

WITHOUT RESPITE

**Renewed Attacks on Villages and Internal
Displacement in Toungoo District**

Karen Human Rights Group

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Without Respite: Renewed Attacks on Villages and Internal Displacement in Toungoo District

With the annual monsoon rains now falling over Karen State, the SPDC’s military offensive against civilian villagers in northern Karen State would normally be drawing to a close. However, quite the opposite is happening. The resumption of SPDC Army attacks on villages and the increased patrols in Toungoo District shows that the offensive is far from over. Thousands more landmines have been reportedly deployed across Toungoo District to isolate certain parts of the district and restrict villagers’ movements. An analysis of SPDC Army troop movements and tactics suggests that the offensive is now set to expand eastward across the Day Loh River where it can be expected that SPDC units will soon commence shelling and destroying villages. In addition to this, the situation in the southeast of the district has become dire as the villagers are now caught between two advancing columns and have nowhere left to flee. It is likely that dozens more villages will be destroyed and thousands more villagers will be displaced in the coming months.

Table of Contents

The Scope of Displacement	2
Implications for Health and Education	7
Increased Isolation of Villages in the Region	9
Examining the Motives behind the Offensive	14

Civilian villagers living in Toungoo District (Taw Oo in Karen), the northernmost of the seven Karen districts in eastern Burma, have been under attack since November last year. In its latest military offensive against the civilian population, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military junta has been targeting Karen villagers living in the hills of northern Karen State in the ongoing attempt to consolidate its control and bring the whole of the population under its rule. Over the past six months, thousands of villagers have been displaced and dozens of villages have been abandoned and/or destroyed. The wet season has now commenced, but the attacks show no sign of slowing down. Unlike in previous years, when offensive activities would cease with the onset of the rains, the SPDC has actually recently intensified its activities against Karen civilians in Toungoo District. The situation for the villagers is now growing increasingly desperate as more and more troops flood into the district to inflict wholesale human rights violations.

The Scope of Displacement

It is important to note that internal displacement in Karen State is not a new phenomenon that has just arisen from this offensive. In September 2004, KHRG released the comprehensive report *Enduring Hunger and Repression; Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued Use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District*,¹ which quoted a Karen relief worker from Toungoo District who estimated there to be approximately 10,000-12,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) hiding in Toungoo District alone. Following this, in October 2005, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) produced the report *Internal Displacement and Protection in Eastern Burma*,² in which they estimated that in 2005 there were 111,200 IDPs living in hiding in Karen State and eastern Pegu Division, with over 14,000 of these in Toungoo district.³ Recent reports by the Free Burma Rangers (FBR)⁴ now estimate there to be approximately 15,000 newly displaced villagers who have taken to the forest since the beginning of the offensive in response to the current attacks. At its highest, the total number of displaced villagers reached 18,000 in May, but fluctuates when SPDC columns return to base to resupply and people briefly return to their villages. Approximately 5,000 of these newly displaced villagers are hiding in Toungoo District, bringing the total number of displaced villagers in Toungoo District to something in the range of 10,000 to 15,000.

“We were very afraid of the SPDC. When they came into the village, they took whatever they wanted from the villagers. They would do whatever they wanted to do to the villagers or village. The first time that they came here they destroyed the village, and later they burned our village again. If they could catch anybody, whether it was a man or woman, they would hurt them, so whenever the villagers heard that the SPDC were coming to the village they would get up and run away immediately.” – Saw A--- (Male, 65), southeastern Tantabin township (February 2006)

“We were displaced by the movement of the SPDC. They burned our villages and our houses so we abandoned our village and fled away to another place. Now we settle in a place called T---, but we know that this is not a safe place for us. We are not the only village that was displaced. We know we can't stay in the forest for very long so we hope to flee to a refugee camp.” – Naw B--- (Female), southeastern Tantabin township (February 2006)

“We have always faced problems. The SPDC soldiers would arrive in our village sometimes. Whenever they came into our village they ate all of the villagers' livestock. They would eat whatever they saw. They did not pay anything for the cost. When they came to our village they tortured our villagers and sometimes they sexually abused the women. When they came they usually stayed one or two days and then left. A few days ago we heard that SPDC soldiers had killed a Play Hsa Loh villager. They cut off his legs and arms, and then they left that person beside the road [to bleed to death] because an SPDC soldier had been wounded by a landmine. ... There are about 1,000 SPDC soldiers staying there and making operations.” – Saw C--- (M, 45), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)

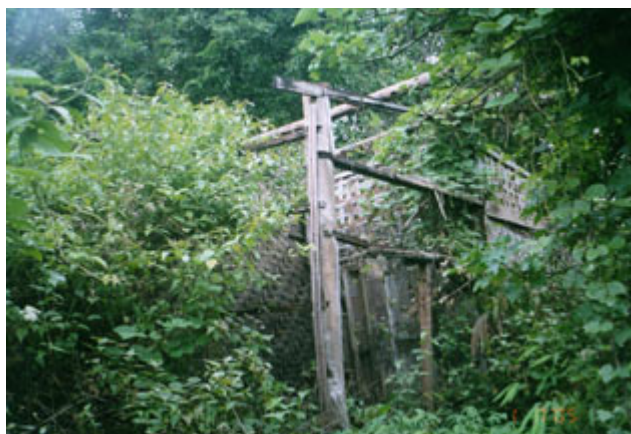
¹ Karen Human Rights Group (2004). *Enduring Hunger and Repression; Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued Use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District*. September 27th 2004 (KHRG #2004-01).

² Thailand Burma Border Consortium (2005). *Internal Displacement and Protection in Eastern Burma*. Bangkok: TBBC, October 2005.

³ TBBC (2005), *Internal Displacement and Protection in Eastern Burma*, p. 37. Toungoo District spans the northern tip of Karen State and extends west into the plains of eastern Pegu (Bago) Division.

⁴ Free Burma Rangers. “Burma Army Captures 800 Civilians and Forces 1,000 Prisoners to Porter for Their Offensive”, 3/6/06. Received by email.

“Our villagers have always had to face problems. SPDC soldiers have come to our village many times. Over 300 soldiers would come to our village. The distance from the SPDC [camp] to our place only takes two hours to walk. We cannot stay in our village because the SPDC soldiers come and harass us. ... I am faced with many very serious problems now so I think that I will go to a refugee camp for a while. If our country gets peace I will come back to my homeland.” – Saw D--- (M, 23), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)



Attacks upon villages by SPDC Army soldiers in Toungoo District are not new. This photo shows the charred and abandoned remains of a home in the old site of Sho Ser village. This home, like many others like it, was destroyed in an earlier offensive in 1997. The SPDC has been mounting offensives against Karen civilians almost annually for the past decade. *[Photo: KHRG]*

KHRG has identified at least 21 different SPDC Army battalions who have been militarily active in Toungoo District since the beginning of the offensive last November. Toungoo District typically falls within the area of operations of the SPDC Southern Regional Military Command (SC), although some battalions subordinate to Western Regional Military Command (WC) also have a presence here. At any one time there are ordinarily a dozen SPDC Army battalions active within the district. To supplement the battalions already stationed in Toungoo District, many more battalions under Light Infantry Division (LID) #66 and Military Operations Command (MOC) #16 have also been brought in for offensive operations.⁵ The marked increase in the number of soldiers flooding into the district has brought with it a commensurate increase in human rights violations, leading to significant forced displacement. Since November 2005 the SPDC has stepped up its efforts to depopulate all areas it cannot directly control – primarily the hills away from vehicle roads – and force the population down to roadside SPDC-controlled villages where they can serve their proper functions as civilians: supporting the Army with forced labour, money, and materials.

