

Karen Human Rights Group

Report from the Field

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Dooplaya District:

Fighting And Human Rights Abuse Still Continue After Ceasefire

Dooplaya district is in southern Karen state (see map). The villagers here have suffered human rights abuses by the Burmese military regime for many decades. An informal ceasefire between the current State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime and the Karen National Union (KNU) was agreed in early January 2004. Even after the verbal ceasefire, however, occasional armed clashes have still occurred in Dooplaya district. The villagers who live close to the SPDC camps still have to do forced labour as porters, and respond to demands for *Loh ah pay* ("volunteer" labour, actually short-term forced labour). There are also some demands for money, food, and materials for camp building. Looting, abuse, and killing still occur as well. In addition the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and Karen Peace Force (KPF)¹, two groups allied with the SPDC, also demand forced labour, logs, bamboo, and thatch when they need them.

Fighting

SPDC Light Infantry Division #88 was replaced in Dooplaya by Military Operations Command #19 in January 2004. That same month, the Army sent rations, bullets and shells up to each of their camps. Over the following three months, a KHRG researcher saw SPDC troops bringing up additional rations and ammunition. The troops set the roadside scrub alight for security,² and the fires sometimes spread out of control and burned villagers' fields and plantations. In mid-2004, many battalions from all four townships in Dooplaya were preparing a military training exercise in the villages by the side of the road from Thanbyuzayat to Ye. Skirmishes between Burmese and Karen forces have occurred especially in Waw Raw (a.k.a. Win Yaw) township in southwestern Dooplaya. When the fighting occurred in Tee Du village (part of Waw Raw Township) one villager died. The SPDC's Southeast Command Headquarters ordered the military units under its control and the military units in the Thai border area to seek out and fight the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA is the armed wing of the KNU) as much as they can. Some villagers have said

¹ The Nyein Chan Yay A'Pway, or 'Peace Force', is also known as the 'Thu Mu Heh' force, after the former KNLA officer who founded it in 1997, and they wear arm badges reading 'KPF'. Previous KHRG reports have named it the Karen Peace Army (KPA).

² SPDC forces clear all scrub for up to 50 metres from either side of a road to protect themselves against ambush. Villagers are often forced to do this with machetes.

that the SPDC has become more severe since the ceasefire. The SPDC in Kya In Seik Gyi township area (in the middle of Dooplaya district, see map) keeps the KNLA from getting too close by shooting at any KNLA soldiers seen within seven miles of any SPDC camp. Because of the ceasefire, however, SPDC troops are able to go to more places than before. The SPDC has ordered the villagers not to assist deserters and to send them back to the SPDC camp, and has threatened that if they find out that villagers have helped a deserter, “action” will be taken such as beatings or imposition of fines. At least twice a week, the villagers close to the camp must give information about whether KNLA soldiers have entered the village or not. Should the KNLA enter the village, the villagers are required to send an urgent message to inform the SPDC about it. If the villagers fail to send the information, they are fined and “action” is sometimes taken.

Forced labour

Since the ceasefire, the SPDC has been demanding forced labour but in a more ‘amicable’ way. For instance, they ask for *Loh ah pay* through the local monk or “request” for help instead of “ordering” forced labour. Army columns still demand two people from a village to guide them to the next village. In addition, villagers seen along the way are often taken as guides and released only when they arrive at the next village. Villagers who live near SPDC camps have to go as porters to carry loads, though not as much as before because the Army brings convict porters instead. In January 2004 when Military Operations Command #19 came to Kya In township, each company brought 5 prison convicts with them. Even so, they sometimes suddenly demand 15 villagers to go with them as porters to accompany them to the next village, and then if they cannot find people to replace them in the next village the villagers must continue portering for up to three days.

Villagers still have to provide *Loh ah pay* to repair Army camps near their villages. Some SPDC military officers have confiscated the villagers’ fields and then forced the villagers to plough, plant the seeds, transplant the paddy, cut and clear the weeds and harvest the paddy. In September 2004, SPDC Infantry Battalion #231 led by Hla Moe ordered village heads to force their villagers to cut and clear the roadsides along the car road from Win Ka to Htee Gu Thaw (approximately three hours’ distance on foot) and specified a deadline for completion; the clearing was intended to protect moving SPDC troops against ambush. Villagers also had to repair bridges, repair the road, and surface the car road with stone from Htee Gu Thaw to Kya In Seik Gyi (approximately eight hours on foot). The SPDC has assigned to the KPF responsibility for repairing the bridges on the car road and building bridges across the rivers in Kawkareik and Kya In Seik Gyi towns. Villagers are to be forced to provide the labour under KPF orders.

