There are over 40 schools in Thaton Township. Some villagers send their children to schools they have set up by themselves and some send their children to missionary schools, but most children go to the SPDC government-run schools. If we look at the SPDC schools, the teachers keep abusing the villagers and the children's human rights. This year [2011], the newly elected government leaders, which they call a civilian government, announced that primary school education would be free. Although we heard this, we have not seen it happen.

The villagers complain about the education situation because the primary school students have to pay a lot of money to attend school. They get free textbooks, but there are not enough for everyone. Even though they get free textbooks, they have to buy their notebooks, pens and rulers themselves. The issue is not only the cost of books, but also that the school principal asks for many things. For a student to attend kindergarten, the principal demands that parents have to pay 3,500 kyat (US \$4.54). For a student to attend the first standard, the cost is 4,000 kyat (US \$5.19), while the cost to attend second standard is 4,500 kyat (US \$5.84). It costs 500 kyat (US \$0.64) more for each progressive standard. The students should be attending school, but

⁶ 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 January 19th 2012, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

they cannot go because their parents cannot afford to send them. This is happening in every village. If there are 100 children in the village, only around 20 or 30 can go to school.

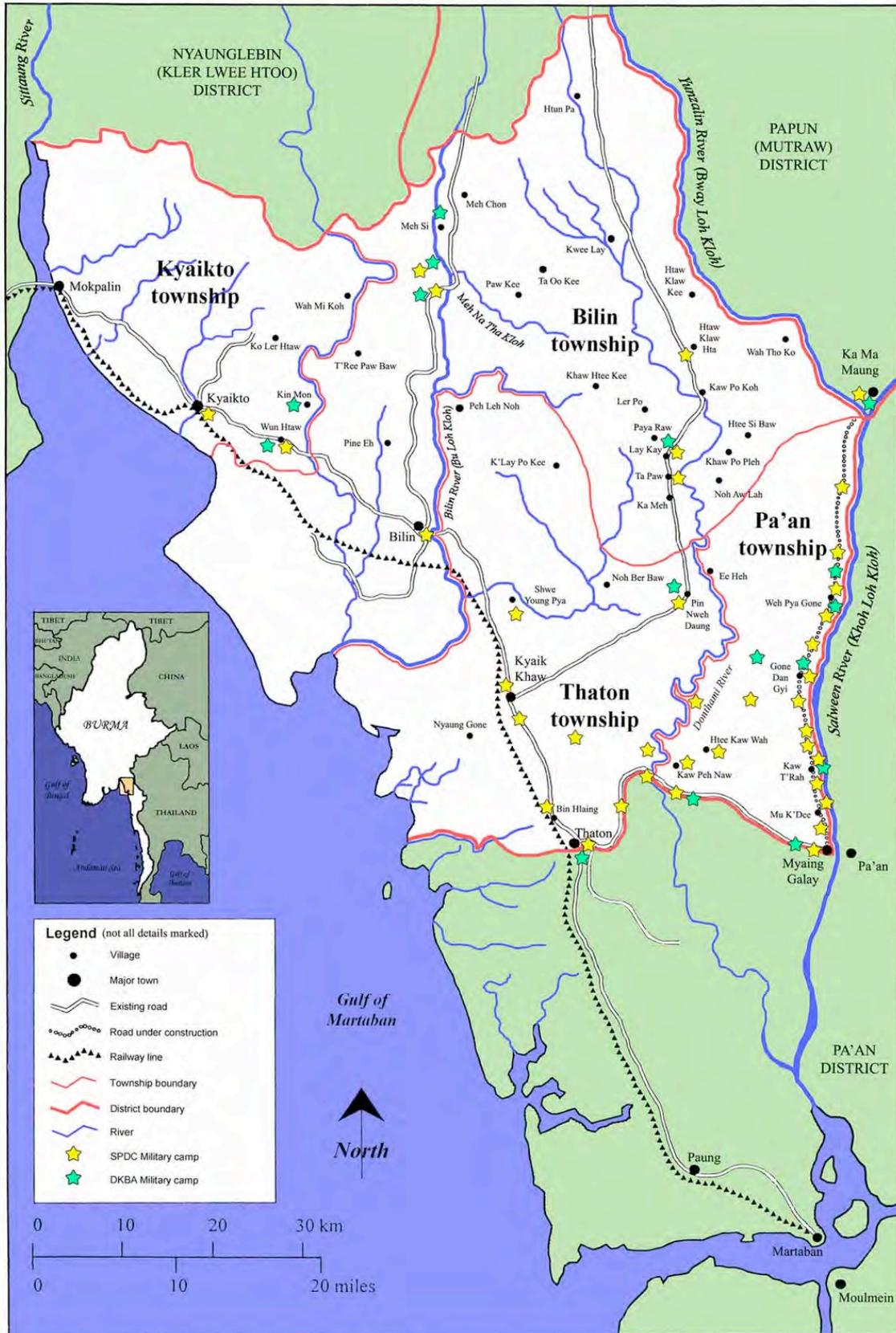
It is not only the school fees that are the problem, but also the fact that teachers hired by the SPDC government leave the villages to collect their salaries once a month. Sometimes it can take the teachers one or two weeks and sometimes even a month, to go and collect their salaries and then come back. This also causes problems for the children and [contributes] to the abuse of their rights to education. The staff at the SPDC government schools also asked for a photograph of the school to be taken. After we took it for them, they printed out four pictures and sent them to the principal. Afterwards they asked us for 2,000 kyat (US \$2.59) from each student to pay for each of the school photographs.

Overall, if we look at the situation concerning villagers' livelihoods, health care, education and SPDC Army activities in Thaton Township, we can say that villagers' rights are still being abused.

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

- "Thaton Interview: Naw L---, February 2011," (January 2011)
- "Thaton Situation Update: June to October 2011," (November 2011)
- "Thaton Situation Updates: May 2010 to January 2011," (May 2011)
- "Exploitative abuse and villager responses in Thaton District," (November 2009)
- "Land confiscation and the business of human rights abuse in Thaton District," (April 2009)
- "SPDC and DKBA extortion and forced labour in Thaton District," (November 2008)
- "Villagers' responses to forced labour, torture and other demands in Thaton District," (November 2008)

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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