



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field

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Road construction, attacks on displaced communities and the impact on education in northern Papun District

In the ongoing offensive against villagers in northern Karen State, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has been working to develop infrastructure supportive of increased military control. The construction of new bases and vehicle roads serve this objective as they obstruct the efforts of local communities to evade army patrols and sustain their livelihoods in areas beyond the reach of SPDC forces. Increased control, in turn, allows the SPDC to more easily exploit rural communities for labour, food and other supplies in support of military structures. This report examines how military deployment and the construction of new roads and bases further into Papun District have led local villagers to respond by evading encroaching army units despite the increasing difficulty of this tactic, and how the subsequent displacement has affected children's access to education.

SPDC military activities

In February 2007 the SPDC rotated Military Operations Commands (MOCs)¹ #10, 15 and 16 out of Papun District, replacing them with MOC #1, Light Infantry Division (LID)² #88 and MOC #8 respectively. In Lu Thaw township of northern Papun District, SPDC troops have been operating out of bases at Shoh Kyoh, Gk'La Day Kyoh, Hsweh Kyoh, Oo Meh Kyoh and Dt'Ler Gker Koh. Many of the SPDC camps in Lu Thaw are situated atop the north-south mountain range running along the western bank of the Yunzalin River. From such positions, these camps command a view of the river bank below, where many villages have traditionally been situated. Soldiers have therefore been able to exploit these mountaintop positions to target and launch mortars into the low-lying villages. Following assaults on Dt'roo Kee, Dt'May Kee Bplaw, and Kay Bpu villages by MOCs #10 and 15 in 2006, during which soldiers launched mortar shells and fired on villagers cultivating their rice fields, civilians residing at these locations fled into the surrounding hills and across to the east bank of the Yunzalin River. Such attacks on villages have continued uninterrupted into 2007. On the evening of February 5th, for example, SPDC forces from MOC #8 attacked Thay Thoo Kee village, in Kay Bpu village tract. SPDC troops began patrolling near this community on November 2nd 2006. During the February attack Saw N--- (male, 43) was seriously injured by the mortars when shrapnel embedded itself into his liver, lungs and stomach as he was leaving Ebenezer Church after an evening service. Two other villagers who were accompanying him, Saw P--- (male, 15) and Saw K--- (male, 16) were also hit by shrapnel and suffered minor injuries at this time. As the mortar shells fell, local residents fled the village into the surrounding hills. Saw P--- and Saw K--- were hospitalised at a KNU-supported clinic at Nah Yoh Htah, while other villagers carried Saw N--- by stretcher on a

¹ A Military Operations Command (MOC) consists of ten battalions for offensive operations, presently averaging 120-150 soldiers per battalion in the offensive area. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) of three battalions each. The majority of the columns pursuing Karen villagers consist of most or all of a TOC, or 200-300 troops.

² Light Infantry Divisions of the SPDC, consists of 10 Light Infantry Battalions.

five-day journey by foot to the Thai-Burma border. Upon arrival at the border, Thai officials allowed Saw N--- to be taken to Mae Sariang hospital for treatment, where he subsequently underwent surgery to remove the metal shards from his organs.

The SPDC troops operating in these areas have been continuously patrolling through forest areas in search of displaced villagers and shifting between their existing bases and new satellite camps. The protracted presence of SPDC forces around their villages has meant that villagers have been unable to return to harvest crops and reclaim their land and homes. Concurrent with troop rotations and patrols, the SPDC has also been sending in weapons, ammunition and food supplies to military units based at camps in Lu Thaw township. With these supplies, SPDC patrols operating around Gk'Baw Kee, Shoh Bper Koh, Htee Hsee Hta, Bpoh Gklah Der, Htoh Wee Kee, Htaw Baw Peh, Taw Koh Mu Der, Htee Baw Day, Th'May Kee, Boh Nah Der and Haw Thweh Kee villages have since late November 2006 been seeking out and attacking displaced communities hiding in the surrounding hillsides.

