

Karen Human Rights Group

Report from the Field

**An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group
December 9, 2005 / KHRG #2005-F8**

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Nyaunglebin district: SPDC operations along the Shwegyin River, and the villagers' response

In late September 2005, State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) forces violated the ceasefire by openly attacking the 9th Battalion headquarters of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 3rd Brigade in Nyaunglebin District. On September 21st, SPDC troops occupied the 9th Battalion headquarters on the Shwegyin River and remained there until early November. Civilian villages in the area along the boundary of Shwegyin (Hsaw Tee) and Kyauk Kyi (Ler Doh) townships, including Kwih Lah, Ler Wah, and Tee Thu Kee, were deliberately shelled, and villagers fled eastward into the hills. Women, children and the elderly moved higher into the hills, where they immediately set up a temporary school and shared out available rice, while men set up shelters closer to the Shwegyin River where they could monitor and report back on SPDC movements. KNLA units sporadically shelled the SPDC troops and made preparations to lay landmines if they should attempt to cross the Shwegyin to pursue the villagers. As a result of all these activities, the SPDC forces never dared cross the Shwegyin, and completely withdrew by November 3rd. The villagers rushed back to complete their rice harvest, which was already overdue. Though some of the rice had already been destroyed by weeds and wild pigs, they have been working day and night to complete the harvest. Those whose fields lie west of the Shwegyin River have been doing this at great risk, because SPDC forces left landmines behind which the KNLA has only partially been able to clear. These villagers have a long history of evading the SPDC columns that come several times each year to destroy their livelihoods and to attempt to force them to state-controlled areas. The villagers say they do not want to live under SPDC control because those who do must face forced labour, extortion, and crop confiscation demanded by SPDC authorities. Even as the returned villagers were rushing to complete their harvest, SPDC authorities in the plains just to the west ordered everyone in 4 village tracts to begin forced labour on November 16th clearing the scrub along both sides of the entire length of the Shwegyin – Kyauk Kyi road, a distance of at least 50 kilometres (30 miles).

Progressive destruction of villages

The Shwegyin River lies just east of the Sittaung River and Burma's central plain, between the plains and the hills (see map). There used to be several large villages of 50 or 100 households along the Shwegyin River north of Shwegyin town. However, the Burmese Army always found it hard to control these villages, and in 1975 they came and burned Ler Wah and other villages along the river. The villagers kept fleeing and returning, but the Burmese Army also returned almost monthly to burn houses and shoot villagers, until by 1982 the larger villages along the river lay abandoned. Many of the villagers drifted eastward, to the Bilin River valley and the remoter hills of Papun District, while some villagers set up small scattered settlements of 3 or 4 households in the forest a short distance east of the Shwegyin River or along the river itself. Some of these scattered settlements have now been stationary for over 10 years but the villagers still live only in semi-permanent bamboo houses, some with incomplete roofs or walls, because since 1999 Burmese troops have come up the river two or three times per year on average so the villagers regularly have to flee into the forest for 10 days or a month at a time. According to villagers in these settlements, two of the worst times were 1997-98, when SPDC forces found and burned most of their temporary houses and laid landmines throughout the area, and 2002, when the SPDC repeated a similar operation. On other occasions the villagers have temporarily fled but the SPDC columns have not reached their houses. Whenever these operations occur some villagers are shot on sight or killed by mines, but most escape into the hills to return after the SPDC troops have withdrawn. Villagers told KHRG that they can no longer build proper villages along the river with good houses, because these will only be destroyed by SPDC forces.

The SPDC wants villagers in this area to move to sites in the plains, along vehicle roads which are garrisoned and controlled by the military. As explained by a KHRG researcher, however, "Villagers who live under SPDC control have to work for the SPDC as porters, *loh ah pay* [other forced labour], and pay many taxes and they suffer a lot from this oppression. So when they order civilians in rural villages to move to relocation sites, the villagers don't want to move there because they know they would have to stay under SPDC control, do labour for the SPDC and give taxes. They don't want to suffer this oppression so they don't move there." The villagers therefore avoid SPDC contact by leaving their village whenever military columns enter the area, then returning when the military has withdrawn.

