

A STRATEGY OF SUBJUGATION

The Situation in Ler Mu Lah Township, Tenasserim Division

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group
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This report aims to provide an update on the situation in Tenasserim Division, Burma's southernmost region. It is based primarily on interviews from Ler Mu Lah township in central Tenasserim Division, but also gives an overview of some background and developments in other parts of the Division. At the end of the report two maps are included: Map 1 showing the entire Division, and Map 2 showing the northern part of Tenasserim Division and the southern part of Karen State's Dooplaya District. Many of the villages mentioned in the report and the interviews can be found on Map 1, while Map 2 includes some of the sites mentioned in relation to flows of refugees and their forced repatriation.

Background

Tenasserim Division (renamed Tanintharyi by the SLORC/SPDC military junta) forms most of Burma's long southern leg, sandwiched between the Andaman Sea to the west and southern Thailand to the east, measuring approximately 600 kilometres (400 miles) north-south but seldom more than 100 kilometres (60 miles) in east-west width. The population of the villages and towns along the Andaman coast is a mix of Burman, Karen, Mon, Tavoyan and some villagers of Indian descent; some villages and areas are almost exclusively Karen or Mon, while others are various mixtures. Villages further inland, in the hills and river valleys nearer the border with Thailand, are predominantly Karen with some Mon villages in the north of the area and a mixture of Mon, Karen, Thai and Burman in the far south. Travel in the region is difficult; the 'main' road along the coast is often little more than a wide dirt track, and roads heading into the interior are often more like oxcart tracks. In the hills most travel is on foot, or by canoes (powered by paddles or motors) along major rivers such as the Tenasserim, which are dotted with rapids and can be treacherous.

The region has long been a world unto itself in the struggles between Burmese regimes and the resistance groups. The succession of military juntas in Rangoon have never managed to gain more than limited control over the coastal towns and most of the coastal road, while a variety of resistance groups have traditionally dominated the interior. The most significant of these are the Karen National Union (KNU) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP), though there have also been and continue to be smaller Tavoyan, Muslim and Burman resistance groups, Mon splinter groups, and in the remotest regions even remnants of the Burmese Communist Party. Even the KNU has always left its people in the area (referred to as Mergui-Tavoy District or KNLA 4th Brigade area) to operate with a great deal of autonomy. The NMSP made a ceasefire deal with the SPDC in 1995, but since then various splinter groups have broken off and restarted fighting the Rangoon regime, sometimes in the south of Tenasserim and sometimes in the north; the most recent breakaway of Mon soldiers began in September 2001 in the northern part of the district.

Tenasserim Division began to attract more international attention when reports of gross human rights abuses connected to the construction of the Ye-Tavoy railway and the Yadana gas pipeline

were reported from 1993 onward. KHRG documented the human rights effects of these projects as well as the general human rights situation in the region in a variety of reports over several years [see ***“Effects of the Gas Pipeline Project”*** (KHRG #96-21, 23/5/96), ***“Ye-Tavoy Area Update”*** (KHRG #96-01, 5/1/96), and other earlier reports]. Both the Yadana gas pipeline and the Ye-Tavoy railway are now complete but they continue to have repercussions on the human rights situation of villagers in the region, as do the plans for new commercial projects which have driven the powers in Rangoon to intensify their campaigns to subjugate Tenasserim Division in the past 5 years.

In September 1996, the State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta began a campaign of forced relocations and forced labour road building in the entire area from Palauk in the north to Tenasserim town in the south. By the end of January 1997 over 60 Karen villages between the Andaman coast and the Tenasserim River had been destroyed, with their inhabitants forced to move to Army controlled sites to do forced labour building new roads into their home areas. Army camps were then established and supplied along these roads [for details of this campaign see ***“Free-Fire Zones in Southern Tenasserim”*** (KHRG #97-09, 20/8/97)]. In February 1997 the SLORC followed this up by launching a massive military offensive into KNU stronghold areas along the upper Tenasserim and Paw Kloh rivers. The KNU was forced to give up most of its territory and take up guerrilla operations, while tens of thousands of villagers fled to Thailand or into hiding in the hills [for details see ***“Refugees from the SLORC Occupation”*** (KHRG #97-07, 25/5/97)]. Most of the predominantly Karen villagers, both in the pre-offensive relocation zones and the areas devastated by the offensive, were either trapped in their villages by SLORC troops, herded to relocation sites for use as forced labour building roads and Army camps, or fled into hiding in the forests where they avoided SLORC patrols with orders to shoot them on sight. The SLORC sent in bulldozers just behind its attack troops to begin work on a road from the port at Tavoy to the Thai border at Bong Ti, fuelling speculation that a major purpose of the offensive was to begin work on a joint Burmese-Thai commercial project linking Bangkok to a new deep-water sea port on the Andaman Sea at Tavoy. Also in February 1997, the SLORC launched an offensive against the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 12th Battalion headquartered at Kaw Tha Say southeast of Mergui, almost at the southern tip of Burma. This followed the destruction of several Karen villages in the area a few months earlier, and attempts by the junta to force the villagers into road labour camps [see ***“Attacks on Karen Villages: Far South”*** (KHRG #97-02, 10/3/97)].

Though the 1997 offensives took most of the territory previously controlled by the KNU, the SLORC (renamed in late 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council) has failed to fully consolidate its control over the region for several reasons, primarily the difficulty of supply and troop movement, harassment by KNLA guerrilla forces, and the determined non-cooperation of the villagers. Low level fighting continues throughout the region, and human rights abuses by the occupying SPDC forces have become endemic. Those living in villages under SPDC control have found themselves repeatedly relocated to place them under more direct Army control, and suffer under constant demands for forced labour, extortion and demands for materials and food. Many are still fleeing into the hills to join the internally displaced, where they must struggle to grow some food and avoid being shot on sight by SPDC patrols. Many have tried to flee to Thailand, but the Thai 9th Infantry Division patrols this part of the border and they frequently force refugees back across at gunpoint.

The Present Situation

“They didn’t shoot us dead with their guns, it is their forced labour and portering that will injure and kill us. We are not free to do our own work. If they shoot us dead it would be easy for the civilians or other countries to see. The painful thing for us is that they [the SPDC] are forcing us but people don’t know about it.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30) [Interview #1]

There have been no large-scale military operations in Mergui-Tavoy District since the 1997 offensive, but the SPDC has been systematically trying to militarise and consolidate control over the area. According to reliable lists, there are presently 36 battalions stationed in Tenasserim Division. Army units from other areas of Burma are sometimes brought in when needed for specific operations. The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) still operates in the district conducting guerrilla attacks on SPDC columns and outposts. The KNLA also provides some measure of protection for the hiding places of internally displaced villagers, acts as security for the small amount of food and medical aid that reaches the villagers from across the Thai border, and has medical teams which provide basic health care and emergency treatment. Landmines are used heavily in the area by both sides. In the immediate aftermath of the 1997 offensive, some villagers and former KNLA soldiers who felt the KNLA was not putting up enough of a fight and were determined to fight back themselves rallied behind an enigmatic pair of young twins who had taken the pseudonyms Johnny Htoo and Saw Luther. The group called itself God’s Army, and though it only fought local skirmishes and never numbered more than 200, it attracted an inordinate amount of attention in the sensationalist international media until it disbanded in January 2001. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and other Karen splinter groups are not present in the district.

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) has maintained, with difficulty, a ceasefire area in the northern part of Tenasserim Division since its 1995 agreement with the Burmese junta. The ceasefire has always been tenuous, mainly because the SPDC repeatedly breaks the promises which were part of the agreement, such as territorial guarantees, the cessation of forced labour as porters by Mon villagers, and the right to teach the Mon language in schools. The NMSP has had very little success in pressing the SPDC to honour these commitments, because whenever the NMSP complains the junta simply threatens to abandon the ceasefire and annihilate both the NMSP and Mon villages. The resulting dissatisfaction with the ceasefire has led various small groups to splinter off from the NMSP and return to the armed struggle over the past six years. Most recently, a group of over 100 men under Colonel Pan Nyunt broke away in early September 2001 to resume armed resistance against the SPDC.