Beyond patrolling in search of displaced communities, SPDC orders to military units in Lu Thaw have, since the end of September 2006, focused primarily on three main objectives. These are 1) construction and upgrading of outpost camps, 2) stocking these camps with ammunition and food supplies in order to make them more sustainable, and 3) preparing the Ler Mu Bplaw to Taw Koh Mu Der and Kay Bpu to Na Yoh Htah routes to upgrade them to fully functioning vehicle roads. This last objective has mainly been implemented by troops from MOC #15, now replaced by LID #88. SPDC authorities have also ordered large-scale road construction in other areas of Papun District. These orders have included the improvement of the Waw Mu to Maw Thay Tha vehicle road in Bu Tho township as well as another from Shwegyin in Nyaunglebin District to Maik Gyi Ma Taung. To support the current reconstruction of these roads, convoys of trucks have been transporting supplies to camps along these routes since October 2006. At present SPDC troops are conducting the initial steps of rebuilding the vehicle road from Gk'Ma Moh to Khoh Loh Nee. According to KHRG researchers in the area, SPDC officers have already ordered local villagers to collect rocks from the surrounding area for this construction.

The SPDC has also begun arranging for the construction of a new 'town' at Pwah Ghaw along the Kyauk-Kyi to Saw Htah vehicle road in Lu Thaw township. This site has been planned for the mass relocation of villagers from the surrounding hills.³ Such large-scale relocation would also allow for the expansion of the SPDC base of Baw Hser Koh, situated on a hilltop overlooking the plains of Pwah Ghaw, by providing a ready source of exploitable civilians for forced labour, finances, food and other supplies. According to escaped convict porters interviewed by KHRG the SPDC is also planning to upgrade the road from Kyauk Kyi (Ler Doh) in Nyaunglebin District to Pwah Ghaw with a more durable all-weather stone foundation. To that end the SPDC is reportedly preparing to bring in bulldozers and more convict porters. The construction of this car road is scheduled to begin imminently along with further road construction north of the Kyauk-Kyi – Saw Htah vehicle road to link Saw Mu Bplaw, Ler Mu Bplaw, Gk'Baw Kee and Taw Koh Mu Der. The SPDC has regularly exploited forced convict labour for both the construction of roads in northern Karen State as well as for portering of supplies alongside military patrols. While the KNU has previously been able to assist escaped convict porters to return to their places of origin in other parts of Burma, the increased SPDC troop activity, especially in Mone township of Nyaunglebin District, has meant that this route is no longer viable, making it increasingly difficult for these individuals to return to their homes.⁴

³ KHRG previously reported on the planned construction of Pwah Ghaw in *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (KHRG #2006-F10, October 2006)

⁴ For more information on the SPDC's use of convict porters see *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005-2006 northern Karen State offensive* (KHRG #2006-03, August 2006).

Displacement in Lu Thaw township

"In the future if the SPDC soldiers remain active and we are unable to stay on our land, we won't know where to go. We dare not plant paddy. We also don't have money to buy food. We hope that the SPDC soldiers will go back to their place so we can work freely."

- Saw L--- (male, 49), L--- village, Lu Thaw Township (December 2006)

According to KHRG field researchers operating in Lu Thaw, the increased SPDC activities in northern Papun have made it increasingly difficult for displaced communities, especially those in Kay Bpu, Naw Yoh Htah, Ler Mu Bplaw and Saw Mu Bplaw village tracts, to manage their livelihoods and address their subsistence and community needs. SPDC soldiers operating in these areas have been actively seeking out displaced peoples living in hiding in the forested hills west of the Yunzalin River, destroying covert crops, food stores and food storage bins as well as destroying community infrastructure such as homes and schools. These villagers have thus been unable to adequately cultivate their crops, leaving them without adequate means of livelihood and thus at severe risk of food shortages for the coming year. Whenever SPDC forces attack displaced communities in Papun, these civilians must gather those who are ill, the elderly and children along with whatever supplies they can carry, and flee the oncoming mortar and gun fire.

"We had to flee to the jungle and up until now we have not dared to go back and stay at our former places. On November 24th 2006 SPDC soldiers found our paddy barn with about 200 baskets of rice and the SPDC soldiers took 50 baskets and they destroyed everything else that we had put in our barn. They took down the barn walls and threw them on the ground."

- Saw B--- (male, 32), B--- village, Lu Thaw township (November 2006)

Most of the displaced communities residing west of the Yunzalin River have sought to remain close to their abandoned villages, hoping to return should SPDC military units withdraw. The expansion and contraction of SPDC forces operating in Karen areas has traditionally been a seasonal pattern, with many units withdrawing during rainy season. However, with the increased construction of new satellite camps, the upgrading of supply routes and the new construction of car roads, these troops have been increasingly remaining at their frontline positions for longer periods. As a consequence, displaced communities who wish to remain near their homes in the hopes of returning to reclaim their land have had to manage with the constant threat of detection by SPDC troops. This has made it increasingly difficult for these villagers to cultivate their fields, operate schools and clinics and access cross-border medical aid brought in from Thailand. Nevertheless, displaced communities regularly attempt to return to their home villages in order to retrieve food and supplies left behind during evacuation. The constant threat of detection and attack by SPDC soldiers operating around their home villages hinders such attempts to retrieve food and possessions.