Internal displacement in Karen State is fluid; people try not to go far, staying in their field huts or nearby forests to retain access to their fields and hidden food caches, return to stay in the village when they can and then flee again when another SPDC column comes near. A brief lull in attacks on villages and IDP communities over the past weeks as SPDC units received new orders and have been busy focusing on resupplying has led many villagers to chance returning to their villages, somewhat reducing the overall number of displaced villagers who are still hiding in the forest. This number, however, seems set to rise again. SPDC Army activities against civilians have recently been stepped up again throughout the

⁵ Each MOC has ten battalions divided into three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs). MOCs are used for offensive purposes and operate under orders of the Regional Military Commands.

offensive area and with this will come an increase in the number of villagers fleeing into the forests as they attempt to evade the SPDC Army patrols.

“The place where we settle now is called B---. All of the villagers in our village moved here. Our villagers do flat fields and hill fields, but when we heard that the SPDC were patrolling or coming we had to run away or hide, so we didn’t have much time to look after our crops and we couldn’t get enough rice. We always have to be alert for the SPDC. Other villages that surround our village also had to flee along with us. They also have to stay in the forest and run away when the SPDC troops were patrolling near the places where we settled. If they [SPDC] continue to do the same as this in the future, our only choice will be to choose to flee to a refugee camp in Thailand.” – Saw E--- (M, 28), southeastern Tantabin township (February 2006)

As has been detailed in several recent KHRG reports, the recent arrival of fresh troops and orders for existing forces to remain in position suggest that the monsoon rains will not put a stop to the attacks as in previous years. Many villagers are of the opinion that the SPDC Army soldiers will keep coming after them throughout the wet season. In the words of one Karen township chairman, *“I think this time the rains will not stop them, they will come slowly and keep coming”*. SPDC Army units are not returning to base, but rather are remaining in their small satellite camps throughout the eastern hills of Toungoo District. Many of these camps are already stocked with several months of supplies, while forced labour orders continue to be issued to SPDC-controlled villages like Kler Lah and Klay Soe Kee to porter more supplies along the roads to many of these camps. A recent report by FBR notes that *“[o]n 22 May 2006, the supplies for the Burma Army were stored under the primary school in Kaw They Der and the villagers were forced to build a floor and walls for the supplies. According to local Karen leaders, this is an unusual rainy season re-supply for the Burma Army because the Burma Army already has its supplies for the rainy season and these are in addition to those supplies”*.⁶ It would appear that this offensive is far from over.

In the last few days of May SPDC Army patrols and attacks on villages resumed anew, with SPDC Army columns in southeastern Tantabin township coordinating their attacks with those in northern Papun District. Two recent KHRG reports detailed how a column of SPDC Army soldiers from Military Operations Command (MOC) #10 are presently slowly advancing northwards out of Ler Mu Plaw in Papun District towards Toungoo District, shelling and burning all villages, field huts and food supplies in their path and shooting villagers on sight.⁷ On May 25th, the three battalions of Tactical Operations Command (TOC) #3 of Light Infantry Division (LID) #66 at Kler Lah in Toungoo District formed a column and are presently moving southeast down the road to Bu Sah Kee, apparently planning to continue down into northern Papun District and meet up with the MOC #10 column near Kay Pu. A KHRG field researcher reports that this LID #66 column rounded up hundreds of men and women in Kler Lah (a.k.a. Bawgali Gyi), Kaw Thay Der (Yay Tho Gyi) and Klay Soe Kee (Yay Tho Lay) villages and are using them to porter ammunition and supplies down the road. Many of the men in these SPDC-controlled villages ran away as a result, so LID #66 troops remaining behind have detained the other villagers, mainly women, children and the elderly, in local schools and churches and plan to use them as porters if more are needed. According to a KHRG field researcher, the LID #66 column has already advanced as far as Dta Kwih Soe (Ta Kwee Soe), nearing the end of the road at Bu Sah Kee, and is expected to continue its push southwards towards Kay Pu in Papun District. Thus far the column has only moved along the vehicle road, but once it passes the end of the road and enters the high hills

⁶ Free Burma Rangers. “Burma Army Activities in Toungoo District, Western Karen State”, 25/5/06. Received by email.

⁷ See Karen Human Rights Group, “SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun District”, June 1st 2006 (KHRG #2006-B6); and Karen Human Rights Group, “Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo Districts”. June 7th 2006 (KHRG #2006-B7).

separating Papun and Toungoo Districts it will probably begin destroying villages and fields. By sending out two columns to move against the villagers from both the north and the south, the SPDC may hope to encircle the villagers and cut off all means for their escape. In the process, it can be expected that many will be killed and thousands more villagers will become displaced. Fleeing from one column will deliver them directly into the hands of the other, in which case they will either be killed or captured and used as operations porters. Making matters worse, “[t]here is also an unconfirmed report that another column from Mawchi in southern Karenni (Kayah) State might be heading into the area from the east, to cut off any possible escape in that direction. If this is true, it could become virtually impossible for any more villagers from Toungoo District or far northern Papun District to reach the Thai border.”⁸ With no media presence in the offensive region, the SPDC knows that much of the media coverage of its abuses has been based on the testimonies of displaced villagers who have reached the border, so it may be trying to block any more villagers from escaping.

“When the SPDC reached the village, they destroyed everything that they could see. They killed our animals; they burned our church and houses; they ruined the rice and food that we kept for ourselves. All of the houses in the village were burned, except for one. They burned one of the neighbouring villages also. ... Most of the villagers don't have enough food. We couldn't do our planting well and we are always harassed and interrupted by the SPDC. We couldn't grow enough food, so we had to go to K--- to buy our rice. We don't have any income and almost all of the villagers have no money. The main problems that we have to face at present are the lack of food, that we don't have enough medicine when we got sick, and that there is no school and no education for the children. I have decided to move to a refugee camp in Thailand because of the shortage of food and all of the other problems that we must face, but someday I will return to my homeland when there is peace and freedom in our state.” – Saw F--- (M, 56), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)



Internally displaced villagers from Hee Daw Khaw village in eastern Tantabin township resting after fleeing from their village. On November 26th 2005, SPDC Army soldiers from IB #75 opened fire on their village without warning, showering it with 60 mm and 81 mm mortars, and sending the villagers fleeing for their lives. [Photo: KHRG]

⁸ Karen Human Rights Group, “Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts”. June 7th 2006 (KHRG #2006-B7).

The first need stated by many villagers is physical security, and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forces try to help through harassing attacks and landmines to slow the advance of SPDC columns, providing villagers with warning of SPDC movements and escorting villagers out of dangerous areas or back to their villages to salvage their food supplies. In effect, the KNLA forces in the region have transformed from a 'rebel' force to a protection force, and the only combat presently occurring is when they try to slow the SPDC columns advancing on villages.

