

Karen Human Rights Group

Report from the Field

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Nyaunglebin District: Food supplies destroyed, villagers forcibly displaced, and region-wide forced labour as SPDC forces seek control over civilians

Nyaunglebin District (Kler Lweh Htoo in Karen) lies northeast of Rangoon, straddling the border of Pegu (Bago) Division and Karen State (see map). It includes the plains east of the Sittaung River and extends eastward into forested hills which continue into Papun District to the east. The plains area is controlled by the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) military junta and is heavily militarised, but in the hills this control is tenuous and Karen resistance forces are active. SPDC military forces mainly patrol the plain areas and up the main river valleys into the hills in the three townships of Nyaunglebin District – Mone (Mu) in the north, Kyauk Kyi (Ler Doh) in the centre, and Shwegyin (Hsaw Tee) in the south. Civilians throughout this district are facing serious food shortages because from October 2004 to January 2005 SPDC military columns spread through the hills of Nyaunglebin District and burned villagers' houses, hill fields, storage barns, and paddy, and planted landmines in the villages. They loot villagers' money and belongings and demand money from villagers to build military camps and other facilities. In plains areas under their control, particularly around Kyauk Kyi, they don't allow villagers to go outside their villages, confiscate fields for military camps and force villagers to do labour building the camps. As a result food is now scarce for villagers throughout Nyaunglebin district, and they also lack money for health and other expenses.

Villages in the Hills

Most of the villagers in the hills are doing rain-fed hill rice cultivation because most of the irrigated flat rice fields in these areas have been confiscated by SPDC military camps. However, many villagers who live in Saw Theh Kee and Tee Blah village tracts east of Shwegyin town are now hiding in the forest. They return to rebuild their houses in the village and sometimes stay there for short periods, but they don't dare to stay long in their villages and they must always watch for SPDC landmines. These villagers have been displaced several times by the SPDC military in recent years, but their current displacement began in

November 2004 when SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #589 (battalion commander Zaw Aung), LIB #350 (battalion commander Than Naing), LIB #264, and Infantry Battalion (IB) #57 (battalion commander Aung Ko Hla) sent about 400 soldiers into Saw Theh Kee and Tee Blah village tracts. The soldiers burned Khaw Hta, Klaw Lu, and parts of other villages, including villagers' houses, hill fields, farmfield huts, and paddy storage barns, and before leaving they planted landmines in several villages. The villagers had to flee suddenly without taking most of their food and belongings. Civilians living in villages in that area which were not burned also had to flee into the forest, and some of their paddy was burned. During November 2004 in Shwegyin township, at least 33 storage barns and hill fields and 3,800 baskets of paddy were burned by SPDC troops, and in December 2004 at least five storage barns were burned in Dta Kaw Der area of Kyauk Kyi township. The villages were attacked during the height of the rice harvest, forcing many villagers to abandon their crop still in the fields as well as the grain they had already harvested. Some managed to return and retrieve some of the paddy they had already harvested or complete a partial harvest, but much of the year's harvest was either burned by SPDC troops or destroyed by foraging animals and insects.

Since January 2005 the SPDC columns have not returned to these villages, but the villagers continue to live in fear that there could be troops still in the area and they could return at any time. The villagers remain on constant alert. Most of them are facing a serious food shortage. Some families who have rice share it with the families who have none, and many are living on boiled rice soup, which makes the rice supply last longer. Some villagers have obtained a two-month rice supply through the help of small Karen relief organisations operating through Karen-controlled areas, but the limited resources of these organisations have only enabled them to assist villagers whose food supplies were burned by SPDC troops, while others have received no outside support. Even those who have received this assistance will have to make it last much longer than two months. For villagers who still have some money or gold, even this does not necessarily generate food security because it is often too dangerous to travel to villages where rice can be bought. If caught in these villages or along the way by SPDC troops, the hill villagers are arrested. Moreover, the villagers are unsure whether they can get rice in the next harvest, because the SPDC military could disrupt the harvest or destroy their rain-fed hill rice fields again. The 2004 attacks certainly appear to have been timed deliberately to disrupt the harvest and eradicate the villagers' food supplies at their most vulnerable time of the year. The loss of seed stock also portends that the next harvest will be a difficult time. If the SPDC military doesn't disturb them and destroy the fields they will be able to produce a reasonable crop, but the food problem will not end easily because in the current situation it will be difficult to prepare fields in time for the coming planting season. Some people can get money by growing cash crops, but some of these plantations were destroyed as well. SPDC military campaigns to destroy villages, fields, food supplies and villagers' belongings are likely to continue because they are a major part of the SPDC strategy to force villagers out of the hills and into areas where they can be more directly controlled by the state.