SPDC officers have also summoned some of the village heads since the ceasefire and ordered them to replace their schools made of bamboo with schools made of wood. Villagers have to find their own wood, tin, nails and other materials and pay the carpenter fees. Vehicles coming from Three Pagodas (Khoh Ther Pler) are often confiscated by SPDC patrols, who then order local villagers to ensure that the vehicles are not stolen from the place they are stored. If the vehicle breaks down, they demand over 50 villagers to come to push and pull it to where they want it stored.

Demands for food and materials

SPDC soldiers have told the villagers that the informal ceasefire doesn't include chickens and ducks, so they continue to steal and demand chickens, ducks, muscovy ducks, vegetables, fruits, pork, rice, oil, and salt from village heads. Animals like pigs and goats are also shot and killed without the owner's permission. Some villagers complain that these abuses have worsened since the ceasefire began. In August 2004, SPDC Infantry Battalion #548 Column #1 led by Commander Soe Min went to the field hut of Saw Gay Moo near Ka Sah village in Kya In township, and took 4,000 Kyat and a radio from the bag he had hanging in the hut. In May 2004, Light Infantry Battalion #548 from P'ya Ngote Doh camp entered Plaw Deh Hta village and arrested some Shan cattle traders who had 32 cows. They demanded 1,000,000 Kyat from the traders, but the traders didn't have it, so the soldiers took 6 cows to their camp instead. The cattle traders were unable to raise the money to ransom the cows back from the soldiers.

Villages are ordered to provide logs, bamboo, fence posts, and thatch, but some villages that are far away from Army camps must give money instead. When SPDC soldiers see villagers going to the towns to buy food, they stop them and demand money and food. If the villagers don't pay, they are detained and threatened until the soldiers get what they want. Cattle and buffalo traders must pay tax at the SPDC camp gates when they pass through. Although the SPDC no longer collects paddy quotas, they still collect flat field tax, plantation tax, and orchard tax: the tax for one acre is 1,000 Kyat. Villagers still have to give sentry fees, teachers' fees, health worker fees, bullock cart fees, boat fees, car fees and food fees. Army units manning checkpoints extort money from cars and motorcycles going from Kya In Seik Gyi to Three Pagodas: 15,000 Kyat per car and 3,000 Kyat per motorcycle. In May 2004 Light Infantry Battalion #548 led by Battalion Commander Tin Maung Oo took three villagers' bullock carts from Tee Poh Way village in Kya In Township. The villagers had to pay 1,000 Kyat ransom for each cart. Also in May 2004, Light Infantry Battalion #548 Column 2 led by Deputy Battalion Commander Aung Mya Thu stole a chainsaw and a motorbike in Ma Oo village, Waw Raw Township. He forced the villagers to ransom the chainsaw for 50,000 Kyat and the motorbike for 100,000 Kyat. In September 2004 in Kya In Seik Gyi town, SPDC Infantry Battalion #284 ordered each village near the town to buy a tractor for 750,000 Kyat.

Restrictions and Relocation

In November 2004, SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #588 Commander Myint Zaw summoned the village tract chairmen and secretaries from Beh La Mu, Yay La Mine and Ka Nay Ka Moh village tracts to provide information on their backgrounds and families. Similar information is to be gathered for village heads. The same battalion demanded a list of the villagers' plantations and crop yields in Nih Su village tract. Civilians are required to have a pass to go to their plantations, hill fields, and gardens. Overnight guests must be registered. In July 2004 the village heads whose stay close to Kyaikdon township headquarters were summoned and had to discuss making identity cards for the villagers; each person must pay 3,500 Kyat for an identity card.

In February 2004, forty soldiers of DKBA Battalion #907 led by officer Soe Moe Oo entered Sho Hta village and decreed that all villagers working outside the village³ must return and

³ Many villagers work fields some distance from their village and stay in farmfield huts for part of the year.

stay inside the village. The DKBA soldiers said they would take action against anyone who remained outside the village, so the villagers were afraid and returned. Also in February 2004, DKBA officers Po Nyein, Kya Ni, Soe Myaing and Toh Pwa Say ordered the villagers from Ka Moh, Ah Pyauk and Klaw Hseh villages to relocate to a place they designated in Weh Taw Tay. All the villagers had to be there by March 2004. The officers threatened to take action against any villagers who didn't go.

