



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field

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**State repression and the creation of poverty in
southern Karen State**

With most of southern Karen State's Doooplaya district under SPDC control since 1997, villagers face increasing regimentation, restrictions and exploitation by the SPDC and its armed allies that make life virtually unsustainable. The main aspects of this regimentation were already described in detail by KHRG in the report Setting Up the Systems of Repression: The progressive regimentation of civilian life in Doooplaya District (KHRG #2006-04, September 2006). This report follows the same themes, updating the situation by drawing on KHRG's continued interviewing and reporting in the field since September 2006. Forced agricultural programmes, forced labour, and forced recruitment to SPDC-run organisations and administrative structures are combining with systematic state-run extortion, looting, and confiscation of land and crops to artificially create poverty and hunger, forcing many villagers to send family members to Thailand to work illegally for the family's survival. While some UN agencies claim that these are simple matters of poverty that have nothing to do with state repression, villagers are increasingly taking matters into their own hands by finding daring and creative ways to evade or refuse the demands placed on them by the SPDC and other authorities and undermine the power of these groups over their lives.

Regimentation of civilian life

Before 1997, many villages in Doooplaya District of southern Karen State (see map), lived outside the control of the Burmese military regime. However, through a large-scale offensive in 1997, the ruling State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC) managed to capture most of central Doooplaya District and cut off many of the thousands of internally displaced people who tried to flee across the border to Thailand. Central Doooplaya's open terrain makes it very difficult for villagers to escape and hide for long, as they have done in the hills and forests of Karen State's northern districts, and the regime was therefore able to expand military subjugation over most of the civilian population. Life in Doooplaya has become increasingly regimented since this date. Originally the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC)¹ used methods of forced relocation and land confiscation to establish control over villagers. Later, as SPDC control over Doooplaya intensified, many villagers were allowed to move back to their villages, but they now face abuses of a different sort as the SPDC imposes restrictions on movement, forced agricultural programs, systematised extortion, forced labour and enrollment in the regime's parastatal civilian associations, all imposed under threat of violence. In early January 2004, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the SPDC agreed on an informal ceasefire. However, this ceasefire did not bring about an end to fighting or human rights abuses in Karen State. Instead, sporadic fighting continued and the SPDC continued its campaign of repression against the civilian Karen population. If anything, the ceasefire allowed the SPDC to further consolidate its control over the

¹ Late in 1997, the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), but with no significant change in policy or tactics.

population of Doooplaya, by allowing it to penetrate further into the forested hills in the east of the district which it had been previously unable to enter, without fear of Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) attacks.

A common strategy used by the SPDC for controlling the population of Doooplaya has been the forced registration of villages, documenting the inhabitants of every household and detailing all their land and belongings, including sawmills, livestock, carts, telephones and other resources. Villages in Doooplaya report that these registers have then been used by SPDC forces as a basis for extortion, taxation and demands for forced labour or forced organisation. Such demands have become a regular part of villagers' lives, with villagers not only facing demands from the SPDC, but also from the smaller SPDC-allied groups, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Karen Peace Force (KPF). In addition, the SPDC demands that villagers report on any KNLA visits to the village and any KNLA activities they know about. Villagers are threatened that they will be punished if they do not comply and are furthermore punished in retribution for any KNLA attacks on SPDC units, irrespective of whether they know about the KNLA presence in the area. Villagers have also been forced to pay for SPDC security forces operating in their villages. In this way, the SPDC aims to quash resistance and exact even greater control over villagers' lives.

"The SPDC demands that village heads conduct a family registration every year. The purpose of this process is to force villagers to do things, because after the SPDC know the numbers of villagers, they order and force villagers to do many things, such as to organise village wards, to crop castor to their quotas, to crop Shin Thweh Hla paddy [in dry season], to buy a type-16 hand tractor², to organise [villagers to join] the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation [MWAF] and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association [MMCWA], to recruit villagers for the militia, etc."

– a KHRG field researcher (Dec 2006)

Forced organisation

In order to extend its control over villagers' lives, the SPDC has forced villages to establish Village Peace and Development Councils (VPDC), which are answerable to the local Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) and act as a local arm of the SPDC. By using the TPDCs and VPDCs to impose demands and restrictions upon villagers, the SPDC forces village leaders into the very command hierarchy they are trying to resist. VPDC Chairpersons are required to attend meetings at the TPDC office every month, to discuss the development of their villages. However, rather than a discussion, these meetings usually consist of SPDC officers issuing orders and demands to the village heads, scolding and threatening them for any recent lack of compliance with orders, and reminding village heads of their duties to the state. Moreover, village heads in Doooplaya report that they have to spend at least 1,000 to 2,000 kyat per meeting, with no benefit to their villagers. They have to cover their own expenses to attend the meetings and are often forced to purchase items at the meeting, such as magazines and calendars or paddy or castor seed, as part of forced agricultural programmes. When forced agricultural programmes are announced through these meetings, village heads are simply issued orders and are not allowed any input as to how these programmes are to be carried out.

