



An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group
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SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response

Despite the difficulty of sustaining regular military operations under rainy season conditions, the SPDC has continued to press its soldiers to continue the northern Karen State offensive that began in November 2005. Rather than a campaign against armed opposition groups, however, the SPDC has been engaged in hostilities against rural villagers living outside of direct military control in areas of Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts. Soldiers have bombarded villages with high-powered mortars, razed homes and food stores, burned crops and shot fleeing civilians on sight. By attacking in this manner, the SPDC has attempted to force all villagers into military-controlled villages and relocation sites in the plains, along car roads and near army bases. At these sites the military can more easily exploit civilians for the food, labour, finances and supplies needed to support individual military personnel and the wider structures of militarisation. However, the SPDC has so far been unsuccessful in bringing all civilians under their control as villagers have consistently fled to evade advancing troops. In such situations of displacement, villagers have employed their own strategies to resist the militarisation of their lives and retain their dignity in the face of systematic human rights abuses. This report presents information on SPDC military attacks against villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts of northern Karen State as well as the responses and resistance strategies of local villagers during the period of March to June 2006.

Over the past six months, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) and other local organisations have extensively documented the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)'s ongoing offensive in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts in northern Karen State. This information has been picked up by the international media and contributed to the increasing international awareness about the situation of Karen villagers living under militarisation. However, there has been a lack of attention within the media paid to the fact that SPDC military operations have been directly targeting villagers and not armed opposition groups. Civilian deaths and injuries have therefore not been collateral damage, but rather the direct outcome of an SPDC programme to remove all civilians from areas not completely under military control. In the context of such attacks against their communities, villagers have been adopting strategies to reduce and mitigate the effects of continued SPDC aggression.

Within this ongoing military offensive against Karen communities living in areas outside of direct SPDC control, local villagers have actively sought to strengthen their position relative to the army. For example, since the beginning of the current offensive in November 2005, villagers in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Papun have avoided capture by evading advancing troops and seeking temporary refuge in forest hiding sites. While residing in temporary shelters at these locations, they have set up schools for their children and monitored troop movements with the intent to return to their homes should the soldiers depart. Where the army establishes a more permanent presence at or near abandoned villages, many of these villagers have had to travel further afield, often attempting to reach refugee camps across the border in neighbouring Thailand.

While the attacks of the current SPDC offensive in northern Karen State have focused on those areas not completely under military control, villagers in other areas - for example, those living in SPDC-controlled villages in Bu Tho and Dweh Loh townships in Papun District - have been exploited to support local bases and the soldiers deployed there. The army uses these civilians for military benefit by demanding forced labour, food and money, and ordering them to build and repair army camps or serve as *set tha* (messengers and camp servants). If the current military operations against villages in northern Karen State succeed in consolidating SPDC control over the target areas and establishing new remote bases, local villagers are likely to face a situation of constant extortion of food, labour, money and supplies similar to the pattern of abuse pervasive in military-controlled areas of Bu Tho and Dweh Loh townships.

This report documents the situation of SPDC militarisation from March to June 2006 in three areas of northern Karen State affected by the current offensive: 1) Kyauk Kyi (known in Karen as Ler Doh) and Shwegyin (Hsaw Tee) townships in central and southern Nyaunglebin (Kler Lweh Htoo) District; 2) Mone (Mu) township in northern Nyaunglebin District; and 3) Lu Thaw township, northern Papun (Mutraw) District (see **map**). More specifically, this report aims to show how, despite systematic abuses by SPDC soldiers, local villagers living in these areas have employed various strategies to resist the militarisation of their lives and thereby work to claim their rights.

SPDC operations in Kyauk Kyi and Shwegyin townships, Nyaunglebin District

In December 2005, KHRG reported the encroachment of SPDC soldiers into Ler Wah village tract, in northern Shwegyin township; an area up until now under the control of Battalion #9 of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The troops had advanced into the area in September 2005 shelling villages along the way and subsequently occupying the KNLA Battalion #9 headquarters located atop Ro Ka Soe Mountain, forcing local villagers to flee into the hills east of the Shwegyin River. Throughout the period of their occupation, villagers had monitored military operations from lookouts east of the Shwegyin River in coordination with KNLA forces who sporadically shelled the SPDC encampment. As a consequence, SPDC forces withdrew in November 2005, KNLA forces re-occupied their base and local villagers were able to quickly return to their homes and harvest their rice fields which by then were long overdue.¹

