



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field

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**The Compounding Consequences of DKBA Oppression:
Abuse, poverty and food insecurity in Thaton District**

As the principal means of establishing control over the people of Thaton District, the SPDC has supported a more aggressive DKBA role in the area. With the junta's political, military and financial backing the DKBA has sought to expand its numbers, strengthen its position vis-à-vis the civilian population and eradicate the remaining KNU/KNLA presence in the region. To those ends, the DKBA has used forced labour, looting, extortion, land confiscation and movement restrictions and embarked on a hostile campaign of forced recruitment from amongst the local population. These abuses have eroded village livelihoods, leading to low harvest yields and wholly failed crops; problems which compound over time and progressively deepen poverty and malnourishment. With the onset of the rainy season and the 2007 cultivation period, villagers in Thaton District are faced with depleting provisions. This food insecurity will require that many harvest their 2007 crop as early as October while still unripe. The low yield of an early harvest, lost time spent on forced labour and the harmful fallout of further extortion and other abuses will all combine to ensure once again that villagers in Thaton District confront food shortages and increasing poverty.

The militarisation of Karen State is fuelling a downward spiral of poverty, malnutrition and ill health. Thaton District (Doo Tha Htoo in Karen) exemplifies this catastrophe as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) seeks to establish military control over the population and eradicate all opposition to its authority via its ally and proxy militia the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DKBA). The region, situated in western Karen State, comprises some of the heaviest areas of DKBA activity. Thaton District extends westwards all the way to the Gulf of Martaban and the Indian Ocean. The district is primarily comprised of low-lying flood plains where the local community, overwhelmingly rural, predominantly engages in flat field paddy cultivation, maintains rubber and fruit plantations and raises livestock. The lack of significant areas of forested mountains, as is found in northern Karen State, combined with heavy military control and restrictions on movement have obstructed flight into displacement as a means of evading military demands and abuse.

With this increasing control, the junta appears to be confident enough in the DKBA to allow the group to carry out its activities in Thaton without a heavy SPDC military presence on the ground. The SPDC does, however, continue to operate in Thaton, specifically with the current deployment of Light Infantry Division [LID] #44 which replaced LID #101 at the end of January 2007. But the situation contrasts with the early days of the DKBA when only a handful of its soldiers would serve alongside a larger column of 50 to 100 SPDC troops. In carrying out their operations DKBA strategy appears to follow three general and interlinked objectives, namely: expanding troop size, strengthening control over the civilian population and completely eliminating the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) presence. To achieve the first of these, DKBA forces operating in Thaton during 2007 have sought to forcibly recruit soldiers to fill their ranks from amongst the local civilian population. Pursuing the second and third objectives, the DKBA has enforced rigid movement restrictions and perpetrated forced labour, land confiscation, looting, extortion, threats, detention and torture.

As the primary military unit in Thaton District, DKBA Brigade #333, led by Brigadier Maung Kyi and Brigadier Aung Naing, has been the major force behind the ongoing abuses. Overall control of DKBA units in Thaton and the source of specific orders underlying regular abuse lie with central authorities at the DKBA headquarters at Myaing Gyi Ngu in Pa'an District which include the monastic head of the DKBA, U Thuzana. On the ground, however, local villagers, especially those living in Bilin and Pa'an townships of northern and eastern Thaton, have overwhelmingly singled out Mo Kyo, Second Commander of DKBA Brigade #333 for culpability in abuse. The infamous Mo Kyo of Brigade #333 regularly plunders livestock and other supplies from villages and fires off guns and mortars while on patrol to frighten villagers, destroy plantations and, apparently, enjoy himself. Mo Kyo has also been personally involved in torturing villagers in at least Khaw Poh Bpleh and Gk'Wa Hta villages, threatening to execute anyone caught violating movement restrictions and sexually harassing a number of women from Khaw Poh Bpleh village. On top of such abuse, Mo Kyo and other officers and soldiers of Brigade #333 continue to enforce regular demands for labour, land and arbitrary 'taxation'.

The ongoing abuses in Thaton District have all combined to limit the time and freedom available for villagers to tend to their crops. The results of this at the end of 2006 were low yields and wholly failed paddy harvests. As a consequence of last year's poor harvests local farmers, now already into the planting stage of the 2007 crop cycle, are confronting widespread food shortages. When food stores run out, villagers will have little monetary means of securing alternative supplies due to the poverty fostered by military predation. Faced with impending famine, many farmers may attempt to harvest their 2007 crops as early as October, while the plants are still unripe and thus only able to provide a limited yield. Moreover, ongoing abuses will compound with the meagre 2007 harvest to perpetuate the downward spiral of poverty, malnutrition and ill health in Thaton District.

Restrictions on movement

"The owners of [farm field] huts were sleeping in the village because the DKBA did not allow them to sleep outside the villages in their huts. And they [DKBA] said that if they saw anybody sleeping outside the village they would shoot them all."

- Naw B--- (female, 46), K--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

On top of the staple paddy crop, which the majority of farmers in Thaton cultivate through flat field, and to a lesser extent hill field, agriculture many local villagers also grow various other vegetables, maintain plantations such as coconut and jackfruit and raise livestock. For such occupations farmers require access to open space outside of the village proper. They furthermore need the freedom to travel to, and remain for long durations at, agricultural fields and pasture land. During the labour-intensive cultivation period that begins with the annual onset of the rains around May to June, farmers need to spend most of their time at their fields, living and sleeping in farm field huts set up amidst their crops. Being close to their fields allows farmers to more easily weed crops, keep away wild animals and insects and waste less time travelling back and forth to their villages. Crucial to the cultivation of flat field paddy, farmers must maintain irrigation dykes partitioning individual paddy plots, keep the fringe around their fields free of weeds and overgrowth and monitor the water level within each segregated plot. Inability to access fields for prolonged periods or daily losses of labour time severely threaten the success of the harvest and can result in limited or wholly failed crops.