Next to physical security, the most urgent need of the internally displaced is food. Many are without enough food to adequately feed their families and, though sharing whatever they can, starvation is always a threat. Once they have fled into the forest, many villagers are able to successfully evade SPDC Army patrols, particularly if they have access to KNLA help and intelligence. Many of their possessions and food supplies, however, are left behind in the rush to flee from an advancing SPDC Army column. Each time villagers have to flee they lose some of what few possessions and/or food supplies they still have. In preparation for the inevitability that they will need to flee again, the majority of villagers hide a supply of rice or paddy (unhusked rice) in small paddy barns in the forest. Once they have escaped from the SPDC and their families (for the time being at least) are made safe, the villagers can then surreptitiously return to collect their rice from their secret caches. In response to this, SPDC Army patrols deliberately seek out and destroy any and all food supplies of Karen civilians. Whenever a paddy barn is discovered in the forest, the soldiers destroy whatever they cannot eat or carry away with them. The rice is typically dumped out onto the ground, where it will either be eaten by wild pigs or take seed, while the barn itself and some of the rice are usually torched. Many of the villagers who are now hiding in the forest are without food, particularly in the southeast of the district where the attacks have thus far been the most concentrated. Many of their food supplies and belongings have been destroyed during attacks earlier in the offensive and they are now fleeing into the forest without food, shelter from the rains, or the medicines to treat those who will undoubtedly fall ill in the absence of adequate food and shelter [see ***"Implications for Health and Education"*** below].

"We don't have enough rice because the soil is not good and we couldn't look after our crops because we have had to run away from the SPDC regularly. We have always been harassed by the SPDC. We used to go to K--- to buy food, but now the SPDC has prohibited the selling of rice and food so now we can't buy enough. Sometimes people there sold rice and other food secretly without letting the SPDC know about it" – Saw D--- (M, 23), southeastern Tantabin township (February 2006)

"I only have a small amount of food left. Our friends who fled with us also don't have enough food. All of us will be faced with the lack of food. We haven't been able to look after our farms very well because we always have to be alert from SPDC. Even though we only have a small amount left, we don't have enough money to buy any more food. We are running out of food so we know we can't stay in this place any longer. We have decided to abandon our own homes and homeland and move to a refugee camp in Thailand. This is not because we are willing to move, but because we are suffering and the lack [of food]." – Saw E--- (M, 28), southeastern Tantabin township (February 2006)

"We had 37 households in our village, with over 280 people. [Our villagers] were doing hill fields. Our enemies [SPDC] have been harassing us so we have not been able to get enough food. We normally bought our food in K---, but recently the SPDC soldiers arrived to our village. Our villagers are faced with many problems. The SPDC soldiers stayed in our village for about one month. During that time the SPDC were burning our houses so we fled and stayed in the forest. Our villagers do not

dare to meet the SPDC soldiers. The distance between the SPDC Army camp and us is only about a one-and-a-half or two hours walk. We did not have any security there any more. We were living with fearful hearts so we prepared our things [and kept them] in baskets so we could take them with us when we had to run away. We have no food, no security, no medicines, and no school.” – Saw F--- (M, 56), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)

Implications for Health and Education

Many of the villagers hiding in the forest were forced to flee their villages with little or no warning, leaving them no time to collect any of their belongings. Many villagers therefore took to the forest with little more than the clothes that they were wearing. They had no time to take any food, blankets, mosquito nets, or tarpaulins with them. Without adequate shelter, many displaced villagers are likely to fall ill, especially now during the wet season. Malaria, dengue fever, and scrub typhus are endemic to the region, dysentery, skin diseases and infections are rife, and cases of villagers dying of diarrhoea are not uncommon. The terrain of eastern Toungoo District is mountainous where altitudes can reach as high as 2,400 metres [8,000 feet] above sea level, and even during the hot season, temperatures can drop rapidly once the sun goes down. Exacerbating this have been the unseasonal rains that began in December 2005 shortly after the first attacks, and have continued intermittently throughout the remainder of the dry season [also see **Recent Attacks on Villages in Southeastern Toungoo District Send Thousands Fleeing into the Forests and to Thailand** (KHRG #2006-B3, 16/3/06)]. Now that the rains have begun in earnest, the situation can only be expected to further deteriorate. Apart from disease, many villagers have been shot and wounded by SPDC troops, and the sharp increase in landmine deployment across the district by all groups is also leading to serious injuries and deaths [see **“Increased Isolation of Villages in the Region”** below].

Medical clinics, like the villagers that they serve, have also become displaced. Clinics operated by KNLA medics or Karen relief organizations have been forced to close, their staff having to flee deeper into the forest along with the thousands of villagers now in hiding. Many of the villagers who would generally seek treatment from these clinics must now hide in the forest without any access to modern medicines. In the absence of conventional medicines, villagers must resort to utilizing traditional herbal medicines concocted from roots and herbs collected in the forests or enlist the services of an animist village shaman. Sadly, many of these traditional remedies do not adequately address the problem and many villagers die from easily preventable and otherwise readily curable diseases.

“Many people got sick when we had to run away from the SPDC and were hiding in the forest. We didn’t have enough medicine to treat them, but we tried our best and gave them treatment with the little medicine that we had.” – Naw B--- (Female), southeastern Tantabin township (February 2006)

“We have no clinic here. If people get sick, some of them will go to the [KNLA] battalion clinic, while others will be treated by other villagers here in the village.” – Naw G--- (F, 45), Tantabin township (February 2006)

The regular SPDC Army patrols sweeping through the hills, who have declared that they will shoot anyone on sight, have made it both difficult and dangerous for villagers to seek medical care. Many displaced villagers, fearful of encountering the SPDC, choose not to risk travelling to a clinic. Furthermore, the increased SPDC Army activity makes it difficult for the

handful of Karen relief organizations that provide food and primary healthcare to the displaced villagers to gain access to the areas where there is the greatest need.

Many villages now destroyed boasted their own primary schools, some even middle schools. Many of these were built and operated by the villagers themselves. Now, however, quite a number of schools in the district have been forced to close as entire villages have been abandoned. According to a KHRG field researcher, on February 9th 2006, the students from one of the middle schools in Tantabin township were denied the chance to sit for their final exams because they had to flee. In another school nearby, the students were forced to sit for all of their final exams over just two days. On February 13th, the students sat for two different exams, while the following day, those same students then had to sit for five more exams in one day. The next day, they too fled deeper into the forest.