Rape and Sexual Harassment

On August 11 2004 at 2 p.m., Lieutenant Colonel Aung Kyaw Soe led Infantry Battalion #284 Column #2 into Meh Ka Dee village in Kawkareik Township when he was drunk. He shot and killed the village secretary's daughter, 17-year old Naw Htwee Kha, also called Ma Mya Win, with his 9-millimetre pistol because he could not convince her to sleep with him. On September 5 2004, the commander of Strategic Operations Command #3 (part of SPDC Southwestern Command) was escorted by Zaw Min's Infantry Battalion #51 troops to Ah Nan Kwin village in Waw Raw township. That night, Zaw Min's soldiers went three times to the nearby Buddhist nun's residence, at midnight, 1 a.m., and 2 a.m., to rape the novice nuns who were sleeping there. Six of the novice nuns, aged between 8 and 14 years old, were attacked. The soldiers grabbed them, tore their sarongs, and in one case a soldier touched one of the novice nuns with his penis, but in each case the novices say they managed to struggle free and escape. The case was reported to the authorities but no action was taken against the soldiers.

Resulting Living Conditions

Because of these human rights abuses, living conditions for civilians have become very difficult. One fourth of the civilians face food shortages and don't have enough rice from their harvest at the end of the year. The chickens they raise and the produce from plantations go to the SPDC. In addition, doing forced labour for the SPDC does not leave sufficient time to do their work.

Most civilians in Burma who live in the rural areas still use traditional medicines like roots and barks. Pharmaceutical medicines are expensive for them. Some backpack medical teams from Thailand arrive in the villages periodically. In addition, teams from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have been to some villages along major rivers and villages along main car roads to give polio and measles vaccinations. The ICRC teams interviewed villagers about the health situation and checked and treated some patients who approached them but stayed only briefly before leaving the village.

Education for the rural children is inadequate. Villagers try to set up schools for their own children. Some schools belong to the SPDC government but villagers have to build the school and take responsibility for everything such as teachers' fees, travel fees, food, medicine, school stationery and books. After forcing villagers to build the school, SPDC soldiers set up the Burmese flag in front of it, with military slogans printed at the base of the flagpole. The education system remains under SPDC control. Books and notebooks are expensive for village families. The students must study in Burmese and can only study their own language during holiday time. Most children stop going to school after primary school (fourth standard), because it is very expensive for the parents to pay for their children to continue to middle school. Some students go to the refugee camps in Thailand to continue studying, but some can't go because of the long distance. Some children cannot continue to

go to school because they must help their parents. Year by year as the children grow older without education they get more and more behind. Students who are unable to learn anymore and have not completed 10th standard (high school) are unable to get jobs. Students without ID cards are unable to sit the 10th standard exam. Sending a child to school costs 100,000 Kyat per year for primary school, 200,000 Kyat for middle school and 400,000 Kyat for high school.

The combined effects of the many problems mentioned above have caused many people to go to Thailand to find money. They send some money to their parents to buy rice and food and to pay fees and other costs. However, many problems can also arise from working in Thailand. Some young people experience further abuse. For example, they are arrested by immigration police, or their employers do not pay their wages. They also suffer from lack of communication with their families, difficulty deciding between good and bad, and exposure to new temptations to take drugs, go to prostitutes, or gamble. Some young girls are trafficked into prostitution, some become a 'minor wife' to a Thai man, and some get HIV and die as a consequence.

Further Background

For further background, see *Operation Than L'Yet: Forced Displacement, Massacres and Forced Labour in Dooplaya District* (KHRG Information Update #2002-U5, 25/9/02); *Dooplaya District: Consolidation of Control in Central Dooplaya* (KHRG Information Update #2002-U2, 31/1/02); *Starving Them Out: Forced Relocations, Killings and the Systematic Starvation of Villagers in Dooplaya District* (KHRG #2000-02, 31/3/00); and other previous KHRG reports on the region. Photographs documenting the situation in Dooplaya will appear in *KHRG Photo Set 2005-A* (soon to be released) and can also be found in *KHRG Photo Set 2001-A* (September 2001) and other previous photo sets. All of these are available on the Karen Human Rights Group website (www.khrg.org).