

# **Karen Human Rights Group** **News Bulletin**

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## **Villagers displaced as SPDC offensive expands into Papun district**

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group  
May 16, 2006 / KHRG #2006-B4

In recent months the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) regime ruling Burma has sent large numbers of troops into Papun district of northeastern Karen State to clear the hills of villagers. Unlike the offensives in neighbouring Toungoo and Nyaunglebin districts, where troops began burning villages in November 2005, in Papun district the attacks against villages only began to escalate in April 2006. Several villages have already been burned, rice supplies systematically destroyed, and villagers shot on sight. The arrival of at least seven new Battalions in the district on May 11<sup>th</sup> 2006 suggests that a major new offensive is about to be launched. This offensive is not related to the new SPDC capital at Pinyinmana, which lies far to the northwest. It may be partly motivated by SPDC plans to dam the Salween River; but the main motivation appears to be to establish control over the villagers of this hilly region who have always evaded state control. The target of the offensive is therefore not the Karen National Union (KNU), but the villagers themselves, and many of them are already fleeing into the forests.

### **Militarisation, demands and destruction**

According to a KNU source in Papun district, throughout 2005 the SPDC used its ceasefire with the KNU as cover to strengthen its camps in Papun district, send up more troops and stockpile weapons, ammunition and supplies. The KNLA was aware of this but could do little about it due to the ceasefire, even though SPDC troops continued to burn villages and destroy villagers' food supplies on occasion. Since April 2006, troops under the SPDC's Military Operations Command (MOC) #10 have stepped up their attacks against villages in Lu Thaw township in the northern half of Papun district, destroying villages and farmfield huts and deliberately targeting the villagers' rice supplies. Battalions have based themselves at new camps along the recently built road from Saw Hta (on the Salween River at the Thai border) west to Maw Pu and Pwa Ghaw and on to Kyauk Kyi town in Nyaunglebin district (see **map**), and are launching columns into the hills north and south of the road. The objective is to make life in the hills impossible so villagers will have to move down to this and other roads which the SPDC controls. MOC #10 has ten battalions, each with 120 to 200 men,

which are sending out heavily armed columns to flush villagers out of the hills or shoot them on sight. In the words of a Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) officer in the district, “Now the SPDC has come up to burn houses and kill villagers. They’re not here to shoot KNLA soldiers.”

On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 39 year old Saw Sein Htoo from Lay Ghaw village in Plah Ko village tract went to his ricefield alone. When he reached his field he was spotted by a column from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #364 and shot on sight. He died leaving a wife and three children. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, LIB 364 troops saw two Paw Mu Der villagers also on the way to their ricefield near the Saw Hta – Kyauk Kyi vehicle road, and shot them on sight. Seventeen year old Saw Ree Htay was killed, and Saw Say Mu Wah was injured but escaped. Saw Ree Htay leaves behind a young wife but no children. On April 27<sup>th</sup>, Columns #1 and #2 of LIB 361 combined and marched to Yeh Mu Plaw and Tay Mu Der villages (south of the Saw Hta – Kyauk Kyi road), arriving at about noon. They shot two villagers in Yeh Mu Plaw, killing one and wounding the other (names not available), and shot dead another villager in Tay Mu Der. They burned down a total of 21 houses and two rice storage barns in the two villages. The villagers fled into hiding in the forest.

On April 28<sup>th</sup>, a column from LIB 361 came to Kaw Tho Ghaw village near Tha Dah Der in Lu Thaw township and burned 8 houses belonging to Naw Pa Thay, Saw Maw Lay, Naw Soe Blu, Saw Kweh Kweh, Saw Thay Paw, Saw Mya Win, Saw Soe Lin and Saw Kyo Htoo. They also burned two nearby farmfield huts belonging to Saw Ba Kyaw and Saw Ghay Htoo, and destroyed two rice storage barns by dismantling them and scattering their contents.

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, a column from LIB 362 and 363 (under orders of MOC #10 Tactical Operations Command #2) patrolling the P’Nah Ay Per Ko area of the upper Yunzalin River burned Teh Po Plaw village and other houses, totalling 60 houses. They also burned any farmfield huts they found in the area, and shot dead three buffalos.