In March 2006, SPDC forces from Tactical Operations Command (TOC) #2 of Military Operations Command (MOC)² #10 returned to Ler Wah area, entering Kwih Lah village tract and re-establishing a temporary camp atop Ro Ka Soe Mountain. When the SPDC soldiers approached, civilians living nearby once again fled to the forest where they waited and monitored the military situation from a distance. During this time, KNLA regularly patrolled the area, laying landmines along paths used by SPDC soldiers and occasionally shelling the camp. The SPDC soldiers therefore withdrew once again from Ro Ka Soe and the villagers who had been displaced were able to return to their villages and fields.

¹ *Nyaunglebin District: SPDC operations along the Shwegyin River and the villagers' response* (KHRG #2005-F8, December 9th 2005).

² SPDC Military Operations Commands each consist of 10 infantry and/or light infantry battalions deployed for offensive operations. At present SPDC battalions are seriously undermanned, averaging 120-150 men. A Tactical Operations Command (TOC) consists of 3 battalions; each MOC usually divides into three TOC columns.

However, in April a different SPDC column, this time made up of Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) #320, 601 and 602 from TOC #2 of MOC #21, advanced into the area of Kwih Lah village tract. Upon advancing, they encountered KNLA forces from Battalion #9 with whom they briefly exchanged gunfire. Subsequent to the confrontation, the SPDC troops moved on to re-establish yet again their former camp on Ro Ka Soe Mountain. With the advancement of these troops, the civilians who had only just returned to their abandoned homes fled to the forest again. This time, however, the SPDC presence appears more permanent. Villagers have been waiting and monitoring the activities of these troops since they returned in April, looking for any opportunity to return and reclaim their land.

If local SPDC operations continue, many of the displaced villagers living in hiding around Ro Ka Soe will lose this year's rice crop and may have little choice but to leave their land behind and travel eastward toward the Thailand border. The SPDC soldiers are aware that if they withdraw, the villagers will return. They have therefore been attempting to establish a more permanent presence in the area and as a result displaced villagers have been cut off from their fields and face a severe threat to food security as they are unable to tend and harvest their crops.

"Last year, when the SPDC army came and established a new camp, it was time for the villagers to harvest. But they [the soldiers] stayed for a while and then withdrew. Now [the soldiers have returned and] they have been based there since the start of April. Up until now they have not yet withdrawn."

- Saw K--- (male, 50), K--- village, Kyauk Kyi township (July 2006)

Since the SPDC soldiers returned to Ro Ka Soe and re-established their base, local villagers have been dwelling in temporary shelters set up in the forest. They have been faced with food insecurity, illness, disease and constant threats of encountering soldiers or landmines. It is now the rainy season and the villagers are having to construct shelters for their families. Prior to the SPDC's arrival in their area, some local villagers had learned about the likely encroachment of soldiers and therefore built huts hidden in the forest in preparation for the abandonment of their homes if necessary. In this way, villagers have been able to mitigate the difficulties involved with flight to the forest.



IDP hiding site in Shwegyin township, built by villagers forced to repeatedly flee their homes following SPDC attacks in September 2005, March and April 2006. These buildings were more durably constructed in preparation for displacement following SPDC attacks. [Photo: KHRG]

"When I got information about the SPDC soldiers' plan to come [to our village], me and my friends went to the jungle and built houses. So for us when we fled we didn't need to build houses [at the hiding site] because we already had them."

- Saw A--- (male, 52), K--- village, Kyauk Kyi township (July 2006)



Displaced children outside a school built at a hiding site in Shwegyin township to which they fled following repeated SPDC attacks on their village. [Photo: KHRG]



A young teacher instructs displaced children in Karen and English inside the school shown in the previous photo. [Photo: KHRG]

As a consequence of these military operations and villagers' flight into the forest, it has been difficult for parents to restart their children's schooling. Shortly after arriving at their hiding site near Ro Ka Soe, teachers and local village leaders called a meeting with students' parents to discuss the reopening of the school. As the villagers do not know when the SPDC troops will withdraw from their village, they have had to organise a temporary school at their hiding site in the forest. A day after the meeting, the villagers prepared a blackboard and school materials and some of them volunteered to serve as teachers so that the children would be able to study.