“We had a school before but it was destroyed because of the increased activity of the SPDC. Our school was constructed by the KNU, but later it was burned by the SPDC. The children who are of school age now stay in the forest and a few of them have gone to a refugee camp to study.” – Saw F--- (M, 56), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)



Crude shelters erected in the forests of southeastern Tantabin township by villagers after their village was shelled. On December 11th and again on December 12th 2005, SPDC Army troops fired a volley of mortars into Hsaw Wah Der and nearby Yaw Tho Pler villages. The villagers fled and set up simple shelters such as the one shown in this photo where they remained in hiding for the following week. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Increased Isolation of Villages in the Region

As part of their efforts to isolate the hills and cut all contact between those living there and those living in the plains, SPDC Army soldiers have been imposing broad movement restrictions on villages in areas that are under their control. Villagers living in these areas are presently not allowed to travel outside their villages unless they secure a pass from the military, although this is now seldom granted. Many of the villagers who find themselves in this situation are now not able to tend to their fields and plantations, nor are they permitted to attend the markets in neighbouring villages. Hill villagers are stopped at SPDC checkpoints along the roads and not allowed to proceed. Villagers in the SPDC-controlled plains in the west of the district are ordered not to sell food to people from the hills to the east, and warned that the SPDC has landmined all the pathways into the hills. Beginning on July 21st 2005, the road from Toungoo town to Kler Lah was closed to all non-military traffic by order of Southern Regional Command. Shortly thereafter, the following order was pasted on the door of the Village Peace & Development Council office in Kler Lah:⁹

- The vehicle road was not closed by the Strategic Operations Command.
- It is the insurgents who have closed the road.
- *[We]* Cannot help at all with the matters of reopening the road or the rice problem.
- Do not ask permission to meet with the officers of the Strategic Operations Command.
- We also cannot do anything about it.
- *[You]* Must solve your problems yourselves.

#1 Strategic Operations Command Unit

The 'insurgents', i.e. the KNLA, have no permanent presence on this road, which is heavily garrisoned by SPDC Army troops with checkpoints every few kilometres. Within weeks, villages in the area were suffering shortages of rice and basic commodities that used to be brought up the road by traders. Many began making secret trips down to the plains along forest pathways, a walk of several days at risk of stepping on landmines. One of these villagers told KHRG how he and a group of others were caught in Toungoo town in August, interrogated by military intelligence and held until they could raise a ransom of 10,000 Kyat before being released.¹⁰ Fruit and other crops which villagers needed to sell at town markets had to be abandoned, threatening their livelihood for the coming year. The only vehicles now plying the roads of Toungoo District are those who have been issued orders by the military to cart rice for the soldiers in order to stock their camps in the hills. Villagers are also being forced to carry these supplies up the road on their backs, particularly when the road is washed out by the rains.

Restrictions on movement outside their villages had already made it difficult for many people to work their own fields, making them dependent on rice deliveries from the plains to feed

⁹ See photos 8-2 through 8-5 in Section 8 of KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005 (April 5th 2006), accessible on the KHRG website at <http://www.khrg.org/photoreports/2005photos/gallery2005/section8.html>

¹⁰ See photo 8-6 in Section 8 of KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005 (April 5th 2006). Accessible on the KHRG website at <http://www.khrg.org/photoreports/2005photos/gallery2005/section8.html>.

their families. By closing the roads, the SPDC has blocked these villagers' access to food, both in SPDC-controlled villages and in the hills. The three battalions which comprise Tactical Operations Command (TOC) #2 of Military Operations Command (MOC) #16 are now enforcing these movement restrictions in Tantabin township, blocking all movement (of people and food) between the hills and the plains.¹¹

"The place where we used to buy our food or rice has now been blocked by the SPDC. The SPDC has prohibited all of the sale and transport of food and rice. Now we only have a little bit of food left. We are faced with problems for our food supply. Many other villages are also in the same situation." – Saw F--- (M, 56), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)

The Free Burma Rangers have reported that closure of the roads was reiterated on February 24th 2006 in an order from LID #66, Tactical Operations Command #3 commander Tin Aung: *"Villagers were told they were not allowed to travel to the plains area and the villagers from the plains were told not to travel on any of those roads. The Burma Army said they would kill all of the villagers if they did"*.¹² Those caught outside their village without official permission can, and have been, fired upon by SPDC Army soldiers. The soldiers then claim that they thought that the villager was a KNLA soldier, regardless of the fact that they were unarmed and were wearing civilian clothing.



A group of displaced villagers from Hee Daw Khaw, Kho Kee, and Klay Kee villages in eastern Tantabin township fleeing to a refugee camp in Thailand. The increased frequency of military patrols and the assaults on villages made it exceedingly difficult for these villagers to find enough food. Presented with few other options, many villagers have chanced the long and dangerous journey to Thailand, taking them through heavily militarized zones where they may be shot on sight and increasing their exposure to the ever-present threat of stepping on a landmine. The journey to the border can take up to three weeks for some to complete. Approximately 2,000 newly arrived refugees have crossed into Thailand since the beginning of the offensive. [Photo: KHRG]

According to a Karen National Union (KNU) press release (#3/2006, [incorrectly] dated January 7th 2006), soldiers from SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #20 dismantled the bridge near Par Der Ka village in Than Daung township on January 19th 2006, and then two more bridges near Htee Pu Chee and Thi Thaw Kaw on January 20th and 22nd respectively. All three of these bridges were steel suspension bridges, the first of which spanned the Day Loh River, while the other two crossed the Dweh Loh River [see **Map**]. It is quite possible that the SPDC removed these bridges in order to further isolate the area to the east of the Day

¹¹These battalions are Infantry Battalion #240 and Light Infantry Battalions #567 and #568.

¹² Free Burma Rangers. "Burma Army activities in Toungoo District, Western Karen State", 25/5/06. Received by email.

Loh River. Over the past decade, the SPDC has mounted repeated unsuccessful campaigns to depopulate and control this region, sending patrols out on search and destroy missions with orders to destroy all food supplies that they find and shoot all villagers on sight. The SPDC has not yet launched any extensive campaigns into this area this year, though the dismantling of these bridges suggests that they may be planning to do so.

This does not bode well for the villagers living to the east of the Day Loh River in Than Daung township. If the SPDC should extend the offensive into this area as well, as appears likely, the villagers in this region will be completely encircled. Over the past two years the SPDC has used two Karenni ceasefire groups, the Karenni Solidarity Organisation (KnSO) and the Karenni Nationalities Peoples' Liberation Front (KNPLF) to launch armed incursions from Karenni (Kayah) State into eastern Toungoo District in support of SPDC Army columns and to block the escape of villagers. The villagers living in the eastern stretches of the district therefore have not only had to flee the SPDC, but also the KnSO and the KNPLF. If the offensive expands east of the Day Loh river in Than Daung township, the villagers will be left unable to flee to the east into Karenni State for fear of encountering the KnSO or the KNPLF. Flight westward across the Day Loh River would send them into an area of heavy SPDC militarization, apart from the fact that the bridges are gone and large numbers of landmines have been planted along the banks of the river (see below). Fleeing to the north or south will also be dangerous as SPDC forces are already operating in these areas.

Landmines are another weapon being used by the SPDC to isolate hill villagers and restrict their movements. Toungoo District has suffered from extensive landmine contamination for years. Throughout the protracted conflict and more recently during the ceasefire, landmines have been planted in their thousands over the past few decades throughout the district. The SPDC and its proxies, the Karenni Solidarity Organization (KnSO) and the Karenni Nationalities Peoples' Liberation Front (KNPLF), as well as the KNLA, are all guilty of deploying antipersonnel mines in Toungoo District.