SPDC violation of the ceasefire

In a blatant violation of its informal ceasefire with the Karen National Union (KNU), the SPDC sent a large column of troops to the upper Shwegyin River area in mid-September 2005. This was a combined force of over 300 soldiers from SPDC Infantry Battalion #4 Column #1 (Maj. Aung Myo commanding), Light Infantry Battalion #12 Column #1 (Lt. Col. Tin Ko Oo commanding), Infantry Battalion #76 (Maj. Kyaw Thu commanding), Infantry Battalion #48 (Maj. Khin Maung Oo commanding), and Infantry Battalion #42 (Capt. Tin Kyaw commanding), all operating under the command of Tactical Operations Command #332, Light Infantry Division (LID) 33. As they entered the area villagers were notified by the KNLA and began to flee. On September 19th, the column shot dead Maw Soe Ko villager Saw Toh Pa, age 38, simply because the soldiers saw him in his field. The column approached the KNLA 9th Battalion headquarters beside Kwih Lah village, shelling villages and scattered settlements with mortars along the way. Only 35 KNLA soldiers were based at the headquarters, so after one and a half hours of fighting they withdrew on September 21st and the SPDC force captured and occupied the headquarters. They destroyed most of the

KNLA's huts, dug defensive trenches and bunkers and set up their own camp huts. The soldiers went through nearby Kwih Lah village stripping the houses of walls, roofing, and in some cases smashing the bamboo floors – partly to prevent villagers being able to reoccupy or hide in their homes, and partly to obtain materials to build their own camp huts. All livestock which the villagers had left behind was killed and eaten by the troops, and any rice, clothing or utensils were plundered or deliberately destroyed. The soldiers systematically slashed villagers' winnowing trays and baskets and punctured their water containers with knives, in a clear attempt to make it harder for villagers to continue living there. An intelligence officer from KNLA 9th Battalion commented to KHRG, "The SPDC military's claim of a ceasefire with the KNLA is a lie. We don't take the first shot at them, but they always take the first shot at us."

The village response

As the column approached shelling their houses, the people who were already scattered in small settlements throughout the area fled with what they could carry. This affected at least 100 families from Kwih Lah, Ler Wah, and Tee Thu Kee villages, and smaller numbers from other settlements up and down the river. Almost all of them headed east, where the riverine lowlands immediately give way to high forested hills. Most of them could only carry enough rice for a few days or a week, plus required utensils, clothing, and their small children. Villagers in this area are accustomed to fleeing SPDC columns at least once every year – this year alone they already had to flee once six months earlier on March 15th – so they knew what to do. Women, children, the elderly and the sick headed well up into the hills to K--- village, where they established rudimentary shelters. Those who had been unable to carry enough food with them borrowed from others. The primary schools of Ler Wah and Kwih Lah had been forced to close when the SPDC column was approaching, but at the hiding place the villagers quickly built a large shelter where the teachers immediately resumed teaching.

The village men did not follow them all the way to K--- village; instead they only went part way up the hills and built a forward set of shelters hidden on the steep forested hillsides, halfway between the SPDC troops and their families. This allowed them to monitor the SPDC columns' movements, partly through keeping their own watch and partly through sharing information with KNLA patrols, so they could warn the villagers sheltering further up in the hills should there be any need to flee further. They also sent groups by night to return to their houses and the rice storage barns, where the villagers keep their food supplies hidden in the forest, to obtain food to last their families for a longer period. It was too dangerous to reach rice barns near the Shwegyin River or on its western side, so some villagers ran out of rice and borrowed rice from the hill villagers. A few days after the SPDC occupation, Kwih Lah villagers Pu H--- and Saw R--- were watching SPDC movements when they were spotted by SPDC troops in a ricefield near Bper Po Kee village and fired upon, but escaped unharmed. For the villagers it was crucial to watch the situation because the rice harvest was supposed to begin in mid-October, and any delay could decrease or ruin the year's crop.

While displaced, the villagers treated the sick using herbal medicines from the forest, and they also received some assistance from KNLA 9th Battalion medics. Medics from the Free Burma Rangers also arrived and provided medical assistance.

SPDC withdrawal and the return of the villagers

The SPDC column remained on the western bank of the Shwegyin River until early November. During this entire period they sporadically shelled the abandoned village settlements and ricefields on the eastern side of the river, and the KNLA replied by firing a few mortar shells into the SPDC camp almost every day as an incentive to withdraw. The KNLA was also prepared with landmines, some of which had been distributed to the villagers, to mine the eastern side of the river if the SPDC column attempted to cross in pursuit of the villagers. Despite their clear superiority in numbers and weapons, for the entire six weeks the SPDC column remained along the river they never dared cross to its eastern bank. KNLA forces blocked their supply line and their rations could not be replenished. They destroyed their own huts, trenches and defensive works and withdrew on November 3rd. On their way back to their base at Baw Ka Hta (in the plains to the northwest) they were ambushed by KNLA forces and suffered casualties. Despite having captured their main objective and held it for six weeks, their withdrawal appeared to demonstrate frustration and defeat. Upon their withdrawal, they left a written note at the former KNLA headquarters reading “Let peace prevail throughout this greater area. *[Signed:] The Whole Tatmadaw [military].*” This is highly ironic given that it was written by the column who had violated the ceasefire to attack this area, shelled villages, shot and displaced villagers. In SPDC parlance, ‘peace’ is used interchangeably with ‘joining hands with the state’, so given the circumstances it is clear that the note means that this area must be brought under state control – yet on this occasion, the military had failed to bring a single village or villager under its control.

