



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee

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The SPDC is continuing its attacks on Karen hill villages throughout northern Karen State, trying to entirely depopulate the northern hills. SPDC columns have regrouped and resupplied and are now launching attacks against undefended villages in hill regions not previously reached by the offensive. Unlike attacks thus far, several Military Operations Commands and a Light Infantry Division are now coordinating their attacks across several districts. If successful, this offensive threatens to completely annihilate the unique way of life and culture of the hill Karen, a distinct group within the Karen population, by either forcing them into relocation sites where they cannot practice their culture and livelihood, or simply killing them off and destroying all remnants of their existence.

Recent KHRG bulletins¹ documented the push southward along the Bilin River by seven battalions of the SPDC's Military Operations Command (MOC) #15, setting out from their base at Pwa Ghaw in the last week of May to sweep downriver destroying all villages as far as Baw Kwaw. The same bulletins also documented a similar push northward by MOC #10 troops based further north at Ler Mu Plaw, who in recent weeks have been shelling and destroying villages in the Ler Mu Plaw and Naw Yo Hta areas. Both of these Military Operations Commands have now begun new moves which make it clear that the offensive is entering a new phase. (Note: most of the places and military manoeuvres mentioned below are clearly marked on the attached **map**.)

Having reached their target of Baw Kwaw, the MOC #15 troops began withdrawing northward back to their base at Pwa Ghaw in mid-June. They had reportedly suffered significant casualties, not only from landmines but also from malaria and the other illnesses which are particularly prevalent in the ongoing rainy season. Approximately 2,000 villagers who had fled to the hills from their villages along the Bilin River began to return and are now hurrying to replant their rice fields in the hope that they may still be able to get a partial crop this year. These villagers have already discovered the bodies of eight porters killed and left behind by the MOC #15 troops during their stay in the Baw Kwaw area. These eight men were among the estimated 400 convict porters brought along by the offensive column to carry ammunition and supplies and for use as human minesweepers (for more information see *Convict Porters: Falsely charged, brutally abused, and unable to go home*, KHRG #2006-B8, 22/6/06).

After resting at Pwa Ghaw for approximately a week, these seven battalions of MOC #15 split into two groups: Tactical Operations Command (TOC) #2 and TOC #3. The four battalions of TOC #2 headed northeast to Ler Mu Plaw, where they have now joined the four battalions² of MOC #10 already shelling villages between Ler Mu Plaw and Naw Yo Hta.

¹ See *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts* (KHRG #2006-B7, 7/6/06), and *SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun district* (KHRG #2006-B6, 1/6/06).

² Light Infantry Battalions #361, 362, 363, and 370.

MOC #10 is now establishing a new Army camp at Twee Mi Kyo, near K'Baw Kee village in Naw Yo Hta village tract. While the MOC #10 battalions set up the camp, the MOC #15 battalions are providing security for them and sweeping the surrounding area. All villagers in the area have fled and are now in hiding in the forested hills. They do not dare return to their villages or fields, knowing that all of the troops in the area are under orders to hunt down and capture or shoot any villagers they can find. Unable to follow up on their rainy season planting, they are almost certain to go without a rice harvest this year.

The other three battalions of MOC #15, organised as Tactical Operations Command #3, headed west from Pwa Ghaw along the road to Mu Theh, then north to Nwa Hta and K'Pah Hta, where they looted and destroyed houses and shot at villagers before continuing north to Tha Pyay Nyunt in Toungoo district. On June 27th they forced local villagers to lead them to Si Daw Ko,³ and later continued toward Bu Sah Kee, remaining close to the Ma La Daw – Bu Sah Kee road. Along the entire Ma La Daw – Bu Sah Kee road corridor, the Free Burma Rangers estimate that the people of 28 villages have fled into the forest in the past two weeks because Light Infantry Battalion #522 of MOC #16 has been attacking their villages and shooting at them; this battalion is now moving east from Play Kee toward Papun district.⁴ The MOC #15 troops are now believed to have arrived at Bu Sah Kee.

Meanwhile, troops of Light Infantry Division #66 based in Toungoo District have been forcing villagers to porter ammunition and supplies down the road from Kler Lah to Bu Sah Kee (now impassable to vehicles due to the rains) in apparent preparation for a renewed offensive against hill villages. Karen National Union sources believe that on their arrival in Bu Sah Kee the three battalions of MOC #15 will resupply and then move southeast into Papun district, destroying all hill villages between Bu Sah Kee and the upper reaches of the Yunzalin River at Baw Lay Der and Kay Pu. From Kay Pu the MOC #15 column is likely to continue southward down the Yunzalin River to reunite with the other four MOC #15 battalions now near Naw Yo Hta.

Beginning on June 19th, according to the Free Burma Rangers, villagers from Kler Lah and Kaw Thay Der were forced to clear land for a forced relocation site at Bu Sah Kee, which they were told was to house at least 70 families.⁵ Most hill villages in this region only have five to fifteen households, so this suggests that the SPDC is planning the forced relocation of at least five to seven villages from the surrounding area. This relocation site may be in anticipation of the forced relocation and village destruction to be carried out by the MOC #15 troops when they march south into Papun district, or Light Infantry Division #66 may be planning another sweep to force villagers out of the hills east or west of Bu Sah Kee. Either way, most hill villagers in this region are already fleeing their villages into the forest in anticipation of being attacked, and it is unlikely that any of them will voluntarily move to the relocation site because they know that once there, they will be provided with nothing and used for forced labour as porters.

