

Karen Human Rights Group

Report from the Field

Reports from the Field are drawn from situation reports submitted by KHRG researchers in the field. They are regularly published by KHRG to provide timely reporting of developments in particular regions or regarding thematic topics of concern, particularly when urgent action may be required. Reports from the Field are intended primarily for quick release via Internet, though hard copies are also available. Topics covered will generally be reported in more detail, with supporting testimonies, documents, and photos, in upcoming KHRG reports.

Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun District

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group April 29, 2006 / KHRG #2006-F3

It is easy to believe that civilians living in 'peaceful' areas controlled by the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) state authorities would have easier lives than those hiding in the jungles to stay beyond SPDC control. However, civilians in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun (Mutraw) district report that they are always suffering at the hands of SPDC soldiers and live with constant worry for their daily livelihoods. A KHRG field researcher in the area reports, "The villagers living under the authority of SPDC soldiers are facing many kinds of problems. The SPDC soldiers force them to move to other places, confiscate their land, arrest and torture them, so they don't have time to work for their families."

Land confiscation by SPDC soldiers

Currently SPDC soldiers are confiscating land from the villagers and setting up their army camps. Those who suffer the worst from this are the villagers whose lands are confiscated, but others also suffer from the resulting forced relocations and increase in forced labour.

Saw M---, a village head in the SPDC-controlled area, told KHRG,

"On 13/2/2006 LIB [*Light Infantry Battalion*] #642 Strategic Operations Commander Myo Win, who is based in Papun, ordered his soldiers based at Meh T'Roh to establish more army camps. They had already confiscated 6 farms close to Meh T'Roh village and established their army camp there. Now they are planning to establish more army camps, and as they don't have enough space, they will relocate the Meh T'Roh villagers to Nyi Pu beside the Bway Loh Kloh [*Yunzalin River*]. This will make the villagers suffer even more problems, because there are 86 households with more than 1,000 villagers. Some of the village houses are made of wood [*i.e. they are permanent and expensive*], and those houses will be destroyed. Recently we heard that after they set up new army camps around Meh T'Roh, they plan to establish more in Bweh Kla village. In Bweh Kla area there are 492 households with more than 1,200 villagers. So if they start setting up army camps, more than 2,200 villagers will be faced with big problems, some will suffer from hunger and some will die."

Looting and poisoning of livestock and gardens

One of the problems caused by SPDC army camps in the area is looting of villagers' livestock and gardens. The village head quoted above reported that SPDC soldiers and their families loot food from the village because their officers steal part or all of their salaries. He says that since establishing their camps, many of the soldiers have brought their wives to be with them, and they send their wives out to steal the villagers' chickens and loot their vegetable gardens. The situation is worst for soldiers who have lost legs to landmines or combat; they are kept in the army, but their officers are now withholding their entire salaries. The villagers dare not stop the soldiers and their wives from looting for fear of reprisals. Some of the wives of the SPDC soldiers have told local villagers, "The commanders are not giving our husbands their salary, so we don't have any food and we have to steal things from the villagers."

On August 21st 2005, SPDC soldiers from Infantry Battalion #62 led by Deputy Battalion Commander Soe Win Kyaw entered Ka Dwee Ko village and stayed there for two hours, during which the commander demanded and took a big tin of rice [*about 16 kg / 35 lb*], two trays of eggs [*about 60 eggs*], 10 plates, 4 pumpkins and a big tin of dogfruit. After the troops left the village, the villagers saw many of their chickens fall dead and one of their buffalos was found dead in a wallow. The villagers suspected that the soldiers had spread poisoned feed for the chickens and put poison in the water of the buffalo wallow, causing the buffalo to die after drinking it.

