

Karen Human Rights Group

Report from the Field

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‘Peace’, or Control?

The SPDC’s use of the Karen ceasefire to expand its control and repression of villagers in Toungoo District, Northern Karen State

Despite the informal ceasefire since January 2004 and the ongoing formal ceasefire negotiations between the Karen National Union (KNU) and Burma’s ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military junta, the human rights situation for villagers in Toungoo District of northern Karen State is not improving. Instead, it is worsening for many as SPDC military activity in the district continues to increase. The ceasefire has given the Tatmadaw (Burmese Armed Forces) greater freedom of movement, and it is using this to extend its control further into remote areas of the district. Ongoing dry season military operations to consolidate the Army’s penetration into remote areas since December 2004 have led to further forced relocation and displacement, and SPDC troops are increasing their use of villagers as forced labour to secure control of roads and to supply troops in the hills. As the military’s freedom of movement increases, it uses its increased control of travel routes to reduce the freedom of movement of villagers and internally displaced people (IDPs), blocking their access to vital food supplies or making it conditional on their compliance with forced labour orders.

Militarisation

At present there are at least eight Tatmadaw battalions operating in Toungoo District (Frontline Infantry Battalions #26, 53, 60, 73, and 124, and Frontline Light Infantry Battalions #75, 439, and 590), which rotate with others as often as every few months. They are based at a network of at least 30 large and small military camps which are mainly located along vehicle roads (see map). All of these camps have remained active since the informal ceasefire, and at least two new camps have been added: a new camp at Maw Pa Der (along the Toungoo – Kler Lah road) and the re-establishment of a previous camp at Ko Day (east of Kler Lah on the road toward Mawchi). Instead of scaling down operations under the ceasefire, in December 2004 most of these units suddenly intensified their operations, sending out more columns to secure military access roads and villages and patrols to flush

internally displaced villagers out of the hills. The Maw Nay Pwa area (south of Klaw Mi Der) and the Kaw Thay Der area, both in Tantabin township, are now seeing a particularly high level of Tatmadaw activity. Normally, operations beginning in December tend to carry on until the end of the dry season in June, so this intensification of operations will probably continue for several more months. This has already led to frequent armed clashes between SPDC and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forces despite the ceasefire. For example, between December 17 and 22 alone there were at least four firefights in four different locations (K'Law Soe, Sheh Bway Baw, Bway Baw Der, and Si Kheh Der, i.e. near the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road and in the hills to the west), resulting in two dead and five injured from SPDC Infantry Battalion #73 and Light Infantry Battalion #590, but no reported KNLA casualties.

In addition, during 2004 over 200 people in Toungoo District were forced to join the SPDC's *Pyitthu Sit* (People's Militia), adding to the hundreds of members already forced into this group. Most of those forced to join are from plains villages in the west of the district. The Tatmadaw gives these people militia training and weapons, but their home villages have to pay the costs of the training and must then pay monthly support costs to *Pyitthu Sit* members. They are expected to keep KNLA forces out of their villages, and when Tatmadaw patrols are in their area, *Pyitthu Sit* members are forced to accompany them as guides and are often placed in front of the column in case of landmines or KNLA ambushes.

The SPDC's *Dam Byan Byaut Kya* ('Guerrilla Retaliation') execution squads, which began operations in Nyaunglebin District in 1999 (see *Death Squads and Displacement*, KHRG #99-04, May 1999) and then spread into Toungoo District, now appear to have been merged back into regular Tatmadaw battalions. These units, known as the *Baw Bi Doh* ('short pants') by the villagers for their non-military dress, were handpicked from regular Tatmadaw units but operated independently of the battalions in the area. Their main function was summarily executing any villager suspected of the slightest contact with the KNU. They sometimes told villagers that they only answered to Khin Nyunt, head of the Military Intelligence Services in Rangoon. Each of their 10-man operational sections assumed its own nickname, the 'Wei Za' ('supernatural being') section being particularly feared by Toungoo District villagers. Though they were expanding their operations in Toungoo District as recently as mid-2004 (see *Enduring Hunger and Repression*, released by KHRG in September 2004), KHRG researchers report that since the beginning of 2005 they have suddenly stopped using their section nicknames and their units are now only operating as part of regular Tatmadaw columns. This may be a result of Khin Nyunt's arrest in 2004 and the SPDC's ongoing dismantling of his intelligence apparatus.

