

# **KAREN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP**

## **Report from the Field**

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### **Thaton District: Continued Consolidation of SPDC and DKBA Control through the use of Forced Labour, Extortion and Movement Restrictions**

Since the informal ceasefire between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the Karen National Union (KNU) began in January 2004, the situation in Bilin, Thaton, Kyaikto and Pa'an Townships in Thaton District has remained bleak. KHRG researchers have seen that the SPDC and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) soldiers are still abusing the villagers with no decrease in the suffering of the villagers. Between June and November 2004, the SPDC and DKBA continued committing human rights violations by demanding forced labour from the villagers in the area such as carrying rations and constructing roads, restricting the movements of the villagers, extorting money, and demanding building materials and food from the villagers.

The SPDC still forces villagers to accompany them as porters, but their methods have changed. The SPDC now usually takes villagers from one village to the next, where the porters are changed for new villagers. More commonly, the soldiers demand only two people from a village to go with a column as *lan pya [guides]*. The *lan pya* have to guide the soldiers as well as carry things for them. When the Army needs to use many porters to carry their things they usually use convicts brought in from prisons in other parts of Burma. The use of convicts as porters and labourers around Army camps has become widespread in the district. The Army does still demand large numbers of villagers when they have to resupply their outlying camps with rations, but the soldiers do not always accompany the villagers anymore. The soldiers know that the villagers would not dare to lose or steal anything because they are afraid of what the soldiers would do if anything happened to the rations. In August and September 2004, Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #380 Battalion Commander Kyaw Kyaw arrested the villagers from Thaton township to carry food for his battalion.

The SPDC is using Karen villagers in Thaton township for its own benefit to build bridges and perform road construction. In 2004, SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #8 led by Captain Thet Kaing built a road in Thaton township between Kyaik Tu and Keh Maw villages and the villagers near the road had to work for the SPDC every day. LIB #3 Commander Tin Aye

forced one person from each house in Th'Raw Meh village to cut and clear the brush from the side of the road. He also demanded two pieces of big bamboo from each house in the village. If the villagers did not work for them, they would have punished them by making the villagers jump like frogs. IB #8 Battalion Commander Myint Naing of Light Infantry Division (LID) #44 demanded 800 Kyat from each house in Shwe Yaung Pya village for a total of 80,000 Kyat, 700 Kyat from each house in Ka Law Kher village for a total of 70,000 Kyat, 800 Kyat from each house in La Aw Kher village for a total of 80,000 Kyat, and 700 Kyat from each house in Kya T'Raw village for a total of 70,000 Kyat. The total was 300,000 Kyat from those villages for the construction of the road. The SPDC said this money was for petrol for the trucks used in the construction. In September 2004, LIB #9 soldiers led by Major Mya Soe forced the villagers from Ma Yan Gone, Mi Chaung Aing, Htee Nya Paw and Ma Ei Cha villages to build bridges across the Htee Pa Doh, Ka Meh and Htee Htaung La Rivers for the vehicles to use. The villagers themselves had to find the wood needed to build the bridges.

After the ceasefire between the SPDC and the KNU began, the SPDC from Military Operations Command #9 commanded by Brigadier General Myint Aung from Kyauk Taw town, Arakan State, came to replace the soldiers from LID #66 who had previously been stationed in the area. They set up their headquarters at Lay Kay Army camp and forced the villagers to collect stones to repair a car road. Each village had to collect 300 piles of stone. Each of the piles of stone were one foot high and 10 feet around and it took 10 bullock cart loads to make one pile of stone. The villages to the west of the car road are Maw Lay, Ka T'Daw Ni, P'Nweh Kla, Noh Nya Thu, La Ko, Ka Meh, Ta Paw, Ler Klaw and Lay Kay villages. The villages to the east of the car road are Ei Heh, Gru Si, Noh Aw La, Pwa Ghaw, Kyaw Kay Kee, Ta Thu Kee, Noh Law Plaw, Noh Ka Day, Htee Pa Doh Kee, Meh Theh, Pwuh and Ha T'Reh villages. All these villages had to collect 300 piles of stone per village. In addition to this, the soldiers from the army camp also demanded thatch, bamboo and posts during this same time period.