A KNU radio transcript acquired by a KHRG field researcher stated that: *"In Than Daung township, LID #66 and Southern Command troops planted landmines in many different areas. They have planted landmines at Pa Weh village all the way up to Htee Bpu Kee, from Hta Yeh Ploh to Htee Bpu Kee, from Thi Thaw Ko to Htee Bpu Kee, and from K'Ter Kee to Dee Dah Ko and across to the [Day Loh] River. [The SPDC also planted mines on] all of the paths along the banks of the Day Loh River that the villagers use. The enemy [SPDC] planted so many landmines that the villagers can't go to the markets to buy and sell food or go to their hill fields. They can't do anything so they are facing many difficulties and problems" [see **Map** for locations].* The deployment of these landmines represents an extensive north-south line which bisects the district. This line begins in the far north of the district around Htee Bpu Kee and Hta Yeh Ploh, follows the course of the Day Loh River and continues southward past Than Daung Gyi into Tantabin township and onwards all the way down into Nyaunglebin District. Many of the mines deployed along the banks of the Day Loh River and around Than Daung Gyi were planted there by soldiers from SPDC Infantry Battalions (IB) #20, #39, and #124. The geographic pattern to the laying of these mines suggests that the SPDC is trying to restrict any communications or movement of villagers from the eastern hills to the plains in the west of the district, and vice versa. This limits the access that hill villagers will have to food, with the intent of slowly starving them out of the hills and down into SPDC controlled villages where they can be used for forced labour and extortion.

A recent report by FBR supports this theory. FBR estimates that in addition to the thousands of mines already *in situ*, the SPDC is now deploying 2,000 new landmines across the district: *"The Burma Army is now laying landmines in a north-south line along the Day Lo[h] river in the vicinity of Thandaung [Gyi], north of Toungoo. It is reported that over 2000*

*anti-personnel mines will be laid to stop all civilian mo[ve]ment from the mountains to the plains [in] this area”.*¹³

The southeastern tracts of the district where most of the attacks have been focused so far are already plagued with landmines. A common tactic employed by SPDC Army troops is to loot or destroy everything in a village once the villagers have been relocated or have fled, then plant landmines in and around the village before leaving. This is done to maim or kill any villagers who attempt to return, thereby providing ‘encouragement’ to move to SPDC-controlled areas. The soldiers bury their mines in places that they know villagers must walk, such as at the base of the ladder leading into a house, in a villager’s plantation, directly in front of their rice storage barn, and even in schools. The SPDC troops who burned Hee Daw Khaw village in southeastern Toungoo District in late November 2005 left only the church and the pastor’s house unburned, but laid a landmine at the entrance to the church and planted others at other strategic locations throughout the village.¹⁴ Now that so many villages in this area are displaced as a result of the offensive, SPDC Army soldiers have been roving from village to village looting and destroying the abandoned villages, littering them with landmines before moving on.



A KNLA soldier removing a landmine from a path near Than Daung Gyi in Than Daung township. This mine is a copy of the US-made M-14 blast mine. KHRG has not yet been able to ascertain where these mines are manufactured or where the SPDC is acquiring them from. Some reports claim that SPDC Army soldiers are planting a further 2,000 landmines throughout the district to isolate some areas and restrict the movement of villagers. [Photo: KHRG]

“The Burmese troops planted landmines near the village but the villagers didn’t know where they were planted, so many of them died from the landmines when they went outside [the village]. The Burmese soldiers would plant the landmines whenever they entered the village. [They would plant them] under the ladders, on the paths that the villagers used, and in the places where the students were studying. But because the villagers didn’t know about this, many have been killed. Although they said that they planted them against the KNU, few KNU soldiers have been killed by the landmines. Most of the victims have been villagers. The main way that the Burmese soldiers use landmines is whenever they enter a village they will plant the landmines as they leave. They also plant them where the people work and many of the villagers’ livestock have been killed. They have also planted landmines at the villagers’ rice

¹³ Free Burma Rangers. “Burma Army Launches New Attacks in Western and Northern Karen States”, 15/5/06. Received by email.

¹⁴ See photos 1-32 through 1-34 in Section 1 of KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005 (April 5th 2006). Accessible on the KHRG website at <http://www.khrg.org/photoreports/2005photos/gallery2005/section1.html>.

barns so the villagers will be killed when they go to get their rice". – Saw H, southwestern Tantabin township.

Many villagers have lost their limbs or their lives to landmines in Toungoo District this year. On January 4th 2006, five villagers were wounded when one of them stepped on a landmine planted by IB #39 near Shwe Nyaung Bin in Than Daung township. Two days later on January 6th, while walking along a path near Than Daung Gyi, two brothers detonated a landmine, killing one outright and seriously wounding the other. The mine had been planted there by soldiers from IB #124. On January 24th 2006, a 48 year old villager lost his leg to a mine planted by soldiers from IB #20 near Tah Yeh Pee village, Tantabin township. Then in March 2006, Par Weh Der Ko villager Saw Lay was killed after he stepped on another landmine planted by IB #20. His 50 year old travelling companion also received injuries from the explosion, but was lucky to escape with his life. SPDC Army soldiers refused to allow him to seek treatment in Than Daung Gyi, telling him they did not want him to be seen by any "foreigners". While Than Daung Gyi has been developed and marketed as a tourist destination, foreign tourists are not yet permitted access to the area so it is unclear exactly which foreigners they feared would be present.

Most landmine victims in Toungoo District die from their injuries. Medical attention may be several days' walk away, during which time the victim dies either from shock or loss of blood [see "**Implications for Health and Education**" above]. The SPDC rarely treats any villagers who inadvertently step on their mines. They always deny responsibility and tell the villagers that their 'cousins' in the KNLA must have planted them, so the villager should look to the KNLA for accountability. Most medical care that civilian landmine victims receive comes from KNLA medics, or to a lesser extent from independent Karen relief teams that occasionally travel into these areas with backpacks full of medicine. Both the KNLA medics and the Karen relief organizations alike try their best to serve all in need, although all of these groups suffer from lack of funds and a lack of supplies. Ultimately, the demand far exceeds the supply. Landmines represent an invisible and indiscriminate scourge for the villagers of Toungoo District, and indeed all of Karen State, and their continued deployment throughout the district by all parties to the conflict will only result in many more villagers being wounded, maimed, or killed.

Examining the Motives behind the Offensive

Many journalists and Burma watchers who have been commenting on the current situation in Karen State have been claiming two things: firstly, that the full-scale military offensive now underway in northern Karen State is a conflict that is being bitterly waged between government troops and Karen rebels and that the thousands of newly displaced villagers are all fleeing from the fighting; and secondly, that the offensive is a security measure being undertaken by SPDC forces related to the recent relocation of the national capital from Rangoon to Pyinmana in Mandalay Division. These assertions need to be explored further.

The first of these misconceptions that needs to be examined is the belief that the present offensive is a counter-insurgency operation aimed at hunting down and crushing the Karen resistance: the KNU and its armed wing the KNLA. This belief leads to published statements like *“the [SPDC] military and ethnic Karen rebels have been locked in fierce combat since February”*.¹⁵ There has not been any *“fierce combat”*. Admittedly, there have been sporadic clashes, but nothing that would amount to the *“fierce combat”* suggested. In fact, the only fighting that has occurred in Toungoo District so far this year has been when the KNLA has ambushed an advancing SPDC Army column in order to give internally displaced villagers in the area a chance to get away, or whenever an SPDC or KNLA unit has unwittingly stumbled across the other, leading to a brief firefight before one of the groups retreats. With several thousand SPDC Army soldiers now in the region the KNLA, far outmanned and outgunned and forced to adopt guerrilla tactics to harass SPDC Army patrols, stand no chance in a stand-up fight. Their role in Toungoo District, if not in most of Karen State, is now more to protect the villagers and slow the advance of approaching SPDC Army patrols, giving the internally displaced an opportunity to flee to safer territory.