In October 2006, villages in Kaw Nweh village tract of Kawkareik township were forced to buy newspapers for a month at a cost of 4,000 kyat and farming books for 2,500 kyat each at the TPDC meeting. In the same month, eight villages in Yay Kyaw Gyi village tract were

² These are long-handled self-propelled (petrol-fuelled) ploughing machines used mainly to plough irrigated rice fields; the operator walks behind the machine.

also ordered to pay 'fees' towards the expenses of the Karen State football and Done³ dance teams. The village names and amounts they had to pay are as follows:

| | Village Names | Amount paid (Kyat) |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Yay Kyaw Gyi | 53,000 |
| 2 | Yay Kyaw Lay | 34,000 |
| 3 | Hlaing Wa | 73,000 |
| 4 | T'Dah Kyoh | 16,000 |
| 5 | T'Maing Kohn | 18,000 |
| 6 | Ywa Thay | 18,000 |
| 7 | Kyaw Sha Kohn | 5,000 |
| 8 | Tha Ya Kohn | 8,000 |
| Village Tract Total: | | 225,000 |

In November 2006, Tha Ya Kohn village in Kawkareik township was forced to buy three bowls of castor seed for 8,000 kyat, three posters for 400 kyat, one boxing ticket for 3,000 kyat and two calendars for 3,000 kyat. The arbitrariness of these prices is evident in the varied amounts demanded, as at the same November meeting Kyaw Sha Kohn village was forced to buy three bowls of castor seed for 8,000 kyat, two posters for 600 kyat, two boxing tickets for 2,000 kyat and a calendar for 1,500 kyat, while previously that month Ywa Thay village had been forced to buy six bowls of castor seed for 1,400 kyat and five posters for 1,500 kyat. At another TPDC meeting at the end of November 2006, Ah Pah Gyi village tract was ordered to pay 500 kyat for a rubber stamp (to be used as the VPDC seal on orders issued to villagers) and 1,000 kyat for a journal.

In addition, throughout Dooplaya, villagers have been forced to join SPDC organisations, such as the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF), the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), the militia or the fire brigade. Normally village heads are given quotas for the number of villagers that must join the organisation and are forced to pay application or membership fees for each villager. Villagers see this as an attempt by the SPDC to expand their control over the villagers and extort money from them, as often they are never informed of any duties or activities they should perform, nor any benefits they will receive, after they have paid for their application.

"The SPDC also collected people to join Myanmar Women's Affairs [Federation]. They collected people one month ago, around the second week of October. After they collected people, they sent the Honour Certificate and a letter to attend the meeting. They said that every woman in the village must join the Myanmar Women's Affairs. They divided small girls into one group, young women into a second group and adult women into a third group. The adult women group was for women over 50 years old, the young women's group was for women between the ages of 20 and 30 and the small girls group was for girls over 10 years old. These women had to complete an application form to join the group and they had to give money for the application form. Each application form cost 200 kyat. ... They didn't tell us anything about what happened to [this] money. ... The villagers didn't know what they were going to do, but they had to join because they were forced to."

– Saw H--- (male, 30), D--- village, Kya In township (Nov 2006)

³ A traditional Karen dance, normally performed at ceremonies.

Land confiscation and forced agriculture

It is common for local SPDC officials to confiscate land from villagers in Dooplaya. This land is then sold either back to the villagers, if they can afford the price set by the officials, or otherwise to the highest bidder. On other occasions, villagers are forced to crop their fields for the SPDC under state-instigated forced agricultural programmes. Sometimes the villagers are forced to crop paddy on their fields and then give a percentage of their harvest or profit to SPDC, despite the SPDC's claim to have stopped this practice after criticism from the World Bank in 2003. Many villages have been forced to crop paddy for the SPDC during the dry summer season (January to May), although this is often unsuccessful, as there is typically insufficient water at this time of year to maintain crops. M'Hee Gklah village, in Kya In township, made a loss of 400-500,000 kyat from summer paddy planting in 2006, but are still being forced to do it again this summer. Each farmer has to plant one and a half baskets of paddy seed and the villagers have to do all the ploughing and cropping and then transport the crop to the SPDC at the end. If they fail to produce the quota demanded, they must buy rice on the open market and hand it over to the authorities to fill their quota.