From May 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>, a column from Light Infantry Battalions 362 and 363 moved around Saw Mu Plaw area of northern Lu Thaw township burning and destroying everything they found. Deliberately targeting the villagers’ ability to produce food, they focused on two areas where there are extensive open irrigated ricefields – Toh Thu Plaw and Thay Bo Plaw – and burned a total of 69 village houses and twelve farmfield huts. They looted a total of 96 baskets of paddy, 83 *viss* [133 kg / 292 lb] of salt, and 34 *viss* [54 kg / 120 lb] of chillies from the houses and huts before burning them, then burned the rest of the contents with the buildings. A total of 1,796 baskets of paddy were burned, which would have yielded 22,500 kilograms (49,500 lb) of rice after milling. On returning to the area after the troops moved on, the villagers found ten of their buffalos shot; four were killed and left to rot, while the other six were wounded and left laying on the ground. Without these buffalos it will be extremely difficult to plough their paddy fields when the rains arrive in June. Ninety-two of their goats had disappeared; only four of their corpses were found, so the soldiers had probably eaten or taken away the others. Thirty pigs had disappeared, of which seven were found

dead but not eaten. Two hundred and seventeen chickens and eighty-seven ducks had vanished.

As of May 14<sup>th</sup>, troops under Military Operations Command #10 continue to sweep through northern Papun district, burning every farmfield hut and rice storage barn they find in the Saw Mu Plaw, Plah Ko and Ler Mu Plaw areas. Yet the events in Saw Mu Plaw area are probably just a prelude to the offensive likely to sweep Papun district in the coming weeks. On May 11<sup>th</sup> seven new battalions under Military Operations Command #15 arrived in the district, totalling an estimated 1,200 soldiers, and they brought 400 forced labour convict and civilian porters with them. These fresh troops are currently at Pwa Ghaw (along the Saw Hta – Kyauk Kyi vehicle road) awaiting orders, and are expected to launch operations any day now. This brings the total number of SPDC battalions in Papun district to at least 27, totalling an estimated 4,000-5,000 troops. As of May 15<sup>th</sup>, the seven new battalions are still awaiting orders. A meeting has been going on at SPDC Southern Command Headquarters in Toungoo attended by the commanders of Military Operations Commands #10 and 15 (now operating in Papun district), MOC #16 (operating in Nyaunglebin district), and MOC #21 (operating in Nyaunglebin and Thaton districts). As soon as these commanders return with their orders, the new battalions in Papun district are expected to launch major sweeps north and south of the road to destroy all hill villages and kill any villagers found in the forests.

Unlike many SPDC offensives, this one is expected to continue straight through the coming rainy season. As one indication of this, Karen intelligence reports indicate that Military Operations Command #10 has been ordered to remain in Papun district until December rather than rotating out according to schedule in August.

According to a KHRG researcher operating in the area, there are few Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers in the areas being attacked. The SPDC columns are focusing their attacks on civilians, food supplies and ricefields. Villagers throughout northern Papun district are now fleeing their villages into the forests or to villages which have not yet been burned, and KNLA forces are focusing their efforts on defending the hiding places of the villagers and providing security for them when they return to their villages to rescue their food and belongings. Villagers obtain warning from KNLA units of SPDC troop movements in their area, so they can usually escape their villages before SPDC columns arrive. Unseasonal rainfall has been occurring almost every day since April and this is making life extremely difficult for the displaced villagers; rain, rats and insects have already destroyed some of the paddy and supplies the villagers have hidden outside their villages. The rains, however, are also making movement much more difficult for SPDC forces, making the steep muddy footpaths through the area almost impassable, ridden with leeches and malaria.

In a report released on May 10<sup>th</sup>, the Free Burma Rangers ([www.freeburmarangers.org](http://www.freeburmarangers.org)) estimated a total of 11,900 displaced villagers in Nyaunglebin District, 2,500 to the north in Toungoo District, 1,100 from the latest attacks in Papun district and another 1,000 Toungoo District

villagers now along the Salween River in Papun District. The estimate of over 1,000 displaced villagers in northern Papun district is likely to rapidly increase as soon as the new battalions in the district receive their orders and launch operations, probably in the coming week.