SPDC-controlled plains areas

Like most paranoid military regimes, the SPDC seeks to bring the entire population under its control – a condition the SPDC equates with 'peace', but which most civilians refuse to accept. In seeking its objective, the regime forcibly moves populations and uses those under its control as a source of labour and resources, without thought or concern for the burdens they face as a result. In Nyaunglebin district, civilians are forced to work in support of the

SPDC's militarisation of the region to the point where they don't have enough time left to do their own work. SPDC authorities know that civilians don't dare to openly disobey them, so they force them to do labour without payment and without any food. Roads are a key component of SPDC control in the district, so villagers under their control are forced to build, rebuild, and upgrade roads for the military. Most of the roads are unpaved and must be rebuilt and repaired after each rainy season, so every year villagers are forced to rebuild and repair the roads from Kyauk Kyi to Mu Theh, Mu Theh to Pwa Ghaw and Kyauk Kyi to Shwegyin. This dry season the SPDC is using bulldozers to remake the old road from Kyauk Kyi to Shwegyin. In addition, Light Infantry Battalion #351 and Infantry Battalion #60, under orders of Operations Commander Colonel Khin Maung Oo, are forcing the people of plains villages, including Pay Tu Sa Leh, Kyweh Chan and Aung Soe Mo villages near Kyauk Kyi, to work in their Army camps and to build vehicle roads to several villages in the area. Villagers from Pay Tu Sa Leh had to cut and clear the scrub along both sides of the road south from Kyauk Kyi as far as Myay Ni Gone. They were ordered to clear everything within 100 cubits (150 feet/45 metres) of either side of the road – a common form of forced labour aimed at protecting SPDC troops moving along the road from attack and making it difficult for displaced people or resistance forces to cross the road without detection. Villagers from Aung Soe Mo and Kyweh Chan villages had to repair the road between Kyauk Kyi and the SPDC Army camp at Thauung Bo. They had to dig and carry soil and fill all the gaps in the road until it was finished, with no food or payment provided. A new Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) camp at Baw Gali, just north of Baw Ka Hta near the Kyauk Kyi – Shwegyin road, is forcing people from nearby villages to work on a new road to their camp. All of these improved roads mean better communications and transportation for the SPDC military, but more hardship for civilians – who face more forced labour on road maintenance, more Army checkpoints restricting their movements, and more forced labour at new Army posts and checkpoints which are set up along every road. The SPDC claims to have banned all forced labour since 2000¹, and points to the recent convictions of a handful of civilian officials for demanding forced labour in other parts of the country as evidence of its sincerity; but not a single case has yet been brought against any Army officer, and these are the people most responsible for forced labour. As a result, its prevalence in Nyaunglebin district is increasing.

Forced labour is demanded not only on roads, but also to support other mechanisms of military control. In October 2004, LIB #351 and IB #60 based at Aung Soe Moe camp near Kyauk Kyi forced civilians to build sentry huts and take turns standing sentry. Anyone who fails to take their turn is fined 500 Kyat. Also in October, LIB #599 company commander Thein Soe ordered 50 villagers from Aung Chan Tha and Bpee Der villages to build a military camp for them near the Myaw Oo monastery in Mone township. The villagers themselves had to pay for the 50 viss (80 kg./175 lb.) of 3-inch and 2½-inch nails needed to build the camp, at a cost of 90,000 Kyat. They were not allowed to leave the site until the work was completed. To make way for the camp, the betelnut tree plantations belonging to fifteen villagers were cut down without compensation. Company Commander Thein Soe then forced civilians to build three sentry huts beside the new Myaw Oo military camp and ordered that from then on, three villagers must come each day for 24 hours of sentry duty. Any villager caught sleeping during sentry duty is fined one viss (1.6 kg./3.5 lb.) of chicken. Also in Mone township, in December 2004 LIB #599 officer Ya Naing Soe forced Ma La Daw villagers to extend the military camp in Ma La Daw village. Seven families in the village lost their houses to make way for the camp, and one person from each house in the