In addition, since the SPDC announced in December 2005 that it planned to implement a project to grow castor bean plants on "50,000 acres in each of Myanmar's nine military divisions"⁴, for the purpose of refining the beans to produce biofuel, KHRG has received growing numbers of reports of villagers being forced to buy castor seed from the SPDC at TPDC meetings and then cultivate the plants. To meet the 50,000 acre target, each TPDC has been ordered to plant a quota of castor bushes; these are divided between all the villages in the township based on village population, and each village is then ordered to buy the required volume of seed, plant it on whatever land is available and cultivate it. Some villages have been threatened with fines if any of their quota of plants dies. For example, in June 2006, both M'Hi Gklah village and Kyauk Kaing Kohn village were told that each person in every household, including children, must plant 200 castor plants without fail. Thus a household of 10 people had to plant 2,000 plants, regardless of how young or elderly the household members may be. This has caused much stress and difficulty for the villagers, because not only is there not enough land to do this planting, but they say they are not familiar with how to grow this crop and see little use in it, and it also leaves them with very little time to plough their fields and crop their paddy. As a result many village leaders have purchased the required seed but simply put it in storage instead of planting it, hoping to negotiate or pay their way out of punishment when the time comes.

"The SPDC wrote a letter to us on 18th October 2006 telling us we must plant castor seeds. Even though they forced us to plant the castor, they didn't give us any seeds. They said that they would be able to use the castor oil to drive cars. For the castor, they just ordered us to take cuttings from around the village and plant it. For now, even if we haven't planted the castor, they won't trouble us, but if they keep ordering us to plant it in the future, we will have to plant it. The one that forced us to plant the castor is TPDC Secretary U Soe Thein, in Kya In Seik Gyi township."

– Saw H--- (male, 30), D--- village, Kya In township (Nov 2006)

⁴ ['Castor beans to be grown for biofuel'](#), Myanmar Times, 9-15 January 2006.

“At the moment, the Operations Commander Aung Kyaw Nyein is forcing us to do castor planting. We have to do it ‘without fail’. They called us to a meeting... [and] forced us to buy castor seeds. They sold us one basket full for 70,000 kyat... When the seeds arrived at my village, I had to explain to my villagers that the price of the seeds would have to be shared among the villagers. The villagers also have to work on their fields so they don’t have time to plant this castor. I told the soldiers about the villagers’ problem, but it didn’t work. I am in the middle of the soldiers and the villagers. I couldn’t persuade either so now I am in trouble. The villagers don’t want to plant it and don’t know how to plant it so they don’t want to pay me the money... I don’t want to be the village head anymore because I feel really worried and afraid.”

– Daw K--- (female, 40), B--- village, Kya In township (June 2006)

In July 2006, the Operations Commander of Strategic Operations Command (SOC) #2, Colonel Aung Kyaw Nyein ordered a surveyor to measure villagers’ land near the army camp of Infantry Battalion⁵ (IB) #283, along the planned road between Ther Dter village and Meh Gk’Taw village. Following measurement, 65 blocks of land were confiscated from the villagers, with each block measuring up to 5 acres in area (and at least 4 chains, equivalent to 80 metres, wide). Aung Kyaw Nyein then sold all of this land back to the villagers at 20,000 kyat per block and hence collected 1,300,000 kyat from all the land he had confiscated. In November 2006, the same battalion started building a new road network connecting Kya in Seik Gyi town to Kya In, T’Ghay, Meh Gk’Taw and Aung Chan Tha villages. Again land was confiscated from the villagers, with all land without houses near the new road measured and sold off block by block. The villagers were also forced to cover the petrol costs for the machines which were used to construct the new road.

Villagers in Kawkareik Township are also very concerned about the construction of the Asian Highway. The Asian Highway is an inter-governmental project backed by the United Nations, envisaged as a way to enhance trade and tourism opportunities by connecting 32 countries along 140,479 km of highway. The Burma section of this highway will connect Burma to India on one side and Thailand on the other.⁶ The highway will cross Doolaya district at Kawkareik Township and the construction of this stretch of the highway is due to start this summer. Villagers are very concerned as they know that the highway will destroy many of their lands, fields and gardens and that they are unlikely to receive any compensation. The construction of the highway in Thaton District has already involved much uncompensated land confiscation and forced labour for the construction.⁷ The SPDC has yet to respond to complaints by landowners in Kawkareik township about the expected loss of their lands.

On 1st November 2006, IB #284 Commander Khin Maung Myin Aye and Deputy Commander Maung Myint called a meeting of Village Heads at the Operation Command’s office in Kya In Seik Gyi town, to discuss the lands that had been confiscated from villagers in the area surrounding Wah Boh Gohn army camp ten years previously. The village heads were informed that if land owners wanted the land, they would have to buy it back, otherwise it would be sold off to other people. Moreover, if the villagers bought back their land, they would then be forced to crop rubber on that land and give a percentage of the output to the SPDC.

⁵ Infantry Battalion of the SPDC, supposed to be about 500 soldiers strong, but at present most SPDC battalions number under 200.

⁶ [‘Asian Highway Handbook’](#). United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), December 2003.

⁷ See *Oppression by Proxy in Thaton District*, KHRG #2006-F11, December 2006.