"Because the parents fled to different places [in the forest] it has been difficult to organise [a way for] the students to study. But we don't know when the SPDC soldiers will withdraw so we have had to organise it [the school in the forest] and now all of the students have a chance to study."

- Naw H--- (female, 36), school principal, K--- village, Kyauk Kyi township (July 2006)

SPDC operations in Mone township, Nyaunglebin District

The SPDC forces currently operating in Mone township include troops from LIB #536 and 351 operating under MOC #15, and LIB #522, 568 and 507 operating under MOC #16. While the SPDC has previously deployed these soldiers throughout Mone township, their most recent operations have been focused around Yaw Loh, K'Mo Loh, Kheh Po Der, Saw Tay Der, Theh Baw Der, Kyaw Pya, Kwi Da Koh, Htee Ler Baw Hta, Ler Klah, Saw Ka Der, K' Waw Ko, Saw Tay Der and K' Ya Ta village tracts. These troops have also periodically crossed into Tantabin township in Toungoo District to the north of Nyaunglebin. They have engaged in attacks against villages throughout these areas since March 2006.

The most intense areas of SPDC operations in Mone township have been in Saw Ka Der, Yaw Loh, Theh Bpaw Der and K' Ya Ta village tracts. On June 24th troops from LIB #522 under MOC #16 entered K' Ya Ta village and captured two villagers. One of these was a 31-year-old woman named Naw K--- who was taken along with her son Saw Bee Ohn. Though Naw K--- was later released, the soldiers killed Saw Bee Ohn. Subsequently, these SPDC troops moved on to attack villages in Theh Bpaw Der, K' Waw Ko, Kheh Po Der and Saw Tay Der village tracts. The villagers from these areas therefore fled into the forest. At the same time SPDC soldiers from TOC #3 of MOC #15 arrived in the region and joined up with LIB #522 of MOC #16 so that the two groups could conduct operations jointly.

Also on June 24th, SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalions #536 and 351 under MOC #15, based at Mu Theh army camp in southern Mone township, entered Saw Ka Der village tract and shot at a villager named Saw Way Moo, but he managed to escape. Allegedly in punishment for Saw Way Moo's escape, although indistinguishable from the SPDC's general pattern extortion, the soldiers fined local villagers 7 pigs and 31 hens valued at about 200,000 kyat. Subsequently on July 28th the soldiers returned to their army camp at Mu Theh.

On June 29th troops from LIB #522 of MOC #16 attacked villages in Theh Bpaw Der village tract forcing villagers to flee to the jungle. Following this the troops returned to their army camp at Gawlawah Lu. Due to the attacks in Theh Bpaw Der, civilians from villages located in nearby Saw Ka Der village tract did not dare remain at their homes and so fled to stay in hiding in the forest as well.

SPDC Military Operations Commands #15 and 16 have been active in both Mone township, northern Nyaunglebin District and Tantabin township, southern Toungoo District throughout the current offensive. Continuing SPDC activities in Mone township have been making the situation much worse for local villagers. As a consequence, more and more civilians have been displaced since the start of July. Most are still staying in the forest near their home villages, but the people of at least 17 households have fled the township and have now arrived at the Thai-Burma border. They will likely attempt to cross into Thailand as refugees.

"We have learned that the situation and suffering of civilians in Nyaunglebin District are similar to that of civilians in Toungoo District. Both of these groups of civilians are suffering from food insecurity and lack of medicine."

- KHRG Field Researcher (July 2006)

SPDC operations in Lu Thaw township, Papun District

On August 9th KHRG reported SPDC military operations against villagers living at hiding sites in Lu Thaw township, northern Papun District and the establishment of new bases in the region.³ The report documented the movement of seven battalions from MOC #15 which destroyed villages along the upper Bilin River during June, then split into two Tactical Operations Commands to support MOC #10's attacks against villagers in the far north of Papun District. While these attacks were conducted, local villagers were employing their own strategies to remain beyond SPDC capture and cope with the attacks directed against them.

In the first week of June SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalions #352, 535, 537, 552, 565, 564 and 353 under MOC #15 led by Major Aung Naing conducted attacks along the upper Bilin River northwest of Papun town. The villages that they attacked in this area included Dta Paw Der, Dta Meh Der, Thay Ko Mu Der and Dta Thu Der. Subsequent to these attacks, the soldiers established camps in the region of the villagers, hoping to sever contact between local villagers and KNLA soldiers in both Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts. The military also hoped to consolidate control of more territory in the region. Concurrent with the establishment of these camps, the soldiers conducted local patrols, destroying villagers' hill fields and food stores.