¹ See *Forced Labour Orders Since the Ban* (KHRG #2002-01, February 2002).

village had to take part in the building work. In October 2004 at Thaung Bo army camp in Kyauk Kyi township, LIB #351 officer Tun Hlwin forced 120 villagers from Plaw Khee La, Shan Chaung and Thaung Bo villages to dig latrines and build chicken coops and gave them two days to complete all the work. Villagers who have been forcibly relocated to sites at Pay Tu Sa Leh, Kyweh Chan and Aung Soe Mo in Kyauk Kyi Township are regularly being forced to do labour on roads and at the nearby Army camps. These villagers need to go to their fields in the hills to grow rice and cash crops, but they can only get short-term passes to do so despite the long distances to their fields, and even these passes do not always provide protection against abuse by SPDC patrols in the hills. At the relocation sites they receive nothing from the SPDC, so many of them are facing food shortages.

Villagers in Nyaunglebin district have very little cash income. Some people can sell the yield of their plantations in the towns and some do paid day labour, but even these activities are becoming more difficult due to movement restrictions and SPDC demands for forced labour. If SPDC soldiers meet people along their way, they often detain them and take all their money and belongings. The amounts of money may be small, but these small sums are crucial to survival for rural villagers. SPDC officers are aware of this, yet they still loot belongings and demand money from the villagers. They often claim the money is for constructing Army buildings or for other purposes, but sometimes they demand money without giving any reason whatsoever. In November 2004, Sergeant Khin Maung Gyi of LIB #351 demanded 500 Kyat from each house in the villages near Aung Soe Moe army camp, saying it was to build a dispensary. Altogether he gathered 120,000 Kyat, then he forced 110 villagers to build that dispensary in the army camp. He also demanded bamboo and roofing thatch from the villagers, but then sold the bamboo at 50 Kyat per piece and kept the money himself. In December 2004 in Mone township, IB #73 Dta Ler Day camp commander Myo Naing demanded 218,000 Kyat from four civilians without giving any reason. Also in December, SPDC LIB #599 Company Commander Khin Maung Myint demanded a total of 335,000 Kyat, which had to be gathered by sixteen betelnut growers and the Mone township villages of Tee Baw Byin, Myaw Oo, Baw Bpee Der, Aung Chan Tha and Mee Dtaing Taw, to pay for medical treatment for Ko Maung Lin, one of his soldiers. In December, troops from SPDC LIB #383 patrolling in Myaw Oo area of Mone township stole 347,000 Kyat in cash, 15,500 betelnuts, two golden rings and a golden necklace from five villagers in Tee Nya B'Day Kee village, and demanded an additional 200,000 Kyat in cash from five other villagers. As was noted earlier, after forcing villagers to build Myaw Oo Army camp in Mone township, LIB #599 Company Commander Thein Soe ordered them to do sentry duty every night; however, in the week of November 21-27 2004 he told them not to come for sentry duty, but that they must pay instead the fine of 16,000 Kyat per night for the entire week for not coming. The villagers wanted to complain, but they know that complaining to the SPDC only puts them in more trouble and results in even heavier demands. While some of these demands are intended to keep villagers impoverished and under control, many of them are simply corruption carried out with complete impunity. Such corruption is a foreseeable consequence of increased militarisation. Increased SPDC control allows greater personal accumulation of wealth by Army officers, while rank and file soldiers are left to loot for their survival. All of this occurs at the expense of the villagers, who as a result face food shortages, lack of money for health care, and displacement.