These fields adjacent to the Kya In Seik Gyi – Kyone Doh vehicle road were confiscated without compensation by camp commander Htun Sein of the nearby DKBA #906 Battalion camp. Since confiscating the land, he has forced local villagers to work on it establishing a rubber plantation for his own profit. [Photo: KHRG]

“On 1st November 2006, the SPDC summoned me to attend the meeting at their IB # 284 army camp. They talked to us and forced us to come and take rubber and plant it in the lands next to the IB #284 army camp. The lands were quite big, but I can't tell how big they are. The lands were the villagers'. They confiscated the villagers' land when they constructed their army camp 10 years ago. They constructed their army camp on the land and, with the remaining lands, they either sold it or forced the villagers to plant rubber on it. Some of the lands that they confiscated used to be plantations of the villagers and others were rice fields. The owners of the lands felt bad and unsatisfied. The owners went to them

[the SPDC] to discuss their lands, but they didn't give it back to the owners. They said that the government had already confiscated it, so they couldn't give it back. They sold some lands that they confiscated and two or three people from Seik Gyi [town] bought it, but none of our villagers bought it. Some bought about 4 acres and some bought 5 acres of land. ...The people who bought the lands from SPDC have a few rubber plants in the land, but have to plant more. If the owners wanted their lands back, they would have to buy it back from the SPDC and they also have to give the SPDC 25 sheets of rubber for every 100 sheets produced. In our village, a sheet of rubber is 5 viss (18 lb. / 8 kg.) in weight. People in our village sold a viss (3.6 lb. / 1.6 kg.) of rubber for 700 kyat, so a sheet of rubber is worth 3,500 kyat.”

– Saw H--- (male, 30), D--- village, Kya In township (Nov 2006)

Forced labour

As society has become more regimented in Doooplaya, villagers have become accustomed to regular demands for forced labour from the various armed groups. Forced labour demands include orders to serve as guides for military patrols, collect building materials and deliver them by cart or by foot, to work on road construction or conduct building work and to grow crops for the Army on confiscated land. This labour is unpaid and uncompensated and, in the majority of cases, villagers are not even given any food or drink while they work.

The villagers in Meh Gk'Taw Htah and Bpeh Traw Doo area of Kawkareik Township have faced many demands for forced labour from both the SPDC and the Karen Peace Force (KPF). In December 2006, Commander Aung Myint Soe of SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁸ #343 demanded that two bullock cart owners carry the packs and ammunition of a column of 120 soldiers for two hours. The owners were not given any compensation for the use of the carts and were not given any food to eat. The same battalion also approached another villager while he was working in his flat field and demanded that he guide them and carry them, and their loads, on his cart to Gklay Htah. There were 10 soldiers, each with loads of about 10 viss (35 lb. / 16 kg.), and the villager was forced to carry them for 1.5 hours without being given any pay or food. In December 2006, SPDC soldiers also took a twelve-year-old child from his house in Noh N'Boo village, in Kawkareik township, when his parents were not there. They forced him to guide them on foot to the Gklay river, a 30

⁸ Light Infantry Battalion of the SPDC, supposed to be about 500 soldiers strong, but at present most SPDC battalions number under 200.

minute walk away. The child was given a bag to carry, which weighed 5 viss (17.5 lb. / 8 kg.) and was not given any pay or food. The soldiers tried to get the child to lead them further, but he refused, saying he needed to return home and do his homework.

In the villages surrounding Kya In Seik Gyi town, Strategic Operations Command (SOC) #2 makes demands for forced labour year round. In the dry season villages receive demands for wood, bamboo and thatch to repair nearby army camps and firewood for brick baking, while in rainy season villagers are forced to crop paddy for the Army in addition to their own crops. In October 2006, the KPF Commander Bo Eh Myee demanded that five villages surrounding Gklay village in Kawkareik township construct houses for his soldiers. Each household had to bring five shingles of leaves and five bamboo poles with them and every villager had to go. They



SPDC Strategic Operations Command #2 Colonel Aung Kyaw Nyein inspects villagers doing forced labour building a brick wall around the village football ground in Kya In Gyi village of Kya In Seik Gyi township. Throughout 2006, Aung Kyaw Nyein was responsible for ordering many kinds of forced labour like this, and was also behind orders for villagers throughout the district to plant dry season paddy crops and castor bean for the Army. [Photo: KHRG]

were not given any food or pay and had to bring their own rice and water. The villages that had to take part in this construction work were Gklay Poh Kee, Gklay Poh Htah, Daw Kyeh Kee, Meh Gklaw Wa and Th'Der Koh. Similarly, in Kya In township, every villager in Bpee T'Kah village was forced to cut bamboo for the KPF, although the villagers did manage to negotiate to only cut 700 poles instead of the 1,000 demanded.