The local SPDC battalions are heavily involved in logging in Thaton District. Village heads often receive demands from SPDC officers to supply large amounts of logs to the Army camps. No payment is usually given for the logs or for the labour of the villagers in cutting them. LIB #9 Battalion Commander Than Htoo Kyaw at Wa Pa village called for a meeting of T'Rweh Kee and Htee Pu Wah villages south of Noh Ka Toh village and T'Maw Daw and Noh Per Baw villages to the north of Noh Ka Toh. At the meeting the SPDC demanded 15 tons of logs from T'Rweh Kee, Htee Pu Wah and T'Rweh Wa villages and 18 tons of logs from T'Maw Daw and Noh Per Baw villages. The villagers had to send them to Wee Raw and nothing was paid for them. On another occasion, Major Mya Soe of LIB #9 demanded 50 logs, 12 cubits [548.64 cms /18 feet] in length and of 5 pay [152.4 cms /5 feet.] around, and 50 logs, 3 cubits [137.16 cms /4.5 feet] of 5 pay [152.4 cms /5 feet] around, from the Mi Choung Aing villagers, 50 logs, 12 cubits in length and 5 pay around, and 50 logs of 8 cubits [365.76 cms /12 feet] and 50 logs of 10 cubits [457.2 cms /15 feet] from Ma Yan Gone village. The villagers had to send the logs to the battalion stationed at Htee Nya Paw village before September 13<sup>th</sup> 2004.

In September and October 2004, SPDC IB #96 officer Tin Maung Win from Kyaikto Army camp in Kyaikto township demanded 300 pieces of *wa may* [a type of bamboo] from Pi Ti Kee village, 200 pieces of *wa may* from Kler Law Seh village and 300 pieces of bamboo from Moh Klaw Law village. The villagers had to send them to the Army camp by September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2004. During October, the villagers were also forced to cut the brush along

the sides of the road between Nga Pyaw Daw and Kru Kay villages by LID #44, LIB #2 led by Battalion Commander Aung Soe and Deputy Battalion Commander Aung Moo Htoo. The villagers did not go to do the work, so the soldiers demanded money instead; 12,000 Kyat from Kho Poe, 24,000 Kyat from Htee Nu Pu and 2,000 Kyat from Paw Paw Pu villages.

In September 2004, LIB #375 Camp Commander Kyaw Naing Lwin from Meh Pray Kee Army camp in Bilin township forced the villagers from Zee Gone village to roof the soldiers' video house [*a hut where people are charged to watch videos*]. When no one went to do the roofing work, the villagers were fined. For the building of the bridge at Aye Nay Loh River between Meh Pray Kee and K'Ser Poe villages, one person from each house in these two villages were forced to go and work on it. Villagers in Pa'an township have had to work for the SPDC soldiers collecting thatch, bamboo and posts, as *set tha* [*messengers*], as guides and carrying food for them. They have had to build roads and bridges, stand sentry on the roads and collect stones that are used in road construction.

In October 2004, LIB #378 led by Commander Khaing Ngwe entered Peh Wa Hta village at 4 o'clock in the evening. A 13 years old village girl was coming back from catching fish. One of the SPDC soldiers from the battalion captured and raped her in the flat fields near the village. The girl did not dare to report this incident to the officials because of her fear of revenge from the soldiers.

The DKBA has also been very active in Thaton District. KHRG researchers from the area assert that the demands for forced labour and the extortion which the villagers have to face from the DKBA are worse than from the SPDC. They also say, however, that although the DKBA now appears to be the worst group committing human rights abuses in the district, in reality it is the SPDC who advises them and uses them against the civilians. This makes it look as though the SPDC is not the group committing human rights abuses. The DKBA #333 Brigade operates in Thaton District and its three battalions are primarily concentrated in Pa'an township, although they have small camps throughout the district. They have set up seven checkpoints at Plaw Poh Toh, Leh Pan Tan, Mer Rer, Ta Gaw Bo, Meh Ka Raw, Myaing Galay, and Law Pu villages. A report sent in by a KHRG researcher stated that #333 Brigade operates in conjunction with the *Tha Ka Hsa Pa* (Anti-Insurgent Group). The *Tha Ka Hsa Pa* functions as an SPDC-controlled militia in Thaton District.

The DKBA has been active throughout the ceasefire and became more active in November 2004. DKBA soldiers came to the villages and prohibited the villagers from going outside the villages or to their fields. They told the villagers that if they were caught outside their villages they would be fined and tortured. When these orders came the villagers did not dare to go out or to their fields anymore. The result was that the villagers faced problems getting enough food because November is harvest time and the villagers were unable to go to their fields and harvest their paddy. During the past year the DKBA has started wearing uniforms similar to those worn by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) commandoes so that the villagers will trust them. They then go to the villages and order the village heads to get them a guide to send them to another village.

