



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field

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**SPDC forces attack rice harvest
to force villagers into 'new towns'**

It is now rice harvest season, and following the end of the monsoon rains the SPDC has sent more troops into northern Karen areas to force all villagers out of the hills. Having already shelled and burned the villages, their present tactic is to patrol the rice fields to keep the villagers away from harvesting their crops so that the rice will be destroyed, while in some cases their troops trample or uproot the crop themselves. Knowing that this crop is essential to the continued survival of villagers in the region, the SPDC hopes to force them out of the area by destroying it and has ordered its battalions to establish several 'new towns' along the roads where villagers are to be interned, controlled, and exploited for forced labour. Most villagers, however, are more likely to flee toward Thailand than submit to life in these internment camps.

The heavy rains of June to October slowed the SPDC Army's destruction of Karen villages in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin, and Papun districts by impeding the movement of military columns. Instead the battalions involved used medium- and long-distance mortars to shell villages and suspected hiding sites of displaced villagers, and concentrated on setting up new camps in remote areas to watch the ricefields and prevent villagers from being able to weed or prepare their crops. The rains are now over and it is rice harvest season. New SPDC troops have been sent in to intensify the offensive, and their new strategy is to systematically destroy the entire rice harvest in the region so that villagers still trying to evade their control in the hills will starve over the coming year. To achieve this, some military units are going around trampling or uprooting rice in the fields, while others are posting snipers to shoot at any villagers seen in the exposed hill fields. Some units are simply patrolling the fields and firing weapons into the air, knowing that this will be enough to force villagers to remain hidden while their crop rots on the stalk or is destroyed by weeds, insects and wild animals. At the same time, the military has begun the establishment of several 'new towns' in the region with the objective of forcing all hill villagers into these. Roads are being upgraded so that these 'new towns' can be heavily garrisoned by SPDC troops, while the populations forced to live there are to be used intensively as forced labour to 'develop' SPDC control in the region.

Intensive military activity: the deliberate destruction of the rice harvest

The ongoing military operations against villagers are under the direction of the SPDC's Southern Regional Command based in Toungoo. Under its orders, operations against villagers are presently intensifying in at least four regions which will be discussed below: northern Papun district; Mone township of Nyaunglebin district; an area spanning southern Nyaunglebin district and southwestern Papun district; and southern Toungoo district.

In northern Papun district, KHRG already documented the destruction of Karen villages in the upper Yunzalin River valley by Tactical Operations Command (TOC) #2 of Military

Operations Command (MOC) #15,¹ and the establishment of new camps at Twih Mee Kyoh and Baw Ka Bplaw by these troops.² TOC #2 operates out of Ler Mu Bplaw, a major base of MOC #10 and MOC #15 on Htaw Mu Pleh Meh hill overlooking a wide area of fertile irrigated rice fields, now abandoned by villagers because of the military camp. In early September, Southern Command ordered MOC #15 at Ler Mu Bplaw to lay out a route for a vehicle road from Ler Mu Bplaw to Kay Pu, which is where the troops have established a presence in the upper Yunzalin valley (see map). This road is probably intended to support a large garrison intended for Kay Pu which would dominate the upper Yunzalin valley. At the same time, Southern Command sent an order to Burma's national prison authorities to send 700 convicts for use as porters by MOC #10 and MOC #15 in the coming months.

On October 7th a column of MOC #15 left Ler Mu Bplaw on operations to map out a route for the road. On October 8th they arrived at Sho Per Ko and Htee See Kee villages, where they destroyed 7 paddy fields and burned 3 paddy storage barns of the Htee See Kee villagers. The villagers fled when they learned of the large military column approaching their fields, and when they returned they found the entire crop in these 7 fields trampled or ripped out of the ground. The battalions proceeded north, and on October 16th they arrived at Dtaw Ko Mu Der. On their way they found a good site for a new camp, so they abandoned the camp they had set up at Twih Mee Kyoh and set up new camps instead on two hilltops near Dtaw Ko Mu Der: Shwe Kyoh and Sho Kyoh. On October 23rd rations were sent up from Ler Mu Bplaw to these two camps; they were carried by convict porters, who had to make the trip twice each day.