"Sometimes the SPDC, DKBA and KPF wrote letters to our village head and demanded villagers for work. The SPDC forced the villagers to cut bamboo and wood and to fence their army camp. We had to bring our own machetes and bamboo to tie and make the fence. We carried the bamboo on carts. Sometimes they demanded two carts of bamboo and sometimes three carts. ... They didn't give us food and we had to bring our own rice to eat. We had to make the fence for one day. Beyond the fencing, they also demanded leaves from us. Sometimes they demanded 250 shingles and sometimes 500 shingles [of leaf thatch]. Nyein Chan Yay [KPF] forced us to harvest for them once. They divided it between different villages to work at different times. They ordered Kyer Kyaw and Gker Gaw to work at one time and Meh Gk'Taw Kee and Meh Gk'Taw Htah to work at another time. There were about 70 people at the time we went. The commander of the KPF force who forced us to work was Kyaw Khin. He ordered us to help him harvesting the paddy and he fed us two goats to eat."

– Saw H--- (male, 64), former village head, B--- village, Kawkareik twp (Dec 2006)

"The SPDC demanded 150 bamboo poles from both G--- and P--- villages. They demanded that each bamboo pole should be at most as big around as an arm and 10 cubits [15 feet] long. Each household had to cut five bamboo poles. The Gklay Htah army camp that we had to take the bamboo to was about one hour from our village. We had to carry the bamboo by ourselves [without carts], so two people from each household had to go because one person couldn't manage to carry all five bamboo poles. When we got there, they didn't give us any food to eat and we had to come

back to eat in our own house. They also didn't give us any money. Don't expect that they will give you money. Instead of giving you money, they ask for more and more forced labour."

– K--- (male, 30), village secretary, G--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

Extortion and looting

SPDC soldiers, along with the DKBA and KPF, commonly make demands of villagers for food, building materials, money and other items. Demands are made in the village (normally to village heads), by order or letter, or at TPDC meetings (as discussed above). From October to December 2006, SPDC battalions entered some villages in Doooplaya District twice a month or more, demanding food such as chickens, goats, rice, chillies and fish paste. Sometimes the rice the villagers had grown was insufficient even for their own consumption, but the soldiers still demanded it from them. As a consequence they had to buy additional rice to meet the soldiers' demands at a cost of around 12,000 kyat per basket. On November 26th 2006, column #2 from IB #343 based in Kyaikdon demanded three viss (10.8 lb. / 4.8 kg.) of chicken (worth 9,000 kyat at that time) from the village head of Hla Pah village and on December 4th 2006, column #1 of the same battalion demanded four viss (14.4 lb. / 6.4 kg.) of chicken (worth 12,000 kyat), ten packets of coffee mix (worth 1,500 kyat) and one basket and twelve bowls (96.5 lb. / 43.8 kg. in total) of rice (worth 22,500 kyat) from the same village.

"On December 2nd 2006, SPDC LIB #343 Commander Aung Myint Soe came to my village and interrogated me and then he complained that I didn't give him anything to eat. He said that I didn't even give him one chicken or one betel leaf or one betel nut. So I told him I would give him something. Then they left my village and went to L--- village. I thought I would lie to him and wouldn't give him anything, but when he returned from L--- on December 6th 2006 he came back to my village so I couldn't lie to him and I had to give him a goat. ... They didn't pay me any money for this goat. I felt bad because I had to give him the goat for free and then ask the villagers to help me pay for it. The villagers didn't want to pay, but they had to. The goat cost 25,000 kyat and I don't know how much money I should collect from each household. I haven't collected the money from the villagers yet. Also, the goat wasn't mine and I haven't repaid the cost to the owner yet. ... We felt very unsatisfied, but we couldn't do anything because we are small and under their control. We were afraid. They had guns and we didn't."

– Ma M--- (female, 47), village head, H--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

Villagers have also faced demands to cover the costs of petrol for road-building or to provide diesel for generators to recharge soldiers' radio batteries. For example, IB #284, based in Wah Boh Gohn in Kya In township, told the villagers in Dt'Kah Kloh village that they would have to pay between 200,000 and 300,000 kyat for the cost of diesel to fuel machines to construct a new road near their village. The villagers could not afford to pay this amount, so they requested that they be allowed to construct the road themselves. The SPDC allowed them to do this and the villagers did so. But then in October 2006 the SPDC announced that they were going to construct another new road between Dt'Kah Kloh and Dt'Kah Kee villages and again demanded the fuel costs, this time demanding 40 gallons of diesel from the two villages. A gallon of diesel cost the villagers 4,800 kyat, so the total cost was 192,000 kyat, which had to be paid by November 7th 2006.

"This month the SPDC have already entered my village two times. When they came into the village some of the soldiers stole the villagers' chickens. They ate the villagers' chickens, pumpkins, stone pumpkins [marrows] and other vegetables. There were about 30-35 soldiers that entered the village. ... Three years ago, when

they were in the village they asked the village head to find some chickens for them and they also stole chickens themselves from the villagers. They took about 15 chickens. The group of SPDC soldiers who entered my village this month stole chickens from the villagers and stayed in my village for three nights. But they weren't satisfied with the chickens, so they asked the village chairperson to find a pig for them. They were armed and, furthermore, they could torture us if we didn't find one for them, so we had to find one for them."