### **Neighbouring districts**

In the neighbouring districts SPDC offensives are not letting up either, and the continued arrival of new troops and construction of new bases both suggest that these offensives will also continue through the rainy season. Just west of Papun district lies Nyaunglebin district, where Tactical Operations Command #2 of MOC #16 continues to launch columns northward from its base at Mu Theh (on the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Hta vehicle road; see **map**) to burn villages throughout Mone township all the way up to the southern edge of Toungoo district. An estimated 5,000 villagers already displaced in Mone township are finding they can no longer return to their homes because Military Operations Command #21 has built a new base at Kyaw Pya, in the northeastern hills of the township, from which its Tactical Operations Command #1 now patrols the hills. MOC #21 has also established a new base for its Tactical Operations Command #2 further south at Roh Ka Soe, which is near Ler Wah in Kyauk Kyi township. MOC #16 is also present in Kyauk Kyi township, and both Commands continue to sweep the hills of this township as well.

To the north in Toungoo district, the troops of SPDC Light Infantry Division #66 who have been burning hill villages since November are now being replaced by Light Infantry Division #99, another indication that offensive operations will probably continue through the rainy season. To the south, SPDC troops and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) #999, 777 and 333 brigades in Thaton district and in parts of southern Papun district are operating together. According to KHRG researchers in the area, the SPDC has given the DKBA 200 million Kyat to participate in joint operations, and the two groups are ordering villagers to give complete information on KNU and KNLA operatives in each village tract. Villagers unable to provide any information have been beaten and tortured, and the combined units have also been looting villages and making heavy demands on the villagers' rice.

In Dweh Loh township of southern Papun district there is not yet an offensive, but DKBA forces have been placing their own demands on villagers. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, DKBA #333 Brigade officers Zaw Maung and Htun Loh demanded a total of 370 baskets of paddy from Tee Law Thi Hta, K'Dter Dtee and Lay Po Hta village tracts. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, these same two officers issued an order that the three village tracts must provide them a total of 54 porters for one year starting immediately. It was left up to the villages how often they want to replace these porters, but the DKBA is to have 54 villagers on hand as porters every day of the year. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, a DKBA officer demanded two ducks from Tee Law Thi Hta villager Pa Ki Der. He said he had no ducks to give but then the officer saw some ducks under his house, so Pa Ki Der was detained, beaten, then tied up in the hot sun for an hour as punishment. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, DKBA #333 Brigade officers Zaw Maung and Htun Loh ordered the people of Po Ma Heh, Noh Paw Htee and Po Gha

villages to pay them 10 million Kyat per village by May 12<sup>th</sup>, while Baw Kyo Leh village was ordered to give 10 buffalos by the same deadline. These were imposed as fines because two DKBA soldiers had been killed in a clash with the KNLA.

## **Conclusion and Further Background**

SPDC attempts to destroy all hill villages in Papun district and force the villagers to move to the roadsides have been ongoing since they systematically destroyed over 200 villages in the district in 1997 (see **Wholesale Destruction**, April 1998). In 2004 and 2005 the attacks abated somewhat under the ceasefire, but the SPDC used this period to extend its presence and strength in the district without having to fight the KNLA. Now we see the result, as it mobilises its new forces in its biggest campaign since 1997 to force villagers out of the hills where it cannot control them. These attacks are not about protecting the new capital at Pinyinmana – if that were the case they would be occurring in the northern half of Toungoo district, which lies 100 kilometres closer to Pinyinmana but where villages are not under attack at the moment. Instead, the new offensive, the move to Pinyinmana, the increasing restrictions placed on international organisations, and the demand for ceasefire groups to surrender their arms should all be seen as parallel symptoms of an increasingly hardline regime which is determined to force everyone in Burma to live under its direct and daily control.

For further background on the situation in Papun District, see:

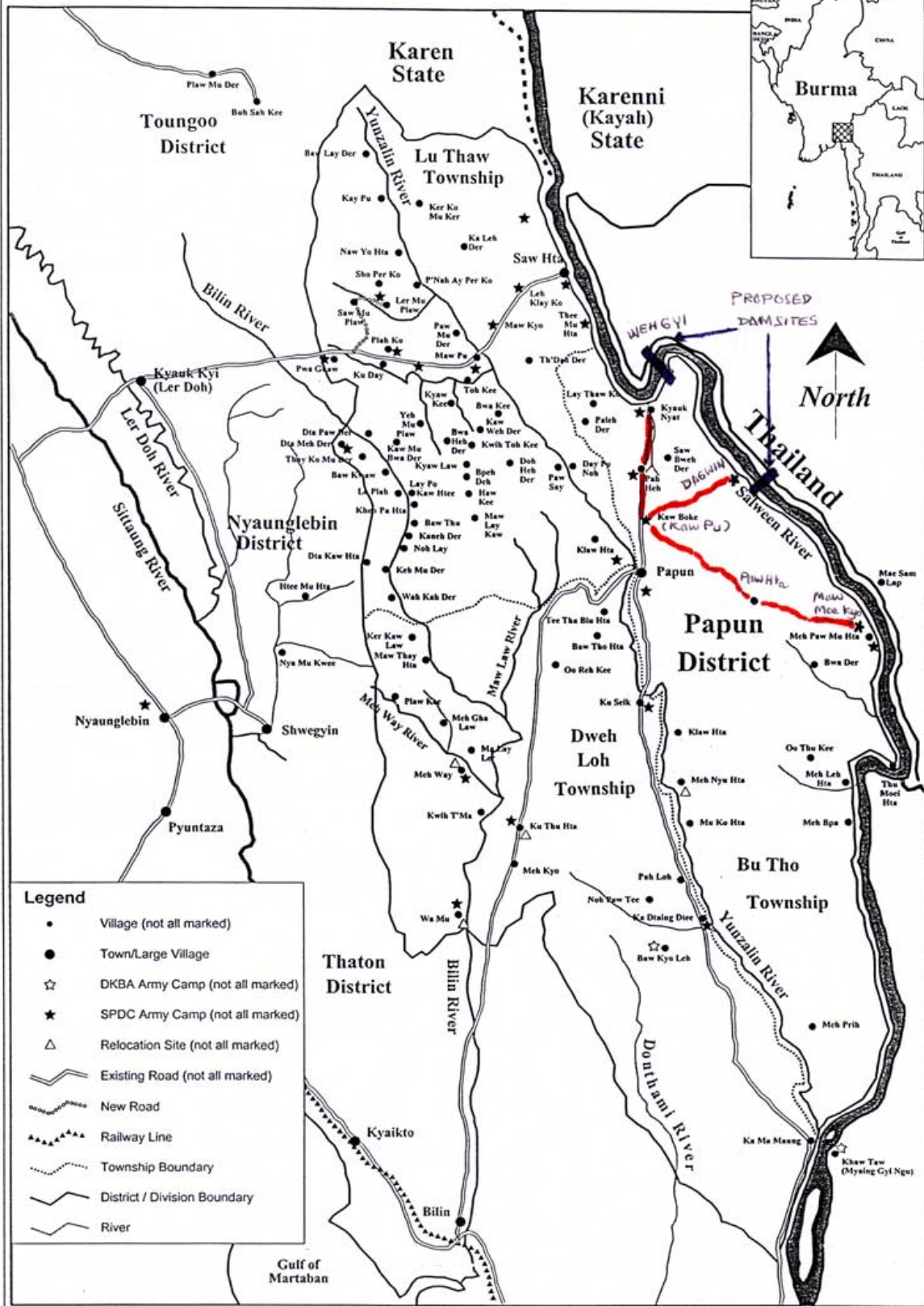
- **Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun district** (KHRG #2006-F3, April 2006)
- **Attempted rapes and other abuses in northern Karen districts** (KHRG #2006-B2, March 2006)
- **SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians** (KHRG #2006-B1, January 2006)
- **Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts** (October 2001).

More information on the attacks and other abuses in neighbouring districts is available in the following recent reports:

- **SPDC operations in Kler Lweh Htoo (Nyaunglebin) district** (KHRG #2006-F4, April 2006)
- **Recent attacks on villages in southeastern Toungoo district send thousands fleeing into the forests and to Thailand** (KHRG #2006-B3, March 2006)
- **Surviving in Shadow: Widespread militarization and the systematic use of forced labour in the campaign for control of Thaton district** (KHRG #2006-01, January 2006)

Photos from Papun and all neighbouring districts are presented in **KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005** (April 2006) and **KHRG Photo Set 2005A** (May 2005). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