As part of their effort to strengthen control of the roads, the Tatmadaw is clearing all scrub along the roadsides to make it more difficult for KNLA forces to ambush them, or for KNLA troops or villagers to cross the roads without being seen. Most of the clearing is done by forced labour of villagers, but bulldozers have also been brought in. On December 4th 2004 two SPDC bulldozers arrived in Klay Soe Kee, the village at the junction of the Toungoo – Mawchi road and the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road. SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #439, which is responsible for road security, was accompanying the bulldozers, led by deputy Battalion Commander Aung Hlaing Win. On December 15th his troops detained four Klay Soe Kee villagers, including a schoolteacher and the Christian pastor, and forced them to walk alongside the bulldozers as they travelled along the road to Kaw Thay Der. He told them that if anything happened to the bulldozers, Klay Soe Kee village would be forcibly relocated. Meanwhile at Kaw Thay Der, intensive intimidation tactics were being

implemented. On the evening of December 6th the Kaw Thay Der villagers were celebrating Christmas. Troops from Light Infantry Battalions #590 and #439 who are based in Kaw Thay Der, along with additional Army sections from Der Koh and Der Kee, threatened the villagers by firing their guns in the air. The villagers had to stop the celebration. On the evening of December 13th 2004 at 5 p.m., LIB#590 commander Aung Kyi arrested seven women and four men from Kaw Thay Der. Among the seven women, commander Aung Kyi slapped Naw M---'s face and threatened her by firing his gun. The women had to carry loads to Po Day, where they were released that night, but the men weren't released until later. On December 15th 2004 at 5 p.m., the SPDC column accompanying the bulldozers arrived at Kaw Thay Der riding two trucks, with the Klay Soe Kee villagers walking alongside the bulldozers. While the bulldozers were to be used to clear the roadsides near Ku Ler Der, the trucks were for carrying rations further up the road. The Kaw Thay Der villagers were told that if anything happened to the vehicles their village would be forced to move.

Landmines

SPDC forces plant landmines all around their camps, so villagers are wary of walking anywhere in the vicinity of SPDC camps. KNLA forces use landmines both defensively and offensively. Unlike the Tatmadaw, they inform local villagers where they have planted the mines, and sometimes remove them when no longer needed. The Karenni Solidarity Organisation (KnSO), a breakaway group from the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) which now works with the Tatmadaw, sometimes send troops into eastern Toungoo District and has reportedly been laying landmines.

The Tatmadaw does not share information on mines with local villages, nor do they remove mines once planted, even when their battalions rotate. SPDC troops are known to have laid many mines over the past three years near the Day Loh river, especially in Naw Thay Der area (north of Kler Lah), so many people dare not go to that area anymore. In 2002 and 2003 SPDC forces also heavily mined the hills around Kaw Thay Der and several villagers were subsequently wounded or killed by these mines, so villagers there no longer dare use the paths to their fields. On December 23rd 2004 Klay Soe Kee villager Saw Ta Po Dee, age 15, stepped on a landmine and one of his legs was blown off. Most villagers' fields are located on hillsides some distance from their village, so mines are a constant danger and many no longer dare work their old fields. Few people dare use the main paths going from the hills to Kler Lah or down to the plains, because SPDC troops patrol those paths and people believe that they have landmined many of them.

In the past Tatmadaw columns regularly forced villagers to walk in front of them and to ride on their own or the Army's vehicles along the roads to sweep for landmines. As part of the informal ceasefire, the KNU informed the SPDC that its troops can travel on the roads safely without forcing villagers to ride on their trucks for protection anymore. Even so, SPDC troops still force villagers to lead the troops like before.