– K--- (male, 30), village secretary, G--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

As can be seen from the quote above, it is also common for SPDC soldiers to loot and steal when they enter villages. In Dooplaya, villagers report that they are scared to go to work outside their village when SPDC troops are around, because soldiers often enter unoccupied houses and steal their chickens, ducks, vegetables and other belongings. For example, on November 18th 2006 IB #231 Military Operations Commander (MOC) Than Htun demanded a chicken from Ywa Thay village and yet still stole bamboo, a pumpkin and cigarettes from the villagers. Similarly, when the soldiers of LIB #343 entered Bpeh Traw Doo village they stole a machete and caught and ate villagers' chickens. The DKBA and the KPF also frequently log the areas surrounding the villages, leaving villagers without necessary building materials for their homes and destroying the natural habitat, which supports plants and wildlife that form a vital component of villagers' livelihoods. Even where items are demanded, it still amounts to little more than stealing, as villagers fear repercussions if they do not comply and soldiers often take what they are not given. Moreover, the soldiers who loot and steal are able to do so with impunity, as complaints from the villagers to commanding officers are often ignored or dismissed. In fact, soldiers' rations are often stolen or sold off by their commanding officers who then instruct them to live off the villages. Soldiers have also threatened to punish villagers who report them to their commanders.

"Some villagers came to report to me that the soldiers had stolen their chickens. So I went to report it to their battalion commander. Then he said to me, 'Did you yourself see the soldiers steal the villagers' chickens?' I told him, 'I didn't see it myself, but my villagers reported it to me and asked me to report it to you.' Then he replied, 'When the soldiers enter the village, I don't have time to look after them all the time. What they do or eat is up to them. I don't have time to look after or talk to them. Even my bodyguard has stolen people's things.'"

– K--- (male, 30), village secretary, G--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

Villagers in Dooplaya also face excessive and arbitrary 'taxation', with overlapping demands for funds from the SPDC, the KPF, the DKBA and in some areas the KNLA. The KPF frequently demand payments for fields and plantations. In December 2006, the KPF sent a letter to Gklay Poh Kee village in Kawkareik township ordering them to pay fees for their plantations, hill fields and flat fields. The village didn't pay the total amount demanded, but still gave 50,000 kyat as they were afraid they would be tortured or punished otherwise. Sawmill owners face particularly heavy demands for such 'taxation' and villagers report that new payments are often demanded by each new SPDC column rotating into an area (which occurs every few months) as well as by the KPF. In Ywa Thay village of Kya In



The dry season vehicle road between Kya In Seik Gyi and Kyone Doh in western Dooplaya, seen here in June 2006. Villagers using this road must pay 'fees' at a number of SPDC and DKBA checkpoints in order to pass. The fees are particularly heavy for vehicles or carts carrying goods, which local villagers say stifles all trade in the region. [Photos: KHRG]

township, an SPDC soldier demanded that one sawmill owner with a broken sawmill pay 5,000 kyat and another sawmill owner, who had only used the sawmill to construct the village school and not for his own profit, pay 20,000 kyat. The DKBA and the KPF also frequently set up checkpoints on the roads near the villages, demanding money from villagers who try to travel to work or buy food. At the many KPF checkpoints in Kya In township, villagers are forced to pay 50,000 kyat to pass with a herd of cattle and sometimes have to pay 30,000 kyat for just one or two buffalo. This has made it very difficult for the villagers to sell their cattle to visiting cattle traders, as it is so expensive for the traders to transport the cattle out of the village.

“The Nyein Chan Yay [KPF] also came to our village occasionally. They just came to our village to collect taxes on sawmills. Some of the sawmill owners had to pay 100,000 kyat, including elephant tax, and some had to pay 50,000 kyat. The KPF came to collect tax, the SPDC came to collect tax and the DKBA came to collect tax as well. In one month, troop after troop came to collect taxes in the village. After one troop came and left, another troop came. The KPF also collected taxes on hill fields and flat fields. They collected one basket of rice for each hill field and two baskets of rice for each flat field. We had to give it to them. We didn't dare stay if we didn't give it to them.”

– Saw H--- (male, 64), former village head, B--- village, Kawkareik twp (Dec 2006)