"When DKBA soldiers came to operate they did not allow villagers to go to their hill fields, so many of the villagers' fields were overgrown with shrubbery. So the paddies

were ruined. This year many of the villagers' hill fields were ruined. The hill fields that should have yielded 100 baskets of rice yielded only 20 baskets of rice. And this year there were about ten hill fields, in Khaw Poh Bpleh village, that should have yielded 100 baskets but yielded only 20 baskets of rice from the harvest. This happened because of the DKBA."

- Saw N--- (male, 37), K--- village, Bilin township (Dec 2006)

In a blatant disregard for the labour-intensive requirements of the cultivation cycle, DKBA forces operating in Thaton and especially those troops active in the northern township of Bilin have enforced severe movement restrictions on local villages. These restrictions were intensified a year ago at the start of the 2006 rainy season when villagers needed to prepare their fields and begin the initial stages of planting. The orders, implemented by Mo Kyo of DKBA Brigade #333, involved strict control over all entry and exit of the village confines and an absolute prohibition on remaining at farm fields over night. DKBA forces appear to believe such measures will help eradicate the KNU/KNLA presence in Thaton and prevent civilians from fleeing forced labour and other demands. DKBA soldiers told villagers that those spotted violating the regulations would be deemed KNLA informants and shot on sight. Many inhabitants were thus unwilling to travel out of their village even during the day and thus missed out on the initial planting phase. To address the situation some attempted to rear cattle and buffalo within the village confines. It was not until the local presence of Brigade #333 soldiers subsided after about a month that many villagers willingly ventured out and attempted to salvage the fleeting potential of the rainy season. As the successive stages in the crop cycle are dependent on changing weather conditions, many farmers were too late and their fields had to be simply abandoned. These movement restrictions, variants of which are now established across much of SPDC- and DKBA-controlled areas of Karen State, effectively ensured that the yield of the subsequent harvest was a fraction of its potential.

"The villagers dared not leave the village while the DKBA was conducting operations because the villagers were afraid that if the DKBA saw us in the forest they would beat and interrogate us. And the villagers were also afraid that the mortar fire of the DKBA would hit them as well."

- Naw B--- (female, 46), K--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

Villagers in Bilin township further reported that individual DKBA soldiers said they would do whatever they wanted to any villagers spotted outside their village. Ridiculing the extreme nature of these restrictions Saw Ht---, a resident of Gk--- village, Bilin township said *"even the cattle and buffaloes didn't dare to travel outside the village."* Complaining about Mo Kyo, Naw B---, the head of K--- village described how he would fire off rifles and mortars seemingly at random into forests, farm fields and plantations destroying large tracts of paddy fields and coconut, jack fruit and other trees during the course of his patrols.

The detrimental consequences of DKBA restrictions compounded with earlier large scale flooding in Bilin township during the 2006 rainy season. Shortages in staple goods such as rice, fish-paste and salt, due largely to trade restrictions and obligatory paddy quotas, have driven up their market price. In 2006, the cost of rice in Burma rose by a nationwide average of 30%.¹ The result has become a dire situation of food insecurity and poverty for villagers in Thaton which has continued into the 2007 harvest period. Normally, villagers would rely on the food stores left over from the previous harvest to sustain them through the dry season and the subsequent cultivation period. However, the low yield of crops brought on by DKBA restrictions and last year's flood may force farmers to cut short this year's cultivation period and harvest their paddy as early as October. While this option will provide some rice to

¹ "Roundup: Myanmar takes measures to bring down commodity prices," *People's Daily Online*, August 30th 2006. Accessed at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200608/30/eng20060830_298141.html on July 6th 2007.

offset their limited provisions, the yield will be low as the rice will not have ripened by this time. A low yield due to an unripe paddy crop will combine with the effects of movement restrictions imposed by DKBA, frustrating the harvest once again and undermining the yield of the 2007 crop even further.

Looting, theft and extortion

Operating with impunity, DKBA and SPDC forces in Thaton District freely loot, steal and otherwise extort money, food and supplies from local communities. Villagers in Thaton have told KHRG that those primarily responsible for such theft have been the soldiers operating under the authority of Second Commander Mo Kyo of DKBA Brigage #333, Company Commander Pah Gker Ler of DKBA Brigade #2, Battalion #333 and a third officer identified as Pah Mer Ler who operates under the authority of Commander Bih of DKBA Brigade #333. In Bilin township, soldiers from DKBA Brigade #333 regularly steal livestock, money and other supplies from villagers. Although many DKBA officers and soldiers claim to be vegetarian they continue to openly steal and eat villagers' livestock.

"He [Pah Mer Ler of DKBA Brigade #333] never asked to buy anything. He just took and stole [the items] when he saw that the shop was open and the owners were not able to ask for payment. He took [whatever] as he wanted."

- Naw B--- (female, 46), K--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

To give an example, one villager spoke to KHRG regarding an incident which took place on September 9th 2006 when DKBA Brigade #333 Second Commander Mo Kyo and 40 of his soldiers entered to Wa Keh Hta village at 9:00 in the evening. At that time the soldiers went from house to house stealing a total of approximately 40 chickens, a number of ducks and 50,000 kyat in cash. Some of those whose property the soldiers stole are listed below.

No.	Villager's name	Age	Stolen items
1	Ma Aye Mying's mother	40	2 roosters
2	Naw Baw Kaw Day	30-40	1 hen
3	Pee Gklo's mother	50	1 hen
4	Mu Ray	28	1 chicken
5	Htoh Daw's mother	40	50,000 kyat

"There were about 40 chickens that they [DKBA] stole. If we weighed these 40 chickens, it would weigh about 30 viss [49 kg. / 108 lbs.]. The recent price of a viss of chicken is 3,000 kyat. So, the total cost of the lost chickens is about 90,000 kyat. The chickens were stolen at night time."