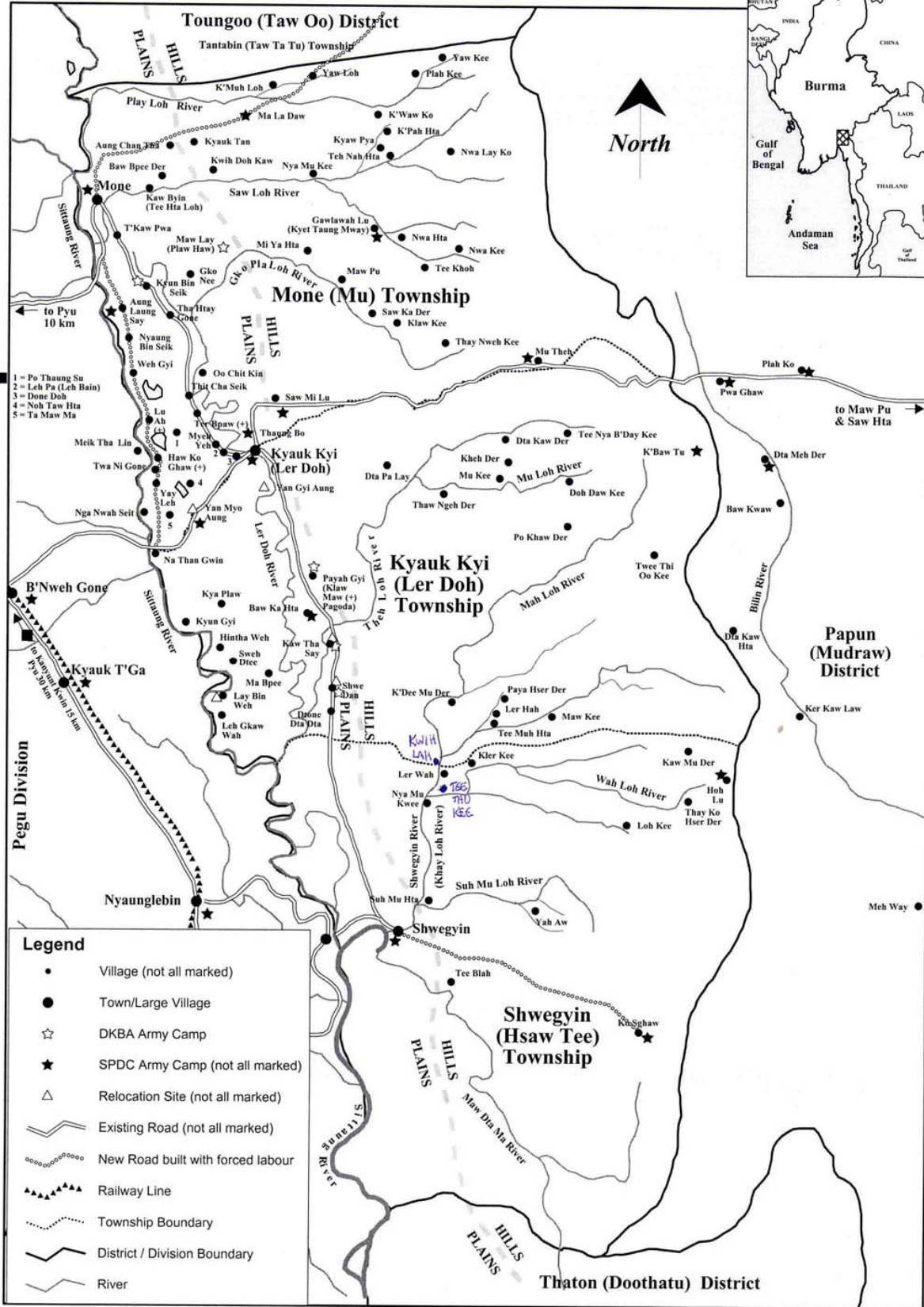
# Papun District



Scale: 1 cm to 7.5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

# Nyaunglebin (Kler Lweh Htoo) District



Scale: 1 cm to 5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

(+) Note: Haw Ko Ghaw = Nga Tway Sote  
 Lu Ah = Myin Tha Yah  
 Ter Bpaw = Htaing Bin  
 Klaw Maw = Kyauk Maw

# Karen Districts



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