Forced Labour

To support military access to the remoter areas of the district, SPDC units order villagers to carry rations and other loads, and to clear scrub alongside the vehicle roads. Despite having bulldozers at their disposal, SPDC officers still order villagers to do most of the road maintenance and roadside clearance work. During December 2004 and January 2005, villagers in Kaw Thay Der and Klay Soe Kee had to clear scrub along the Kler Lah –Bu Sah

Kee road every day. Besides going to cut the scrub alongside the car road they have to carry rice and rations as well. Some SPDC soldiers also order villagers to gather firewood and vegetables for them from the forests alongside the vehicle road, despite the danger of landmines.

The SPDC has clearly prioritised securing the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road, which gives the Tatmadaw access to a mountainous area of southeastern Toungoo District which it has never been able to effectively control. On December 15th 2004, Tatmadaw Operations Commander Khin Soe, Infantry Battalion #73 commander San Myint and his deputy Battalion Commander Maung Maung Soe forced twenty Kaw Thay Der villagers, including women and men, to improve the road surface and cut the roadside scrub along the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road from Kaw Thay Der to Naw Soe. The following day, LIB #439 Battalion Commander Aung Htay Win forced one person from each house in Kaw Thay Der village to dig earth and improve the same vehicle road between Ku Ler Der and Naw Soe, while at the same time IB #73 forced twenty people from the same village to clear scrub alongside the vehicle road near Ku Ler Der. SPDC officers still demand villagers for forced labour in Klay Soe Kee area as well. On December 23rd 2004, LIB #439 Battalion Commander Aung Htay Win forced fourteen men and four women from Klay Soe Kee to clear scrub beside the road to Bu Sah Kee and improve the road surface. On a different occasion, each house in Klay Soe Kee village was required to send one person to clear scrub and improve a section further along the same road, between Naw Soe, Si Kheh Der and K'Mu Loh. They had to work every day.

Every year these dirt roads wash out in rainy season and must be repaired. During the dry season (November to May), villagers are forced to improve the roads and those with private vehicles are forced to use them to transport rations, so that Army camps can stockpile rations for rainy season. No payment is given for use of the private vehicles. If a village doesn't transport rations for the Army, the roads to Kler Lah and Toungoo are blocked to villagers and traders from that village. SPDC officers frequently tell villagers that "If you don't work for us we will move your village and we will block your way." Villagers are afraid of this because they rely heavily on rice and goods from the plains.

In rainy season, the road from Toungoo to Kler Lah is still passable, as are the hard-surfaced roads to Than Daung Gyi and Loikaw. But the roads east of Kler Lah, both to Mawchi and to Bu Sah Kee, become impassable, and porters are forced to carry all supplies to the Tatmadaw camps. One indication that the SPDC now feels more confident of its control of the district is that this year they are bringing in far fewer convict porters and relying more heavily on forced porters demanded from local villages. Villagers living near the District's vehicle roads, from villages such as Kaw Thay Der, Klay Soe Kee, Kaw Soe Ko, Wa Tho Ko, Ler Goh, Der Doh, and Gha Mu Der, now complain to KHRG researchers that they have to do a lot of portering and other forced labour. In Than Daung Township, where vehicle roads are scarce, villagers must carry supplies along footpaths; such as on December 27th 2004, when Infantry Battalion #26 commander Yeh Aung Soe at Hu Kyaw army camp forced seven Ku Thay Der villagers, four S'Ba Law Kee villagers and seven Kaw Law Ka villagers to carry supplies from Than Daung Gyi to Maw Kyaw army camp. Kler Lah is the only village where forced labour may have declined, because the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has established a field presence there and the SPDC does not want them to witness demands for forced labour; but this has no effect outside Kler Lah village. Instead, while continuing to demand forced labour some SPDC Battalions have forced village leaders to

sign a document stating that they are not forced to work, that they are willing volunteers and that they are being paid.