Rape and sexual abuse

Cases of rape or sexual abuse by soldiers in Doooplaya District continue to be reported. Soldiers have committed such abuses as a means of control and because they are rarely punished for such attacks. One incident of attempted rape began on December 7th 2006, when Gkaw Kwa army camp commander Aung Chan Lay, under the control of SPDC IB #586 Battalion Commander Theh Htun, and his soldiers were conducting security operations on the road between Kya In Seik Gyi and Kyaikdon. When they reached M--- village at 10 o'clock, three soldiers went to Naw K---'s hut to cook food. Naw K--- is 41 years old and has five children. The soldiers saw that Naw K--- was alone and tried to persuade her to go bathing, but she refused to go because her leg was injured. Then one soldier told her that he would give her milk to drink and talked to her about love, asking her to love him. She told him she had a husband and children and was not interested in him, but the other two soldiers said, “He is a medic. Choose to love him!” After talking with her for a while, two of them went back to the car road and only the medic was left. In fact he was not a medic, but his two friends had said that he was to make her fall in love with him. She was not interested in him, but he still professed his love to her and demanded her love in return. He kissed her, grabbed her breast and massaged her painful leg. Then he sat on her injured leg and pushed her down to the floor twice. Then he climbed onto her body, so that she couldn't move. When he started to unzip his trousers, Naw K--- could see that her situation was desperate, so she kicked the soldier with her injured leg and he fell off her. Then he heard the sound of Naw K---'s mother coming back from collecting vegetables, so he took his gun, left the hut and went back to find his friends on the road. Naw K--- said that he wrestled with her for about 30 minutes, but he didn't manage to rape her.

In some cases SPDC soldiers have raped Karen women strategically, as sex before marriage violates cultural norms so many women who have been raped face communal pressures to marry the soldiers afterwards. Some women married in this manner are taken away by the soldier when his unit rotates out of the area, while others are simply left behind while the soldier goes on to repeat this tactic in his next posting.

The response of villagers

Despite the increasing militarisation of Karen society and the systematic nature of repression, villagers in Dooplaya have found many ways to resist human rights abuses and negotiate with soldiers and officers for reductions of demands. For example, at great risk to themselves, village heads often defy demands to send people for forced labour or to join SPDC-controlled organisations. In D--- village in Kya In township, local SPDC officers tried to force villagers to join the *Pyit Thu Sit* (people's militia), but the villagers refused to go. The soldiers threatened that should they not join, they would be punished. The villagers nevertheless refused to join and as yet the soldiers have not punished them. The same village has also avoided the forced construction of a library that local SPDC officials demanded they build over a year ago. The forced construction of libraries is an SPDC tactic used to support the claim of 'development' in Karen areas. However, not only must villagers expend their own resources and labour in the construction of these structures, but they furthermore receive negligible SPDC support following their completion, leaving the libraries empty or containing only a handful of Burmese magazines.

H--- village in Kawkareik township refused to give rice and oil demanded of them by Gklay Htah army camp. Another village reported that they waited a day before informing the SPDC about KNLA visits to the village, instead of informing them immediately as demanded. After having been forced to collect and deliver wood and bamboo to Gklay Htah army camp, P--- village in Kawkareik township refused to do the building they were demanded to do. Local villagers told the soldiers, "*Your camp is full of soldiers, so build it yourself*". When the KPF demanded 1,000 bamboo poles from B--- village, in Kya In township, the villages successfully negotiated to lower the number to 700 poles on the grounds that they needed more time to tend their fields.

Some of the most strenuous resistance has occurred in the context of the SPDC's forced agricultural programmes. Though most villages have been forced to buy castor seed, many of them have not yet planted it because they do not want to; the seeds sit in storage, despite repeated written orders from the authorities reminding them that they should have planted the bushes by now. T--- village in Kya In township resisted the forced plantation of castor by simply scattering the seeds randomly after buying them. They may later tell the SPDC soldiers that they did not know how to plant them or that the crop failed, as Karen villagers often do in such circumstances, but in the meantime they have not wasted valuable time and effort cropping castor instead of the more important subsistence crops. Similarly, many villages have ignored orders to plant a dry season rice crop, choosing instead to bribe their way out of the dry season rice quota when it is eventually demanded. Most villages have similar stories to tell of ways they have resisted and evaded demands and abuses by local military authorities, whether by ignoring orders, delaying or only partially complying, negotiating reductions, using bribes, misreporting information, or other means.

"SPDC soldiers also demanded things from the villagers. They demanded money one time, leaves three times, bamboo one time and wood one time. They demanded 20,000 kyat from G--- village and 20,000 kyat from P--- village. They didn't tell us what this money was for, but before I heard them say they didn't have enough oil so they would buy oil. We had to take this money to their army camp. When we reached their army camp, they told us to find food for them. We told them, 'We've already brought money to you and now we still have to find food for you, we won't go.' Then he asked, 'What will you do if you don't go?' We replied, 'We have our own work and travelling, as well as children and grandchildren at home. We have to go back to look after them.' The money that we brought to them was collected from the villagers. I collected 500 kyat from each household. Some of the villagers said, 'The Burmese are the leaders. How come they still come to demand things among the villagers?'"

– K--- (male, 30), village secretary, G--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

Effects on villagers' survival and living conditions

"The villagers have to do both their own work and forced labour and they are having food problems. The villagers are in trouble now. They come frequently to discuss it with me."