Furthermore, SPDC units do not presently, nor do they typically, actively seek out and engage the KNLA. If SPDC soldiers receive word of a KNLA unit nearby, their tendency is to actively *avoid* them. The current offensive, like most over the past ten years, involves the SPDC Army directly targeting unarmed Karen civilians, not the armed combatants of the KNLA. The villagers are therefore not fleeing from fighting between others, but rather are fleeing because they are the target of these attacks. All of the attacks seen thus far during the current offensive have been mounted against villages and the hiding sites of the internally displaced, not KNLA soldiers or camps. A KHRG field researcher from the region has said, *“As the SPDC junta has increased their activities, the number of villagers fleeing has also increased. Regardless of whether the villagers would regularly encounter the SPDC Army soldiers or not, more of them are fleeing to Thailand. It is not because of warfare, but because their rights have been violated and they couldn’t endure it any more”*. These sentiments were echoed by a KNLA officer in Papun District who told KHRG, *“[n]ow the SPDC has come up to burn houses and kill villagers. They’re not here to shoot KNLA soldiers.”*

The majority of SPDC Army officers stationed in Karen State are more interested in using their time there to exploit and terrorize the population and line their pockets with money extorted from the villagers than they are in fighting a war. The internal displacement that we are seeing growing almost daily is being caused not by a war between two armed forces, but by the human rights abuses that are targeted directly at the villagers themselves. By evading SPDC military columns and refusing to comply with orders, the villagers pose more of a threat to local and regional SPDC power than the KNLA. The regime therefore sees them as the enemy, and attacks them and their means of sustenance in its attempts to subjugate them. The KNLA is only one expression of how Karen people resist this

¹⁵ Agence France Presse. “Burma must halt offensive against minority rebels: UN rights experts”, 17/5/06. Received by email.

subjugation; most of their resistance takes the form of nonviolent noncooperation, like ignoring orders calling for forced labour, bribing military officers, or fleeing into the forest to evade SPDC control.

“The SPDC looks upon us civilians as their enemies. My view of the SPDC is that they are a terrorist group, they are terrorists and abusers. The KNU looks upon us civilians as their friends and part of their organization, so my view of the KNU is that they are good to us and don’t abuse us.” – Saw F--- (M, 56), southeastern Tantabin township (March 2006)

Another common claim regarding the current offensive is that it is in some way linked to the relocation of the capital to Pyinmana. On May 3rd 2006, Thai English-language daily *The Bangkok Post* quoted Sop Moei District superintendent Police Colonel Suthep Thaphanaworakul saying of newly arrived refugees that, *“these people are coming to the border because Burma’s government has forced all ethnic Karen living within five kilometre[s] of their new capital, Pyinmana, to clear out. They are afraid construction on the capital will be sabotaged by ethnic rebels, such as the KNU [Karen National Union]”*.¹⁶ It is highly unlikely, however, that the move to Pyinmana is a significant factor in this offensive. The first and most obvious reason for this is simple geography: Toungoo District is approximately 100 kilometres [60 miles] south of Pyinmana and villages now being attacked in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts are even further away. The KNLA has no operations at all any closer to Pyinmana. If the SPDC’s objective, as suggested above, is to secure a five kilometre radius surrounding Pyinmana, it would seem more logical to focus its military resources on that area rather than sending thousands of troops over 100 kilometres away to attack forces who have no operations near the new capital. Even if we accept this as a logical ‘pre-emptive strike’, we should be seeing similar attacks in the northern tip of Toungoo District, which is much closer to Pyinmana, and against areas of Karenni (Kayah) State and Shan State where the Karenni Army (KnA) and Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) are operating, which are the same distance from Pyinmana. But such attacks are not occurring.

The present offensive in northern Karen State is no more related to the move to Pyinmana than is the increased pressure being placed upon ceasefire groups to disarm, renewed restrictions being imposed upon international NGOs working within the country, the adjournment of the SPDC’s constitution-drafting national convention, the imposed “retirement” of NLD politicians, or the ongoing detention of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. All of these are simply displays of an exceedingly paranoid and hard-line regime trying to hold on to power at all costs. The Free Burma Rangers (FBR), in their April 29th 2006 report, ***Relationship of the Offensive to the Move to the New Capitol [sic] of Pyinmana***, stated that the attacks that we are seeing *“are a continuation of the yearly attacks, and are part of an ongoing 50 plus year attempt to crush the resistance and control the people”*.¹⁷ That same report quoted a Karen relief worker from the region to have said that, *“This is a bad year and maybe [it] will be as bad as 1997 or worse, but this is all part of their plan to control the people and destroy any who disagree with their orders.”* The SPDC has long sought to gain control over Toungoo District. It is a region which they have never been able to effectively control, and the regime appears to have decided that they can bring more civilians under their control with yet another major offensive against villages.

The SPDC has taken full advantage of the protective shield provided by their informal ceasefire with the KNU since January 2004. They have used this time to expand and improve their networks of roads and establish new military camps in areas where previously

¹⁶ *The Bangkok Post*. “More Karen flee junta’s ‘slave labour’”, 3/5/06.

¹⁷ Free Burma Rangers. “Relationship of the Offensive to the Move to the New Capitol of Pyinmana”. 29/4/06. Received by email.

there were none; both through the use of forced labour. All of these camps, the newly built and the existing ones alike, have been fully stocked with food, supplies, and munitions, again through the use of the forced labour of villagers. This has occurred not only in Toungoo District, but throughout Karen State. The SPDC exploited the freedom of movement enabled by the ceasefire, moving into areas where they were previously unable to go for fear of being ambushed by the KNLA. KNLA soldiers have largely been unable to repel the SPDC expansion, many of them frustrated by the orders to observe the ceasefire and not to engage with the SPDC. The ceasefire has thus allowed the SPDC to gain a foothold in areas that have traditionally been controlled by the KNU and this has provided them with a unique springboard from which to launch the current offensive.

Much larger offensives in 1997 destroyed thousands of villages throughout a much wider area, and similar but smaller offensives were mounted against civilian villages every year from 1998 to 2003, burning villages and displacing villagers, but the media and most of the international community has ignored them. Just because the international media is taking notice for the first time, they assume that this must therefore be a new phenomenon, and seek its causes in other current events – hence the assumption that it must be related to Pinyinana. But this is not new; it has been standard SPDC practice for ten years. It would appear that everyone who is claiming a relationship has also overlooked the simple fact that this offensive, having begun in November last year, commenced at the same time as every other SPDC dry season offensive mounted annually in Karen State.