That same month, Company Commander Soe Win from Light Infantry Division #44 came to Khaw Klah village and slept there two nights. He demanded seven milk tins of rice [*about 1.5 kg / 3.3 lb*], mixed it with poison and spread it on the ground. The chickens ate it and 87 chickens died. The villagers didn't dare eat them, but the Burmese soldiers took those chickens, cooked and ate them all. After they left, the villagers saw a container labelled 'DTT', but dared not say anything to the commander. [*KHRG has been unable to find out what this poison may have been; in chemical circles, DTT most commonly refers to dithiothreitol or Cleland's reagent, an expensive chemical used in experimental laboratories and unlikely to be in the hands of SPDC soldiers. As Karen villagers are not used to using the Latin alphabet, they may have misread 'DDT' (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), a strong pesticide banned in many countries but common in Southeast Asia, but DDT would only kill chickens outright if fed to them in significant amounts. The soldiers may have used a DDT container but mixed in something stronger.*]

On February 3rd 2006, SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion #341 entered Kler Ko village and slept there for one night. On February 4th they took three chickens belonging to Naw H---, Naw M---, and Pa W---. The same day they took a bowl of rice [*1.6 kg / 3.5 lb*] and ½ viss [*800 g / 1.7 lb*] of chillies from U W---, and a bottle gourd from Pa E---, then went to Saw Klih village and took a pig weighing 13 viss [*21 kg / 45 lb*]. Later they ordered the Kler Ko villagers to pay the cost of that pig to the owner in Saw Klih village. On February 5th the patrol reached Soe Kee Law village and took a chicken and one bowl [*1.6 kg / 3.5 lb*] of rice from M---, and a chicken from Naw K---. They took it without any payment. On February 6th this patrol returned to their battalion camp at Dta Ko Dteh.

Arbitrary detention

On February 4th 2006 a bomb exploded in Toungoo town. On February 5th, all of the boats travelling along the Salween River were forced to stop at the SPDC checkpoint at Dta Khaw Hta village. On February 6th, Dta Khaw Hta village head Saw Mer Ler was arrested by SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion #60, who accused him of writing a travel pass for the man who exploded the bomb in Toungoo. They also arrested Dta Khaw Hta villager Saw Ghay Ler Htoo, 33 years old, and said that the man who exploded the bomb had slept in Saw Ghay Ler Htoo's house before leaving for Toungoo. When the troops came to arrest the two men, other villagers were afraid of the soldiers and dared not go out of their houses.

Dta Khaw Hta village lies just south of Saw Hta on the bank of the Salween River. It is a remote location with no road connections. A travel pass issued by the Dta Khaw Hta village head would not be sufficient to travel all the way to Toungoo, a trip of over 200 kilometres to the northwest requiring several days and passing through several SPDC-controlled regions with dozens of checkpoints. Furthermore, at the time of the arrests the SPDC was still making vague charges that all opposition groups had conspired to explode the bomb, and apparently had not arrested anyone for the explosion. The real reason for these arrests is therefore unclear, unless they were made mainly for propaganda purposes in order to blame the KNU for the attack by claiming that the attacker had crossed the Salween from Thailand.

In the weeks following their arrest, Saw Mer Ler and Saw Ghay Ler Htoo were sent to Saw Hta and then west to Maw Pu army camp, still within Papun district (see **map**). The villagers were not allowed to visit or see them. On March 10th 2006, Saw Ghay Ler Htoo escaped alone and fled. After his escape, to take his place the SPDC soldiers arrested and detained his wife Naw Lah Hser Paw, age 27, and their infant child. These two were later released, but at time of writing the villagers still have no news of what has happened to Saw Mer Ler. The soldiers will give them no information nor permission to visit him.

In an unrelated incident, a battle occurred between KNLA and DKBA soldiers on the night of February 26th 2006. The next morning, the DKBA unit called in the help of SPDC Infantry Battalion #232 led by Deputy Battalion Commander Nyi Nyi Min. He summoned the village heads of all villages in the area for interrogation, and personally tortured Pa Ko Pay, village head of Wah Klu Ko village, by covering his head with plastic and beating his face. Afterward, Nyi Nyi Min ordered him and the other village heads to accompany the IB 232 column on patrol until March 2nd, when the village heads were finally released.