"The SPDC soldiers came to T--- village in B--- area on November 2nd 2006. My hill fields were near to the SPDC army camp. So, [after fleeing] I tried to retrieve my crops at night time. But I only got 20 baskets of rice. So, for the coming year my family will face problems."

- Saw Y--- (male, 50), T--- village, Lu Thaw Township (Month 2006)

Saw Mu Bplaw village tract in Lu Thaw township has traditionally contained a large number of paddy fields cultivated by local villagers who have in this way effectively managed their livelihoods and supported their families and communities. However, as SPDC forces have encroached further into the area north of the Kyauk-Kyi – Saw Htah vehicle road, where Saw

Mu Bplaw is located, soldiers have regularly burned whatever crops they encounter, thereby exacerbating poverty and undermining the efforts of local peoples to sustain themselves outside of SPDC control.⁵

"Previously I stayed in Shoh Bper Koh village but because the SPDC soldiers were conducting operations I fled to stay at B--- village. So at present I have had to abandon my place of occupation because the soldiers are active in that area. So I cannot go to cultivate my hill fields."

- Saw M--- (male, 41), B--- village, Lu Thaw township (November 2006)



Displaced villagers who fled from SPDC attacks on their homes and fields in Mone (Mu in Karen) township, Nyaunglebin District as they wait with their possessions in Lu Thaw township. This community, like many others from northern Karen State, has attempted to make the journey to Ee Thu Hta camp for internally displaced peoples in eastern Papun District along the Salween river. Along the way they must constantly evade SPDC troops who block travel routes and car roads in order to prevent the movement of displaced communities. [Photo: KHRG]

These soldiers, however, missed the two villagers who then fled and returned to their hiding site. Villagers from Yay Ghoh Kee have lived in an insecure situation ever since 1997 when SPDC forces initially began operations in the area. Since that time these villagers have been unable to permanently remain in their village, choosing instead to flee upon the approach of SPDC patrols and return to reclaim their land and homes when the soldiers depart.

On December 27th 2006 SPDC Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs)⁶ #387 and 276 of MOC #21, under the command of Brigadier General Soe Nway, entered Htwee Pah Wee Kyoh area near Th'Lay Ghaw Der village. As the soldiers approached, local villagers fled into the surrounding forest. Since that time these villagers have remained living in hiding and dare not return to their villages, because the SPDC soldiers continue to patrol the area. On February 8th 2007 these same troops from LIBs #387 and 275 arrived at Baw Gkwaw area. Upon the arrival of the troops local inhabitants from Baw Kwaw as well as nearby Thay Koh Mu Der, Ber Ghaw, Th'Lay Ghaw Der and Lay Poe Kaw Htee villages fled to the forest where they currently remain amidst precarious conditions and depleting food reserves. These same villagers were already displaced temporarily in June 2006 when a previous SPDC column came through to destroy their villages.⁷ Although these villagers were only able to carry a limited amount of rice with them when they fled, they dare not return to retrieve food from covert storage bins left near their abandoned village as they are aware that any villagers spotted in that area by SPDC forces risk being shot on sight. On January 10th 2007, for example, SPDC soldiers fired on villagers Saw Y--- and Saw P--- from Yay Ghoh Kee

⁵ For more information on the SPDC's practice of crop destruction in northern Karen State, including Papun, see *SPDC forces attack rice harvest to force villagers into 'new towns'* (KHRG #2006-B12, November 2006).

⁶ Light Infantry Battalion of the SPDC, supposed to be about 500 soldiers strong, but at present most SPDC battalions number under 200.

⁷ See *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts* (KHRG #2006-B7, June 2006).

"I know for myself that up until now I have had to flee because the SPDC soldiers always attack us. But now I am quite old and I can't manage to flee. Every time when I flee I feel pain in my wrists and my legs."

- Saw M--- (male, 70), village head, T--- village, Lu Thaw township (November 2006)

The impact of displacement on education

"Because the SPDC is active near my neighbours' village we have had to flee from our village. The school year is not finished yet so the children have had to continue their schooling under the trees in the jungle."

- Saw L--- (male, 59), L--- village, Lu Thaw township (January 2007)



Students from Boh Nah Der village, Dt'Yu Bplaw area study outside with their bamboo blackboard in order to warm up under the sun. Their teacher said that in the past, they had about 20 students but because they have been fleeing regularly only 17 students remain, the others having fled further afield.