³ See *SPDC military begins pincer movement, adds new camps in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-B10, August 9th 2006).

"The main aim of the SPDC activity [in this area] is to close the connection between villagers and KNLA from Nyaunglebin and Mutraw [Papun] District."

- Saw L--- (male, 58), T--- village, Lu Thaw township (June 2006)

Previous KHRG reports have documented the SPDC's regular use of civilians as porters for military patrols in Karen territory. In connection with the current northern Karen State offensive, however, the SPDC has been increasing its use of convicts from prisons across Burma as military porters.⁴ The SPDC uses these convict porters to carry weapons, food and other supplies for the soldiers. The soldiers overwork porters, do not provide adequate food or medical treatment; and regularly threaten, torture and kill those unable to keep pace with military patrols. Because of the gravity of their situation, many porters attempt to flee from the soldiers. Although many porters are caught and subsequently tortured and/or killed as punishment, many have managed to escape and have received assistance from local Karen villagers and KNU/KNLA soldiers and officials.

"I know that many of the SPDC porters have fled because they are not given enough food and they are not taken care of when they are sick and some are killed. They have to flee to save their lives."

- Saw L--- (male, 58), T--- village, Lu Thaw township (June 2006)

Both SPDC soldiers and the porters who are accompanying them regularly fall ill due to the consistently wet rainy season conditions. They also regularly encounter landmines and occasionally come under guerrilla-style attacks by KNLA forces. On one occasion in the upper Bilin River area, when a few soldiers detonated landmines the entire column ground to a halt for days. This hesitancy to continue the advance demonstrates their lack of morale. Most SPDC soldiers are conscripts, many of them are children, and the wet rainy season conditions and risk of injury or death prevalent in frontline military operations undermine their will to maintain the pace of the offensive. After less than 20 days in the upper Bilin and immediately upon reaching their assigned objective of Baw Kwaw, the combined column of close to 1,000 troops withdrew back to base at Baw Hser Ko army camp near Pwa Ghaw.⁵ MOC #15 then split into two Tactical Operations Commands. TOC #2 re-supplied and headed north to support MOC #10 troops destroying villages and establishing new camps in the upper Yunzalin River. TOC #3 sent their sick and injured soldiers to Mu Theh army camp in Nyaunglebin District, then headed north to Toungoo District and have now advanced back into Papun District from the north, establishing a new camp of their own at Si Day.⁶

When SPDC soldiers came to villages in the upper Bilin River area in June, including Dta Paw Der, Dta Meh Der, Thay Ko Mu Der, Htee Lay Hta, Ber Ghaw, Meh Law, Dta Lay Kaw Der and Maw Kee Der, villagers fled into the surrounding hills. As soon as the troops withdrew the villagers immediately began returning to their abandoned fields and villages. However, some of their hill fields had already been destroyed by the SPDC soldiers and it was therefore difficult for them to prepare and work for their livelihoods. The villagers returned to their villages to find the dead bodies of over a dozen porters killed by the departing SPDC soldiers. They also found that the troops, in setting up some of their temporary camps, had destroyed some of the villagers' paddy fields which had already been planted. The SPDC soldiers had also constructed bunkers and trenches.

⁴ See *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005 – 2006 Northern Karen State Offensive* (KHRG #2006-03, August 22nd 2006)

⁵ See *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (KHRG #2006-B9, July 4th 2006).

⁶ See *SPDC military begins pincer movement, adds new camps in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-B10, August 9th 2006).



Abandoned SPDC army bunker and temporary shelters in the Bilin River area near Dta Paw Der and Dta Meh Der villages, Lu Thaw township. Following attacks on local villages, soldiers built these shelters in the middle of villagers' ricefields, destroying their crops and obstructing future farming. These photos were taken in July 2006 following the withdrawal of MOC #15 from the area. [Photo: KHRG]

When villagers are forced to flee like this during the rainy season, many become sick and are without access to medical treatment. According to one KNLA medic, there are over 700 displaced villagers in Lu Thaw township currently ill as a consequence of having to remain hiding in the jungle during the rains. When possible, KNLA medics and mobile Free Burma Rangers teams try to give medical assistance. This situation is particularly difficult for pregnant women who may have to give birth at unhygienic hiding sites in the forest. When they flee, villagers can only take what they can carry and are therefore always short of the necessary amount of food. Displaced villagers share what food they have and often cook a watery rice porridge in order to stretch out their food supplies. They attempt to return to their paddy storage barns and farm-field huts in order to retrieve food, sometimes with KNLA escorts for security. However, if their fields are too near the SPDC encampment this is not possible.