- Naw B--- (female, 46), K--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

At one point during the event some village women caught sight of a group of DKBA soldiers chasing after three elusive ducks. When soldiers managed to grab hold of the ducks the villagers shouted at them from their homes. In surprise the soldiers dropped one of the ducks and were only able to make off with the other two. Elsewhere in the village, a local woman looking out from her home spotted a soldier attempting to catch one of her chickens. She called out to him saying, *"My nephew, you are taking my chicken."* However, the soldier responded aggressively saying *"Come down here if your back wants to be beaten."* Frightened, the woman dared not descend or say anything more, thus forsaking the chicken to the thief. This woman told KHRG she had really wanted to eat that chicken but she had been holding out, making the theft that much more frustrating. Commenting on the whole incident Naw M---, the local village head suggested that, *"Even though the women dared to speak out, they wouldn't dare to go out off their houses. They are scared. We would have also been afraid if it had been you or if it was me."*

While night time looting seemingly indicates a recognised, if violated, sense of property rights both SPDC and DKBA officers and soldiers nevertheless frequently demand payments outright in cash or kind with the backing of force to exact compliance. This form of theft differs only in so far as army personnel confront villagers directly and make no attempt at subtlety. Such extortion often involves demands for rice, chickens, ducks and other food for soldiers; building materials for the construction of army camps or for resale; or straightforward cash payments.

Examples of such extortion are numerous. On January 20th 2007, for instance, Deputy Commander Aung Than Htway of SPDC IB #257, LID #101 demanded three sacks [150 kg. / 330 kg.] of rice from Khaw Poh Bpleh village. This event occurred prior to Aung Than Htway's reassignment to the SPDC base at Gk'Dter Dtee when the Army deployed LID #44 to replace LID #101. During the incident Aung Than Htway told the village head that he had run out of rations but that SPDC authorities would not allow him to take additional rations from Lay Gkay. Instead, they instructed him get his rations from Gk'Dter Dtee. He explained to the villagers that he was therefore travelling to Gk'Dter Dtee to pick up extra rations, but the trip would take several days. So, he was afraid that his soldiers would not have rice to eat along the way. The village head was afraid that the Aung Than Htway would be dissatisfied if the villagers did not supply the rice demanded. So, she informed the community of Khaw Poh Bpleh who organised the three sacks of rice and gave it to him. However, as soon as Aung Than Htway got the three sacks of rice, he demanded ten villagers to serve as porters to carry the rice for him all the way to Baw Gkoh Hta. The village head responded they would not provide any porters as they had already given the rice. Aung Kyaw Htway then replied that he would be forced to sell off the rice he had just confiscated since he would be unable to carry it all the way to Gk'Dter Dtee. However, the village head told him that he could do as he liked as she could not provide him with porters in any case. The village head said that three sacks of rice was no small amount and it furthermore was taken without compensation.

On November 10th 2006, Officer Kyaw Mu Lah of DKBA Brigade #333 based at Lay Gkay army camp, summoned village heads for a meeting at which they ordered them to manufacture and deliver thatch shingles leaves for the construction of roofs for the homes of families of soldiers from Brigade #333. Most DKBA and SPDC demands, such as this one, are backed by an often explicit, if vague, threat to enforce compliance. As one local village head told KHRG, "*In every order-letter which they have written to us they have said that if we don't do as they demand, they will 'take action' against us.*" The villages from which Kyaw Muh Lah demanded thatch were Khaw Poh Bpleh, Htee Hsih Baw, Lay Gkay, Bp'Yah Raw, Dtah Uh Kee, Dtah Uh Nee, Ler Gk'Der and Ler Poh. The amount of thatch was dependent on the size of each village. Khaw Poh Bpleh village, for example, was ordered to prepare 2,000 thatch shingles. Village head Daw Htah Yee organized the delivery of the thatch using nine bullock carts. Those villages situated furthest away from the army camp were told they could provide cash in lieu of shingles; a seeming relief from having to trek the whole way carrying the thatch. These villages were ordered to pay 5,000 kyat for every 100 shingles demanded. However, many felt the cost of preparing the shingles and the opportunity cost of delivering the items to the camp would be less than the cash demanded, and so they ended up choosing to make and deliver the thatch instead.

"The DKBA, they still demand leaves every year. They demand 2,000 shingles of leaves per year. They said that if we paid them in cash instead of leaves, we would have to give them 5,000 kyat per one hundred shingles of leaves. So, we told them that we couldn't give 5,000 kyat and we just gave them the leaves. The DKBA [Brigade] #333 Commander Maung Kyi was the one who demanded leaves."

- Daw K--- (female, 52), Ht--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

On January 22nd 2007, SPDC LID #44 Commander Hlah Myint Shwe demanded 1,500 thatch shingles, 750 poles of *may* bamboo (a species of thin bamboo used in construction) and 50 poles of *gklu* bamboo (a species of thick bamboo used to construct floor beams) from Lay Gkay village for use in constructing a new army camp. Hlah Myint Shwe told the villagers that he would pay them for the thatch and bamboo, but villagers reported that such payment never came. At current prices in Thaton a hundred shingles of bamboo cost 5,000 kyat, a post of *may* bamboo is 50 kyat and a post of *gklu* bamboo is 500 kyat. The total financial burden on Lay Gkay village for this demand was thus 137,500 kyat.