[Photo: KHRG]



As a result of regular SPDC incursions into the area of Htee Hsee Kee village, the local community has had to flee several times and the students have been unable to study uninterrupted. In response, the parents and teachers established a school at B--- hiding site, shown here, where the students now come to study. [Photo :KHRG]

Ongoing SPDC attacks on the communities of Papun District have meant that many schools have had to close as villagers have fled to the forest to evade military forces. As part of their attacks on these villages, soldiers frequently destroy local schools, either during the initial shelling of the community or subsequently upon entering the abandoned village. The consequences of this in Papun District are that communities from Taw Koh Mu Der, Gk'Baw Kee, Htee Hsee Kee, Htee Thoo Kee, Boh Nah Der, Dt'May Kee and Thay Thoo Kee have been unable to continue providing education at their home villages. While displaced communities quickly restart schools at forest hiding sites, the teachers and student body are often broken up as villagers flee to different locations. Furthermore, continued pursuit by SPDC forces means that displaced communities must be wary of potential detection. Continued evasion of SPDC patrols requires some communities to regularly relocate, which is disruptive to the students' schooling. As displaced communities confront new challenges at forest hiding sites, parents often require their children's assistance in, for example, foraging for food, preparing meals and setting up new homes. These children then no longer have time to attend school.



Thirteen-year-old Naw G--- from B--- village, Lu Thaw township assists her family by milling rice. Although she would like to study, the constant need to evade SPDC forces has increased pressure on her family's livelihood, thereby requiring that she spend more time on household activities. She said, *"My mother sent me to school but we had to flee again and again so my mother asked me to help out with housework and work in the fields. But there is a school in my village so sometimes if I have time, I go to play with my old classmates at the school."* [Photo: KHRG]



This family of three fled when SPDC troops arrived near their home in Thay Thoo Kee village on November 2nd 2006. They currently remain in hiding at a nearby displacement site in the forest. Naw H---, the mother, said that she occasionally returns to check on the situation of her abandoned village and see whether the soldiers have departed. Having covertly constructed a hut in the forest, Naw H--- has been able to flee recurring SPDC attacks without needing to rebuild a new shelter. However, she also said that because her family has had to regularly flee SPDC patrols, her daughter (left) has been unable to continue her education at school and must therefore study at home. Upon meeting a KHRG field researcher Naw H--- told her daughter, *"If you don't understand your lesson, ask your brother [the researcher] who has come and visited us now."* [Photo: KHRG]

"In my village not all of the children are able to come and attend school. For some, their mothers don't allow them to come to school and they have to look after their younger siblings. Some wanted to come but they had family problems."

- Naw H--- (female, 49), L--- village, Lu Thaw township (January 2007)

Following up on a previous incident reported by KHRG in which SPDC troops arrived and burned down Htee Moo Kee village in Ler Mu Bplaw village tract, including their local school, in June 2006, KHRG field researchers returning to this village have learned that the local community subsequently rebuilt a school building following the withdrawal of SPDC troops.⁸ Nevertheless, not all of those who initially fled have returned, and the school which formerly supported around 100 students and 16 teachers has since been reduced to about 70 students and 13 teachers.

"Because of the SPDC soldiers' human rights abuses the children are unable to study freely and they must move from place to place. Also, they have to face a lot of problems so some parents cannot send their children to school and their children

⁸ For more information on this incident see *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue*, October 2006 (KHRG #2006-F10).

have to help them with their daily livelihoods. Also, since some children don't have a chance to study freely they have decided to stop their education."

- KHRG field researcher, Lu Thaw township (December 2006)