In this area, villagers from Bpo Klah Der, Htee See Kee, Dtaw Ko Mu Der and Bpo Nah Der had already fled their villages but were living scattered in the forests and continuing to covertly work their fields. Many of them had run out of food and now they are no longer able to work their fields because these hillside fields are very visible from the hilltops, so every time they tried to do field work they were sighted and shelled with mortar fire by the troops at the new SPDC camps. On October 25th the KNU township authorities gathered many of these villagers together and escorted them to the Yunzalin river near Kay Pu, where they can have limited access to relief supplies but where they will no longer have access to their fields.

On November 13th troops of SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #353 led by the MOC #15 TOC #2 commander arrived at Ler Gher Ko, a high mountain very near Kay Pu and Dta May Kee villages, and built a new camp there.

Meanwhile, MOC #10 troops are operating from their camps at Baw Hser Koh (the base of MOC #10 commander Ko Ko Hla), Ler Mu Bplaw (MOC #10 TOC #1 commanded by Kyi Soe), and Maw Pu (MOC #10 TOC #3 commanded by Aung Thi Ha, located further east along the road to Saw Htah). The MOC #10 units have been assigned to control the vehicle road to Saw Htah and destroy villages and crops in the hills near the road. They only patrol fairly near their bases, but throughout the rainy season and afterward they have been firing mortars at villages and suspected hiding sites of villagers, keeping watch on rice fields and firing mortars at civilians who attempt to return to work on their harvest. According to KHRG researchers in the area, troops from MOC #10 are now sniping regularly at villagers seen trying to harvest their paddy in their exposed hillside fields. They have sniped at people at least 3 or 4 times. There have been no casualties but it has driven people off the harvest. The apparent objective at present is to prevent any villagers near the vehicle road being able to harvest a crop in order to create starvation so the villagers will have to surrender and move to garrisoned relocation sites.

¹ A Military Operations Command (MOC) consists of ten battalions for offensive operations, presently averaging 120-150 soldiers per battalion in the offensive area. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) of three battalions each. Most of the columns hunting Karen villagers consist of most or all of a TOC, or 200-300 troops.

² See *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (KHRG #2006-F10, October 6th 2006).

In northern Nyaunglebin district, MOC #16 based at Tha Pyay Nyunt (Thet Oo commanding) is responsible for bringing Mone township under control. On October 9th the Southern Command in Toungoo reportedly ordered MOC #16 TOC #2 commander Than Htun Oo to clear out all hill villages in eastern Mone township. Five battalions were sent out to commence operations on October 20th – Infantry Battalion (IB) #241, IB #242, IB #240, Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #323, and LIB #567. On November 1st they captured the headquarters of the KNU for Mone township and the headquarters of the local KNLA battalion. Civilians throughout the area fled eastward toward Papun district. On November 2nd, over 500 of these villagers arrived in Kay Pu area of northern Papun district. The KNU Lu Thaw township authorities began seeking relief aid for them. On November 10th, 215 villagers (48 families, 104 male and 111 female) who had fled Dtay Nah Htah, Dtaw Poh Htah, Dtaw Pya and Ghay Klay Htah villages in Mone township crossed the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Htah vehicle road in Papun district and headed for the Thai border. On November 13th they reached the border and travelled to the IDP camp on the Burma side of the Salween River at Ee Thu Htah. This group breaks down as follows:

Village	Families	Male	Female
Dtay Nah Htah	15	43	40
Dtaw Poh Htah	6	13	10
Dtaw Pya	7	11	15
Ghay Klay Htah	20	37	46
Total	48	104	111

On November 14th, over 100 more villagers displaced from Mone township and Toungoo district crossed the same vehicle road heading for the border. The Toungoo district group was from Than Daung township (the northern half of the district), east of the Day Loh river. They were out of food. They numbered 58 people from 15 families, including 35 people over age 12 (20 male and 15 female), and another 23 children under 12 (11 male and 12 female).