On February 8th 2007, San Win, Battalion Officer SPDC IB #251, LID #101 ordered villages in Bilin township to each furnish 300 rattan sticks five cubits [228.6 cm] in length before the end of the day. This order was sent to Th'Waw Pya, Mya Lay, upper Gkaw Heh, lower Gkaw Heh and Shwe Oh villages. San Win also ordered Ma Gkloo Htaw, Dt'Raw Poh, Htee Hser Kee, Gkwee Lay villages on the same day to provide quantities of rattan sticks proportionate to their population size. The order required each village to deliver the poles to Mya Lay. None of the villagers were in any way compensated for the rattan sticks or for the labour required to collect and deliver them. Moreover, the SPDC told the villagers that the rattan was for use in social welfare.

Covering the situation in Pa'an District, KHRG reported in December on widespread extortion and forced labour which DKBA forces had perpetrated to support their celebration of Karen New Year, at places such as Shwe Gkoh Gkoh, a village on the Thoo Mweh river which borders Thailand, on December 19th 2006.² In Thaton District as well, the DKBA forced villagers to shoulder the financial burden so that local bases could throw a lavish affair for the occasion. In Bilin and Pa'an townships officers from DKBA Brigade #333 demanded money as early as September 9th 2006 to finance the celebration of Karen New Year in Kaw Htaw Bpoo. The villagers were told they had to pay the money 'without fail'. Those villages in Thaton District from which DKBA forces extorted money for the Karen New Year celebration at Kaw Htaw Bpoo are listed below.

No.	Village	Amount (kyat)	No.	Village	Amount (kyat)
1	Hsoo Kee	100,000	24	Lay Gkay	200,000
2	Ta Meh Kee	10,000	25	Ler Gklaw	90,000
3	Lah Gkyoh Koh	10,000	26	Dta Baw	80,000
4	Lah Gkyoh Kaw Htee	10,000	27	Gkah Meh	30,000
5	Wa Kheh Htah	6,000	28	Lay Kaw Htee	10,000
6	Meh Baw Kee	10,000	29	Htee Bpa Doh Kee	25,000
7	Htaw Gklaw Kee	50,000	30	Gkaw PohKoh	50,000
8	Htaw Gklaw Poh Kee	4,000	31	western Yoh Gklah	70,000
9	Noh Ber Baw	30,000	32	eastern Yoh Gklah	40,000
10	Gkwee Lay Pya	50,000	33	Htaw Gklaw Hta	10,000
11	Gk' Wa Hta	15,000	34	eastern Htee Bpa Doh Hta	150,000
12	Gklaw Hta	50,000	35	western Htee Bpa Doh Hta	150,000
13	Htoh The Kee	30,000	36	Ma Gkloo Htaw	50,000
14	Gkwee Lay Bpoo	20,000	37	Gkwee Lay	30,000
15	Baw Naw Kee	5,000	38	Th'Waw Pya	10,000
16	Nya Poh Kee Th'Waw	10,000	39	Htee Hser Kee	10,000
17	Ler Gk'Der	100,000	40	Gkaw Heh	60,000
18	Dta Uh Nee	100,000	41	Shwe Oh	20,000
19	Dta Uh Kee	100,000	42	Mya Lay	10,000
20	Bpaw Kee	50,000	43	Htee Hsih Baw	150,000
21	Ler Poh	30,000	44	Khaw Poh Bpleh	100,000
22	Thoo Gk'Bee	30,000	45	Gkyoh Wah Baw Naw Nee	120,000
23	Bp' Ya Raw	70,000	46	Gkyoh Wah Th'Waw Pah Doh	120,000

² [Forced Labour, Extortion, and Festivities: The SPDC and DKBA burden on villagers in Pa'an District](#), Karen Human Rights Group, December 2006.

Most villages complied with the demands and delivered the money by October 20th 2006. Some paid the extortion at Lay Gkay army camp and others at Oh Daw army camp. Even though the villagers were ordered to pay the money 'without fail', some of village heads refused and, through carefully worded arguments, were able to negotiate with the DKBA soldiers for a reduction of as much as half the original demand. Nevertheless, villagers in Thaton later complained to KHRG that while the DKBA soldiers were the ones who got to celebrate the Karen New Year festivities, it was the villagers who had to bear the costs. Despite the excessive financial burden of this extortion, villagers paid the money, with the exception of those few able to negotiate a limited reduction, in the face of punitive retribution for non-compliance.

"We didn't know what they would do to us if we didn't arrange the money for them... Would they have said that we were naughty? Would they have said that we didn't care about them? Would they misunderstand us? ... We couldn't determine it [the punishment for non-compliance], so we just organised the money."

- Poo P--- (male, 70), Dt--- village, Bilin township (Dec 2006)

Since the start of 2007 DKBA officers have labelled much of the extortion which they have demanded in Thaton District as a form of religious 'alms giving'. The implication being that these payments are in some way meritorious. However, as villagers already give so much of their time and resources to the DKBA under duress this attempt was simply seen as yet more blatant extortion. The SPDC and DKBA both frequently use religious language in an overwhelmingly unwelcome effort to grease the mechanisms of coercion. Although terms such as 'alms giving' and 'merit making' are bandied about, villagers typically see the exploitation through the language.

"The DKBA did not give us any wages and they told us to donate alms. People have to do alms-giving [for the DKBA] all the time so they are no longer patient and they have started to get annoyed. They told us that constructing the pagoda is alms work and they told us to go. But we have to do it without fail anyway. This 'alms-giving' is forced alms giving."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 42), L--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

Forced labour

"The villagers who are building the road are girls, boys, men and women. One of women came back yesterday because her baby wanted to nurse and she went back again the next morning. The oldest villagers who are building the road are more than 50 years old and the youngest are 14 years old. My 14-year-old daughter has gone to build the road now as well. The villagers have to carry stones, lay mud to fill the holes and level the road with mattocks."³

- Naw Dt--- (female, 55) T--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

"For our occupation, we villagers cultivate flat fields. But this year we won't have enough rice because our paddy has died. We planted sesame again, but it also died. We couldn't do anything anymore. This year, we will have to struggle hard and I don't know if the machetes and spears will fly around [if there will be fighting between the armed groups]. While facing insufficient food for ourselves, we were fined by the DKBA and forced to labour by the SPDC. If the SPDC soldiers go back, it will be better for us. But if they stay here, they will continue to force us to labour."