Conclusion

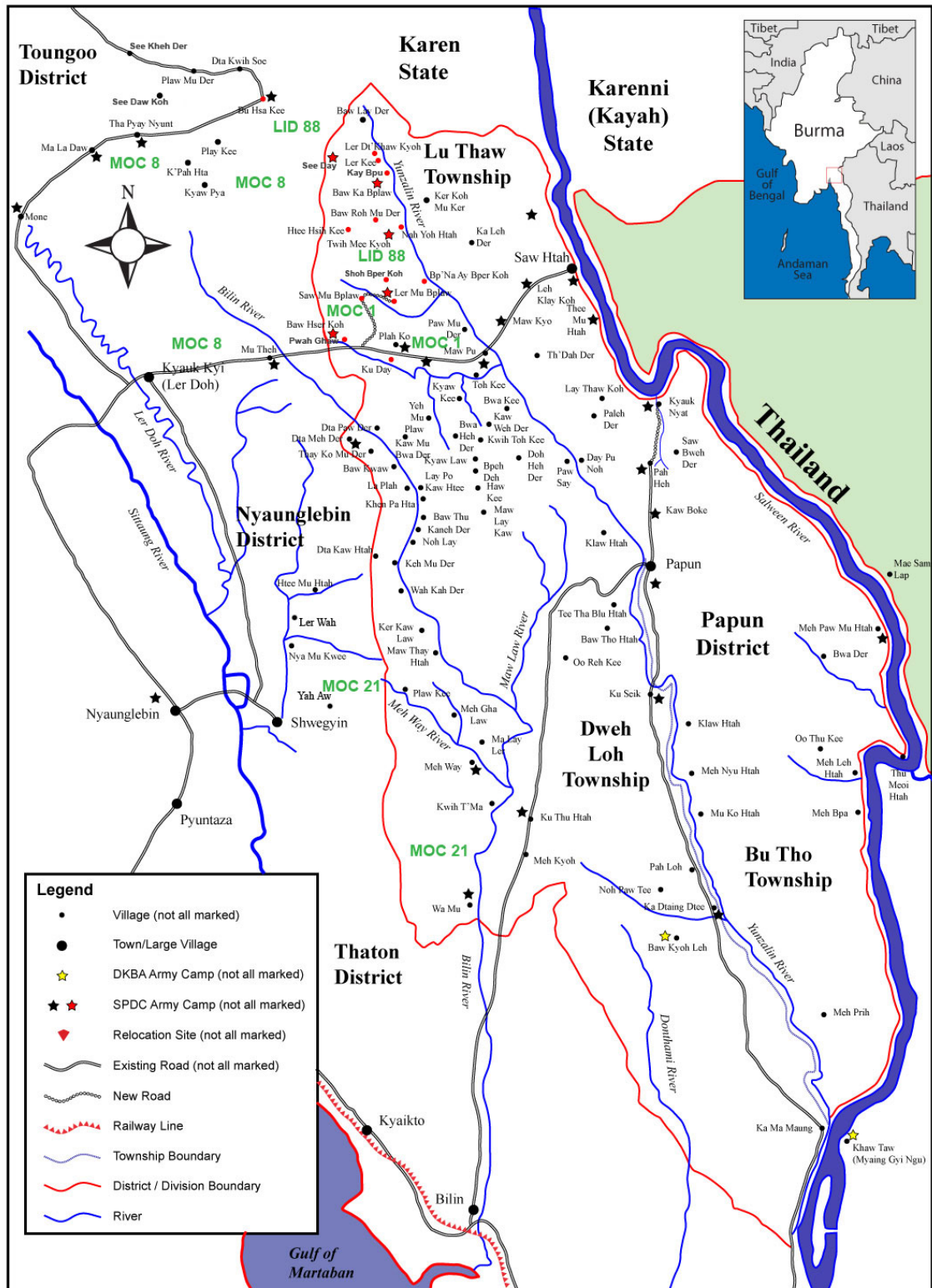
With the ongoing expansion of road networks and search and destroy missions targeting those communities attempting to evade military forces in Papun and other districts, the SPDC has made it clear that it will not tolerate anyone living outside of state control. In carrying out this agenda the SPDC military has shown itself willing to sacrifice whole communities, shooting them on sight and destroying their attempts to sustain themselves independently of the junta's authority. Nevertheless, as they continue to evade military units, operate schools in conditions of displacement, prepare covert food stores and construct clandestine structures in the forest in preparation for displacement, these communities have demonstrated their intention to continue resisting the SPDC's attempts to control and exploit them and regain their rights.

Additional background information regarding the human rights situation in Papun District can be found in the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (KHRG #2006-F10, October 2006)
- *SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response* (KHRG #2006-F9, September 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)
- *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)
- *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)

Photos from Papun and all neighbouring districts are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (updated March 2007), *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.

Northern Offensive Area



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A map of Burma and its surrounding regions. Burma is shown in white, with a yellow rectangular area in the south. Neighboring countries are labeled: THAILAND to the east, LAOS to the northeast, CHINA to the north, and INDIA to the west. Bodies of water are labeled: Gulf of Thailand to the south, Andaman Sea to the southwest, and Gulf of Thailand to the southeast. The word 'Burma' is written in large black letters in the center of the white area.