"I used to flee in the jungle many times by SPDC attacked. But, this time when I flee it face a lot of problem for me, because this time is the raining season, some of villagers get sick and we don't have enough food to take. For me, I can't take enough food because I have to take care of my family and carry my children."

- Saw B--- (male, 35), M--- village, Pla Koh village tract, Lu Thaw township (June 2006)

"Civilians have fled to the jungle and built shelters at temporary hiding sites. When the villagers stay in the jungle they have to build shelters quickly because it is the rainy season. So, men and women work together to build shelters. Because of the rainy season, many of the villagers are sick and some women who are pregnant find it quite difficult to give birth."

- Saw T--- (male, 70), Lu Thaw township, (June 2006)

"Due to the increasing SPDC activities, we always have to flee and don't dare to work in our paddy fields and hill fields. When we flee into the jungle, animals come and destroy our fields and this causes us to face problems with food security in the coming future."

- Saw B--- (male, 43), B--- village, Yeh Mu Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw township (June 2006)

When the SPDC army decides to establish a new camp it is very discouraging for villagers in hiding in the area, because it means they will not be able to return to their fields and villages any time soon. In the upper Yunzalin River, the establishment of three new camps at Baw Ka Plaw, Twee Mi Kyo and Si Day mean that this year's rice crop will probably be lost to

villagers living west of the river. Similarly, though MOC #15 withdrew from the upper Bilin River, MOC #10 established a new camp just to the east at Thay Wah Kyo (see **map**). As a result, many local villagers dare not stay at their homes. There are more than 40 hillside ricefields and 10 flatland irrigated ricefields which now lie abandoned because the villagers dare not return to work them.



Displaced villagers in Lu Thaw township split bamboo in June 2006 for the construction of temporary shelters in the forest where they can wait and monitor the movements of SPDC troops. [Photo: KHRG]



A mother with her two young children, displaced by SPDC attacks against their village in Lu Thaw township (June 2006). [Photo: KHRG]

According to a KHRG field researcher operating in Lu Thaw township, the biggest problem for villagers in the area is the lack of food security. Displaced villagers are uncertain about how they will continue to produce food in the future if SPDC soldiers remain active in the area around their home villages.

KHRG researchers in the region believe the SPDC is also planning to extend its control through 'development projects'. These include not only the dam projects on the Salween River, but also reported plans to build a 'town' at Pwa Ghaw on the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Hta road. Pwa Ghaw is a large area of level ricefields, but these have been abandoned and overgrown for years due to SPDC presence in the area. At present the only habitation there is the Army camp of Baw Hser Ko. However, the SPDC reportedly plans to force large numbers of villagers to move to the site and create a 'town' under direct military control, which would then facilitate sending in even more troops to militarise the entire region. They have made little progress in these plans, however, because they have been unsuccessful at capturing any of the villagers in the area.

Conclusion and Further Reading

The information in this report helps to demonstrate that the SPDC's attempts to bring the villagers of northern Karen State under control have thus far failed primarily because the villagers have employed strategies to resist and evade control. Despite this lack of success, the SPDC can be expected to continue its military campaign for control in the region, particularly once the rains abate in October.

Villagers' continued resistance to military control stems from the conflicting objectives of these two groups. The SPDC wants all civilians to live in military controlled areas and to support local army units with uncompensated labour, finances, food and building supplies. Civilians, however, having learned over many generations that capitulating to SPDC demands undermines their very lives and livelihoods, know that they cannot easily fulfil

SPDC orders. They therefore struggle to the extent of their abilities to continue evading SPDC attempts to control them. So long as the SPDC refuses to acknowledge villagers' needs, the villagers can be expected to refuse to submit to the SPDC.

"We would like the [KNU] leaders to make some special arrangement for us - to stop the SPDC's activities. Then we would have a better life in the coming future and live in peace on our land."