The SPDC has not had a great deal of success in consolidating its control over the area since the 1997 offensive because of the lack of enough infrastructure to support a large military presence and the continued activities of resistance groups. Internally displaced villagers are still scattered throughout the region, and SPDC patrols and small camps are regularly subject to ambush by guerrilla forces and victimised by landmines. Much of the area east of the southern Tenasserim River remains a virtual no-man’s land. Shortly before the 1997 offensive a new regional command, the Coastal Command, was created to militarise and subjugate Tenasserim Division, and a heavy military presence has been maintained there. New military access roads have been pushed through to enable the Army to better resupply its units in the area. Throughout the Division, most villages located in the hills and those not near an Army camp or a vehicle road have been ordered to relocate to roads or garrisoned villages, and the houses have been destroyed. Patrols move through the hills seeking out and destroying the hiding places of the internally displaced, and shooting displaced villagers on sight or taking them as porters.

“They burned down one house at Pee Thee Kee and then came up and burned five houses [at K’Saw Lu Htee Kee]. In the lower place [Pee Thee Kee] all of their belongings were burned as well. At the higher place [K’Saw Lu Htee Kee] it included their rice and paddy, about 50 or 60 baskets of paddy.” - “Saw Lah Ghay” (M, 32), describing the burning of villages by SPDC troops in March 2001 [Interview #3]

“[T]he enemy is gathering the villagers at Ta Pwoh [Kyo Gu in Burmese] and Pway Palaw. The villagers must come and stay there so they can torture and force the villagers to work. When the villagers go to fetch water and do not let the soldiers know it, they are fined 500 Kyat.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

“They forced us to build a road in the village. After we cleared [the route] for the road and took out the tree stumps, we had to dig and build the road. After we dug and made it level, we had to carry stones and sand. Then we had to use them to cover it. If it rained and the road washed away, we had to carry again.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30), describing forced labour he had to do after being forcibly relocated [Interview #1]

“They built bridges at Ta Mu and Kweh Gu. In the past over 20 people at a time had to go and build them. It took over a week, one or two weeks. It was not only at one place. The people from the Burman villages also had to build, but it was mostly Karen villagers who had to go and build them. ... In Ka Pyaw village they also have to build a monastery. ... They don’t give payment for it. When they build a bridge or whatever, the villagers have to give all their energy. The soldiers don’t pay a single Kyat. There is money given [by the State for the project], but it is taken by their leaders.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

Villagers in relocation sites and SPDC-controlled villages are forced to build fences around their villages, both to limit their movements and so that SPDC patrols can quickly seal off the village and capture people for forced labour before they have a chance to flee. Those who have been relocated may be given the chance to go home to farm their own fields if it is not too far, but they must obtain passes to do so which often do not allow them to go overnight.

“The villagers have to make fences around every village in the frontline area. ... When we went down there before [to a relocation site] we had to build a road, but I haven’t heard about it lately. ... When they see houses now they burn them. ... If they meet people they will shoot them. They shoot whenever they meet us. ... We don’t dare to face them. When we see them we flee and they shoot. They call but we don’t dare to face them. When we see them we flee and escape. If the bullets hit us we are finished.” - “Saw Lah Ghay” (M, 32) [Interview #3]

“We had to fence around the village. The villagers fenced it. The Army came and ordered us to do it. That was #371’s operations commander, Myint Soe. He ordered us to do it. ... [B]efore they allowed us only seven or eight days [outside the relocation site at a time] but the [village] chairperson went and asked for 15 days. If we go over the date [on their travel pass] and can’t come back, we must pay 1,000 Kyat per day.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30), speaking about movement restrictions on villagers forcibly relocated to Naw Deh Hta [Interview #1]

“In the Ka Pyaw area where the enemy has settled, the enemy forces the villagers to fence their villages. The villagers didn’t want to fence them so they only built a gate along the road. Later, when the enemy came to check the fence, they weren’t satisfied and they forced the people to fence around the entire village. They have now finished fencing.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

The interviews included in this report originate from Ler Mu Lah township, the central township of Mergui-Tavoy District [see attached map]. They include references to the forced relocation sites at Ka Pyaw, Naw Deh Hta, Pway Palaw and Ta Pwoh [Kyo Gu in Burmese], to which remoter villages are still being forced to relocate. Forced labour is demanded daily from the villages under SPDC control. Villagers are constantly ordered to go as porters carrying the Army's supplies and rations and as guides for SPDC units. The SPDC also forces the villagers to build and maintain the roads in the area and to cut the brush along the roadsides to make it more difficult for resistance forces to mine the roads or spring ambushes, and to prevent the movement of internally displaced villagers across the roads. No payment is ever given for the work. Villagers must come on rotating schedules and bring their own tools and food. Medicine is almost never given to workers who become sick. Villagers who do not have time to go for their stint at forced labour must pay bribes to get out of the work. These fees are usually based on the number of days of work demanded, at a rate of 500 Kyat per person per day. Most villagers, particularly those who have been relocated off their land, cannot afford to pay these fees on a regular basis, so they have no choice but to do the labour.

“They force us to do ‘loh ah pay’ [general forced labour] and to porter. We have to repair the Army camp. ... They specify that we start working at 7 o’clock in the morning and stop at 4 o’clock in the evening. ... They don’t pay. They don’t give us food. They also don’t give drinking water. ... I had to occasionally go as a porter. It was in 2000, during the dry season [March-May]. We took them from Palaw to Way Toh Ray. ... The Burmese porters died. I don’t know their names. ... The soldiers beat them to death because they couldn’t walk.” - “Saw Kri Muh” (M, 28) [Interview #2]

“I had to go and porter twice and I had to go and send [as a guide] their soldiers once. The first time I had to porter was for the soldiers of #371 and #542 [Light Infantry Battalions]. ... They called me for four days, but I had to go for seven days. ... At Kyi Praw Koh they called 30 villagers. On our way to Thay Kaw Oh there were 30 villagers, and then they called another 50 villagers from Thay Kaw Oh. The total number of people was 80 villagers. ... There were only men but it did include children who were 12 or 13 years old. There were three children ... They didn’t allow us to go back. We had to continue going forward. We had to continue going the whole day and they didn’t feed us rice. If they gave us rice, it wasn’t enough. They gave us 2 milk tins [391 grams / 14 ozs] of rice each. When we came back they also didn’t feed us rice. We could only get rice to eat when we arrived home.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30), describing some of the forced labour he had to do after being forcibly relocated [Interview #1]

“We have to do things the whole day. If we don’t finish it we have to continue working until it is finished. When we had to repair the road it took one week. They are going to use it as a car road. They didn’t pay. We had to bring our own food. ... We had to go and repair it starting from Naw Daw and down to Maw Ka. It was all the villagers from Pa Saw Aw. Villagers from four villages repaired the road. One person from each house. That includes women and children. The youngest children were 12 or 13 years old. The oldest people were 30 or 40 years old.” - “Saw Kri Muh” (M, 28) [Interview #2]

“They never call less than 10 people. They call at least 10, 20 or 30 people. ... If they [the soldiers] order it, we have to go and sweep their barracks and build their living places. Sometimes we have to build barracks and sometimes we have to fence their camp.” - “Saw Lah Ghay” (M, 32) [Interview #3]

“They always have to pay porter fees. Some villagers also go to carry loads, even women. Sometimes they also include children. Most of the people are women. The youngest women are 17 or 18 years old and the oldest is over 40 years old. They make a point of forcing women to carry if they can. Before I heard they took 50 or 60 women.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

The SPDC has increasingly been using convicts as porters with their frontline battalions. More and more reports have been received by KHRG of civilians from central Burma being arrested for small offences or on fabricated charges and sent, often without charge or trial, to porter for the Army. The increased use of convicts is perhaps an attempt by the SPDC to escape mounting international criticism of its use of forced labour, because convict labour is deemed more acceptable by most governments and in international labour conventions. Convicts are sometimes used as substitutes for villager labour around Army camps, particularly in areas where many villagers have fled to the forests to avoid forced labour. While this has been happening throughout Burma [see for example the report ***“Convict Porters”*** (KHRG #2000-06, 20/12/00)], Tenasserim Division is no exception. Villagers interviewed for this report have described the treatment of these porters as extremely brutal. One villager interviewed by KHRG described how the convicts who could no longer walk were gathered together in one place and beaten to death by SPDC soldiers.

