

Karen Human Rights Group **News Bulletin**

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group
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News Bulletin is regularly produced by KHRG in order to provide up to date information on recent developments taking place within Karen and other areas of Burma, particularly when urgent action may be required. To receive News Bulletin by email, subscribe to the mailing list by following the links on the KHRG Homepage. Topics covered in News Bulletin will generally be documented in more detail in future KHRG reports.

SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime in Burma is using 'development' projects to encroach on areas where resistance forces are active and where villagers are trying to evade SPDC human rights abuses like forced labour. The result is more forced labour, land confiscation and land destruction for people in SPDC-controlled villages, and threats to the survival of displaced villagers and their ability to continue living beyond SPDC control.

Road-building has been a tactic of the SPDC regime for several years. Road construction is used to bring people under military reach and control. They are then forced to maintain the roads, and to clear the scrub along both sides of the roads to make it difficult for armed resistance groups and displaced villagers to travel. This year in Bu Tho Township of Papun (Mutraw) District, Karen State, the SPDC is working on three roads. Upon hearing of the road construction plans, villagers hurried to complete their harvest because those in SPDC-controlled villages feared their land might be confiscated or destroyed, while displaced villagers feared the military coming to secure the roads might force them into flight. The SPDC commander in charge told local village heads he doesn't care how much of their land is destroyed. Construction began in December, leading to fears of increased militarisation and forced labour which threatens the lives and livelihoods of villagers throughout the area. The roads appear to be part of the SPDC's efforts to secure the entire region in preparation for construction of the Weh Gyi and Dagwin dams, a joint venture with Thailand which threatens to intensify the armed conflict and displace thousands of villagers if completed.

SPDC deployment and plans

Information gathered by KHRG field researchers suggests that the SPDC plans to extend its network of army camps, rebuild existing roads and add new roads in eastern Papun (Mutraw) District. Bu Tho township in the east of the district was previously occupied by troops from the SPDC's Southeastern Regional Command (*Ya Ta Ka*), but in December 2005 they were withdrawn and replaced by Infantry Battalion (IB) #19 and Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) #340, 341, and 434 under the command of Light

Infantry Division (LID) #44. The replacement of the garrison force with this offensive force is likely to be followed by military operations to extend SPDC control in the region. Some sources believe that these four battalions received special training before being deployed in December 2005. They have already begun rebuilding the road from Papun town northeast to the SPDC Army post at Kaw Pu (a.k.a. Kaw Boke). The Operations Commander at Papun has ordered the soldiers of Infantry Battalion #8 Column 1 based at Kaw Pu to oversee construction of three vehicle roads, connecting Kaw Pu with SPDC Army camps at three sites along the Salween River: Kyauk Nyat, Dagwin, and Maw Moe Kyo (see map). A KHRG field researcher explains that, "Since the SPDC and the Thai government signed the agreement for the Salween dam project, both of them have begun road construction, on the Thai side and the Burma side [of the border]. I think the SPDC and the Thai government plans for road construction are related to the Salween dam project." The plan involves several dams on the Salween, but in Papun district the dams are to be at Weh Gyi, which is just downriver from Kyauk Nyat, and Dagwin – in other words, near the end points of two of the three roads. The dam and its associated infrastructure would help the SPDC to either flood out or establish control over large areas of Papun district where it has never been able to bring the civilian population under its command.

Thai Government Plans

The Salween river forms the border between this part of Karen State and Thailand. The Thai side of the river is a forested and sparsely populated area mainly controlled by the Thai Forestry Department. Thai interests in the dam include electricity, the diversion of Salween water into Thailand, and profits from logging the area to be flooded (the only form of commercial logging which is allowed in Thailand).¹ In November 2005 a Thai company began construction on a road from Poe Saw to the Salween at Weh Gyi; by the end of 2005 it had reached Aw Law. According to local villagers, in March 2006 the governor of Thailand's Mae Hong Son province plans to visit Weh Gyi accompanied by other Thai officials and security forces in order to 'explain' the dam project to the villagers. They believe he has been assigned this responsibility by the Thai government.

Effects on villagers in the SPDC-controlled area

The village heads of Paw Hta, Oh Kaw and Hto Mo Pwa Der villages were summoned to a meeting at noon on December 12th 2005 at Kaw Pu Army camp. An SPDC officer from Infantry Battalion #8 Column 1 said to the village heads, "We will build a vehicle road from Kaw Boke [Kaw Pu] to the Meh Yeh bridge, then we will continue it to the Meh Yeh river, then on to Oh Kaw and then to Paw Hta. After we finish at Paw Hta we will start working together with DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army] soldiers under Commander Hla Maung and Commander Bo Mer. We will continue building the road to the Thee Raw river, Thee Raw Hta and then to Meh Paw Mu Hta on the Salween riverbank, where our Army camp is." [The main camp is on

¹ For more information see *The Salween Under Threat: Damming the longest free river in Southeast Asia*, by Salween Watch, Southeast Asia Rivers Network, and Center for Social Development Studies at Chulalongkorn University. October 2004.