Further south in Shwegyin and Kyauk Kyi townships of Nyaunglebin district, MOC #21 has set up a new camp near Ler Wah and has expanded the offensive to the east into an area of Papun district lying southwest of Papun town. MOC #21 has stationed its Tactical Operations Command #3 commanded by Than Aung at Meh Way (see map) and has assigned it responsibility for bringing villagers under control between Meh Way and the long-time SPDC garrison at Wa Mu. Since August, the three battalions of this Tactical Operations Command (IB #47, IB #223, and LIB #276) have been demanding porters, thatch, wood and forced labour for camp construction from local villagers, and they have forced villagers to porter rations up the Bilin River from Wa Mu to stockpile them at Meh Way. Now they have mounted a new operation: beginning from November 6th, IB #223 and LIB #276 have begun patrolling villages west of the Bilin River such as Plaw Kee, Wa Tho Law and Meh Po Kee. This constitutes an expansion of the offensive area into the hills southwest of Papun, which had not formerly been affected. They are not destroying villages, but they capture any women and men they see along the way and force them to go with the column as porters and guides. The movements of the patrols do not appear to have any aim except to keep the villagers away from their fields during the crucial harvest period; by rounding up everyone they see for unnecessary forced labour as guides, the patrols cause the villagers to hide in the forest and thereby keep them away from their fields, where the crops are left to be destroyed by wild pigs, buffaloes, insects and other animals.

On November 8th LIB #362, part of MOC #21, entered Bper Day village and the surrounding paddy fields. They burned 60 tins of newly harvested paddy belonging to Saw Lay Day, and another 60 tins belonging to Saw Eh Doh Wah, both Bper Day villagers. The troops are still encamped in these fields and are now going around trampling or uprooting the paddy in all rice fields in the area.

Meanwhile, in Shwegyin township of southern Nyaunglebin district, SPDC Infantry Battalion #247 has been very active in the Yah Aw area (see map) from October 19th up until now. Instead of large columns, they have been sending small groups of just a few soldiers around through all the paddy fields in the area. These scattered groups have been randomly firing off their weapons in the rice fields, knowing that this will cause all villagers within several kilometres to leave their fields and disappear in the forests in fear that a column may be about to arrive. Like the larger MOC #21 columns operating further east, their only objective appears to be to destroy the rice harvest by keeping the villagers away while the crop rots on the stalk or is eaten by insects and wild animals.

Clearing the hills and establishing 'new towns'

In combination with its systematic attempt to starve villagers out of the hills by destroying the rice harvest, information from escaped convict porters, local villagers and intercepted radio messages suggest that the SPDC is planning to create several large and heavily-garrisoned forced relocation sites throughout the region, which it is labelling as 'new towns'. Thus far KHRG has information that 'new towns' are being planned at Bu Hsa Kee in southern Toungoo district; the former KNU headquarters area in eastern Mone township of Nyaunglebin district; Mu Theh in Nyaunglebin district and Pwa Ghaw in Papun district, both along the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Htah vehicle road; and possibly at Mu Taw south of Papun town. Other sites may be planned as well. All of these sites have three main factors in common: they lie along Army-controlled vehicle roads, they host growing SPDC military garrisons, and local villagers are being forced to provide labour and materials to clear the sites and upgrade the access roads to them.

In southern Toungoo district, four battalions of MOC #15 are based at Bu Hsa Kee under the command of Aung Naing. They have reportedly been ordered to set up Bu Hsa Kee as a 'town' and clear all villagers out of the surrounding hills. They are now sending patrols into the surrounding hills to accomplish this. They have established a new camp in the hills south of Bu Hsa Kee at Tee Taw Bper, and patrols from this camp regularly encroach southward into northern Papun district. As noted earlier, another Tactical Operations Command group of MOC #15 are already operating in the upper Yunzalin river valley of northern Papun district.

