



Report from the field

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Villagers' responses to forced labour, torture and other demands in Thaton District

From February to July 2008, SPDC and DKBA forces operating in Thaton District continued to demand forced labour, extort money and threaten villagers as punishment for allegations that villagers had contacted KNU/KNLA personnel. In addition, the destruction wrought by Cyclone Nargis on Thaton's infrastructure and crops has added to the struggles of villagers. Despite such hardships, villagers in these communities continue to test and refine strategies to resist abuse by the SPDC and DKBA. Both local and international humanitarian and development agencies should increase efforts to support these villager-based resistance strategies, enabling villagers to claim their rights.

Thaton District of western Karen State is comprised of Kyaikto, Bilin, Pa'an, and Thaton townships. State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces are present and active in all four of these townships, yet have so far this year conducted only limited military patrols within and around villages in Bilin and Kyaikto Townships. Both groups, however, have been conducting more regular patrols in Pa'an and Thaton townships, especially since the end of June 2008.



This photo shows trees uprooted by Cyclone Nargis in Khaw Po Bpleh village, Thaton District, on May 4th 2008.
[Photo: KHRG]

Due to the reduced troop movements of SPDC and DKBA soldiers in Bilin and Kyaikto townships, and the simultaneous easing of travel and trade restrictions, villagers in these areas have been able to travel and work more freely than in the past. Even so, residents of these townships have continued to face forced labour and other demands from both SPDC and DKBA forces operating in the area. In Pa'an and Thaton townships, where SPDC and DKBA patrols have continued more regularly, villagers have not dared to travel and work outside of their village confines because they have been worried about encountering soldiers operating in the area. These villagers also continue to face forced labour and other demands from SPDC and DKBA soldiers who enter their villages. On top of this, local SPDC and DKBA soldiers have been restricting villagers' travel and work outside of the village confines and constantly demand information from villagers who have allegedly had contact with Karen National Union (KNU) / Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) personnel. The table below shows SPDC and DKBA units currently deployed in all four townships of Thaton District.

Townships	SPDC/DKBA Unit	Commander	Unit strength	Remarks
Bilin	SPDC LIB #343	Battalion commander Thu Hta	32 soldiers	
	SPDC MOC #19	Deputy battalion commander Nyo Meh	30 soldiers	
Kyaikto	SPDC IB #96, Southeast Regional Command headquarters			Operating with two columns of <i>pyithusit</i> ('people's militia')
Pa'an	SPDC IB #61	Battalion commander Soe Myint	45 soldiers	
	SPDC MOC #19	Battalion deputy commander Tha Nyunt	40 soldiers	
	DKBA Battalion #1 of Brigade #333	Battalion deputy commander Thaw M'Nah	25 soldiers	This unit has been active alongside SPDC IB #61
Thaton	SPDC IB #24	Battalion commander Kyaw Kyaw	40 soldiers	
	SPDC Southeast Regional Command headquarters	Battalion deputy commander San Aye Saing	35 soldiers	
	SPDC LIB #3, LID #44	Battalion commander Aung Kyaw Kyaw	35 soldiers	
	DKBA Battalion #2 of Brigade #333	Battalion deputy commander Than Myint	20 soldiers	
	DKBA Brigade #333	Company commander Gkaw Loo	7 soldiers	

Cyclone Nargis in Thaton District

"This was the strongest [storm] that I've ever seen. It [the cyclone] occurred on May 2nd 2008. The wind started blowing early in the morning. It came from the direction of Gkaw Heh [village] and we dared not stay in the house. No villagers were injured. It destroyed seven houses in the village [and] destroyed durian trees and some other plants. Trees fell down and destroyed all of these houses. The durian plantations and a thatch plantation were destroyed."

- Naw K--- (female, 28), T--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

Little information has come out regarding the extent of the damage from Cyclone Nargis in Karen State. Although the cyclone wrought the most damage in the Irrawaddy Delta when it struck on May 2nd and 3rd 2008, the cyclone also caused damage to parts of Karen State. According to KHRG field researchers operating in the area, many trees were knocked down when the cyclone struck Thaton township. Some of these trees then struck and destroyed

nearby houses. Overall, much of the damage to Thaton's economic infrastructure has only made day-to-day life more difficult for local villagers already under strain from SPDC and DKBA forced labour demands.