“They always take their convicts. The people they brought from the west [the convicts] are tied together in groups of three to six people. They are tied with rope so it is not easy for them to run away. The loads are heavy so some of them flee because they are tired. ... They could see that we were afraid so they didn’t do it [beat us] so much. But there are their people such as the ‘yeh beh’ [convicts], the people that they had forcibly arrested and called to come with them, they mistreated them a lot. They [the soldiers] beat them. When they [the convicts] couldn’t walk anymore, the soldiers gathered them in one place and they died there. The soldiers didn’t shoot them dead, they beat them to death. There was no need to shoot them, so they beat them to death.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30) [Interview #1]

Physical abuse by SPDC soldiers is common. Village heads are beaten when demands are not met. Villagers are also beaten when they go for forced labour, especially when they go as forced labour porters. SPDC officers often demand weapons and walkie-talkies from villagers, so that they can report these items as ‘captured in battle’ and gain promotions and other rewards. Villagers are often held under torture and threat of death unless the other villagers can somehow find or buy a gun or walkie-talkie to hand over.

“On March 15th 2001, the enemy arrested Saw M--- and Saw B--- and demanded a gun from them. They couldn’t get a gun from B--- so they beat him painfully. Then they demanded money from him and fined him for the cost of a gun. It cost 90,000 Kyat. They also arrested Saw M---, beat him and tied his hands behind his back. After that they heated a knife until it became red and then enemy [deputy] battalion commander Nay Lin Soe touched it to M---’s legs. His legs became blistered, burned and smelly. On the same day they arrested Naw M--- and interrogated her. Afterwards they raped her. They arrested her at 12 o’clock and released her at 4 p.m.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

Extortion money and taxes are regularly demanded from the villagers in addition to the money they pay to avoid forced labour. ‘Porter fees’ are one such form of direct extortion which is demanded monthly and can amount to 2,000 to 5,000 Kyat per month per family. These fees are supposedly used to hire porters so the villagers do not have to go, but in reality the money is

simply pocketed by the officers while the villagers still have to go as porters. Failure to pay these ‘porter fees’ can result in arrest or additional forced labour as a porter. More formal taxes are demanded from villages nearer the coast, but villages in the mountains are usually too impoverished to pay these. There are also rice quotas levied on the villages in the area. The quotas are from 10 to 15 baskets of paddy (rice still in the husk) per acre, which represents 20% to 50% of the crop depending on yield. The rice is gathered and sent by forced labour porters to the area Army headquarters at Ler Pa Doh on the southern Tenasserim River.

“They are always gathering rice at Ka Pyaw. When they need rice they have to send it to the division at Ler Pa Doh. They force the villagers from Ka Pyaw village to send it to K’Saw Po Yweh. The villagers were told they would be released when they arrived at K’Saw Po Yweh so the villagers went as the Army commanders ordered them. When they arrived the Army commanders told them to keep going. The villagers didn’t want to go so they all fled.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

“We have to pay once a month. It is 2,000 Kyat. I avoided it one time. When we can’t pay we have to borrow money and pay it.” - “Saw Kri Muh” (M, 28) [Interview #2]

“Ka Pyaw village always has to pay. Weh Bone village also has to pay. They have to pay porter fees. They demand money from the people who can’t go to carry. Each person must pay 2,000 or 3,000, up to 5,000 Kyat. Whether the villagers work for one day or one month, the soldiers still demand money as they like. ... In Ka Pyaw village the soldiers who pass through are always demanding money. It costs 4,000, 5,000, up to 10,000 Kyat.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

The shortage of food is becoming serious for many villagers living under SPDC control. The constant forced labour leaves the villagers with very little time to work their own fields. The situation is often worse for relocated villagers. There is often no available land near the relocation sites. Sometimes villagers are allowed to return to work their fields, but for many it is a long walk to the fields and some commanders refuse to allow the villagers to be away overnight. Without being able to stay in their field huts to take care of the crop and chase off animals, much of the paddy is destroyed or eaten with very little left at harvest time. The soldiers’ looting of vegetable gardens and fruit plantations compounds the problem by taking away more of the villagers’ food, some of which they could otherwise sell to get money to buy rice or to pay SPDC extortion fees. Buffaloes, cattle, chickens and pigs kept by villagers are killed and eaten by soldiers when they come to villages. Soldiers have sometimes shot and killed an animal, then eaten only a small part of it and thrown away the rest. Some villagers have resorted to eating rice porridge, a last resort to try to make the rice supply stretch further. Other villagers are moving to the villages of more prosperous relatives. Others are fleeing into the hills where they can at least try to grow a crop, even if they risk being shot on sight by SPDC patrols.

“Some of the villagers didn’t have food anymore and couldn’t do anything. If they had stayed there they wouldn’t have had free time to work, because the Burmese enemy [SPDC] always forced them to work. They had to go [flee] and rely on their aunts and uncles who have plantations and fields, because if they had stayed in the village they would have only had boiled rice porridge to eat.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30) [Interview #1]

“They eat the villagers’ poultry but they also shoot dead and eat people’s cattle and buffaloes. They don’t pay any Kyat. They shot them dead and ate them for free. When they couldn’t eat it all, they threw the rest in a hole and left it. They eat only the thigh of a cow or pig and then

go back. They also climbed up the betelnut and coconut trees and ate the young fruit. The owners don't even get to eat them anymore." - "Saw Play Htoo" (M, 42) [Interview #4]

"There were over 80 houses and another two or three houses of widows before, but now there are only a little over 40 houses. Some people have moved to Pay Kya. Some people asked for permission to move to Pay Kya but they didn't go. They are now hiding in the middle [in the forest]. ... When I went to stay in the [relocation] village I hadn't decided if I would stay there or not. I went there to see and understand whether their actions would be the same as their words. Once I was there I could see the true situation. They [SPDC] spoke very sweetly, but their words were not followed by their actions. So when the time was right and the way was clear, I left." - "Saw K'Paw Muh" (M, 30), talking about people fleeing the relocation site where he lived [Interview #1]

Some villagers are trying to eke out a living in hiding in the mountains and forests of the area. They are often on the move fleeing SPDC Army columns which are sent out to hunt them down. The homes and huts of villagers living outside SPDC control are also routinely burned down. SPDC soldiers commonly shoot villagers on sight on encountering them in the forests or fields, and assaults are also made on undefended villages with the soldiers shooting indiscriminately at the villagers as they flee. In early 2001, an SPDC unit ran into a group of 10 villagers near Htee Ter Kee village and opened fire on them, killing two villagers and wounding a 20 year old man and a 16 year old girl. The soldiers then went to Pee Thee Kee and shot and killed Naw Lay Tay and her 12 year old daughter, Naw K'Yeh. Attacks like this are common.