Forced labour

Villagers in SPDC-controlled villages have to work as forced labour for both SPDC and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army [DKBA] soldiers. The SPDC and DKBA soldiers based in Papun are constantly ordering the villagers to make and send them thatch roofing and bamboo to build houses for their families and their army camps.

On October 10th 2005, SPDC soldiers based in Papun started to make a farm in Meh T'Roh area so they ordered the villagers in Meh T'Roh to cut 120 bamboo and deliver it to them the same day. It took 20 villagers (7 women and 13 men) to carry all the bamboo. In January 2006, SPDC soldiers based in Kwih Si ordered local villagers to clear the brush alongside the road; 35 people had to go for this work, including both men and women. They had to bring their own food to eat.

SPDC and DKBA bases in Papun town ordered the villages listed below to make and send thatch roofing shingles to them by January 30th 2006. For each thatch shingle, villagers must gather thatch leaves and cut bamboo, then split the bamboo into sticks and shave it into ties, then make bamboo frames and tie the leaves to the frame to make shingles about one metre by 30 centimetres. Complying with a demand like this can require several days of work by the entire village. The demand was allocated based on village size as follows:

Kler Ru Der village	1,750 shingles
Wah Mi Day village	1,250 shingles
Klaw Hta village	850 shingles
Toh Thay Pu village	200 shingles
Hto Lwee Kyo village	1,250 shingles
Day Baw Khaw village	1,250 shingles
Ter Khaw Kyo village	1,250 shingles

On March 5th 2006 DKBA officer Maung Pu, the security chief at Meh Mweh Hta army camp, ordered each village in the area to give him 300,000 Kyat. The villages included in the order were Meh Ku Kee, Meh Ku Hta, Htee Doh Hta, Toh Mu, Dta Per Pah, Kler Hsi Ko, Wah Klu Ko, Meh Mweh Hta, and Nyat Tin Loh. DKBA soldiers working for Maung Pu said that the villages had to give this money because there had been a battle between DKBA and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers and the KNLA had captured some of their weapons. They informed the villagers that this order came from their senior leaders and that every village must comply. If any village didn't want to give the money, Commander Maung Pu said, "I will go into the village and burn down the village."