Within days of the SPDC withdrawal the villagers returned to their settlements near the river to begin the delayed rice harvest. Those living east of the river could return to undamaged homes, but most of those living west of the river had to set up new shelters on the eastern bank, because their homes had been destroyed and the KNLA had intercepted radio messages from the departing SPDC troops indicating that they had deployed 14 landmines and 2 tripwire-mines in the villages and rice fields west of the river. KNLA units began sweeping the pathways west of the river for mines, while some villagers risked walking on the pathways checked by the KNLA to get to their fields. As noted by a KHRG field researcher, “Now the *[Kwih Lah]* villagers have gone back but they don’t dare go around their houses. When they plant landmines, the SPDC military doesn’t intend them only for the KNLA, they intend them for the villagers too. When we hear of landmine explosions, the people who are wounded are mostly villagers. ... When they came this time they fired not only at the KNLA, but at the villagers too. They want to make civilians too afraid to harvest, and too afraid to live in their villages anymore.”

When the villagers returned to their fields some of the rice had already been strangled out by weeds or eaten by wild pigs, and some had been destroyed by unseasonal rains that continued into November, preventing the ripening or causing grains to sprout while still on the stalk. Many people lost 50-80% of their crop, but they began harvesting day and night for weeks to bring in what they could. With the loss of this much of their crop, most of the villagers will begin to suffer severe food shortages beginning between March and May 2006.

The primary school in Kwih Lah village remained temporarily abandoned for fear of landmines but Ler Wah primary school resumed immediately. The school had to close some days to allow for the intensive work on the harvest, and even on its open days some students told KHRG they were unable to attend because they had to help their parents bring in the

harvest or watch over younger siblings while their parents worked day and night in the fields. Thra T---, one of the teachers, told KHRG “Maybe before the school year finishes [*in February*] we will have to flee again, I’m not sure. While we’re teaching the children we have to listen for news of the SPDC.”

Forced labour in SPDC-controlled villages

At present there are still no indications whether SPDC forces will launch another attack on this area in the coming months, but among villagers and KNU sources there is speculation that the SPDC may be planning to invade hill regions in several districts between now and the mid-2006 rainy season to try to bring more hill villagers under their control. Meanwhile, just three hours’ walk west of the Shwegyin River lies the Sittaung River plain, where villages are under SPDC control. In this area, beginning on November 16th 2005 all villagers in the four village tracts of Bpa Dta Lah, Eh Net, Weh La Daw and Thu K’Bee were ordered to come out daily for forced labour clearing all scrub along both sides of the vehicle road from Shwegyin to Kyauk Kyi, a road at least 50 kilometres (30 miles) long. This order was issued by SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #439, Zaw Htun commanding. It affects people of over 20 villages, pulling them away from their fields during the final weeks of the rice harvest. Each village has been assigned a stretch of road to clear within a week or more; no food, payment or tools are being provided. Clearing the scrub is intended to create an open field of vision for military vehicles, to make it more difficult for Karen soldiers to ambush SPDC troops or landmine the road, and to make it difficult for villagers to use or cross the road without detection by military checkpoints along its route. This forced labour is extremely dangerous, as villagers run the risk of detonating SPDC or KNLA landmines which may have been placed along the flanks of the road. Villagers have little choice but to comply or flee their villages. A schoolteacher along the Shwegyin River told KHRG,

“Along the [*Shwegyin-Kyauk Kyi*] road down in the plains there used to be many villages, but the big villages have become small and the small villages have become forest. Many people have gone to the towns or come up here, because the SPDC demands so many taxes from them and forces them to do all kinds of labour.”

Under these circumstances, villagers in the Ler Wah area told KHRG they are determined to continue evading any contact with the SPDC forces trying to bring their area under state control.

Further Reading

For further background see *Proliferation of SPDC Army camps in Nyaunglebin District leads to torture, killings and landmine casualties* (KHRG Bulletin #2005-B5, July 2005) and *Nyaunglebin District: Food supplies destroyed, villagers forcibly displaced, and region-wide forced labour as SPDC forces seek control over civilians* (KHRG Report from the Field #2005-F4, May 2005). Photos of SPDC attacks on civilian villages in late 2004 and the resulting displacement are presented in **Section 1** of *KHRG Photo Set 2005A*, and other sections of the same photo set show evidence of forced labour and other abuses committed since the ceasefire agreement by SPDC forces. See also the comprehensive report *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (KHRG #2001-03, October 2001). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site (<http://www.khrg.org>).