- Pee R--- (female, 61), Ht--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

³ Mattocks are digging tools common throughout Karen State with a flat blade set at right angles to the handle and used to break up agricultural soil prior to planting.

As with all military-controlled areas of Karen State forced labour in Thaton District is widespread and systematic with both DKBA and SPDC forces regularly ordering villagers to work on a wide range of tasks. Frequently DKBA and SPDC soldiers simply show up at a given village and demand porters to carry rations and ammunition or alternatively send order documents to the village head who must then take responsibility to arrange the stated number of labourers. These villagers are uncompensated and unfed but they are nevertheless ordered to comply without fail regardless of illness or injury. According to Saw M---, a villager from Gk--- village, none of the residents of his village want to serve as porters because the soldiers treat those who do so very roughly and if the porters feel that they are no longer able to continue walking, they are reprimanded and kicked and forced to go on. As a consequence of such harassment, abuse and complete lack of compensation many villagers ordered to porter have chosen to hire others to take their place. In payment for this service, villagers provide the stand-in porters with one big tin [12.5 kg. / 27.6 lb.] of rice. However, many villagers have no surplus rice or money with which to hire a stand-in and must therefore go themselves. DKBA soldiers have also threatened village heads in a number of cases that they will shoot every man they meet if they don't get the requisite number of porters. In some villages, the men have fled prior to the arrival of DKBA soldiers upon learning of their approach so as to avoid forced labour.

"The DKBA and SPDC soldiers demand forced labour and supplies, but if we don't follow them, we are worried that they will trouble and torture us. So, despite the difficulties we are afraid of them. So, as we are villagers we have to obey them."

- Saw K--- (male, 45), Bp--- village, Bilin township (Dec 2006)

"The villagers have to do forced labour for both the DKBA and SPDC army every time they demand it. If they [SPDC] need bamboo, wood or thatch people have to go and cut it for them. If they need us to construct a road, we have to go and construct it. If they need us to clear the road we have to clear it."

- Saw M--- (male, 37), K--- village, Bilin township (Dec 2006)

Regular forced labour in Thaton District, especially among those villages situated in Bilin township, has been a primary factor leading to increasing food insecurity. Compounded with severe restrictions on movement, forced labour prevents villagers from engaging in their own agricultural work, thus weakening their crops and fostering a low yield or completely failed harvest. Instead of investing their time in preparing the land, planting and transplanting the paddy, weeding the fields, and finally harvesting their crops, villagers have had to engage in the time-consuming labour of portering and other tedious work for military units.

"They [DKBA] demanded six villagers. We couldn't reduce this by even one person. They said, 'We will ask you only once, but if we don't get it [the number of labourers] we will force you to walk naked when we come down.' This was in the month of Wa Gaung.⁴ At that time, people were still planting the paddy. They took the people, forced them to carry things and took them to Ler Poe. It was five days until they released them. They didn't give them anything and not even rice to eat. It was very difficult. The villagers told me, 'We are very tired.' I felt very sorry about that. The load that each villager had to carry weighed about 10 viss [16.33 kg / 36 lbs]."

- Naw M--- (female, 37), W--- village, Bilin township (Sep 2006)

⁴ Wa Gaung is one month in the Burmese calendar which follows the lunar cycle. This month falls around July – August each year.

Villagers in Bilin township have reported that since December 2006, Camp Commander Kyi Shwe Oo of SPDC IB #257, LID #101 based at Yoh Gklah army camp has ordered all villages situated near the camp to provide people to serve as *set tha*. Kyi Shwe Oo has demanded two people per village to serve in this capacity for a period of two days, with this responsibility rotating from village to village every two days. The work primarily involves duty as a messenger relaying orders from army officers to village heads but also includes other menial tasks around camp when no messages are in need of delivery. Villagers serving as *set tha* at Yoh Gklah army camp, for example, have been ordered to travel to a forest about three miles away in order gather between 50 and 100 bamboo poles each. The *set tha* have also been ordered to cut down toddy leaves, carry water, build and repair the perimeter fence and carry military rations. This last task has taken up to three days, thereby prolonging the period of labour beyond the two initially demanded. Villages which have had to provide people to serve as *set tha* at Yoh Gklah army camp include, eastern Yoh Gklah, western Yoh Gklah, western Htee Bpa Doh Hta, eastern Htee Bpa Doh Hta, Htaw Gklaw Hta, Htee Bpa Doh Kee, Lay Kaw Htee and Htaw Gklaw Kee. Some of the soldiers based at Yoh Gklah have on occasion allowed villagers serving as *set tha* to eat with the soldiers at the camp. This, however, depends on the whims of those stationed at Yoh Gklah and the food has not been forthcoming daily. Villagers have therefore occasionally made the trek all the way back to their homes from the army camp in order to eat.



43-year-old Daw A--, the head of Y--- village, shown here in January 2007, explained to KHRG that commander Kyi Shwe Oo of SPDC IB #257, LID #101 has been forcing her villagers to cut down bamboo, prepare thatch shingles and porter army rations. [Photo: KHRG]

“They forced the set tha to cut bamboo for them. And if each set tha must cut 50 bamboo poles, then each of them must cut 50 bamboo poles. The set tha were uncompensated, but sometimes the soldiers called them to eat rice there at the army camp and then released them to come back. The set tha weren’t fed rice every day so sometimes they would just come back to eat at home.”