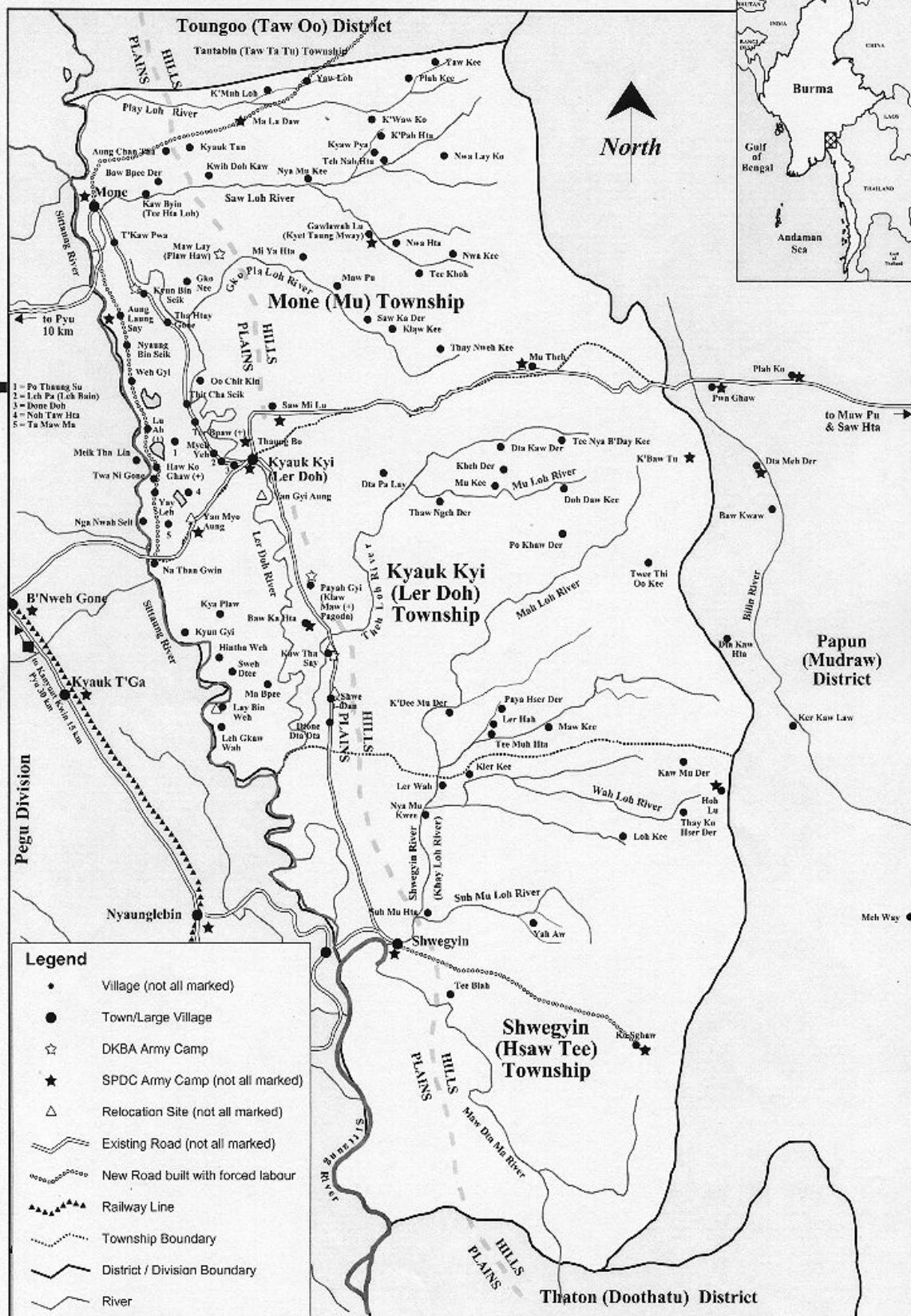
In Nyaunglebin district, civilians in SPDC-controlled villages, those who have had to relocate to SPDC-controlled areas, and people evading SPDC forces in the hills are all facing food shortages and abuse by SPDC forces. As long as the SPDC military seeks to increase its control by destroying villagers' rice fields and food supplies, sabotaging their livelihoods,

forcing them into SPDC-controlled areas and forcing them to do labour, civilians in Nyaunglebin district will face food shortages and other hardships. Greater SPDC control could masquerade as 'peace' but it would only bring further deprivation, with a swollen, corrupt and over-powerful Army living and enriching itself on the backs of the civilian population.