There are many distinct similarities between what is occurring now and what has happened in past offensives. In 2002, the SPDC launched Operation *Than L'Yet* in Dooplaya District in southern Karen State [see **Operation Than L'Yet: Forced Displacement, Massacres and Forced Labour in Dooplaya District** (KHRG #2002-U5, 25/9/02)]. During the six months from January to July 2002 in which this offensive took place, the SPDC forcibly relocated approximately 60 villages, more than half of which were destroyed, and an estimated 10,000 villagers were displaced. Villages were fired upon with small arms and shelled with mortars. Once relocated or abandoned, villages were looted and then either partially or completely burned down by SPDC Army soldiers. Rice barns were also looted and burned. Most villagers, faced with little other option, chose to go to the relocation sites as ordered by the soldiers. Aside from the easternmost stretches along the Thai-Burma border, the open terrain of most of Dooplaya District offered little in the way of places to hide. Those villagers who did flee into these forests were hunted by SPDC Army patrols throughout the wet season. The SPDC planted many landmines and maintained a very heavy military presence along the border to block those attempting to flee to Thailand. In spite of this, over 1,300 refugees arrived at Noh Poe refugee camp in Thailand, and Thai military authorities at the time had estimated that a further 4,700 were hiding in the forests not far from the border, waiting for an opportunity to bypass the SPDC soldiers and cross over. All of this, however, was taking place at the same time that the SPDC was building up international anticipation that they would soon release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, who was eventually released in May to international jubilation. The SPDC, adept at playing on the international media and its infatuation with the charismatic democracy icon, knew full well that all media attention would be focused on Daw Suu, thus creating an impenetrable smokescreen behind which they could hide their activities in Dooplaya District [see also **KHRG Commentary #2002-C1**, 26/9/2002, which details the almost exact correlation between the lead-up to the release and the build-up of the offensive].

It is possible that the SPDC engineered the current offensive much in the same way as they did Operation *Than L'Yet*. Perhaps they thought that they would be able to conduct their operations in Karen State with impunity while the world focused on the sudden relocation of the capital to Pinyinana. If this was indeed their plan, it clearly failed, and failed terribly. Ironically, the only reason that the world has taken notice of this year's Karen offensive is because some journalists interested in Pinyinana began to claim that there was a

relationship between the two events. Had those journalists not believed in that connection, the world would as usual not have paid any attention.

When the Pysinmana smokescreen backfired on them, SPDC leaders found themselves having to deny that any offensive was underway in Karen State. They have instead repeatedly referred to any military activity as “security measures” and “cleaning-up operations” in areas where “terrorist insurgents” were believed to be hiding. On May 14th 2006, SPDC Information Minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan admitted to the offensive, stating that:

*“The Government has the duty to protect the lives and property of the people. Hence, with a view to preventing KNU atrocities and sabotage acts and ensuring the public safety, the Government has to clear up the surrounding areas and those areas where KNUs and hardcores could take refuge. ... In fact, the Government is not in favour of war[;] that it is taking security measures. As KNU has been time and again jeopardizing and harming the lives and property of the people, the Government has to take security measures. The national people dare not live in their native villages due to power struggle, massacres, bullies and coercion of KNU”.*¹⁸

Labelling the KNU as “terrorist insurgents” vindicates the SPDC for any offensives conducted in any of the areas in which the KNU operates. All such operations can then be conveniently dismissed as “counter-insurgency” and any abuses committed against civilians during these operations as “collateral damage”. The SPDC has long employed this policy quite successfully as a means of sidestepping international condemnation. Unsurprisingly, the SPDC has levelled blame at the KNU for the recent spate of bombings in and adjacent to Karen State, claiming that the KNU has been responsible for 13 separate bombing attacks since November 2005¹⁹; an allegation that the KNU denies. Two obvious questions arise: firstly, why would the KNLA, an impoverished army with over 50 years experience fighting a much larger and better equipped force, plant small ineffective explosives in markets, schools, or other such locations of no strategic importance? Secondly, why is it that there have not been any explosions thus far that have caused any real damage to any SPDC infrastructure or personnel? All bombs that have allegedly been planted close to any SPDC installation have either been reported by “duty conscious people” and disarmed before detonating, or if they have detonated, have been too small to cause any substantial or critical damage. It appears far more likely that the SPDC are planting the bombs themselves in order to strike terror into the hearts of the people living there so that they may be lulled into the belief that continued military rule is necessary for the stability of the nation, and to justify offensives against villagers in Karen State.

If the SPDC is indeed responsible, as the evidence suggests, this would not mark the first time that the military junta has employed such a strategy. In 2003 at Depayin, a large gang of assailants attacked a motor convoy carrying Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, reportedly killing dozens of her escort and violently beating others. Daw Suu escaped unharmed, and the attack was later reported as being organised by the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), an SPDC-sponsored group often used for such operations. After organising the attack, the SPDC used it as an excuse to return her to house arrest “for her

¹⁸ *New Light of Myanmar* (online version). “Government not in favour of war that it is taking security measures. As KNU has been time and again jeopardizing and harming the lives and property of the people, the Government has to take security measures. KNU drove out the people to prevent them from contacting Tatmadaw and to displace them. Large number of rural people lose lives and limbs due to booby traps of KNU”, 15/5/06. Accessed at: http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/enlm/May15_h1.html on 16/5/06.

¹⁹ *The New Light of Myanmar* (online version). “Atrocities committed by KNU in Southern Command area”, 15/5/06. In the article, the KNU is blamed for 13 separate bombing attacks between November 2005 and May 2006. Accessed at: http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/enlm/May15_rg5.html on 16/5/06.

own safety.” Similarly, in the speech quoted above SPDC Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan clearly suggests that SPDC troops are burning villages, shooting villagers on sight and landmining their ricefields “to protect the lives and property of the people.”



The charred remains of a home in Hee Daw Khaw village. Two days after shelling the village on November 26th 2005 and scattering the villagers into the surrounding forests, SPDC Army soldiers from IB #75 burned Hee Daw Khaw to the ground. [Photo: KHRG]

Meanwhile, the SPDC has once again begun playing the “Suu Kyi card” to distract attention from the offensive. It is possible that the SPDC may try to repeat its 2002 success by using exactly the same tactics and relying on the international community’s deliberate amnesia. Its extension of her detention on May 27th 2006 is no surprise, because SPDC tactics are always to do something very bad before doing something slightly good: that way the ‘good’ action looks much better, and draws more international support. For example, the SPDC always extends prisoners’ sentences shortly before releasing them in order to be credited with releasing them ‘early’, and in 2002 it was vilifying Daw Suu in the media just before releasing her ‘early’. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Under-secretary-general Ibrahim Gambari have already joined this public relations campaign, promising SPDC Senior General Than Shwe that they will try to get more money for him if he releases Daw Suu,²⁰ stating to the world that the SPDC is ready to “turn a new page”,²¹ and all the while Annan does not even mention the Karen offensive in any of his statements.

In a recent report, KHRG explored the possibility that the impending construction of a number of hydroelectric power plants in or near the offensive area may be part of the impetus for the attacks that we are seeing now. “By destroying all hill villages and forcing villagers to sites under direct SPDC control, the dam environs and access routes would be ‘secured’ and the villagers would become available for exploitation – primarily to provide forced labour, food, materials and extortion money to support the troops sent in to secure the dam access routes, but possibly also on the dam projects themselves”.²² KHRG has identified no fewer than six proposed dams that are all located very close to areas in which the offensive is taking place in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin, and Papun Districts.²³ While these

²⁰ *Los Angeles Times*. “Myanmar extends Suu Kyi’s arrest”, 27/5/06. Received by email.