MOC #16 has seven battalions based in Mone township of northern Nyaunglebin district. Three of these are now based at a new camp they have established at the former KNU Mone township headquarters area, which they captured on November 1st (see above). The SPDC reportedly plans to establish a garrisoned 'new town' relocation site in this area, or possibly at Tha Pyay Nyunt (just to the north along the southern boundary of Toungoo district) where there is already a significant garrison. Of the other four battalions of MOC #16 in Mone township, two are patrolling eastern Mone township to destroy the rice harvest, and the other two have been assigned to upgrade the vehicle road from Thaug Bo (just outside Kyauk Kyi town) to Mu Theh, further east along the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Htah road. According to KNLA radio intercepts, this construction was to begin on November 15th using bulldozers and heavy equipment. The SPDC plans to make it into a main road to support their plan for heavily garrisoned 'new towns' at Mu Theh and Pwa Ghaw.

At Ma Taw village south of Papun town, on November 13th the TOC commander in charge of IB #19, LIB #340, LIB #341 and LIB #434 gathered the civilians for a meeting and began demanding bamboo, wood, thatch and other materials for construction of some form of relocation site which could be another planned 'new town'. KHRG has yet to receive further information on this.

Conclusions

The SPDC's current tactic of attempting to systematically destroy the entire rice harvest of northern Karen State is perhaps the clearest indication thus far that its targets in this offensive are not the armed opposition but the villagers themselves. The deliberate destruction of civilian crops and food supplies is a crime against humanity, as is the SPDC plan to intern this entire population in a series of 'new towns' which are in reality garrisoned forced labour camps. At present it is likely that the SPDC is aware that its campaign of the past year has succeeded in displacing almost all civilians in the offensive region from their villages, but not from their fields and the surrounding forests. The regime also knows that if it can destroy the current harvest there will be very little means for these villagers to survive in their home areas in the coming year. If the harvest is lost, thousands will have to decide between surrendering to a life in SPDC relocation sites and fleeing toward Thailand. Though the SPDC probably hopes most will choose submission, it is probable that the vast majority will choose the latter, because they know that life in SPDC relocation sites amounts to slavery with accompanying starvation.

The deliberate attempts to destroy the rice harvest and force villagers into 'new towns' are consistent with the objectives of the SPDC offensive as previously reported by KHRG, i.e. to depopulate the hills and bring the entire population into areas where they can be directly controlled and exploited by the military. These tactics, and the expansion of the offensive into areas southwest of Papun, do not support the theory often put forward internationally that the offensive is intended to secure the SPDC's new capital at Pyinmana. Moreover, SPDC forces in this region have been attacking villages in order to bring villagers under control for the past 12 years, long before any move to Pyinmana was envisaged. Most analysts suggesting a connection to the capital at Pyinmana are unaware of the history of SPDC offensives in this region, and mistakenly believe that this offensive is a new phenomenon. The objectives have not changed, but the tactics are increasingly destructive.