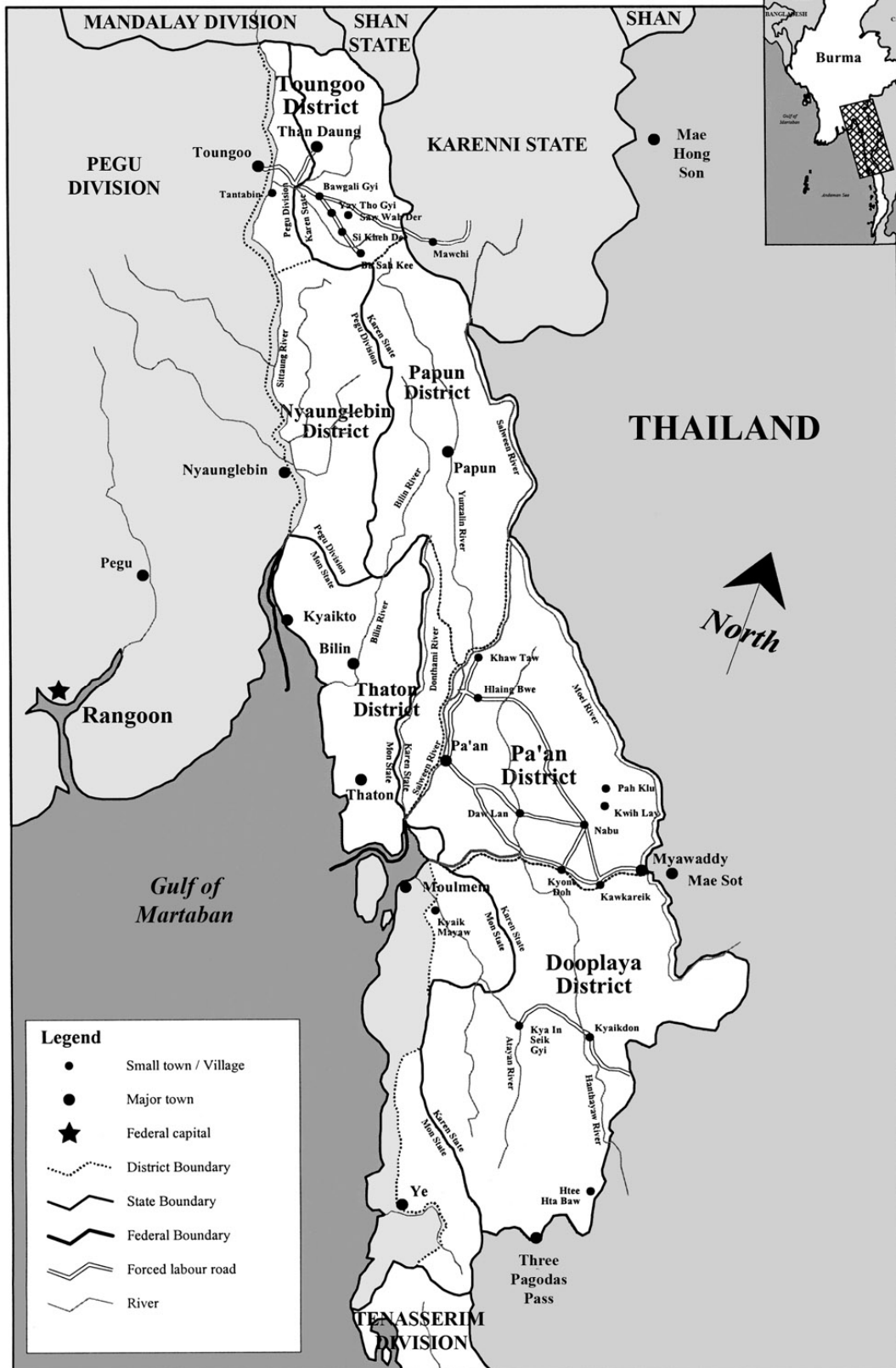
Further Reading

This report is based on current information submitted by KHRG field researchers in Nyaunglebin District. For further background on the situation in the district, see the KHRG Information Update *Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts: Continued Oppression During the Ceasefire* (KHRG #2004-U2, September 2004), and the full report *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (KHRG #2001-03, October 2001). Recent photos from Nyaunglebin 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>).

Nyaunglebin (Kler Lweh Htoo) District



Districts of Karen State



Scale: 1 cm to 22 km
1 in. to 35 miles

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group