Convict porters

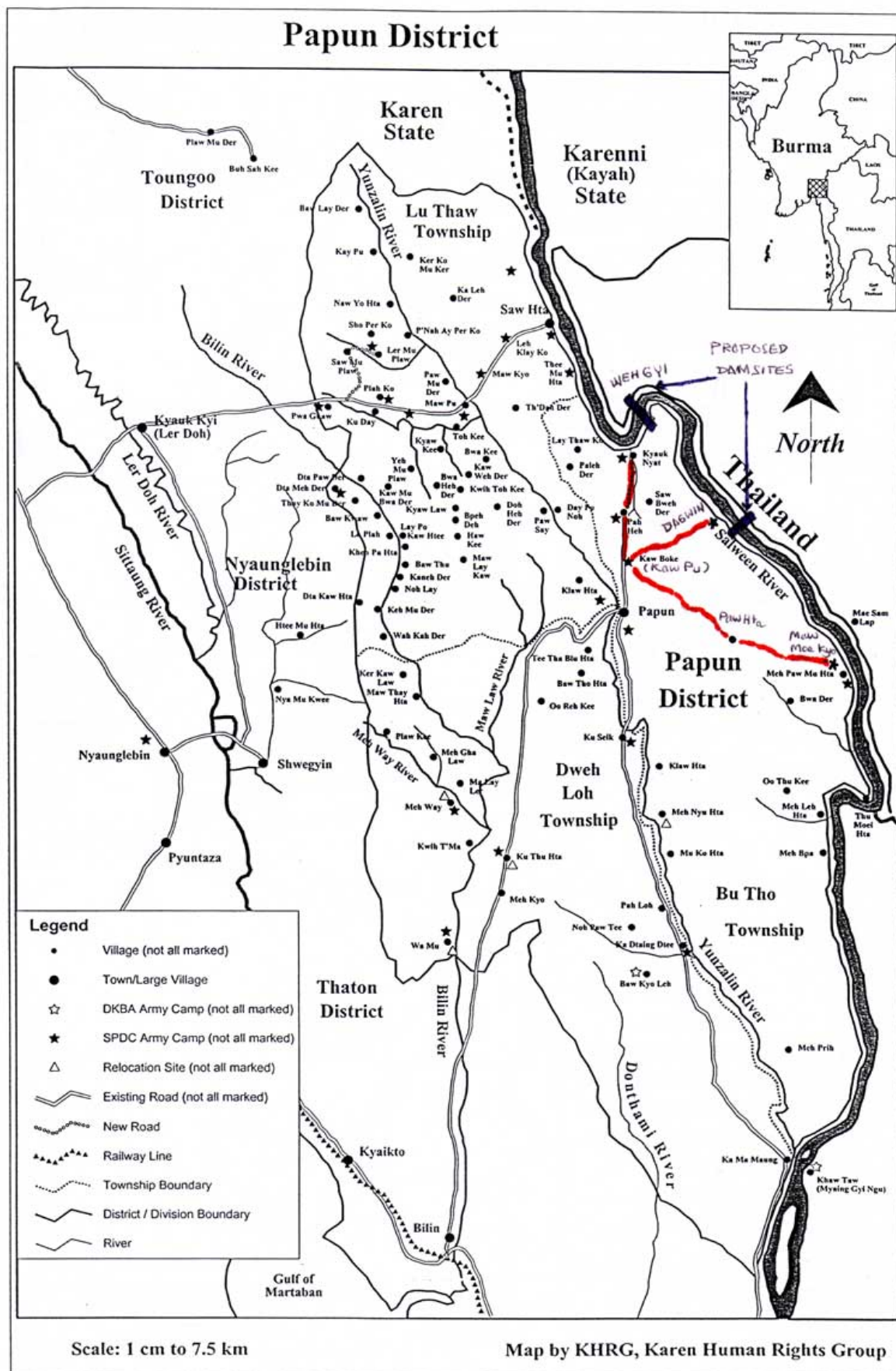
KHRG researchers in Papun district are reporting that the number of convict porters used by SPDC forces in the district has greatly increased, especially in 2006. One researcher estimates that there are at least 300 convict porters presently in the district. Many of them are Rakhine ethnicity, from Rakhine State in northwestern Burma, possibly sent to Karen State because the SPDC officers think they will not dare escape in such unfamiliar territory so far from home. However, many are attempting escape, because they are treated much more brutally than civilian porters. Dozens have ended up in the hands of the Karen National Union, but when interviewed they say that many others have been shot dead by SPDC soldiers or killed by landmines while trying to escape. In March 2006 KHRG researchers found several bodies of convict porters floating in the Salween River, probably dead of drowning while trying to swim to Thailand; the Salween is wide, swift, and full of small whirlpools, and would be dangerous to cross even for a strong swimmer.

Convicts who have successfully escaped describe a Burmese judicial system rife with corruption, where everything depends on the ability to pay bribes. They described to KHRG the constant efforts of Burmese police to extort money from local people in many ways. In the courts, judges must be paid to render a favourable verdict, and if the defendant cannot pay then he is convicted regardless of the evidence. In prison, authorities summon the prisoners and tell them, "If you don't want to be a porter in the front line you have to give money." They know which prisoners are likely to be able to pay and which cannot, so they summon enough poor prisoners to fill their porter quotas along with additional prisoners they think they can extort money from. The prisoners are then summoned together, and all of those who

cannot pay are selected to be front line porters. Some families go into debt in order to save an imprisoned relative from being sent as a porter. The convicts say that there is no way they can get justice in Burma now.

Background

The information above is drawn from research and interviews conducted by KHRG researchers in the field. Photos from the region are included in ***KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005*** and ***KHRG Photo Set 2005A***. For further information see also ***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), ***Papun District: Forced labour, looting and road construction in SPDC-controlled areas*** (KHRG Report from the Field #2005-F5, May 2005), and ***Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts*** (October 2001). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site (<http://www.khrg.org>).



Karen Districts



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