- Pee R--- (female, 61), Ht--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

Pee M---, headwoman of Ht--- village reported that not all of the villagers were able to manage the long trek to the army camp and some among those who were able to reach the camp and complete the forced labour fell ill upon returning home. Those unable or unwilling to act as *set tha* were obliged to hire another villager at a cost of 2,000 kyat per day to take their place. On top of providing villagers as *set tha*, SPDC IB #257 also ordered each village to provide bullock carts, which has required drivers serving in rotation to transport rations to the SPDC camp at Yoh Gklah.

In January 2007 DKBA Brigade #333 officer Kyaw Min told Gk'Ma Moh villagers that the monk U Thuzana, head of the DKBA and based at Myaing Gyi Ngu in Pa'an District, had sent 4,000 bricks to Htee Lay Kaw village for the construction of a new pagoda at Gkyah Htee Yoh Koh Poh. This pagoda was to be constructed upon the summit of the Htee Lay Koh village mountain in Bilin township. Along with the construction of the pagoda itself, the DKBA also organised the construction of a road which ran from a pagoda at Meh Say to the Htee Lay Kaw pagoda. Construction on the pagoda and road began in January 2007. In order to carry out the construction work, DKBA Brigade #333 soldiers forced local villagers to labour on the project. Village heads received written orders in which DKBA Brigade #333

threatened to 'take action' if the villagers failed to comply. As part of the road and pagoda construction work soldiers forced villagers to carry lime, water, sand, bricks and cement from the base of the mountain to the summit. Those forced to carry these supplies reported that it was extremely difficult to climb up the side of the mountain as it was a very steep slope and they feared slipping and falling down along the way. Moreover, the people that worked on the road construction have had to bring their own tools and have been told to clear every last tree stump in the construction area.



K--- village head, 55-year-old Daw T---, shown here in January 2007, explains that DKBA soldiers and SPDC forces from IB #257 based at Yoh Gklah camp have forced her villagers to do *loh ah pay*⁵ [forced labour] and *set tha* all the time. [Photo: KHRG]

"The DKBA [Brigade #333] ordered villagers to construct a pagoda at Gku Wah Mountain. They demanded 50 villagers each day. They started construction on January 20th 2007 and it took 12 days before it was finished. The distance from our village to the top of the mountain is about four hours on foot. It is very hard to climb the winding route up the mountain. In some places in order to cross a gorge we had to make a bridge. In some places [we] had to build a ladder. The villagers were so scared to cross [the gorges] and climb it [the mountain]. But the villagers had to do it without fail. Before going to do the pagoda construction, we went to work on the road construction first. For the work on the road construction, they ordered us to bring our own axes, mattocks and everything. It took us two days working on the road construction. While we were working on the road, they didn't even let us leave a single tree stump [in the area being cleared]. We had to work both on the road construction and pagoda construction. The order was from the commander [Brigadier] Maung Kyi and was disseminated to the villagers by Kyaw Mu Lah at Lay Gkaw army camp."

- Saw Gk---, (male, 42), L--- village, Bilin township (Feb 2007)

"We had to carry bricks, sand, cement, water and lime from the bottom of the mountain up to the top. They demanded 20 people from our village for three days and they have rotated every village in turns. One turn lasts three days and we have had three turns. The one who ordered us was Brigade #333 Brigadier Maung Kyi. He wrote a letter to us and said that if we didn't go, 'action' would be taken against us. So, the villagers thought it would be better if we went because if they came and took our rice we wouldn't dare say anything and we would be in trouble."

- Naw B--- (female, 46), village head, K--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

While ordering the villagers to labour, the DKBA told them that they were participating in religious work for which they would get merit. Each village has had to provide workers to labour for a three day stretch, after which time they have been replaced by workers from another village. Villagers have reported that for the duration of the work they were not permitted to return to their homes. And as the construction initially began during the cold season, the nights were frigid and the villagers had not brought blankets or warm clothing.

⁵ 'Loh Ah Pay' is a Burmese term originally meaning voluntary service in the construction of temples and other community buildings. The SPDC uses the term when demanding uncompensated labour. For villagers the term has come to mean most forms of forced labour.

Nevertheless, neither DKBA nor SPDC personnel exacting forced labour have compensated local villagers for their labour.

Land confiscation

In 2007, villagers living around the recently established Htee Poh Nyah Lih SPDC army camp have reported that they are now confronting the dire effects of last year's land confiscation. On September 1st 2006, the SPDC Artillery Group #314, under the command of Battalion Commander Colonel Kyaw Than, had arrived at the site of Htee Poh Nyah Lih near Gkya Dt'Raw village. While setting up a new army camp Colonel Kyaw Than also ordered the confiscation of the surrounding plantations and flat field agricultural land. Most local residents maintained toddy palm, rubber and fruit plantations for their livelihoods. However, following the confiscation of their land these villagers were told they no longer had permission to freely collect rubber or toddy from the trees.

Instead, the newly arrived soldiers began plundering the plantations, collecting the fruit for themselves and cutting down whole trees for use as fire and construction wood. The soldiers built a brick kiln amidst one of the confiscated flat fields and used the newly felled plantation trees as fuel. Some villagers were told that they would be permitted to collect rubber if they paid a fee of 75,000 kyat. As most could not afford this amount they were left without access to their former means of livelihood. At present these villagers are feeling the mounting effects of the land confiscation as the loss of income has left them unable to address their subsistence needs. The names of the villagers and the amount of land confiscated from each are listed below.