²¹ Agence France Presse. “Myanmar may be paving way for Suu Kyi’s release: UN”, 23/5/06. Received by email.

²² Karen Human Rights Group (2006). *Toungoo District: Update on the dam on the Day Loh River*. May 30th 2006 (KHRG #2006-B5).

²³ The Thaukyegat dam project on the Day Loh River in western Toungoo District, the Bawgata (Baw Ka Hta) Hydropower Project and the Shwe Kyin (Shwegyin) Hydropower Project in Nyaunglebin District, and the Weh Gyi, Dagwin, and Hat Gyi dam projects on the Salween River in Papun District.

projects cannot explain the geography of some parts of the offensive (for example the attacks in southeastern Toungoo District), it is probable that they provide at least part of the motivation behind the offensive.

Overall, the main motivating factors behind the offensive appear to include a combination of the unprecedentedly hardline approach of the regime at present, the access to Karen areas secured under the ceasefire, the desire to secure lucrative dam and infrastructure projects, and most of all the need felt by a paranoid regime to bring the life and livelihood of every civilian in Burma under its direct and daily control. In its implementation, this offensive is another step in the SPDC's ongoing efforts to depopulate the hills and force all villagers into areas which the Army can more effectively control, where they can then be exploited as a source of forced labour and extortion to support the continuation of military rule. The villagers, however, are once again refusing to submit, evading the Army and getting their story to the outside world. The SPDC strategy may be failing, but it is inflicting extreme suffering on the civilian population and this war of attrition must be forced to stop through whatever means necessary.

Further background

For additional background on the situation in Toungoo District and the present offensive as it affects neighbouring areas, refer to the previously published KHRG reports:

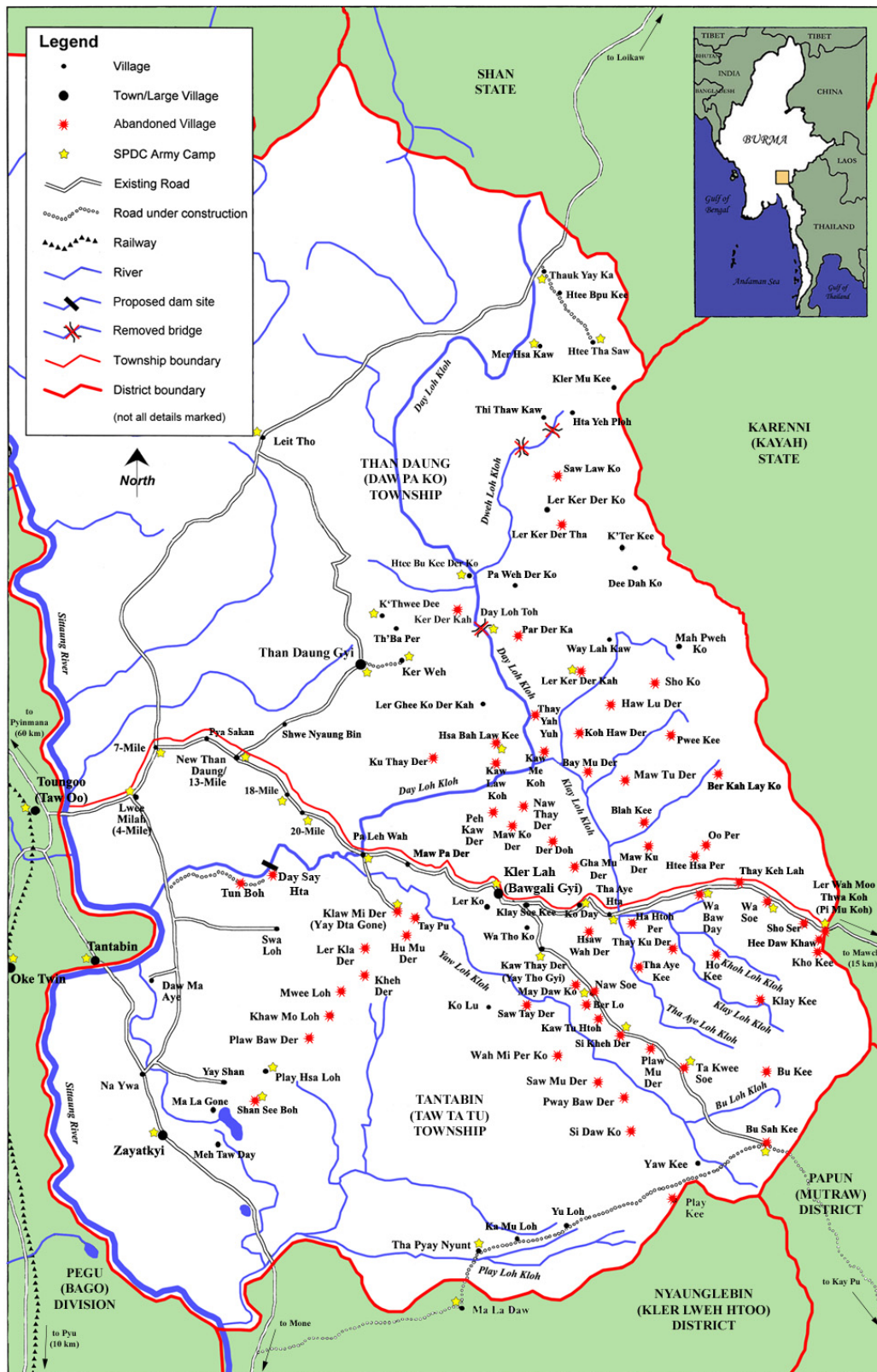
- ***Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts*** (KHRG #2006-B7, 7/6/06)
- ***SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun district*** (KHRG #2006-B6, 1/6/06)
- ***Toungoo District: Update on the Dam on the Day Loh River*** (KHRG #2006-B5, 30/5/06)
- ***Civilians as Targets*** (KHRG #2006-C1, 19/5/06)
- ***Recent Attacks on Villages in Southeastern Toungoo District Send Thousands Fleeing into the Forests and to Thailand*** (KHRG #2006-B3, 16/5/06)
- ***Villagers displaced as SPDC offensive expands into Papun district*** (KHRG #2006-B4, 16/5/06)
- ***SPDC operations in Kler Lweh Htoo (Nyaunglebin) district*** (KHRG #2006-F4, 30/4/06)
- ***Toungoo District: Civilians displaced by dams, roads, and military control*** (KHRG #2005-F7, 19/8/05)
- ***'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*** (KHRG #2005-F3, 22/3/05)
- ***Enduring Hunger and Repression: Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District*** (KHRG #2004-01, September 2004)

Recent photos from the area may be viewed in

- ***KHRG Photo Gallery 2005*** (KHRG #2006-P1, 6/4/06)
- ***KHRG Photo Set 2005-A*** (KHRG #2005-P1, 27/5/05)

These and other KHRG reports, maps, and photographs of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



Karen Districts



Burma