Despite the ceasefire, DKBA soldiers have gone to villages, tied up villagers, hurt them and questioned them about the places where the KNLA or KNU might be hiding. A KHRG field researcher reported that in October 2004, the DKBA arrested one of the KNU Agriculture Department heads for Thaton District and several of his workers. After they were arrested, the DKBA asked the villagers to pay a ransom of 400,000 Kyat for each person. Some of the

men who were not ransomed were killed by the DKBA and the rest were sent to prison. In August 2004, soldiers of DKBA #333 Brigade led by Company #3 Commander Tin Win entered the lower part of Kaw Heh village in Bilin Township and arrested 4 villagers; Saw Htee Tha, 35 years old, Ta Poe Nyaw, 40 years old, Maung Ni, 40 years old and Maung Taw 40 years. The DKBA then forced them to show where the KNU was hiding. The villagers were brutally beaten when they were unable to show them the hiding places. Another incident occurred in Pa Ya Raw village in October 2004. Company #3 Commander Tin Win and his fellow soldiers, Myint Win, Kyaw Mu La and Wah Po, entered the village and gathered the villagers together. Then they forced them to find the KNU village head for them. The villagers told them that they could not find him. The DKBA replied that if the villagers could not find him, they would be fined 100,000 Kyat. The villagers pleaded with them that they did not have any money, so the DKBA said that if they did not have money, the villagers must give them 3 baskets [63kgs/138lbs] of paddy and 50 viss [80 kgs/175 lbs] of pork. The villagers gave them the 3 baskets of paddy but told them that they could not find enough pork to give them 50 viss, so the DKBA shot one pig that weighed 35 viss [56 kgs/122.5lbs] and did not pay for it. The villagers were forced to pay the owner for it. Then the villagers were forced to find two porters, who were hit five times each by the DKBA soldiers.

The DKBA has also demanded thatch, bamboo and posts to build houses for their families from villagers in Pa'an township who already had to collect stones for the SPDC to build a road [see above]. When the DKBA was doing logging, they ordered villagers to saw and mill the wood for them, but they paid them nothing. In April 2004, they forced the villagers to begin constructing a road to Meh Si mountain. When the villagers didn't go, they came to chase them with guns and said that they would shoot all of the villagers dead. The villagers had to start constructing the new road from the Ka Ma Maung to Papun road in Papun District to Wa Ta Moh, P'Hi Kla and Meh Si Kaw Hti [at the foot of Meh Si mountain]. Part of this road runs through Thaton District so villagers from Bilin township such as Kaw Heh, Th'Waw Pya, Shwe Ohn, Mya Lay, Kway Lay, Ma Kru Htaw, Ler Klaw, Lay Kay, P'Ya Raw, Htee Si Baw, Khaw Poe Pleh, Pwoh, Noh Law Plaw, Htee Pa Doh Kee, Noh Ka Day, Noh Aaw La, Pwa Ghaw, Ta Thu Kee, Kyaw Kay Kee, Meh K'Na Kee, Kru Si, Ha T'Reh, Ta Bpaw and Ka Meh villages had to work on building the road to the DKBA's pagoda on Meh Si mountain. Each person had to go to work on the road for five days. They were not able to come back before five days because no one would go to replace them until their five days were finished. Some of the villagers came back before the five days because they did not bring enough clothes, and there was no more medicine or tobacco. The DKBA accused them of fleeing, and forced them to go back and work for another 15 days. The villagers were afraid of the DKBA's guns, so they went to do it.

The DKBA #333 Brigade has become very involved in the drug trade, particularly amphetamines, both within the district and in transporting it to the border with Thailand. The DKBA has been able to trade and use amphetamines in the district because the SPDC has permitted them to do it without fear of arrest. KHRG researchers claim that DKBA soldiers have forced young boys in the villages to buy one tablet for 500 Kyat each. The DKBA soldiers also use amphetamines and KHRG researchers have reported that they are able to walk the whole night without sleeping to search for the KNLA. The SPDC has not taken any action against DKBA soldiers who take amphetamines.

In order to put a better face on their activities in Thaton District, the SPDC has recently been doing a lot of 'development projects' in the district. They go to the villages and organize the

villagers to build clinics and schools, make toilets and to clean up the villages. The villagers are ordered to do it without payment. SPDC commanders in the conflict areas of the district have ordered the villagers to build clinics in each of the villages and the villagers have built clinics in the larger villages in the area. The SPDC did not supply any building materials, so in order to build the clinics, the villagers had to take wood planks from under villagers' houses. These planks were being kept by the villagers for their own use. When the clinics were finished the SPDC erected signboards with the name of the clinic and claiming that it was the SPDC that built the clinic. For example, SPDC officers went to one village and took photos of the newly completed clinic and erected a signboard saying that the 'Regional Development Clinic' was built by Battalion Commander Hla Win of LIB #376. In reality it was the villagers who paid all the expenses for building the clinic. No doctors were sent and no medicines were given to the clinics. SPDC Army medics sometimes give medicines when the soldiers come and sleep in the villages for two or three nights but it is not free. Villagers who do not have money have to give one or two chickens. The soldiers say they do not have anything to eat, "Please mother, give me one chicken."

The SPDC has called for one health worker from each village tract to attend medical training to become midwives. The three month trainings cost the villagers 40,000 to 50,000 Kyat to send someone to attend. This cost is too expensive for most villagers in Burma to pay. Most villagers in Thaton District earn approximately 200 Kyat per day. After the training the SPDC does not provide any medicines and the new midwives are expected to buy their own, which they cannot do because they do not have any money. Even if there was medicine, the SPDC's restrictions on carrying medicine make it very difficult for villagers to get enough medicine to cure their diseases.