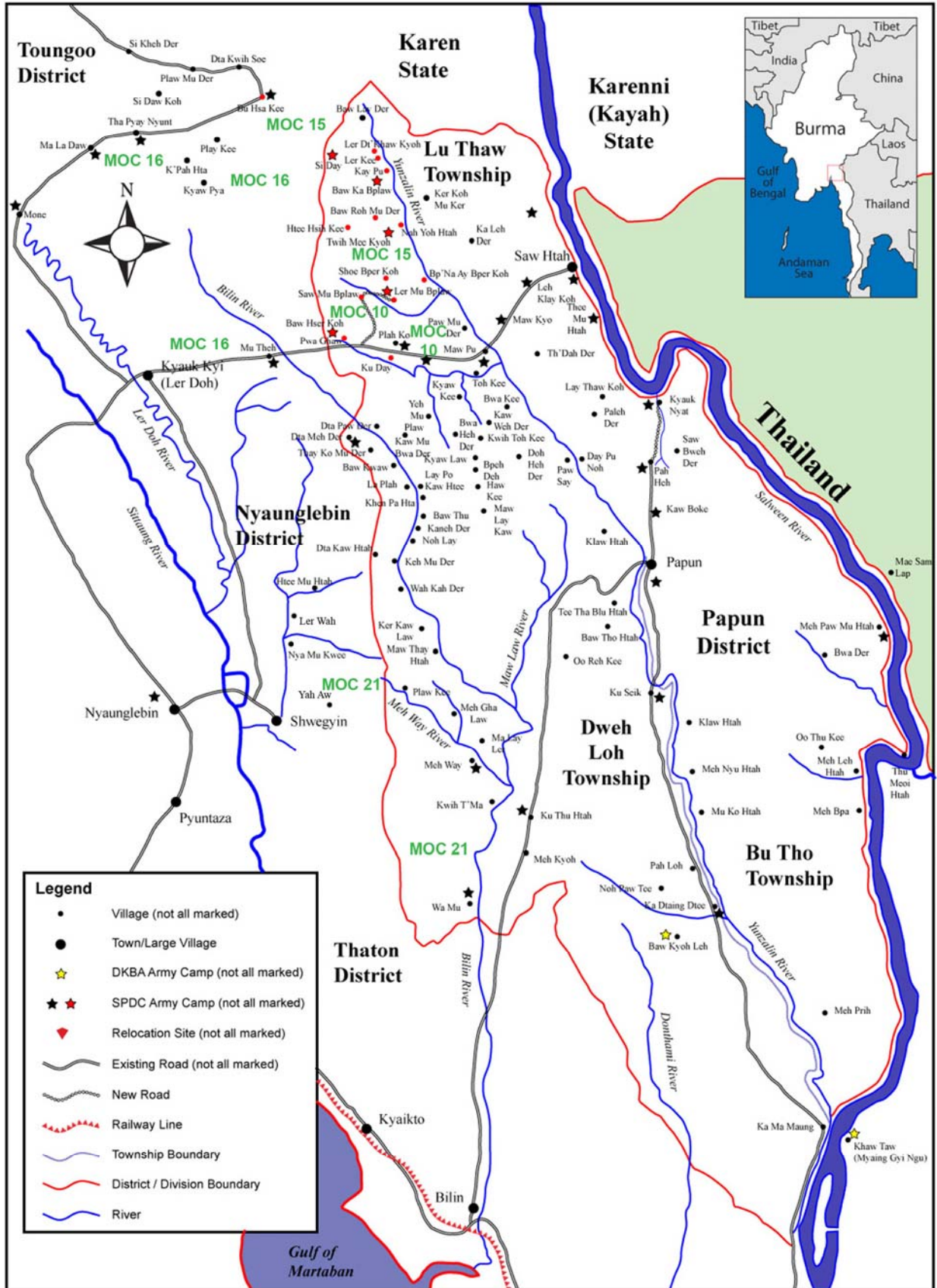
Further background

Further background on the attacks against villages in northern Karen areas can be found in the following Karen Human Rights Group reports:

- *One Year On: Continuing abuses in Toungoo District.* November 17th 2006, KHRG #2006-06.
- *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue.* October 6th 2006, KHRG #2006-F10.
- *SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response.* September 11th 2006, KHRG #2006-F9.
- *Toungoo District: The civilian response to human rights violations.* August 15th 2006, KHRG #2006-F8.

Preceding reports from the past year also contain more information. Recent photos from the area are presented in Section 1 of *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (KHRG #2006-P1, 6/4/06). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khr.org>.

Northern Offensive Area



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Karen Districts



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