Maw Moe Kyo hill above Meh Paw Mu Hta.] One of the village heads replied, “Commander, if you build this road some of our paddy fields and other plantations will be destroyed.” The commander answered, “I don’t know if your paddy-fields or plantations will be destroyed. This order comes from our higher leaders, and three other countries are also working together on this project.” He did not specify which “three other countries”, though he may have meant partner Thailand and potential funders China and Japan.

The officer went on to tell the village heads that troops from Division 44 and Infantry Battalion #99 will be responsible for security and will patrol the villages and remoter areas where displaced people are living. He said that Karen forces must not attack them during road construction, with a clear implication that local villages would be heavily punished in retaliation for any attacks. Villagers expect that they will be forced to act as human shields for the SPDC bulldozers as in previous years, and that they will be forced to clear the ground along both sides of the road route to minimise the chance of ambushes. Meanwhile, the villagers say they are still forced to do things for the military as always, including forced labour as messengers and porters, and providing food, materials and money to Army camps.

People in the villages of Baw Kee, Lay Kweh Law, Dta Nya Law, Oh Kaw, Dta Ku Der, Pway Day, and Paw Hta say they are afraid the road construction work will create serious problems for their livelihoods. One of the village heads stated that, “Thirty paddy fields will be destroyed. In 2003 and 2004 some of our paddy fields and irrigation canals were already destroyed by their road construction. Some of those fields we could no longer use, and others we had to rebuild. Some of the villagers had to sell their livestock in order to hire people to come and rebuild the paddy fields for them.” Irrigated rice cultivation requires a huge amount of work levelling ground, building up dykes and establishing an elaborate system of irrigation canals and sluices which is normally developed over generations, but can be destroyed in a day by an SPDC road project without any compensation. Another village head stated, “In 2003 and 2004 when they built roads the Karen soldiers did not attack them, but they forced us to clear the scrub along both sides of the car road [a defensive measure against ambush]. Also, three or four villagers had to go with their bulldozer every single day. We didn’t have time to rest, and they did not pay us anything either. Some of our paddy fields and canals were destroyed, but they did not rebuild them for us. We had to rebuild all of them by ourselves.”

Displaced villagers

Many people in this region are living displaced in the forests in order to evade the control and the demands of the SPDC military. They stay in their villages when feasible, but whenever SPDC forces become active in their area they move into the forest and evade the troops. As they live outside state control, the establishment of new roads is a serious threat to them. Upon hearing of the SPDC’s plans for road construction, many of these villagers tried to finish their harvest before the road construction could come near their fields, and store the harvest in hidden storage sites well away from possible road routes. They worry that any problem to their harvest will lead

to food shortages in the coming year. Some of these villagers told KHRG researchers that the biggest problems that they face concern food, health, security and education for their children. If road construction comes near, they do not dare to stay and continue working in their current place. Moreover, some of the displaced villagers send their children to the schools in SPDC-controlled villages, but they say if the road construction forces them to move further away or brings more SPDC military activity into the area then it will no longer be safe for their children to attend school.