No.	Villager	Land confiscated
1	Poo Tee Maung Win	5 acres of flat field, 11 acres of rubber plantation, 3 acres of toddy plantation and 1 acre of durian plantation
2	Saw Tee Pah	2 acres of toddy plantation
3	Saw Thaw Shwe	1.5 acres of rubber and toddy plantation
4	Saw Gkaw La	2 acres of rubber and toddy plantation
5	Saw Maung Leh	3 acres of rubber plantation
6	Saw Pah La Thah	3 acres of rubber plantation
7	Saw Sheh Poe	3 acres of rubber plantation
8	Saw Thah Lah	2.5 acres of rubber plantation
9	Saw Soe Mya	2 acres of rubber plantation
10	Naw Lah Aye	1 acre of rubber plantation
11	Saw Poe Noo	2 acres of rubber plantation
12	Saw Pee La	1 acre of toddy and bamboo plantation
13	Saw Maung Sien	2 acres of rubber and durian plantation
14	Saw Dt'Wah Dih	1.5 acre of rubber plantation
15	Saw Maung Tu	2 acres of rubber plantation
16	Saw Pah Thoo Gklay	1.5 acres of rubber and toddy plantation
17	Saw Lay Neh	1.5 acres of rubber and toddy plantation
18	Saw Kyaw Bpyu	8 acres of rubber plantation and 2 acres of toddy plantation
19	Saw Sah Lwin	2 acres of toddy plantation
20	Naw Aye Paw	2 acres of flat field
21	Saw Than Hlah	4 acres of rubber plantation
22	Saw Pah Bweh	7 acres of rubber plantation
23	Saw Dt'Gku	5 acres of rubber plantation
24	Saw Nyah Htee	5 acres of durian and bamboo plantation
25	Saw Aung Yay	10 acres of wood and bamboo plantation
26	Saw Pah Gkaw	2 acres of rubber plantation
27	Naw Mu Kyi	5 acres of wood and bamboo plantation
28	Saw Htin Shwe	4 acres of toddy plantation
29	Saw Kah Sheih	5 acres of rubber plantation

Forced recruitment

Between December 2006 and January 2007, DKBA forces in Thaton District began implementing orders from their authorities at Myaing Gyi Ngu to expand the number of soldiers in their ranks. According to DKBA Commander Maung Kyi, the order to enlarge troop size came directly from the monk U Thuzana, head of the DKBA. On January 2nd 2007, DKBA Brigade #333 Brigadier Maung Kyi summoned the village heads of eastern Baw Naw, Bilin township and Pa-an township for a meeting at the DKBA base at Ohn Daw. KHRG field researchers report that larger villagers, those with 200 households or more were ordered at this time to gather six men each to be soldiers. Smaller villages with 60 households or less were told to collect two to three men each. Other villagers, however, reported orders to gather five men as soldiers. Maung Kyi told village heads to send the selected recruits to him by the end of March. If they failed to arrive, Maung Kyi warned, village heads would be fined 600,000 kyat for each soldier short of the quota. Moreover, Maung Kyi told the village heads that if they couldn't gather enough villagers, he would send DKBA soldiers to the villages to seize the required number of recruits themselves. And if they had to come and catch the villagers, they would take not only enough to meet the initial quota but would take all men under the age of 40 to serve as DKBA soldiers.

"The DKBA summoned us to a meeting and told us to collect soldiers for them. They told us to return back to them after three days. But now it has already been five, six days and we haven't returned to them. They told us to collect six villagers from my village to join the military. We went to this meeting on the full moon of this month [January 2nd 2007]. In the meeting we met with Deih Bu and he said that he was ordered by somebody to inform us, the village heads. Deih Bu is a soldier of Commander Bih of [DKBA] Brigade #333. But we didn't see Commander Bih when we went to this meeting. We met only Deih Bu and Pah Mer Ler. They said that if we didn't provide them with the soldiers, they would come and catch them by themselves. There were some other villages that went to this meeting together with us. They were Mya Lay, Th'Waw Pya, Shwe Oh, Khaw Poh Bpleh and Htee Hsih Baw villages. We went to attend the meeting at the outskirts of Gkaw Heh village."

- Daw K--- (female, 52), Ht--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

Following the orders, one village head-woman, Naw K--- who was attending the meeting spoke up and said that they would not be able to gather enough villagers and also didn't have enough money to pay the stipulated fine. Naw K--- went on to say,

"The villagers don't dare and don't want to be soldiers. But if you come to capture them by yourselves and if they [subsequently] desert with your guns, don't come to blame us. We have already told you now."

Then DKBA Commander Pah Mer Ler reiterated that if the recruits were not provided, he would send soldiers to catch them. He furthermore said that he would hold the village accountable for any deserters and threatened those attending once more against non-compliance.

"The DKBA demanded five villagers in our area to serve as DKBA soldiers last month [December] on the 27th or 28th and I told the DKBA that my villagers dared not serve as DKBA soldiers or as KNLA soldiers and that 'if you arrest my villagers to serve as DKBA soldiers, they will surely runaway someday.' The DKBA commander who has been demanding soldiers is Column Commander Day Buh from Battalion #2 of [DKBA Brigade] #333. I heard Daw K--- say that the DKBA has ordered her villagers to serve as DKBA soldiers as well. My villagers have had to serve as soldiers for the DKBA before. When I told [Column] Commander Day Buh that my villagers dared not

serve as soldiers he didn't argue about anything with me. So now my villagers don't have to serve as DKBA soldiers. Our villagers dare not do any kind of soldiering because we are living between the armed groups."