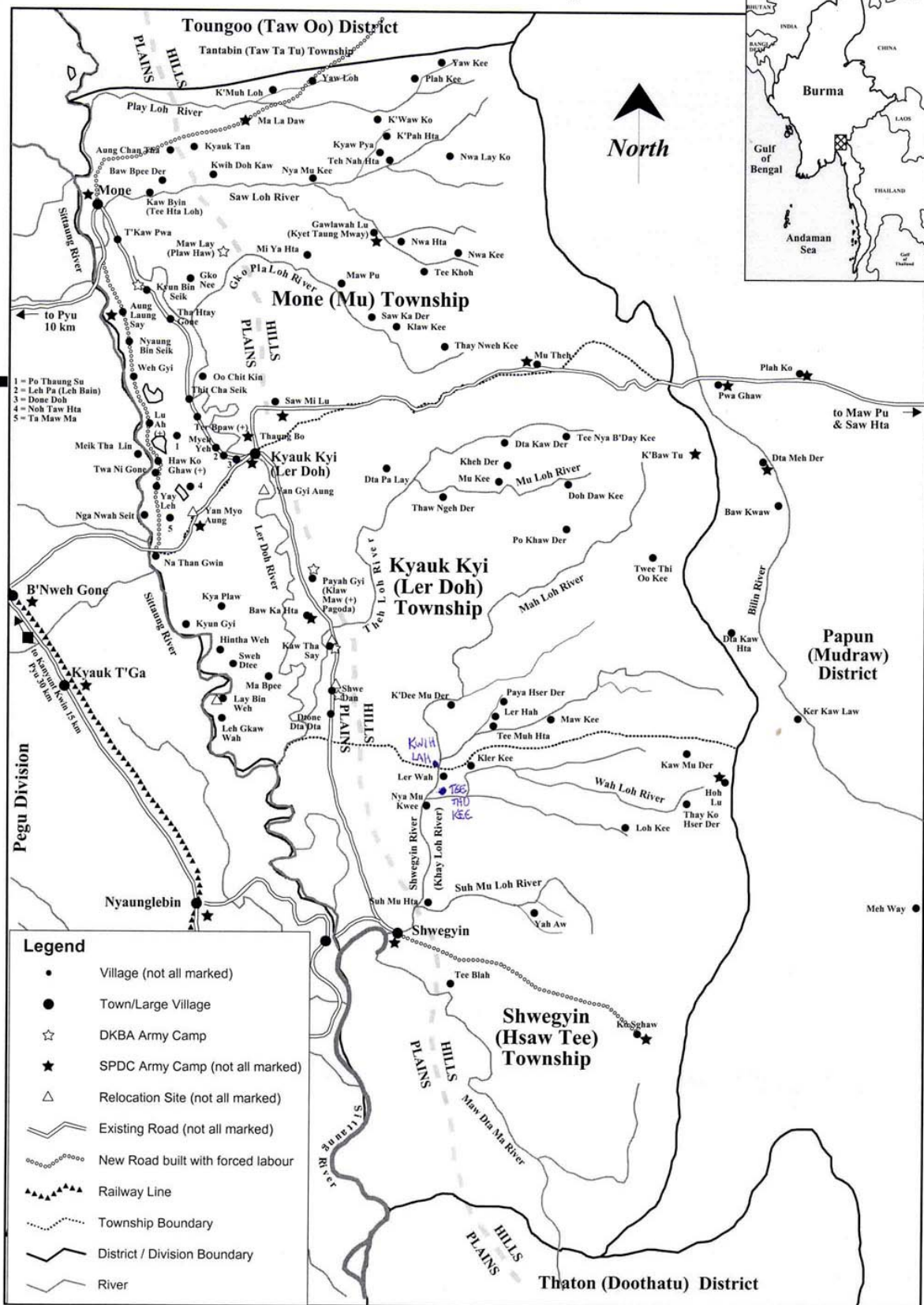
- Saw B--- (male, 43), B--- village, Yet Mu Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw township (June 2006)

For further background see the following reports:

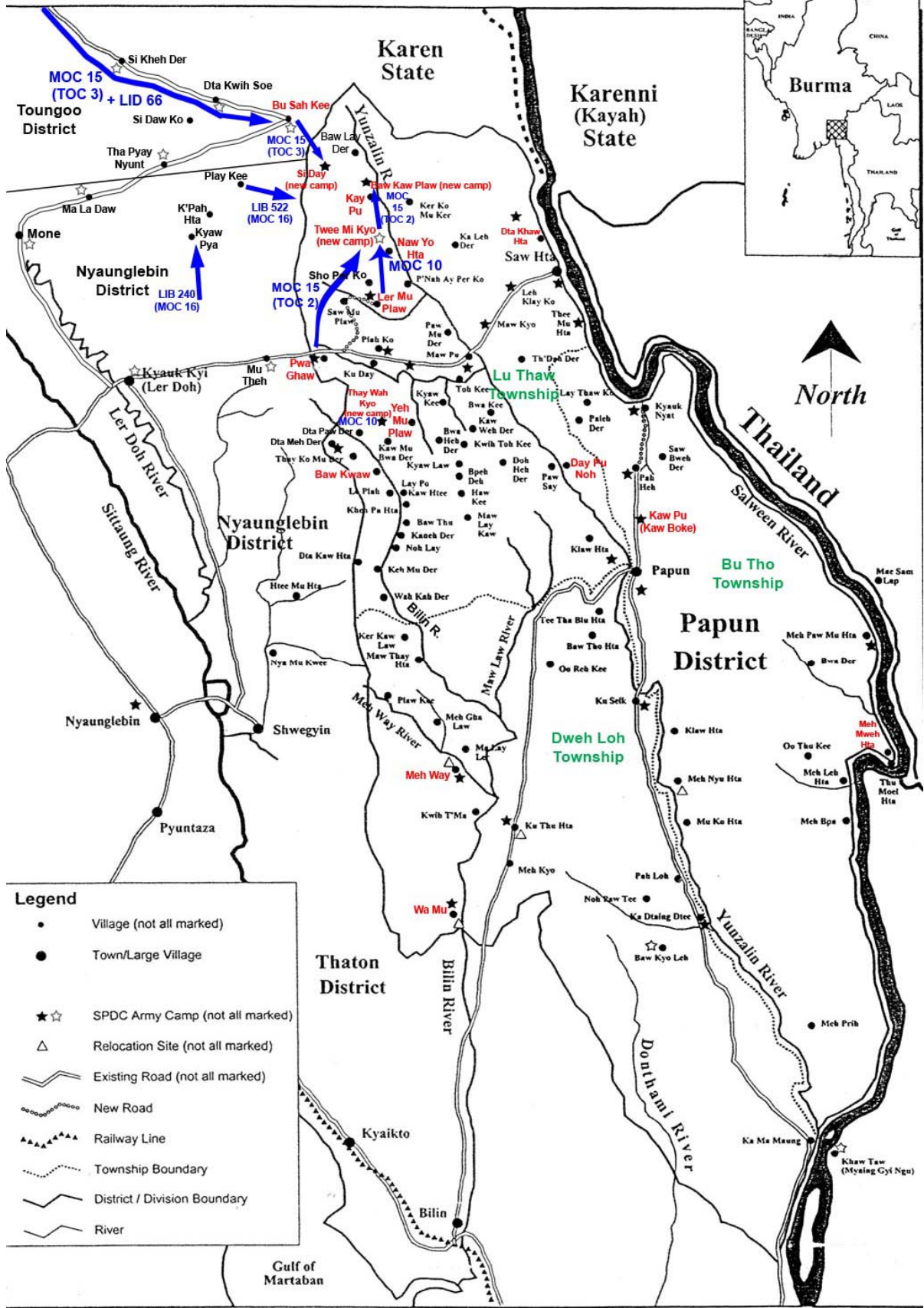
- *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005 – 2006 Northern Karen State Offensive* (KHRG #2006-03, August 2006)
- *SPDC military begins pincer movement, adds new camps in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-B10, August 2006)
- *Forced labour, extortion and abuses in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-F7, July 2006)
- *Forced relocation, restrictions and abuses in Nyaunglebin District* (KHRG #2006-F6, July 2006)
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (KHRG #2006-B9, July 2006)
- *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo Districts* (KHRG #2006-B7, June 2006)
- *SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun District* (KHRG #2006-B6, June 2006)
- *Villagers displaced as SPDC offensive expands into Papun District* (KHRG #2006-B4, May 2006)
- *SPDC operations in Kler Lweh Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District* (KHRG #2006-F4, April 2006)
- *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).

Photos from Papun, Nyaunglebin 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.

Nyaunglebin (Kler Lweh Htoo) District



Papun District



Scale: 1 cm to 7.5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group

Karen Districts



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