"It was at Htee Ter Kee [village]. There were more than 10 people, including seven women. One woman was wounded and another one was killed. Two people were wounded in all, including one man. The name of the dead woman was Auntie Naw Mya Thein. She is over 50 years old. They didn't question her. They met each other and the soldiers shot them. The wounded woman is Naw M---, she is 16 years old. The man who was wounded is Pa B---, he is 20 years old. They were all going together. ... After they shot them they went up to another place and shot at people there. That was at Pee Thee Kee. Two people died, two women. They were Naw Lay Tay and her daughter, Naw K'Yeh. Naw Lay Tay was 25 or 26 years old and her daughter was 12 years old. ... I don't know the reason. They came up and when they saw the villagers' houses they opened fire. When the villagers saw them they fled, so the soldiers shot at them. ... They shot before they had time to ask anything. ... They shot at people in that place and then they went back down. After they went down they came up again and shot at people at Ku Pa Leh. No one was injured. They burned down all the houses including the rice and paddy in the houses." - "Saw Lah Ghay" (M, 32) [Interview #3]

"[T]here was a man named Saw K'Way. They came up and shot him dead. He had made no mistake. When he was travelling he was also holding one of the enemy's passes, but they didn't look at the pass and shot him dead. It happened at the highest field in Kyet Ma Oh in the beginning of March 2001. He had a wife and two children." - "Saw Play Htoo" (M, 42) [Interview #4]

The SPDC forces do occasionally capture villagers. These villagers are taken to relocation sites or Army camps and kept there. The fate of these villagers is often unknown to their families still in hiding. They simply disappear until weeks or months later when they manage to escape, or when news reaches the family of where they are now living. One villager told KHRG how his mother-in-law, younger brother, his son and a married couple disappeared and he only found out later that they were being held at an SPDC militia camp.

“[T]hey forcibly arrested people [to force them to move down to the relocation site], and when they reached the top of a mountain they beat some of them to death. Some of the villagers were injured but the soldiers didn’t take care of them and left them. The villagers didn’t get rice to eat, so when they arrived at the Htee Moh Pwa river ... they swam across [to escape]. There were over 100 villagers who swam, but six people died. They were all villagers. They swam and crossed the river to escape with their lives. Six villagers died because they couldn’t make it across. There were 130 or 140 villagers. The other villagers escaped. The soldiers shot at them but didn’t hit them and they escaped.” - “Saw K’Paw Muh” (M, 30) [Interview #1]

“They arrested one of my parents-in-law, one of my younger brothers and Pa N--- and his wife. My mother-in-law is Auntie P---. She is over 60 years old. I don’t know what they did to her because I haven’t seen those people again. We haven’t heard anything about them yet. My younger brother’s name is Saw P---. He is 17 years old. The other two people are Pa N--- and his wife, Naw P---. There was also one of my sons, Pa S---. He was going to stay with his grandmother. ... They are at xxxx. They are keeping them with the militia. The Pyi Thu Sit [‘People’s Army’; SPDC organised militia] ...” - “Saw Lah Ghay” (M, 32) [Interview #3]

The SPDC also targets the villagers’ food supplies in an effort to starve them out of the mountains. When soldiers come across fields they burn or trample the crops. Paddy storage barns are also looted and then burned when found by soldiers near villages or the hiding places of internally displaced villagers. Some villagers manage to buy or barter for rice and other food from people in villages under SPDC control or from traders along the Tenasserim River. Even for those who can do this, rice bought in this way is only a temporary solution and is usually not enough to last the year.

“When the enemy came to stay in the village they did as they liked in the villagers’ betelnut plantations. The villagers couldn’t do anything. The soldiers climbed up to get all the nuts. ... The soldiers demand paddy. They have to give more than 10 baskets for each acre. It is about 14 or 15 baskets [per acre]. ... They destroyed and burned over 200 baskets of paddy at Ka Pyaw and Per Yweh. It was on March 17th 2001.” - “Saw Play Htoo” (M, 42) [Interview #4]

Refugees fleeing forced labour, the miserable conditions of the relocation sites, or internal displacement find Thailand an unwelcoming host. This entire section of the border is controlled by the 9th Infantry Division of the Thai First Army, which is notorious for human rights abuses and corruption and has direct cross-border business links with the SPDC Army. Unlike the Thai Army Task Forces controlling segments of the border further north, the 9th Division acts as a law unto itself and appears to have very little accountability to the Army high command in Bangkok or to government authority. Officials in the Thai Ministries of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly state their complete helplessness in the face of the lawless 9th Division, and there appears to be a great deal of physical fear involved in this. During the 1997 offensive it was the 9th Division which assisted Burmese offensive troops to move through Thailand, and began supplying the same troops with rice when their supply lines were cut. When refugees began streaming across the border the 9th Division was quick to force them back into combat zones at gunpoint, at Tee Lai Pa in the north (bordering Dooplaya District) and at Bong Ti, Thu Ray, Ter Lwee and other locations in the south [see Maps 1 and 2; for more information see *“Refugees from the SLORC Occupation”* (KHRG #97-07, 25/5/97)]. Some of these people fled and were forced back several times in succession. As international pressure increased, a camp was finally created for some of the refugees at Ban Htam Hin in Ratchburi District. This camp remains under the control of the 9th Division and conditions there are notoriously poor: fenced in

like animals, the refugees are not allowed proper housing and their movements and activities are tightly controlled. The camp is overcrowded with its present population of over 8,500, and the swampy conditions have led to serious outbreaks of typhoid and haemorrhagic dengue fever in 2001 which have killed several refugees. In late 2000, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Sadako Ogata was allowed to visit the camp. Frequently an apologist for repressive regimes and the forced repatriation of refugees, Ogata was behind the forced repatriation of close to 200,000 Rohingya refugees to Burma from Bangladesh from 1993-2000 despite surveys which proved that the repatriation was involuntary and reports from her own people that the returnees were being deprived of land and forced to labour for the Army; throughout the mid-1990's she also persisted in declaring that all refugees fleeing Burma to Thailand were economic migrants who should be sent home. However, after her visit to Htam Hin even Ogata strongly criticised the Thai authorities for conditions in the camp. Relief organisations and even Thai government ministries have pressed for the camp to be moved, but the 9th Division blocks any attempt to move the camp or improve conditions there. Meanwhile, those finding refuge in other parts of the 9th Division's territory have found themselves moved back and forth great distances from their home areas, apparently in a deliberate effort to keep them destitute and disoriented, and forced into unsafe sites like Ban Don Yang, within easy sight and shelling range of an SPDC Army camp across the border. At present, Thai policy is that no new refugees are allowed except those 'fleeing fighting', and the Thai authorities say there is no fighting in Tenasserim Division. This argument is used by the 9th Division to forcibly repatriate all new refugees.

The most recent incident began on October 20th 2001, when 63 Karen villagers who had fled a relocation site crossed the border into Thailand in the Thong Pha Phum area of Kanchanaburi province [see Map 1]. The Thai 9th Division quickly decided to force them back without convening a meeting of the 'provincial admissions board' which is supposed to be part of the procedure for assessing refugee claims. Under pressure from UNHCR and various Embassies, an admissions board meeting was hastily convened but only rubber-stamped the 9th Division's decision, and on November 6th the entire group was trucked to Sangklaburi District and forced across the border at the Mon ceasefire location of Halockhani [see Map 2]. The refugees had no choice but to go to Htee Wah Doh, a Karen refugee camp created in Mon territory of Burma after the Thai 9th Division repeatedly forced Karen refugees from Dooplaya District back across the border during and after the 1997 offensive. Just 2 weeks later on November 21st, the SPDC attacked Htee Wah Doh, looted and burned the houses and destroyed the food supplies. Fifteen refugees were captured and taken as porters, including some of the 63 who had so recently been forcibly repatriated. All of them later escaped or were released, but Saw Pu Saw (age 30 with a wife and child), one of the group of 63, was shot in the leg by the SPDC troops and left to die in the forest. He was found by Mon villagers on November 28th and taken to a hospital across the border in Thailand. Gangrene had set in, and his leg had to be amputated to save his life. At present about 800 people from Htee Wah Doh are sheltering under the protection of the Mon in Halockhani, while another 800 people from Htee Wah Doh have fled and disappeared. The presence of Karen refugees in this Mon ceasefire village is creating very strong tensions between the New Mon State Party and the SPDC and it is even possible that Halockhani could be attacked as a result. However, despite intense international pressure the Thai 9th Division still refuses to allow the refugees to cross into Thailand. As this report goes to print on December 19th, the situation remains extremely tense and further developments are awaited. However, one fact which remains clear is that as long as the Thai 9th Division is allowed to act with complete impunity and control along the border, it will remain difficult or impossible for refugees from Tenasserim Division to seek asylum in Thailand.