- Naw Dt--- (female, 55) T--- village, Bilin township (Jan 2007)

Conclusion

The SPDC's increasing reliance on the DKBA to expand control over the population in Thaton District has meant that local villagers have confronted a proportionate increase in associated human rights abuses perpetrated by DKBA forces. Villagers report increasing curfews and movement restrictions, forced labour, land confiscation, looting, extortion, threats, detention, torture and other abuse. Such abuses have continued to undermine villagers' efforts to cultivate their crops and pursue other forms of livelihood leading to increased poverty, food shortages, malnutrition and a deepening humanitarian crisis. As one KHRG field researcher reporting from Thaton District described it in February 2007,

"The villagers in Thaton District are suffering under the restrictions, forced labour, extortion, interrogations and torture of the DKBA and SPDC military. They continue to bear it from year to year, month to month. And there is no land, no places, no high mountains and no forests for them to evade military control. And they also don't have money to pay the military anymore because it has been years and years and months and months [that they have already been paying]. So, the villagers themselves are getting poorer and poorer. Their rice barns are finished and it will be very difficult for them to survive through the year."

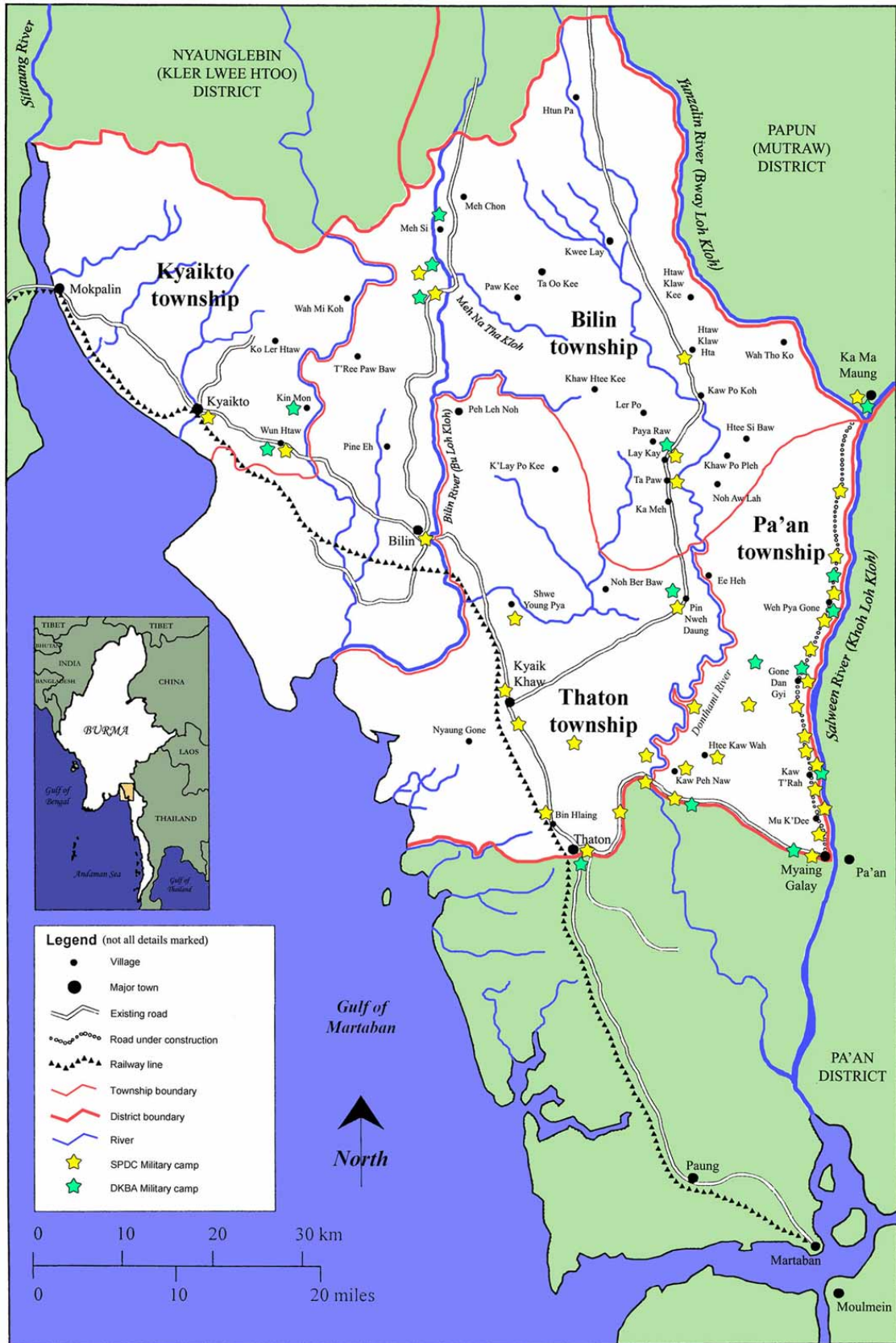
Moreover, while the DKBA has intensified its oppression of the civilian population in Thaton District, SPDC forces have been able to pull back some of their battalions for redeployment in northern Karen State where the junta's troops have been pushing through with their intensified attacks against villagers for the past year and a half.

For more information on the situation in Thaton District see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *Oppression by Proxy in Thaton District* (KHRG #2006-F11, December 2007)
- *Hunger Wielded as a Weapon in Thaton District* (KHRG #2006-B11, September 2006)
- *The Ongoing Oppression of Thaton District: Forced Labour, Extortion, and Food Insecurity* (KHRG #2006-F5, June 2006)
- *Surviving in Shadow: Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District* (KHRG #2006-01, January 2006)
- *Thaton District: Continued Consolidation of SPDC and DKBA Control through the use of Forced Labour, Extortion and Movement Restrictions* (KHRG #2005-F2, February 2005)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (KHRG #2006-P1, November 2006), *KHRG Photo Gallery 2005* (KHRG #2006-P1, April 2006) and *KHRG Photo Set 2005-A* (KHRG #2005-P1, May 2005). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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