

Commentary

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As more and more people throughout the world are coming to realise, everything in this world is interconnected. This applies just in much in Burma as anywhere else. Many people who should be fully aware of this are choosing to ignore it, pretending that as long as the political talks in Rangoon continue and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi can travel to her party offices, the massive human rights abuses being committed at the same time by the State Peace and Development Council military junta and its Tatmadaw (armed forces) against civilians throughout the country are somehow unrelated, as though happening in some other part of the world. But all of these things are connected.

By the end of 2001 the SPDC appeared to believe that it had largely pacified Dooplaya district of southern Karen State. It had established three village tracts and was using villagers as forced labour to build Army camps, roads and schools, demanding large amounts of extortion money and crop quotas from the same villagers. To the SPDC, this is what peace looks like. Though the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) was still active in the district, the destruction and forced relocation of villages had stopped, and many people had even been allowed to return to villages which the SPDC had destroyed before, though their movements were still tightly restricted. [See *“Dooplaya District: Consolidation of Control in Central Dooplaya”*, KHRG Information Update #2002-U2, 31/1/02.] Then Light Infantry Division 88 arrived in the district, and without warning in February 2002 they launched Operation Than L’Yet (named after a traditional Burman four-edged dagger). Initially this involved burning and forcibly relocating small groups of villages in northern Dooplaya, but in mid-April the full weight of the operation was unleashed. Tatmadaw columns went from village to village, forcing villagers out of their houses, beating them and forcing them to watch as soldiers looted their homes and tortured their elders. The entire populations of some villages were detained in their churches for days without food before their houses were burned. Most were told they had one or two weeks to move to a relocation site before troops returned to burn their houses, but the columns invariably returned earlier than that, beat them for being slow and force-marched them out of the village. By July as many as sixty villages had been forced to relocate. At least five thousand villagers had fled into the forest. Over 1,300 had managed to evade the Tatmadaw units posted at the border and reached refugee camps in Thailand. Thousands more were forced into the SPDC’s relocation camps, where they have been provided with nothing and are used alongside the local villagers to build and guard roads and bridges, stand guard at Army camps, carry supplies for the military columns which go out to destroy more villages, and cut down betelnut plantations and forest along road routes to expose the ‘enemy’. Many of the villagers in the relocation sites are already surviving on roots and thin rice soup, trying to find ways to escape into the forest. Army columns also comb the district to shoot on sight villagers trying to hide. On April 28th they found a group of over twenty villagers hiding in some ricefield huts and massacred ten of them. Eight of the ten were women and girls; six of the ten were children aged two to fifteen. Nine others were wounded but escaped. One, a pregnant woman who had lost two children in the massacre, gave birth to a dead baby ten days later, and then died herself. Other villagers have

been shot on sight throughout the district, and many have been tortured or taken away and not seen again. KHRG has interviewed over 100 villagers from the district about this operation and the general situation, supported by photographic documentation, field reports and SPDC order documents. An initial summary is presented in ***“Operation Than L’Yet: Forced Displacement, Massacres and Forced Labour in Dooplaya District”*** (KHRG Information Update #2002-U5, 24/9/02), and a full report will be released before the end of this year.

One of the most notable features of Operation Than L’Yet has been the near-total international media blackout; even the newspapers in neighbouring Thailand have not reported it. Why has ‘pacified’ Dooplaya suffered such a massive military operation, and why has it been so ignored? Orders from the operation came from Rangoon, so it is there we must look for answers. The reason the operation has gone completely unreported internationally is the obsessive international focus on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, centered on her ‘release’ from house arrest on May 6th. This was foreseen by the SPDC, a regime which has become very adept at playing the international propaganda game and is not beyond turning the international infatuation with Aung San Suu Kyi to its own ends. Her release was a carefully engineered public relations operation which was prepared months in advance. It followed a similar pattern to other SPDC initiatives from the past. First, as early as the last months of 2001, the SPDC intensified its public vilifications of the ‘democracy goddess’, to attract more attention and gain maximum benefit from the subsequent about-face, when it suddenly hinted at a possible release. This occurred in early 2002, just as Division 88 was first being deployed to Dooplaya. The regime then alternated between attacks on Suu Kyi and hints at her release, to keep the world guessing and writing about it.