The military activities described above focus on Military Operations Command #15, but reports are also coming in of new attacks by Military Operations Command #16 in Mone township of Nyaunglebin district, and Military Operations Command #21 just to the south in Shwegyin township of Nyaunglebin district. The continuation and geographical expansion of

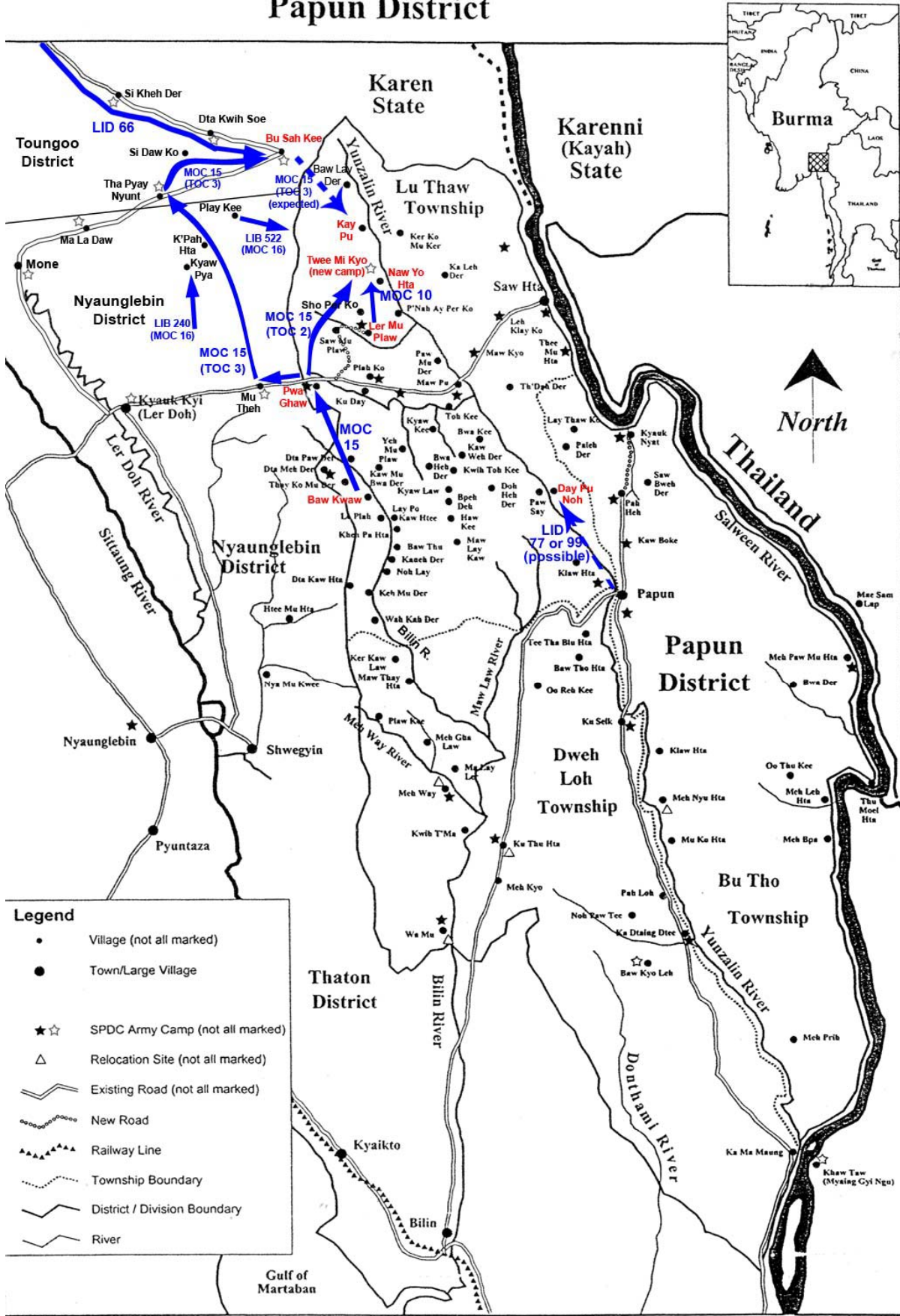
³ *Burma Army begins new attacks in Nyaunglebin and Toungoo Districts, Karen State.* Free Burma Rangers, June 30th 2006. www.freeburmarangers.org.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

this offensive, now entailing the close cooperation of several Military Operations Commands and a Light Infantry Division across the borders of three large districts, make it clear that the SPDC plans to entirely depopulate the hill areas of northern Karen State. These hills are home to a unique subgroup among the Karen population – the northern hill Karen. Their ways of life, religion and culture are significantly different from Karen populations living at lower elevations in larger villages and sowing flatland irrigated ricefields. To many Karen people, whose culture, language and way of life has been influenced by Burman and other peoples, the northern hill Karen are seen as the practitioners and guardians of the old ways, of those traditions most uniquely identifiable as Karen. If this SPDC offensive is successful in completely depopulating the Karen hills, it will eradicate a way of life along with many of the people who practice it. Northern hill Karen people cannot practice their way of life or their culture, with its close spiritual ties to the land and the forest, in a plains village or a garrisoned relocation site along a vehicle road. Many of them would not even survive such a change of environment, or the submission to constant SPDC demands and abuses which it would entail. Fully aware of this, they defy orders to move to relocation sites and try to evade the SPDC columns that hunt them in the hills, all the while trying to remain as close as possible to their land. The current offensive is making this more and more difficult. It is therefore important to recognise that this offensive is attempting to wipe out a unique people, their villages, their culture, their way of life, and all remnants of their existence.

Papun District



Scale: 1 cm to 7.5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

A map of Burma and its surrounding regions. Burma is shown in white, with a yellow rectangular area in the south. Neighboring countries include Tibet, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. The Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea are labeled.