Additional roads have long been planned to increase military access, particularly in the southernmost parts of the district. Some, such as the roads from Ma La Daw to Bu Sah Kee and from Pa Leh Wah to Klaw Mi Der, have already been partly constructed, while others, such as the roads from Bu Sah Kee southward into Papun District, are still only planned. Until now the SPDC has lacked sufficient control to build these roads, but the ceasefire may provide sufficient protection to allow them to continue. If so, the forced labour burden on villagers in the area, and the ability of the military to control and abuse them, will greatly increase.

Restrictions, Extortion and Robbery

Part of the SPDC strategy for control of Toungoo district involves restricting and controlling the movement of people and goods. Checkpoints have been set up on all roads, particularly the road from Toungoo up into the hills to Kler Lah, where the Army stops all vehicles and people at Four-Mile, Than Daung Myothit (13-Mile), Pa Leh Wah, and Maw Pa Der (20-Mile): four regular checkpoints plus occasional *ad hoc* checkpoints within twenty miles (32 km) of road. At each checkpoint, money is extorted from each person and vehicle, and permits must be presented authorising the movement of each person and all goods. The movement of people, rice, dry goods, medicines, and goods such as batteries from the plains into the hills is tightly controlled, and people without proper authorisation papers face arrest and possible accusation as a ‘rebel supplier’. There is no limit on how much can be extorted from travellers and traders. Villages under SPDC control also face constant and heavy demands from local Army units for many kinds of food and ‘fees’ for which village leaders must collect money from everyone weekly, monthly, or whenever demands are made. Kler Lah village used to have to pay extremely heavy ‘fees’ on a regular basis. This burden has lessened slightly because Army officers are wary of the ICRC representatives who now regularly visit the village, but they have made up for this shortfall by demanding even more of other villages in the region.

In the hill areas, SPDC units routinely loot whatever they find. For example, on December 13th 2004, Infantry Battalion #73 Column 2 led by commander Maung Maung Soe entered Ku Ler Der village in Maw Thay Der area of western Tantabin township, detained Saw K--- and ordered him to guide the troops. They beat him and took his 3,700 Kyat in cash. They also took 7,000 Kyat, two chickens, one mosquito net and one hammock from Saw M---, and Saw T---’s belongings including seven chickens, one big tin of peanuts, and one big tin of rice. They then continued to the Ku Ler Der betelnut plantations, where they detained Saw W--- and robbed his 30,000 Kyat savings, ordered him to guide them and hit him twice with a machete. They robbed 22,000 Kyat from Saw E---, then took him with them to Naw Soe and demanded an additional 8,000 Kyat as ransom before they released him.

Displacement and Destabilisation

The forms of repression discussed above have been forcing people to flee their villages into the forests, particularly since the SPDC stepped up operations in December 2004. This level of military activity will probably continue until the rains in June. Many villagers dare not stay in their village and have to flee, particularly in Maw Nay Pwa area (southwestern Tantabin township) and Kaw Thay Der area (northern Tantabin township), where SPDC

forces have been especially active. Most of those who have fled are now in the forests, living under the trees with inadequate food supplies. Many have no blankets, and it gets very cold in these mountains at night between December and March. Because of this a lot of people are sick and have no access to doctors or medicines. Malaria is the most common disease in the area, and in Koh Kee area many have dysentery. Most of the displaced children are malnourished, and some have died. With SPDC soldiers spread more widely through the district and more mobile than ever before, most displaced villagers no longer dare light a fire at night no matter how cold it is. By day, most no longer dare work in fields where they are exposed to capture or being shot on sight; instead, they stay in the forest with little chance to move. KHRG researchers now estimate 10-12,000 internally displaced villagers in the hills of Toungoo district, divided equally between Tantabin and Than Daung townships. This makes up at least half the population of the hills.