Full Text of Interviews

The full transcripts of the main interviews used directly in this report are included below.

Interview #1.

NAME: “Saw K’Paw Muh” **SEX:** M **AGE:** 30 Karen Christian farmer
FAMILY: Married with two children
ADDRESS: Naw Deh Hta village, Ler Mu Lah township **INTERVIEWED:** 3/01

[He was interviewed after fleeing a relocation site at Naw Deh Hta village to live in hiding in the forest.]

Q: Can you tell me how you felt when you still lived in your village?

A: When I stayed in my village the enemy relocated us. They didn’t shoot us dead with their guns, it is their forced labour and portering that will injure and kill us. We are not free to do our own work. If they shoot us dead it would be easy for the civilians or other countries to see. The painful thing for us is that they [*the SPDC*] are forcing us but people [*foreigners*] don’t know about it.

Q: When were you relocated to Naw Deh Hta village?

A: On May 2nd, 2000. I left on March 20th, 2001.

Q: Did the people have to find their own food in the relocation site?

A: We had to find food to eat ourselves. We could eat when we could pull cane [*for making baskets or furniture*]. When we couldn’t pull cane we couldn’t eat.

Q: Did you have to build a fence around the [*relocation*] village?

A: We had to fence around the village. The villagers fenced it. The Army came and ordered us to do it. That was #371’s operations commander, Myint Soe. He ordered us to do it.

Q: Are people allowed to travel around?

A: Yes, before they allowed us only seven or eight days [*at a time*] but the chairperson [*village head*] went and asked for 15 days. If we go over the date [*on their travel pass*] and can’t come back, we must pay 1,000 Kyat per day. If the pass hasn’t expired we can come back.

Q: What do they do if they see people travelling outside the village?

A: You must show your pass.

Q: Do the Burmese soldiers near the village make problems for the villagers?

A: No.

Q: What about in other villages?

A: In the other villages some people were holding weapons [*as KNU sponsored village militia*], but when the situation changed some of them weren’t holding weapons anymore and went back to face them [*they surrendered to the SPDC*]. Some people who never had weapons have been beaten when the soldiers couldn’t find them. When the people can’t suffer it they get diseases.

Q: Does the SPDC take care of people who become ill?

A: They don’t take care of them. They have to treat themselves.

Q: How many houses are in Naw Deh Hta village?

A: There were over 80 houses and another two or three houses of widows before, but now there are only a little over 40 houses. Some people have moved to Pay Kya. Some people asked for permission to move to Pay Kya but they didn't go. They are now hiding in the middle [*in the forest*].

Q: What are the widows doing?

A: The widows are staying and working themselves. They are not forced by the soldiers. They don't collect anything from them.

Q: Did they take care of you with medicine when you stayed in the relocation village?

A: They gave us only what they had. They didn't have enough, they had only a little bit. They gave us only a half a tablet of Paracetamol, but it wasn't good because we usually take two tablets.

Q: What do they do if there are any serious problems in the village?

A: They can't do anything. The villagers have to find their own way and go to a hospital.

Q: Since you had to move, did anyone die from a beating?

A: No, but they forcibly arrested people [*to force them to move down to the relocation site*], and when they reached the top of a mountain they beat some of them to death. Some of the villagers were injured but the soldiers didn't take care of them and left them. The villagers didn't get rice to eat, so when they arrived at the Htee Moh Pwa river the villagers knew the beginning of the path [*on the other side of the river*] and they swam across [*to escape*]. There were over 100 villagers who swam, but six people died. They were all villagers. They swam and crossed the river to escape with their lives. Six villagers died because they couldn't make it across. There were 130 or 140 villagers. The other villagers escaped. The soldiers shot at them but didn't hit them and they escaped.

Q: Did you ever have to go as a porter when you lived in the [*relocation*] village?

A: I had to go and porter twice and I had to go and send [*as a guide*] their soldiers once. The first time I had to porter was for the soldiers of #371 and #542 [*Light Infantry Battalions*]. #542's commander is Maung Maung Win, but I have forgotten #371's commander. The second time was for #342 [*LIB*]. I also had to guide #342. I don't know the name of their commander. There are people who find out these things, but for me, I didn't find out about this.

Q: Did the soldiers beat or curse the porters when you went?

A: No. When we went they said we would come back to eat at 10 o'clock. There were a lot of soldiers there when we arrived. There was also another Army unit. They didn't allow us to go back. We had to continue going forward. We had to continue going the whole day and they didn't feed us rice. If they gave us rice, it wasn't enough. They gave us 2 milk tins [*391 grams / 14 ozs*] of rice each. When we came back they also didn't feed us rice. We could only get rice to eat when we arrived home. We also had to take along rice pots when we went to porter.

Q: Did they give you any medicine if you got sick while portering?

A: They gave only a little bit. They didn't give us enough.

Q: Was anyone beaten or punched by the soldiers when you went as a porter?

A: We are new people [*they had been recently relocated to the village*]. They could see that we were afraid so they didn't do it so much. But there are their people such as the *yeh beh*

[convicts], the people that they had forcibly arrested and called to come with them, they mistreated them a lot. They [the soldiers] beat them. When they [the convicts] couldn't walk anymore, the soldiers gathered them in one place and they died there. The soldiers didn't shoot them dead, they beat them to death. There was no need to shoot them, so they beat them to death.

Q: Do you know any of their names?

A: I don't know their names.

Q: Does the Army always take porters when it travels?

A: They always take their convicts. The people they brought from the west [the convicts] are tied together in groups of three to six people. They are tied with rope so it is not easy for them to run away. The loads are heavy so some of them flee because they are tired.

Q: How did you sleep when you went as a porter?

A: We prepared our sleeping place ourselves.

Q: Did they guard you?

A: Their soldiers kept to themselves.

Q: How many days did you have to go as a porter?

A: They called me for four days, but I had to go for seven days. They called me at Kyi Praw Koh and said we would come back at 10 o'clock. I hadn't had any rice to eat yet.

Q: How many villagers did they call at that time?

A: At Kyi Praw Koh they called 30 villagers. On our way to Thay Kaw Oh there were 30 villagers, and then they called another 50 villagers from Thay Kaw Oh. The total number of people was 80 villagers.

Q: Were there any women when you were portering?

A: There were no women. There were only men but it did include children who were 12 or 13 years old. There were three children but I only know my uncle N---'s son.

Q: How heavy were the loads of the children?

A: They were the same weight as those of the older people, 10 mess tins of rice. One mess tin is five milk tins of rice [975 grams / 2 lbs; the full load was 9.75 kgs / 20 lbs].

Q: Did the KNU ever shoot the Burmese when you were carrying for them?

A: No, but when I went to porter the first time some of them [soldiers] were injured by a landmine. Five people were injured by the landmine. Two of the people died and three lived. Then one [of the three wounded] died and they threw him in the Toh Tay Hta [River] and two were still alive. One of the NCO's [Non-Commissioned Officers] was hurt. I don't know any of their names, but the NCO was over 30 or 40 years old. That was #542 [Battalion], under Major Maung Maung Win.

Q: Did any of the villagers die from portering?

A: No one yet.

Q: Do they collect money or taxes in the *[relocation]* village?

A: They don't do it in our village but they do it in the lower places *[in the plains nearer the coast]*. In the lower places some people have plantations and some people have boats with engines. They are rich people. The people in our place at Naw Deh Hta don't have gardens or fields *[because they have been relocated]*. We don't have any income and they *[the SPDC]* don't have any way to collect so they don't collect anything.

Q: Where are the lower places?

A: They are called Kee Mi Kyo, Kyauk Lon Gyi and Thay Kaw Oh. They collect porter fees in these places, but they still have to porter as well.

Q: Do the villagers *[at the relocation site]* have to go and work at the Army camp, like fencing or cutting bamboo for them?

A: They do not call us for this, because they brought the *yeh beh [convicts]* and force them the whole day without rest.