Common diseases that villagers in Pa'an and Thaton townships suffer from are malaria, headaches, asthma, anaemia and dizziness. Small children are getting hepatitis and malaria and suffer from malnutrition. Villagers in the district get very little medical support from outside. There is some medical assistance in the form of medical teams from the KNLA and Karen relief organisations. The assistance, however, is limited to what the medics can carry in their backpacks and the groups do not arrive very often. Most of the villagers simply treat themselves with traditional medicines made from roots and leaves. Villagers who have money or who can borrow enough money go to hospitals in Pa'an, Thaton or Moulmein towns.

The SPDC has built a few schools in the district which it calls 'Government Schools'. This is another attempt by the SPDC to claim that they are trying to develop the villages when in reality the 'development' is being done through the forced labour of the villagers. The schools are built with money and wood collected from the villagers. When the soldiers decide that they will build something, the soldiers take planks from under the villagers' house, go to the building site and hold the wood and take a picture. The SPDC then takes the photos of the schools and reports back that they went to the place and did development. Once the soldiers leave, however, it is the villagers who do all the work. They do not support the schools with teaching materials or studying materials. They give salaries to some of the teachers, but villagers have to pay for the teachers' transportation costs and food. The villagers have to find most of the teachers themselves and support these teachers. In most of the village schools the children study Karen, but after the SPDC has declared a school to be a 'Government School', no Karen language is allowed to be taught. In 2004 the SPDC took over many of the schools that had been previously built by the villagers. The villagers were not satisfied with this, but they had to obey because they were afraid of the soldiers' guns.

There are no KNU schools in the villages, but the KNU still helps the village schools in other ways.

Most of the schools in the villages are primary schools up to 4<sup>th</sup> Standard [*Grade*]. Most children are unable to study after they have passed 4<sup>th</sup> Standard because they must help their parents or there is no more money to pay the school fees. Children with money can go to study in the towns. Children studying in the towns from 5<sup>th</sup> Standard up must pay 50,000 Kyat for the entrance fee. To attend a university the students must pay 100,000 Kyat per month. During 2003 and 2004, the SPDC forced all the female and male students over 7<sup>th</sup> Standard in the towns to attend basic military training. Many students came back from the towns because they were worried that they would have to become SPDC soldiers after the trainings. The SPDC had asked the older students to join the Army after the training.

Most of the villagers in the district grow rice in hill fields or flat fields. Some people also grow chilli, taro, sesame and beans which they sell to earn extra money. This produce is sometimes taken to the towns and sold, or sometimes people come up from the towns and buy it. A KHRG researcher reported that many of the villagers in Thaton District have to eat boiled rice and *baw k'paw* [*bamboo shoots boiled in a rice porridge*] starting from about mid-year. Villagers usually have to eat *may klaw* [*rice porridge*] starting in October because the rice that they stored from the previous year's harvest is almost finished and the new harvest is not quite ready. Eating *may klaw* before this time is a sign that there is not enough food. A KHRG researcher estimates that about 25% of people did not get enough food in 2004. It rained heavily in 2004 and the flat fields were flooded resulting in much of the rice crop being destroyed. Another reason for the lack of food is that the DKBA prohibited the villagers from going outside their villages or to their fields in Bilin township from the area of Khaw Po Pleh village down to Pa'an township. Much of the paddy was destroyed by birds and animals because the villagers were unable to watch over their crops. When villagers do not get enough rice from their harvest they have to go and hire themselves out as day labourers to earn some money to buy food.

After more than 50 years of fighting, the villagers were very happy that the KNU went to ceasefire negotiations with the SPDC. Villagers thought there would be peace in the country as a result. The people trusted the meetings because since they started there had not been any fighting in the area. The villagers were hoping for peace so they could be happy and have enough to eat. Initially, the villagers thought the fighting would stop and their situation would get better, but later they saw that the SPDC was continuing its normal activities so they no longer believe in the negotiations very much anymore. Although there has been almost no fighting in the district, there has not been any real change in the situation for the villagers since the ceasefire began.

The information above was collected and reported by KHRG field researchers from talking with the villagers and seeing their situation with their own eyes. For more background on the situation for villagers in Thaton District see "*Caught in the Middle: The Suffering of Karen Villagers in Thaton District*" (KHRG #99-07, 15/9/99) and *Information Update 2001-U2* (20/3/01), and photos from the area can be seen in *KHRG Photo Set 2002-A* (June 2000). All of these are available on the Karen Human Rights Group website ([www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org)). Further details on the current situation in the region and interviews with some of the affected villagers will be presented in a future KHRG report.