By April it was clear that the release was imminent. Visas for journalists to visit Rangoon, which had been almost impossible to obtain for years, were suddenly being issued to almost anyone with a press card. In mid-April the journalists started arriving in Rangoon, and Division 88 unleashed the full weight of its attack in Dooplaya. While the troops spent the next four weeks looting and destroying villages, massacring women and children and herding thousands of villagers into relocation sites, the regime played games with the journalists in Rangoon by refusing to clearly state anything about Suu Kyi’s release. The journalists had to file, as the SPDC knew, but none of them filed stories about Dooplaya. Instead they filed only what they could get access to - stories on generals and National League for Democracy (NLD) party leaders.

On April 21st, a combined column of three Tatmadaw battalions entered Tee Tha Blu village, looted houses and burned some of them, beat villager Pa Haw Su brutally and gave him a cut in the neck with a knife. The villagers were locked in a group in the church for three days without food, except the children who were fed once a day. After three days they were taken out of the church and were forced to watch the soldiers steal the zinc roofing from the church and the meeting hall, then burn both buildings. The column beat and interrogated four villagers, including the pastor and the village medic, then took them away. One villager escaped later, but the others have not been seen since. On April 27th, the troops returned and burned the remainder of the village, told the villagers to get out but did not tell them where to go. This has never been reported in the media.

On May 5th, a Division 88 column entered Tee P’Nweh village and told the ninety families living there that they had seven days to move to Meh T’Kreh relocation site, after which their homes and belongings would be destroyed and they would be shot on sight if found in the area, by order of Division Commander Brigadier General Ohn Myint. The troops burned three houses and a

rice storage barn, looted belongings and robbed several villagers at gunpoint. They took two village elders and three villagers as hostages and left the village. The next day, May 6th, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released to a global fanfare. Speeches were made, and articles were written with heavy use of words like “new dawn”, “awakening of a new era”, and “hope”. The visas which had been stamped in the passports of the journalists all expired the very next day. The SPDC did not want them hanging around to talk to the Lady herself, or to see the lack of any positive aftermath. The journalists went home to rewrite the same stories of hope in various different ways. On May 7th, the day that most of the journalists had to leave Rangoon, Division 88 brought back one of the village elders to Tee P’Nweh. He had been tortured. They told the villagers they must finish moving by noon the next day. On May 8th, they returned and began burning all of the houses. Karen soldiers briefly opened fire on them from outside the village, so as punishment they shot the village headman in both thighs, tied him up and took him back with them. Along the way they sliced a tendon in his leg with a knife and left him to die, but his brother was following behind and rescued him. Tee P’Nweh village now lies destroyed, most of its people incarcerated in a relocation camp.

Even after Suu Kyi’s release the smokescreen remained effective for months. The operation continued in full force, particularly for the first ten days after her release, and continued to go unreported. In all of the interviews conducted since then, Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders have not mentioned it. Instead they express concern for their party members first and foremost, as most politicians would. Perhaps they are not allowed to mention things such as Operation Than L’Yet as a precondition of their ‘talks’ with the SPDC. But even villagers in remote areas have told KHRG researchers that they believe it was the smokescreen of her release that enabled the destruction of their villages.

Dooplaya is not the only region where the human rights situation remains dire. In Papun and Nyaunglebin districts of northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Division, the SPDC launched another dry season operation in November 2001. Five battalions from Light Infantry Division 33 were sent out to hunt down the thousands of internally displaced villagers who have been scraping out their survival in hiding in the hills of the region since their villages were first ordered to relocate and burned in 1997 and 1998. Whenever Tatmadaw columns are not around, some villagers manage to rebuild in and around their former villages, only to have to run yet again when the next Tatmadaw column comes to burn their huts. The operation began at rice harvest time, so that the troops could spot the villagers in their exposed hillside ricefields and open fire on them, then destroy the crop or landmine the fields. By preventing the villagers from harvesting a crop, they hope to starve them out of the hills and undermine the food supply of the resistance forces. The villagers are much more resourceful than the SPDC gives them credit for, and survive year after year in the face of repeated offensives. But it is a life which is next to impossible, and in the end many give up and try to make the dangerous trip to a refugee camp in Thailand. This past dry season in particular, more villagers were shot on sight than in recent years and many internally displaced villagers told KHRG researchers they were finding it difficult to go on. A partial update on this situation is presented in ***“Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts: The SPDC’s Dry Season Offensive Operations”*** (KHRG Information Update #2002-U3, 5/4/02).