Q: Do they force the villagers to go and build any roads?

A: They forced us to build a road in the village. After we cleared *[the route]* for the road and took out the tree stumps, we had to dig and build the road. After we dug and made it level, we had to carry stones and sand. Then we had to use them to cover it. If it rained and the road washed away, we had to carry again.

Q: What time did you have to start work when you were building the road?

A: We started at 7 o'clock and worked to 12 o'clock, then we started again at 1 p.m. and worked until 5 p.m. They specified the time.

Q: How many days did you have to work for?

A: When we went to stay there at first *[after being forced to relocate there from their home village]*, we had to work every day in that month. After we had finished some of the work, it was reduced. The chairperson *[village head]* was also present. When we worked for them every day we didn't have food to eat, so the chairperson asked permission to work only two times a month for them. We came back every fifteenth day and worked at the village *[forced labour at the relocation site]* on the sixteenth day, then we went out again and came back after 15 days, and we worked for one day again. We worked two days a month at the *[relocation]* village.

Q: Did they specify the dates?

A: The chairperson specified the date. If the Army specified it would have been every day.

Q: What did you have to do when you worked in the village?

A: They forced us to work at so many things that we can't say. To dig the road and dig the road.

Q: Did they give you payment for doing this?

A: They didn't pay us. They also didn't give us food.

Q: Did you see them burn and destroy houses or abuse people when you were in the relocation village?

A: No.

Q: Did the villagers ever have to move to another place?

A: Some of the villagers didn't have food anymore and couldn't do anything. If they had stayed there they wouldn't have had free time to work, because the Burmese enemy [SPDC] always forced them to work. They had to go [flee] and rely on their aunts and uncles who have plantations and fields, because if they had stayed in the village they would have only had boiled rice porridge to eat.

Q: Did you ever see a company or organisation or foreign people come to your place?

A: They didn't come.

Q: Do they continue to do these things in the village?

A: They continue to do it.

Q: Are they still forcing the villagers to porter?

A: They are still forcing them, but they don't call it portering. They call it *loh ah pay* and 'helpers'. They say that 'porter' isn't the right word to use.

Q: Will other villagers flee the village like you?

A: Yes. If they don't have food to eat, I think all of them will come up. They think the enemy is torturing them because they have seen it with their eyes and felt it with their hands. If they come to this place their families will get food to eat and they will go back to help their nationality. Me and them, all of us, we love our nationality.

Q: How did you flee and escape?

A: When I went to stay in the [relocation] village I hadn't decided if I would stay there or not. I went there to see and understand whether their actions would be the same as their words. Once I was there I could see the true situation. They [SPDC] spoke very sweetly, but their words were not followed by their actions. So when the time was right and the way was clear, I left.

Q: Could you leave like that?

A: Yes, I could. I had to find a way. When I left together with my family I told the soldiers that we would relocate to Pay Kya, but they didn't know that I came here. They didn't know. If they had known they wouldn't have let us. They wrote us a pass, but I threw it away on the path. The pass said I was allowed to stay in Pay Kya for as long as I wanted.

Q: Where will you go?

A: I think I will plan for my family. I will go and find out the things I must do. I will pray first and then I will meet with all my parents and teachers. After that I will come up and work together with them.

Interview #2.

NAME: “Saw Kri Muh” **SEX:** M **AGE:** 28 Karen Christian farmer
FAMILY: Married with two children; 1 and 4 years old
ADDRESS: xxxx village, Ler Mu Lah township **INTERVIEWED:** 3/01

[He was interviewed near his village.]

Q: Is the SPDC forcing you to do *loh ah pay* in your village?

A: Yes, they do. We have to do things the whole day. If we don't finish it we have to continue working until it is finished. When we had to repair the road it took one week. They are going to use it as a car road. They didn't pay. We had to bring our own food.

Q: Where did you have to repair the car road?

A: We had to go and repair it starting from Naw Daw and down to Maw Ka. It was all the villagers from xxxx. Villagers from four villages repaired the road. One person from each house. That includes women and children. The youngest children were 12 or 13 years old. The oldest people were 30 or 40 years old.

Q: Did they give you materials to repair the road?

A: We had to bring our own.

Q: Have you seen any foreigners or companies or organisations enter the area?

A: No, I didn't see any.

Q: What types of labour do the Burmese usually force the villagers to do?

A: They force us to do *loh ah pay* [*general forced labour*] and to porter. We have to repair the Army camp.

Q: What times do you have to work?

A: They specify that we start working at 7 o'clock in the morning and stop at 4 o'clock in the evening.

Q: Do they pay you?

A: They don't pay. They don't give us food. They also don't give drinking water.

Q: Can you sometimes go home at night?

A: Yes.

Q: How do they allow you to sleep if you have to sleep at their camp?

A: We sleep without anything [*no blankets or mosquito nets*]. We didn't sleep in a good place.

Q: Do the soldiers guard you when you work?

A: Yes, they do.

Q: Who orders you to go and work?

A: The Army battalion, #280. The battalion commander is Thein Chit. Kyaw Yeh Aung Pay is one of their officers. I don't know the others.

Q: Did the soldiers ever hurt you when you went to work for them?

A: No.

Q: Did anyone get sick the most recent times when you had to go to work for them?

A: Yes. They mostly had diarrhoea. They [*SPDC*] didn't give medicine.

Q: Did anyone die when they went to work?

A: No.

Q: Did any villagers run away from the work?

A: Yes. It was because they couldn't work.

Q: Did you run away from forced labour sometimes?

A: Yes.

Q: Do they continue to force people to do *loh ah pay*?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think they will continue to do it in the future?

A: They will.

Q: Have you had to go as a porter before?

A: I had to occasionally go as a porter. It was in 2000, during the dry season [*March-May*]. We took them from Palaw to Way Toh Ray.

Q: Did you see anyone die while portering?

A: The Burmese porters died. I don't know their names.

Q: Which unit were they with?

A: I don't know their division or battalion.

Q: Why did they die?

A: The soldiers beat them to death because they couldn't walk.

Q: Do you know the name of the soldiers who did it?

A: I don't know. He was an NCO [*Non-Commissioned Officer, i.e. Corporal or Sergeant*].

Q: Did they feed you food when you went as a porter?

A: We brought our own food.

Q: Did they pay you?

A: They didn't pay us.

Q: Did you flee and escape or did they allow you to come back when you portered?

A: They allowed me to come back.

Q: Have you ever heard of them torturing or beating villagers in other villages?

A: Yes, at Ta Lay Koh. It is always happening.

Q: Do they also demand porter fees?

A: We have to pay once a month. It is 2,000 Kyat. I avoided it one time. When we can't pay we have to borrow money and pay it.

Interview #3.

NAME: “Saw Lah Ghay” **SEX:** M **AGE:** 32 Karen Christian farmer
FAMILY: Married with four children (one deceased)
ADDRESS: xxxx village, Ler Mu Lah township **INTERVIEWED:** 3/01

[He was interviewed after he fled his village and is now displaced at another village.]

Q: Do you have a place to stay here?

A: I had a house when I arrived, but after I built it the enemy came up and burned it down.

Q: Do the soldiers come and abuse the people in your village?

A: They do not come to rape, but they do come to shoot people dead and burn down houses. It happened in 2001 at one place called K’Saw Lu Htee Kee and at another place called Pee Thee Kee. They burned down one house at Pee Thee Kee and then went up and burned five houses *[at K’Saw Lu Htee Kee]*. In the lower place *[Pee Thee Kee]* all of their belongings were burned as well. At the higher place *[K’Saw Lu Htee Kee]* it included their rice and paddy, about 50 or 60 baskets of paddy.

Q: Did they also burn down your house when they burned the houses down?

A: Yes. My household things were not burned, only my brother-in-law’s paddy. We received news in advance *[that they were coming]* so we moved our things.

Q: When did they come and destroy things?

A: During March 2001.

Q: Where do you get food now that you stay here?

