



News Bulletin

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Just another case of coercion and forced labour? Karen villagers' statements on the 2008 referendum

As the SPDC steps up its pre-referendum activities, the regime's officials in Karen State have been forcibly registering local villagers, issuing temporary identification documents and ordering everyone to participate in the May 10th event. Villagers, however, have responded to the whole process with a mixture of skepticism and distrust.

"I would like to see us have a peaceful country with democracy, not a controlled country... If they [SPDC] continue doing the same things as before, we don't want it."

- Ko K--- (male, 37), Ht--- village, Pa'an District (March 2008)

For villagers in Pa'an and Dooplaya Districts of Karen State, the coming referendum on the adoption of a new military-engineered constitution seems to be just another case of coercion and forced labour with little hope of positive change. Local villagers in these areas have told KHRG that they were initially informed in the second week of January 2008 that they would have to register themselves with local SPDC authorities and participate in the country's May 10th referendum; otherwise their respective village heads would be punished. Those villagers with neither official pink Burmese identity cards, nor official green travel documents were told they would be able to get temporary registration documents which would allow them to participate in the referendum. However, local SPDC authorities have provided neither information regarding the contents of the proposed constitution, nor the dates on which either the referendum or subsequent election are to be held. While hardcopies of the constitution have gone on sale in large urban centres in Burma, this does not appear to be the case yet across most of Pa'an and Dooplaya District, where the SPDC maintains a strong presence.

"On January 7th they [local SPDC authorities] announced that an election¹ [referendum] would be held. They had given the order to the village head and the village head informed the villagers that they would have to be involved in the election and that nobody would be allowed to travel [during the time of the referendum]. All the villagers must give their time to participate in it [the referendum]. If the villagers don't give their time to participate in it, the village head will face problems."

- Ko K--- (male, 37), Ht--- village, Pa'an District (March 2008)

After village heads had been informed of the requirements for registration and participation in the referendum, local SPDC authorities began registering the residents of villages in at

¹ Villagers interviewed by KHRG appeared unclear about the details of the referendum, as SPDC personnel had given little to no information. As a consequence, many villagers used the Karen word for 'election' in reference to the coming event in May. As the May 10th event will be a referendum, KHRG has included this term in brackets for clarification.

least Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts and issuing temporary certification cards (which have no photo) for use in voting by those without Burmese ID cards (which have a photo) during the May referendum. Villagers were told to provide thumb prints, signatures, names of family members and household registration numbers. Some villagers were told that they would be able and required to obtain official Burmese photo ID cards as opposed to the temporary cards, but it is unclear whether or not they have already received these. Local SPDC authorities threatened the villagers that they would be punished if they failed to comply with the registration process. In at least one area, village heads and teachers were told they would be removed from their jobs if they did not comply. SPDC officials also appear to be registering children as young as 15 to participate in the coming referendum.

"Recently, those people who don't have ID cards and those people who have reached the [required] age all have to get it [an ID card]. They have to register their names and have a photo taken. If they don't go and get an ID card they will be punished. Therefore, everyone has to register and report their names and go and have a photo taken... The [names of] people who already have ID must be recorded and the people who don't have ID yet have to get their photo taken. If they refuse to do it, the people who already have positions such as teachers and village leaders will be removed from their positions."

- Ko K--- (male, 37), Ht--- village, Pa'an District (March 2008)

"I've noticed that the identity card is different than before. The [new] card doesn't include a photo. It's a kind of credential card. In my village, the special credential cards have been distributed to the children who have reached 15 or 16 years of age. As I understand it, this card is only for use in voting in the election [referendum]. It's not an identity card."

- Saw P--- (male, 58), Gk--- village, Pa'an District (April 2008)

In some cases the temporary cards were not issued despite the collection of registration information. Local authorities simply took away the signatures or thumb prints and did not return. Furthermore, some villagers said that they had not received any information about the referendum process even after completing the required registration.

"Yes, they [SPDC officials] came to the village last month, they told us that they would take our photo for the identity card but now they've disappeared. They also asked us to give them our thumb print – people who already had an identity card and those who didn't have an identity card had to do it. They took our signature with them to the city... but after they took our thumb signature we didn't hear anything."

- Ko A--- (male, 35), Bp--- village, Pa'an District (April 2008)

"After they collected the family unit registration information they took it with them to the city. They haven't told us anything about the election [referendum] yet. I don't know anything about that. They've only come and recorded the family unit [information] such as how many households there are and the people in the village and the parents' name and that sort of thing."

- Naw N--- (female, 30), T--- village, Dooplaya District (April 2008)

Some villagers told KHRG that they did not want to comply with the SPDC's forced registration and have therefore tried to evade the whole process. Avoidance of forced registration is common in Karen State, as SPDC personnel can use registration details to demand specific quotas for forced labour or to extract money and supplies in the form of arbitrary 'taxes' upon households and businesses. Karen villagers in SPDC-controlled areas, therefore, regularly downplay household numbers to reduce such exploitation or, where possible, avoid registration altogether. Large-scale registration for the referendum could, therefore, have serious negative impacts in the future upon the lives and livelihoods

of those Karen villagers who are unable to avoid compliance. Nevertheless, those who have not complied with registration are concerned about possible punishments by SPDC personnel.

"No, they didn't tell us anything about it [the referendum]. For me, I didn't participate with them [in the registration process]... In regards to my house, nobody has taken a [registration] card. Now, I am watching out for them [local SPDC officials], [to see] whether they will arrest us or not."

- Saw P--- (male, 58), Gk--- village, Pa'an District (April 2008)

"In regards to the people who don't want to get an ID card, they heard information from others that after they had obtained an ID card they would have to vote so they don't agree with that. Therefore, some people have fled and have not taken an ID card."

- Ko K--- (male, 37), Ht--- village, Pa'an District (March 2008)

Regarding the referendum in particular, villagers have expressed to KHRG that they doubt they will be allowed to vote freely. Others say that the SPDC is just using the referendum to ensure its continued rule. Given the coercive nature of the whole registration process, the threats against non-compliance and the fact that SPDC officials have provided little or no information regarding the contents of the proposed constitution, villagers have expressed skepticism about the possibility that the referendum could lead to positive developments in the country.

"They [SPDC] don't follow the opinions of the majority of the people. They just try to achieve their own objective."

- Saw P--- (male, 58), Gk--- village, Pa'an District (April 2008)