Conclusion

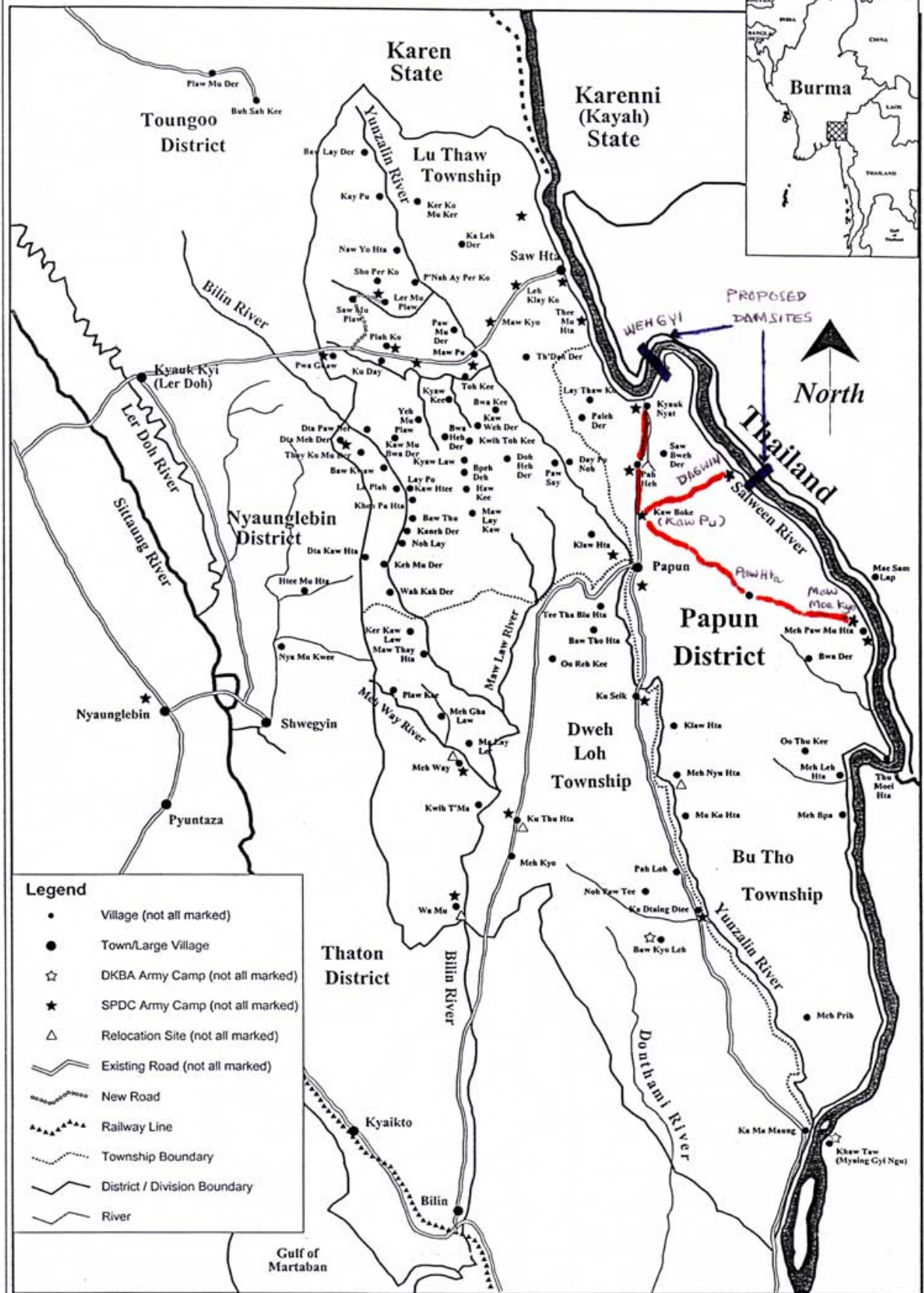
In the opinion of one KHRG field researcher, “The SPDC’s road construction plans are related to the Salween dam project.” The dam itself, however, is partly a weapon to extend the regime’s control. The SPDC and its predecessors have tried to militarily crush all resistance in the Karen hills for over 50 years already without success, so ‘development projects’ like roads and dams are a new tactic for penetrating areas where resistance forces are strong and forcing villagers out of the hills to settle in state-controlled areas.

The first to suffer from the road construction are the villagers living under SPDC control, who have to secure the road construction, carry loads, act as messengers and provide food and materials. Many will also have their fields or irrigation systems destroyed and their livelihoods undermined. Then will come the effects on displaced villagers living beyond SPDC control, whose mobility and security will be threatened by the roads and increased militarisation, undermining their food security, physical security, and their children’s access to education. The SPDC forces would like these people to go and live under their control, but the villagers know that if they stay under SPDC control they will have to do forced labour as porters, carrying loads, and as messengers, and will face extortion and looting of their money, livestock and belongings.

There is some speculation that the dam project itself, by threatening the territory and supply lines of resistance forces, could also lead to intensified armed conflict, and villagers in the area would be the first to suffer from this. Dozens of villages and huge areas of forest and farmland would be inundated, most likely with no compensation offered to villagers except the option of moving to an SPDC-controlled village where they would be landless labourers, regularly exploited for forced labour. The future is therefore very uncertain for the thousands of Karen villagers living in this region.

For further background on the situation in Papun District, see ***Papun District: Forced labour, looting and road construction in SPDC-controlled areas*** (KHRG Report from the Field #2005-F5, May 2005), ***KHRG Information Update #2004-U2: Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts*** (September 2004), and ***Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts*** (October 2001). See also photos from the area in ***Photo Set 2005A*** (May 2005). These and other reports on the district are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org .

Papun District



Scale: 1 cm to 7.5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

Karen State (Kawthoolei)



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