A: When it is easy to reach the Htee Moh Pwa *[the main river; the Tenasserim River]* we take it from there. When that is not easy, we take it from in front at K--- and P--- *[villages]*.

Q: Where was it that the people were shot at by the soldiers?

A: It was at Htee Ter Kee *[village]*. There were more than 10 people, including seven women. One woman was wounded and another one was killed. Two people were wounded in all, including one man. The name of the dead woman was Auntie Naw Mya Thein. She is over 50 years old. They didn’t question her. They met each other and the soldiers shot them. The wounded woman is Naw M---, she is 16 years old. The man who was wounded is Pa B---, he is 20 years old. They were all going together.

Q: Where did the soldiers go after they shot them?

A: After they shot them they went up to another place and shot at people there. That was at Pee Thee Kee. Two people died, two women. They were Naw Lay Tay and her daughter, Naw K’Yeh. Naw Lay Tay was 25 or 26 years old and her daughter was 12 years old.

Q: Why did the soldiers come to shoot them?

A: I don’t know the reason. They came up and when they saw the villagers’ houses they opened fire. When the villagers saw them they fled, so the soldiers shot at them. The soldiers didn’t have time to ask the people anything. We fled before we saw them and when we saw them we fled. They shot before they had time to ask anything.

Q: Was that the only place they shot at people?

A: They shot at people in that place and then they went back down. After they went down they came up again and shot at people at Ku Pa Leh. No one was injured. They burned down all the houses including the rice and paddy in the houses.

Q: Did they rape any women?

A: I haven't heard of this yet.

Q: Have they arrested people in that area?

A: Yes. They arrested one of my parents-in-law, one of my younger brothers and Pa N--- and his wife. My mother-in-law is Auntie P---. She is over 60 years old. I don't know what they did to her because I haven't seen those people again. We haven't heard anything about them yet. My younger brother's name is Saw P---. He is 17 years old. The other two people are Pa N--- and his wife, Naw P---. There was also one of my sons, Pa S---. He was going to stay with his grandmother.

Q: Do you know where they have taken those people now?

A: They are at xxxx. They are keeping them with the militia. The *Pyi Thu Sit* [*'People's Army'*; *SPDC organised militia*] came to watch over the bosses' work there. The SPDC handed them over into the *Pyi Thu Sit's* hands.

Q: Which group of bosses came to work there?

A: I don't know, they are Burmese. They are making a lead mine. I haven't heard that they force people [*to work*] for free there. They give salaries.

Q: Do they force the people to do *loh ah pay* at M--- where they took those people?

A: There is *loh ah pay*. When they need it they call the villagers.

Q: How many people do they call for *loh ah pay* each time?

A: They never call less than 10 people. They call at least 10, 20 or 30 people.

Q: Do women and children also have to do *loh ah pay*?

A: I haven't heard of women and children doing it yet, only the people who are strong and can do it.

Q: Do they also have to go as porters?

A: They have not called for porters yet. The villagers only have to go to do *loh ah pay* at the battalion camp. If they [*the soldiers*] order it, we have to go and sweep their barracks and build their living places. Sometimes we have to build barracks and sometimes we have to fence their camp.

Q: Do the villagers also have to build a fence around their village?

A: The villagers have to make fences around every village in the frontline area.

Q: Are these the villages that had to relocate?

A: Yes.

Q: Do they also have to construct a road?

A: When we went down there before [*to a relocation site*] we had to build a road, but I haven't heard about it lately.

Q: Have you heard that they are going to build any roads?

A: I haven't heard of it in any place yet.

Q: Do you think the soldiers will come to destroy villages and burn houses in the future?

A: If they come they will do it. When they see houses now they burn them.

Q: Do you think they will kill and shoot people dead?

A: If they meet people they will shoot them. They shoot whenever they meet us.

Q: Do they ask the people any questions before they shoot?

A: How are they going to ask questions? We don't dare to face them. When we see them we flee and they shoot. They call but we don't dare to face them. When we see them we flee and escape. If the bullets hit us we are finished.

Q: Do they fire shots just to threaten you?

A: In the past they shot to threaten us, but now I don't know if they are threatening or not. They shoot at the houses but it doesn't hurt the houses.

Q: How long do they shoot for when they shoot?

A: They don't shoot for very long. They shoot 100 or over 100 bullets.

Q: Do they also shoot with big weapons?

A: When they shoot in the lower places they don't use big weapons, but when they come up *[into the hills]*, one time they fired a big weapon three times. No one died.

Q: Have you heard of them killing people, torturing people or burning houses in other villages?

A: We haven't heard about it from other places because we do not go to other people's places. We have not heard of them raping women in our area.

Interview #4.

NAME: "Saw Play Htoo" **SEX:** M **AGE:** 42

Karen Christian KNU

ADDRESS: xxxx village, Ler Mu Lah township

INTERVIEWED: 3/01

[“Saw Play Htoo” is a KNU civilian official. His interview is included here because it provides an overview of the situation in the area.]

Q: Where do you live now?

A: I have come to stay in the Ka Pyaw, Ta Pwoh and Ma Zaw area.

Q: What is the situation in the Ka Pyaw area now?

A: When I recently went to the Ka Pyaw area, enemy battalion #559 was there. The battalion commander is Htay Win, the deputy battalion commander is Nay Lin Soe and the name of their camp commander in Ka Pyaw is Khin Zaw. On March 15th 2001, the enemy arrested Saw M--- and Saw B--- and demanded a gun from them. They couldn't get a gun from B--- so they beat him painfully. Then they demanded money from him and fined him for the cost of a gun. It cost 90,000 Kyat. They also arrested Saw M---, beat him and tied his hands behind his back. After that they heated a knife until it became red and then enemy *[deputy]* battalion commander Nay Lin Soe touched it to M---'s legs. His legs became blistered, burned and smelly. On the same day they arrested Naw M--- and interrogated her. Afterwards they raped her. They arrested her at 12 o'clock and released her at 4 p.m.

Q: How many people did they rape?

A: They interrogated four people. I don't know for sure if they raped all of them or not, but they raped half of them, two people.

Q: How old are the women they raped?

A: Naw M--- is about 42 years old. She is a villager from Ka Pyaw village.

Q: Do the soldiers also force the villagers to do *loh ah pay* or build a road?

A: In the Ka Pyaw area where the enemy has settled, the enemy forces the villagers to fence their villages. The villagers didn't want to fence them so they only built a gate along the road. Later, when the enemy came to check the fence, they weren't satisfied and they forced the people to fence around the entire village. They have now finished fencing.

Q: Do the villagers have to go and work at the battalion camp?

A: The mobile battalion stays at Ka Pyaw. They are always gathering rice at Ka Pyaw. When they need rice they have to send it to the division at Ler Pa Doh. They force the villagers from Ka Pyaw village to send it to K'Saw Po Yweh. The villagers were told they would be released when they arrived at K'Saw Po Yweh so the villagers went as the Army commanders ordered them. When they arrived the Army commanders told them to keep going. The villagers didn't want to go so they all fled. They then came back to stay in Ka Pyaw.

Q: What is the weight of one load?

A: A load is no less than one big tin of rice, 12.5 kilograms [*27.5 lb*].

Q: Do the villagers have to pay porter fees or other fees?

A: They always have to pay porter fees. Some villagers also go to carry loads, even women. Sometimes they also include children. Most of the people are women. The youngest women are 17 or 18 years old and the oldest is over 40 years old. They make a point of forcing women to carry if they can. Before I heard they took 50 or 60 women. The one who led them was Thramu [*female teacher*] H---. She is over 50 years old. She didn't have to carry anything. She had to take care of and lead the carriers.

Q: Do the people who carry loads receive any payment?

A: The people who go to carry loads never receive any payment. They are forced to do it for free. They have used this system since long ago.

Q: Do the villagers have to build or repair the roads?

A: They are always doing this. Right now they have to go and cut the brush along the road. They cut it from K'Saw Po Yweh to Ka Pyaw. It takes one or two days. You can't cut it and finish it on the same day.