Villages already under SPDC control still face the threat of forced relocation orders. On October 30th 2004, SPDC Infantry Battalion #124 commander Myo Min Htet ordered everyone in Klay Soe Kee village to move to Kler Lah. They moved on November 5th 2004. A short time later, they were ordered by the SPDC to move back to their village again. This is probably because Klay Soe Kee is at the crucial junction of the Toungoo – Mawchi road and the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road; perhaps commander Myo Min Htet thought the junction would be easier to control without a village there, but his successor felt the opposite. In such unpredictable circumstances it becomes impossible for villagers to maintain crop cycles and other aspects of their livelihoods. The result is a lack of food, forcing villagers to become more reliant on borrowing or buying food from outside the area. The increasing restrictions on movement of food within the District combined with the daily burden of forced labour and extortion fees ensure that many go hungry.

Thus, villagers hiding in the hills become reliant on buying food from those in SPDC-controlled villages, because their access to Kler Lah and the plains to the west is blocked by landmines and SPDC patrols; yet villagers in SPDC-controlled villages are themselves becoming more reliant on food brought in from Toungoo by traders, just when the SPDC is restricting the movement of traders and food. Displaced villagers risk arrest if they enter the SPDC-controlled villages, so sometimes traders have to bring rice to secret impromptu 'rice markets' in the forested hills. To get money to buy rice, the villagers in hiding try to grow cash crops like cardamom, but this dry season SPDC units are seeking out and destroying their forest cardamom and betelnut plantations as well as their hidden rice storage barns. In the Sho Ser – Wa Soe area near the Karenni State border, SPDC troops lit fires to burn off scrub alongside the Toungoo – Mawchi road, and these fires spread into and destroyed the villagers' cardamom plantations. On December 26th 2004, troops from SPDC Infantry Battalion #73 detained two men at their betelnut plantation near Hsaw Wah Der village in Tantabin township: Saw Htoo Kru, 40, and Saw Dta Dta, 38. They looted their belongings, which included .22 hunting rifles, and took the men away. Both are now presumed dead.

The biggest problems for the villagers are food, health and security, though the disrupted education of their children is also a concern they often express. In many villages people flee whenever a Tatmadaw column comes near, making it impossible to properly tend crops or keep schools open for their children. Internally displaced villagers are scattered at hidden sites throughout the district, but at present there is no hiding place that SPDC troops cannot reach. At present, there are at least six of these hiding sites which KNLA forces are in a position to defend, but if a full SPDC column approaches they can do little more than fight a delaying action while the villagers escape. The main form of protection they give the IDPs is

information, by passing on intelligence about SPDC movements. Some IDP leaders have told KHRG researchers that one of their key needs is for walkie-talkies to improve communications so they can stay one step ahead of SPDC columns.

Conclusion

The main cause of problems for villagers in Toungoo District has seldom been the low-intensity armed combat that has gone on there for decades. Much more often it is the burden of human rights abuses which are targetted at civilians in order to gain control over them. The informal ceasefire between the KNU and the SPDC has therefore meant little to the villagers of Toungoo District. Not only is fighting continuing regardless, but more importantly the ceasefire has given SPDC forces even greater freedom of movement in the remote parts of the district. They are using this mobility to spread and consolidate the reach of the military into the remotest corners and IDP hiding sites. Villagers in SPDC-controlled areas now have to do more forced labour improving roads and hauling rations to support this campaign for extended control, while villagers who have fled their villages into hiding in the forests now find it more difficult than ever to stay one step ahead of SPDC forces determined to force them into Army-controlled sites along the vehicle roads. Should the informal ceasefire become formalised into a more permanent arrangement, this campaign for control will not stop, it will only seek to restrict all aspects of the villagers' lives under the false name of 'peace'.

This report is based on current information submitted by KHRG field researchers in Toungoo District. For further background on the situation in the district, see the KHRG report *Enduring Hunger and Repression: Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District* (September 2004). Recent photos from Toungoo District will also be included in the upcoming KHRG *Photo Set 2005A*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site (<http://www.khrg.org>).