Throughout Karen areas all of the normal abuses are continuing with no abatement: extortion, looting, arbitrary detention, torture, rape and killing. All of last year’s murmurs of hope that pressure by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) may bring about a decrease in forced labour have come to nothing. Instead, since the departure of the ILO’s investigative High Level Team in October 2001, there appears to be a resurgence of forced labour everywhere. New roads

and bridges are being built entirely with forced labour in Dooplaya, Nyaunglebin and Toungoo districts. A giant canal is being dug in southeastern Pa'an district. *[This and other aspects of the situation in Pa'an district are documented in "Consolidation of Control: The SPDC and the DKBA in Pa'an District" (KHRG Information Update #2002-U4, 7/9/02).]* In Dooplaya, troops no longer bother to bring in convicts to carry their supplies as they did last year, but instead force civilians from the villages and relocation sites to do all of the forced labour as porters. While the ILO goes on month after month without deciding on who should be their Liaison Officer in Rangoon, the SPDC is initiating new forced labour infrastructure projects; the international community has turned its attention elsewhere, assuming that the ILO is handling the problem. But it is not. The SPDC appears to believe the pressure is now off. The regime's only efforts at present to address the issue of forced labour are aimed at eradicating the evidence: many village heads now say that instead of receiving written orders demanding forced labour, they are simply summoned to the Army camp and receive their orders orally; the heads of villages being forced to dig the canal in southeastern Pa'an district have been forced to sign documents certifying that the workers are volunteers; portering is now referred to as *loh ah pay*, infuriating the villagers because portering is a far worse form of forced labour than the short-term *loh ah pay* they are forced to do every day.

Another abuse which is on the rise in several areas is forced recruitment. The KNLA presently does very little forced recruitment, but the Tatmadaw and all of the armies allied with it are increasing their demands. In Pa'an district, and to a lesser extent in Dooplaya, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) is trying to increase its strength by imposing recruit quotas on villages. In Dooplaya, the Nyein Chan Yay A'Pweh ('Peace Group', or Karen Peace Army) is demanding several recruits from the few villages it controls, sometimes by threatening to kill people in villages which do not comply. In Dooplaya and Thaton districts, the SPDC is demanding up to twenty recruits per village for its Pyitthu Sit militia. Once trained, these recruits must pay as much as 60,000 or 70,000 Kyat for a gun and the villagers are then forced to support them. They are ordered to keep resistance forces out of their village, and are frequently used at the front of Tatmadaw columns to trigger ambushes and detonate landmines. Some villagers in Dooplaya are joining the DKBA just to avoid forced recruitment to the Pyitthu Sit.

Of all of Burma's ignored peoples, the most ignored are the Muslims. The Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State have received some attention in the past ten years due to the 1992 pogrom against them, though now that most of them have been forced back into Burma the abuses and the flight to Bangladesh are both continuing with far less attention by the international community. But even more ignored are the other Muslim communities which form part of every town and a good many villages throughout all of Burma. In this year when much of the world, including the SPDC, has attempted to equate Muslims with terrorism, KHRG has examined the plight of Burma's scattered Muslim communities. What we found was systematic religious and civil persecution. *[See "Easy Targets: The Persecution of Muslims in Burma" (KHRG #2002-02, May 2002)]* Throughout Burma, mosques are not allowed to be repaired or new ones built, in a deliberate effort to deprive Muslims of places to worship and to turn existing mosques into eyesores and sources of shame. Muslims are also deprived of basic human rights, primarily through the denial of all citizenship. The SPDC will not issue them official identity cards, and the lack of these cards makes it next to impossible to travel, to attend higher education, or to obtain paying work. This effectively forces them to the margins of society, like the 'untouchable' Dalits of India. They have very few options but to spend their lives as day labourers or small merchants, unless they can make enough money to buy citizenship status from the corrupt bureaucracy. They are the first ones targeted for forced labour, confiscation of

property and other similar abuses, because the Army, the civil service, and most of the non-Muslim population are similarly racist against them.

