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Protests spread in rural Karen State

While international attention follows the rapid escalation of protests in the main urban centres in Burma, a growing movement of local anti-regime demonstrations has likewise emerged in Karen State. At least 330 Buddhist and Christian Karen villagers, including monks, teachers, parents and students from 10 villages in Dooplaya District gathered together on Monday, September 24th to share information about the country-wide protest movement; express their solidarity with the anti-regime sentiment; and offer prayers according to their particular religious beliefs. While the extent of military control in Karen State, the greater impunity with which local SPDC personnel operate and the smaller population size of individual communities all restrict the scale of open protest in this area, these acts are nevertheless significant as demonstrations of solidarity with the broader protest movement.

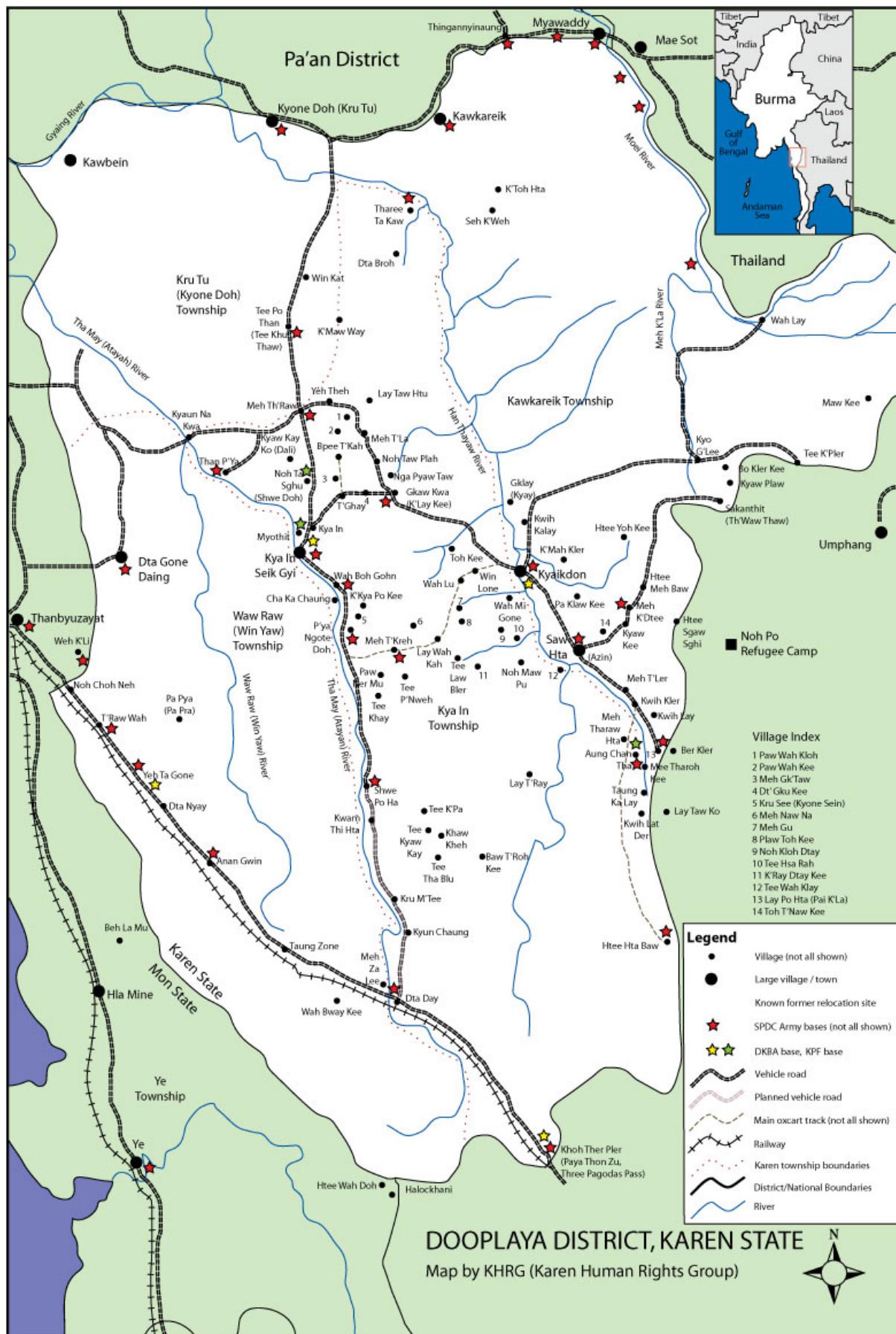
Following the mass increase in the size and numbers of anti-regime protests across the larger urban centres of Burma, villagers in rural areas of Karen State have begun their own local actions in solidarity with wider anti-regime demonstrations. At 9:00 am on Monday, September 24th, 2007 at least 330 Karen villagers from 10 separate villages in Dooplaya District of southern Karen State gathered together at a local school in SPDC-defined Kawkareik township. This group included Buddhist monks as well as both Buddhist and Christian teachers, parents and students from neighbouring villages. Community leaders and monks provided information regarding the broader country-wide protest movement and led fellow villagers in both Buddhist and Christian prayers in accordance to their particular religious beliefs in appeal for the development of a peaceful outcome in the country, an end to violence and the triumph of tolerance and loving-kindness in Burma and across the world. According to a KHRG field researcher active in the area,

“These villagers who live in rural areas agreed with and support the demonstrations which reflect their own feelings regarding the increase in petrol and commodity prices. These rural villagers believe and recognise that this protest [movement] is the correct one.”

As a follow up to the gathering the villagers decided to carry out private religious observances, whether Buddhist or Christian, on the subsequent day – Tuesday, September 25th – and pursue further gatherings and actions should the local-level military situation allow. This heightened wariness on the part of the villagers, in comparison to that in the main urban centres, arises out of the sheer extent of militarisation, the Army's local-level control of the civilian population and the greater impunity with which SPDC personnel operate in Karen State. In rural areas where communities are significantly smaller in number, individuals are more easily identified and violently punished for acts of overt resistance. While more people in Karen State may wish to participate in the types of protests that are ongoing in the cities, the more certain risk of military retaliation have so far limited their actions. As such, these gatherings are all the more significant. On the one hand, they represent a continuation of the daily acts of subtle subversion, non-compliance and steadfast resistance which villagers in Karen State have long pursued. On the other hand, these acts demonstrate solidarity with the wider pan-Burma protest movement and the broad consensus and cross-ethnic character of the anti-regime sentiment.

As the international community focuses its attention on the growing urban protest movement, awareness of the emerging village-level demonstrations in Karen State, and indeed across rural Burma, is crucial. There is a strong likelihood that the regime will feel more confident of its impunity to violently crack down on demonstrators in those rural areas not currently under the microscope of the international community. Furthermore, the spread of such protests across the country marks a decisive moment for the international community to act in support of all people of Burma. This country has suffered too long and deserves far more than token assurances that foreign governments will continue to “*monitor the situation closely.*”¹

¹ “World urges restraint amid Myanmar protests,” *Agence France-Presse* via *Inquirer.net*, September 24th 2007. Accessed at: http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view_article.php?article_id=90444 on September 25th 2007.



Karen Districts



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