Q: Do they give the villagers food when they go to do this?

A: The villagers have to bring their own rice, rice pots and machetes. They don't give rice and they don't give drinking water. They also don't give payment.

Q: Have they beaten people there?

A: They beat people but not always. They always force people to work.

Q: Do they burn houses?

A: I had not heard of it yet since I have been staying in the Noh Pa Doh and Ka Pyaw area.

Q: Did you hear about them torturing people or demanding taxes in other areas?

A: They are always doing it in other places. Ka Pyaw village always has to pay. Weh Bone village also has to pay. They have to pay porter fees. They demand money from the people who can't go to carry. Each person must pay 2,000 or 3,000, up to 5,000 Kyat. Whether the villagers work for one day or one month, the soldiers still demand money as they like.

Q: Do any of the people get sick when they go as porters?

A: We have seen that the people leading the villagers in the village are not sympathetic. They call the people to work whether they are sick or well. They can't do it but they have to carry loads.

Q: Do the soldiers hit and beat the villagers who are sick and can't carry?

A: When they can't walk they are beaten. I don't think they curse them, because they already beat them. I haven't heard it. The Burmese don't curse them with "*ma aye loh [motherfucker]*".

Q: Do they demand things from other villages?

A: Ka Pyaw village has to pay a lot. We don't have exact information from other villages like Pa Thwee because they are far from us. The villagers at Pa Thwee always have to pay. I don't have exact information, but the enemy is gathering the villagers at Ta Pwoh [*Kyo Gu in Burmese*] and Pway Palaw. The villagers must come and stay there so they can torture and force the villagers to work. When the villagers go to fetch water and do not let the soldiers know it, they are fined 500 Kyat. The SPDC forced them to dig a well, but it is the villagers' water.

Q: Have the soldiers confiscated any farmland?

A: When the enemy came to stay in the village they did as they liked in the villagers' betelnut plantations. The villagers couldn't do anything. The soldiers climbed up to get all the nuts.

Q: What about the flat fields?

A: The soldiers demand paddy. They have to give more than 10 baskets for each acre. It is about 14 or 15 baskets [*per acre*].

Q: Have they burned the villagers' paddy?

A: They destroyed and burned over 200 baskets of paddy at Ka Pyaw and Per Yweh. It was on March 17th 2001.

Q: Do you think they will still abuse people in the future?

A: Most of the people think it will be peaceful soon. But for me, I think they will still do it in the future. Recently I have been thinking that they are always abusing people. In the past there was a man named Saw K'Way. They came up and shot him dead. He had made no mistake. When he was travelling he was also holding one of the enemy's passes, but they didn't look at the pass and shot him dead. It happened at the highest field in Kyet Ma Oh in the beginning of March 2001. He had a wife and two children. I don't know his wife's name but his mother is Auntie M---.

Q: Do the villagers have to go and do anything else?

A: In Ka Pyaw village they also have to build a monastery. The villagers have to go and give all of their energy there. They don't give payment for it. When they build a bridge or whatever, the villagers have to give all their energy. The soldiers don't pay a single Kyat. There is money given [*by the State for the project*], but it is taken by their leaders.

Q: Where did they build a bridge?

A: They built bridges at Ta Mu and Kweh Gu. In the past over 20 people at a time had to go and build them. It took over a week, one or two weeks. It was not only at one place. The people from the Burman villages also had to build, but it was mostly Karen villagers who had to go and build them.

Q: Do they come to demand money for food fees in Ka Pyaw village?

A: In Ka Pyaw village the soldiers who pass through are always demanding money. It costs 4,000, 5,000, up to 10,000 Kyat.

Q: Do the soldiers eat the villagers' livestock?

A: They eat the villagers' poultry but they also shoot dead and eat people's cattle and buffaloes. They don't pay any Kyat. They shot them dead and ate them for free. When they couldn't eat it all, they threw the rest in a hole and left it. They eat only the thigh of a cow or pig and then go back. They also climbed up the betelnut and coconut trees and ate the young fruit. The owners don't even get to eat them anymore.

Q: Do they always do this?

A: They are always doing this, but then when they come the next time there is no fruit so they can't do it. They always do this in Kyet Ma Oh.

Appendix A: Terms and Abbreviations

Military/Political

SPDC	State Peace and Development Council, military junta ruling Burma
PDC	Peace and Development Council, SPDC local-level administration
VPDC	Village Peace & Development Council (abbreviated 'Ya Ya Ka' in Burmese)
TPDC	Township Peace & Development Council (abbreviated 'Ma Ya Ka' in Burmese)
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council, former name of SPDC until Nov. 1997
IB	Infantry Battalion (SPDC), usually about 250-500 soldiers fighting strength
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion (SPDC), usually about 250-500 soldiers fighting strength
LID	Light Infantry Division (SPDC); ten battalions, usually for offensive operations
Company	Military unit of about 100 soldiers, though often understrength in SPDC Army
Column	Combination of Companies, assembled for operations; usually 100-300 soldiers
Camp	Army base or outpost; from remote hill posts of 10 soldiers to Battalion HQ camps of several hundred soldiers
NCO	Non-commissioned officers; lance corporals, corporals and sergeants
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, Karen group allied with SLORC/SPDC
KNU	Karen National Union, main Karen opposition group
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army, army of the KNU

Village Terms

IDP	Internally Displaced Person; villagers who have become internal refugees
loh ah pay	Voluntary labour to make merit, but used by SPDC for most forms of forced labour
set tha wontan	'Messengers'; forced labour as errand-runners, messengers, and for some odd jobs
yeh beh	'Servant(s)', used by SPDC officers to mean forced labourers, usually porters
	Prison convicts

Measurements and Currency

Viss	Unit of weight measure; one viss is 1.6 kilograms or 3.5 pounds
Pyi	Volume of uncooked rice equal to 8 small condensed milk tins; about 2 kg / 4.4 lb
Bowl	Volume of uncooked rice same as a <i>pyi</i>
Tin	Also 'big tin', volume of rice or paddy of 8 <i>pyi</i> ; about 17 kg / 37 lb of husked rice
Basket	Volume of rice equal to 2 big tins; 25 kilograms or 55 pounds
Kyat	Burmese currency; US\$1=6 Kyat at official rate, 700+ Kyat at current market rate

Honorifics

Saw	Karen personal prefix used for men
Naw	Karen personal prefix used for women
Pa	'Father'; Karen suffix attached to names to indicate someone's father
Mo	'Mother'; Karen suffix attached to names to indicate someone's mother
Pu	'Grandfather'; Karen personal prefix used for elderly men
Pi	'Grandmother'; Karen personal prefix used for elderly women
Ma	Burmese personal prefix used for young women
Ko/Maung	Burmese personal prefix used for young men
U	Burmese personal prefix used for older men
Daw	Burmese personal prefix used for married or older women

Tenasserim Division



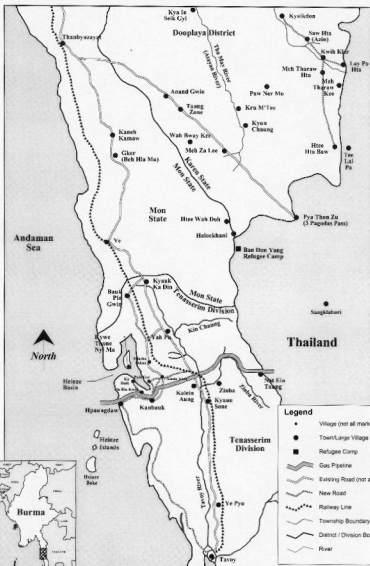
Legend

- Village (not all marked)
- Town/Large Villages
- Refugee Camp
- Gas Pipeline
- Existing Road (not all marked)
- Railway Line
- Township Boundary
- District / Division Boundary
- River

Scale: 1 cm to 25 km / 1 inch to 40 miles



South Dooplaya to Tavoy



Scale: 1 cm to 9 km / 1 inch to 14 miles

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group