The SPDC frequently turns this racism to its own ends, as in 2001 when it instigated anti-Muslim riots to distract public anger away from the collapsing economy and the lack of any progress in the regime's negotiations with the NLD party. Between March and October, anti-Muslim riots occurred throughout Burma, in Sittwe, Toungoo, Kyaukpyu, Prome, Pakokku, Pegu, Henzada, and other towns throughout the country. The violence was usually begun by Buddhist monks, most likely led by 'monks' from Military Intelligence (most large temples in Burmese towns have at least some 'monks' who are in fact Military Intelligence operatives, there to watch for any anti-SPDC tendencies among the other monks; these operatives are also sometimes used to instigate communal violence). In each case the violence spread, and Muslim mosques, homes and shops were destroyed. It is unclear exactly how many people were killed or injured in the riots. In some of the places Muslims fought back and battles with sticks, knives, slingshots and rocks broke out. Muslim townspeople were hit with rocks, slashed by machetes and beaten with sticks. Estimates from Toungoo, where the violence was perhaps the worst, are that between 20 and 40 people, both Muslim and Buddhist, were killed and many more injured. Throughout most of the violence the Army and police, usually so quick to crush any public activity, either stood by or held back the Muslims but not the Buddhists. After the riots Muslims were arrested but not Buddhists. In Toungoo and Prome, the Muslim communities have not been allowed to rebuild their destroyed mosques or even their homes, and in Toungoo decrees were issued that no more than five Muslims could worship together, though no similar restrictions were placed on Buddhists or Christians.

The systematic persecution of Muslims in Burma has taken on an added relevance since the September 11th 2001 attacks in the United States. Never has there been a greater global tendency to persecute Muslims. The Cable News Network (CNN) in the United States recently worsened the situation by broadcasting dubiously sourced videotapes which they claimed showed Muslims being trained in Burma by alleged Al-Qaeda members, though there was no evidence to support this claim and the tapes could have been filmed anywhere by anyone (it should also be remembered that CNN became notorious for broadcasting fabricated propaganda tapes of fake Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait during the Gulf War). The SPDC has already made statements that they are investigating whether Muslims in Burma have 'terrorist' links, probably to test the water to see if the world is willing to turn a blind eye to further persecution and more state-instigated riots against Burmese Muslims. In this atmosphere, it is especially important that foreign governments and civil society organisations stand up for the rights of Muslims in Burma.

But the smokescreen persists, and it will be even more difficult to draw international attention to the plight of Burma's Muslims than to the Shan, Karen, Karenni or other peoples. Now that Aung San Suu Kyi has been released, the international focus is once again on 'the talks' - the same SPDC-NLD talks which have not accomplished anything in two years, with the possible exception of the release of a few NLD members from prison. Under cover of these talks, Operation Than L'Yet destroys villages in Dooplaya and Division 33 shoots villagers on sight in Papun district. If the SPDC were sincere about these talks, would it be launching such operations? In Kosovo, did the diplomats tell the Kosovar Albanians to just wait it out in Srebrenica and other villages until the Serbs could hold talks with each other in Belgrade? No, they intervened, and only when the killings had stopped was it time to sort out the politics in Serbia. This is not a suggestion that NATO or the UN should bomb Burma, but they should declare any SPDC-NLD talks meaningless and irrelevant until the systematic killings of villagers and destruction of their villages stop, and until mass abuses like forced labour are reined in.

Political talks will take years, but mass killings are happening now and must be stopped now. This is not a time for patience. The secret talks in Rangoon are not addressing the human rights crisis nationwide; instead, they are actually allowing that crisis to worsen by providing a smokescreen for the abuses. Both the SPDC and the NLD should be judged not on their words, but on their actions alone, and the effects of these actions on the people of Burma.

KHRG Report Notes

In addition to this commentary, in September 2002 KHRG has released ***“Consolidation of Control: The SPDC and the DKBA in Pa’an District”*** (Information Update #2002-U4) and ***“Operation Than L’Yet: Forced Displacement, Massacres and Forced Labour in Dooplaya District”*** (Information Update #2002-U5). Those interested should also watch our web site (www.khrg.org) for Photo Set 2002-A, soon to be released, which includes over 500 photographs taken throughout this year documenting many aspects of the human rights situation in Karen regions. Before the end of 2002 we will also be releasing a full report on the deteriorating human rights situation in Dooplaya District of southern Karen State, based on well over 100 interviews and other evidence.