– Daw K--- (female, 40), B--- village, Kya In township (June 2006)

The numerous demands and restrictions enforced on the villagers in Doooplaya make it very difficult for them to maintain their livelihoods. The combination of forced labour demands, land confiscation, looting, heavy taxation and lack of medical care, for example, make it virtually impossible for villagers to make a sufficient living from their traditional cultivation of fields and plantations. This has led to food shortages in many villages, with villagers living a hand-to-mouth existence, having to search for food on a daily basis. In response, many parents have sent their children to refugee camp schools in Thailand and many young people, especially women, have travelled independently to Thailand in search of work in order to send money back to support their families. Villagers furthermore struggle with sickness and disease, particularly malaria. Military restrictions, such as those on trade, travel and the possession of medicine by ordinary villagers, and demands, such as those for forced labour and finances, have left villagers ill-equipped to address such illness. Although the SPDC often forces villagers to construct dispensaries at their own expense, the primary function of these structures is to support claims of 'development' in Karen areas. The regime provides neither supplies nor support for staff upon completion, leaving them empty unless local villagers and traditional birth assistants wishing to maintain these clinics take it upon themselves to stock them with medicine afterwards. In such cases, the villagers must purchase the medicines themselves and pay whatever medics or nurses are to work there. Medicine and treatment however, is prohibitively expensive, so many villagers die from common and usually treatable ailments or find themselves in serious debt after paying for treatment.

"We have so many weaknesses in our village. ...Out of 30 households, there are about 25 households which do not have enough food. Only 3 households, very few households, have sufficient food because they have some cattle and buffaloes. But the other households just search in the morning to eat in the evening, and search in the evening to eat in the morning. They are suffering from poverty. Sometimes these people work all day, but only get enough rice for one meal and sometimes they don't even get enough food to share with their children and grandchildren. They have to work very hard day and night, without time to rest. ...The insufficiency of food among the villagers has been caused by sickness, Loh Ah Pay [forced labour] and the travelling [for the forced labour and meetings they are summoned to]. Both the SPDC and Nyein Chan Yay [KPF] summoned us. There were many demands from many armies so the villagers couldn't manage it all."

– K--- (male, 30), village secretary, G--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

"Some of the villagers that didn't have enough food ... sent their son or daughter to Thailand to work. Some of them are in debt because they had to borrow money from other people to send their children to work in Thailand. ... Most of the youths went to Thailand to work. There are only old people above 40 years and children below 14-15 years that stay in the village. In T--- village, at least one person from each family went to Thailand and some have two family members in Thailand. Some of the married women, who have babies or children, left their children with their parents and went to Thailand. Only about 30 households didn't send anyone to Thailand, because they didn't have any money to go."

– M--- (male, 55), village head for VPDC, T--- village, Kru Tu township (June 2006)

The repression and regimentation of Dooplaya District previously documented in KHRG reports is continuing unabated. Moreover, it is important to note that rather than individual incidents of human rights abuses, it is the combined impact of constant restrictions and demands that military personnel enforce in 'pacified' areas, such as Dooplaya, that most pervasively undermine villagers' livelihoods and ultimately make life in these areas unsustainable. This is not simply a question of poverty which can be addressed through financial aid programmes, as has been repeatedly asserted in various fora by Charles Petrie, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator and head of the UN Development Programme in Rangoon; it is a question of predation and exploitation by military authorities that requires confronting the structures of military repression. The villagers themselves are already doing so by resisting and evading the demands placed on them and thereby undermining military power in their villages, but they are left to do this alone with no support from outside actors, most of whom have opted to align themselves with state structures instead of helping them in this struggle.

"The SPDC never comes to our village to improve or develop the village. They never give us suggestions on how to improve the village. They never think to rebuild the school, the monastery or the village road. They come to the village only to eat the villagers' things."

– K--- (male, 30), village secretary, G--- village, Kawkareik township (Dec 2006)

"We are the villagers so we have to suffer under every army... We want both armies, KNU and SPDC, to stay peacefully. ...We can't work peacefully and freely. Even when we buy things to sell, the DKBA collect taxes from us and we have to pay them. ...The SPDC soldiers are dictators. They use their power and authority in everything they do."

– M--- (male, 55), village head for VPDC, T--- village, Kru Tu township (June 2006)

Further reading

Further background on the situation in Dooplaya can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- *Setting Up the Systems of Repression: The progressive regimentation of civilian life in Dooplaya District* (KHRG #2006-04, September 2006)
- *Continued militarisation, killings and fear in Dooplaya District* (KHRG #2005-F6, June 2005)
- *Dooplaya District: Fighting and Human Rights Abuses Still Continue After Ceasefire* (KHRG #2005-F1, February 2005)
- *SPDC Violates the Ceasefire During Karen New Year Celebrations: The Attack on Kah Law Ghaw Village, Dooplaya District* (KHRG #2005-B1, February 2005)

Photos from Dooplaya can be seen in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006*, *Photo Gallery 2005*, and *KHRG Photo Set 2005A*, available on the KHRG web site (www.khrg.org).