The two photos above, taken on May 4th 2008 after Cyclone Nargis struck, show village structures in Khaw Po Bpleh village, Bilin township in northern Thaton District that were destroyed during the cyclone. During the cyclone, houses, farm fields, rice supplies and bullock carts belonging to villagers of Khaw Po Bpleh were destroyed, as was the entrance of the village monastery (above left). [Photo: KHRG]

Forced Labour

"We don't have enough rice because we can't work sufficiently for our livelihood due to forced labour and demands for money. Some [villagers] are not in very good health and the villagers are in trouble in different ways."

- Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

Villagers in all four townships of Thaton District continue to face regular demands for forced labour from SPDC and DKBA army units despite the current decrease in military patrols in Bilin and Kyaikto townships. Army units from both groups typically demand forced labour from communities situated close to their camps and bases. Furthermore, when SPDC and DKBA troops do enter villages in the area, they continue to demand forced labour – typically on-the-spot portering or guide duty. This labour involves carrying supplies or leading troops to other villages or towns, acting as safeguards from KNLA attacks and serving as human mine-sweepers along the way. Other forms of forced labour include bi-monthly portering of military supplies for the SPDC, construction of military camps, serving as *set tha* (messengers), fabricating and delivering wooden planks, thatch shingles and bamboo poles and building roads. Villagers in the area have also been ordered to deliver money and food to local army units. Villagers are often expected to rebuild roads washed out in the rainy season, cut back roadside trees and shrubs that grew during the rainy season, and deliver rations to army camps whose access roads may have long been cut off due to the season's heavy rains. Though the end of the rainy season is the ideal time to harvest rice, some communities have begun to harvest their crops prematurely because they know they will be required to work for the SPDC or DKBA during the traditional harvest period.

"The soldiers ordered [the villagers] to put big logs in a bullock cart and then asked the cart owner to go [drive the cart to a sawmill] in front of their truck, so that if there was a landmine, it would kill the cart owners and the animals first. They [the soldiers] carry guns and order us to go so we have to go."

Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

In one case on May 5th 2008, DKBA Battalion #1 Deputy Battalion Commander Thaw M’Nah from Brigade #333 constructed a sawmill at Bpwoh army camp in Bilin township. After getting the sawmill up and running and producing an initial load of split timber, Thaw M’Nah’s forces ordered residents of nearby villages to bring bullock carts to the army camp for the purpose of transporting the split timber to another location. The chart below shows the number of carts demanded from the different villages:

#	Village name	# of carts
1	P---	7
2	N---	7
3	D---	3
4	N---	4
5	G---	3
Total		24

“They [DKBA] didn’t give us any wages or food. We had to bring our own food and equipment to do the work for them. I think that he [deputy battalion commander Thaw M’Nah] has authority, because even though he sold off some logs [i.e. conducted business for personal benefit], the commander [above him] didn’t say anything. Their [DKBA] businesses bring them profit, but the villagers have to do [the work] for them for free.”

- Saw G--- (male, 70), G--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

In another case from Thaton township, SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #24 and DKBA Brigade #333, Battalion #2 under deputy battalion commander Tha Myint, forced local villagers to porter military supplies between June and July 2008. The table below shows the number of porters demanded and the dates on which villagers had to provide them:

Date	Village name	# of villagers
June 19 th 2008	P---	3
June 19 th 2008	B---	15
June 22 nd 2008	N---	10
July 7 th 2008	N---	11
Total		39

“Both women and men were included in the forced labour. We didn’t let the [young] children go. We only asked villagers who were able work. The youngest were over 10 years old. The oldest were like me - 70 years old. I always have to go and do forced labour.”

- Saw G--- (male, 70), G--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

Accusations of contacting the KNU/KNLA

“The villagers have to do forced labour for [whichever army] camp is closest to their village. We can’t remain [won’t be allowed to stay in the village] without going and doing the forced labour. If we don’t go, they’ll say that we’re close to Koh Per Thoo [literally ‘black scarf’, a euphemism for the KNU/KNLA] and that our views are in line with those of Koh Per Thoo. I think that if we didn’t go as many times [as demanded], they would fine us.”

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

In an alleged counter-insurgency campaign (although with apparent extortive intent), SPDC and DKBA forces have persistently accused villagers in Thaton District of having contact with KNU/KNLA personnel. Given the military context, villagers, and especially village

heads, are often required to balance the competing interests of SPDC, DKBA and KNLA forces with their own community's security and material interests. As a consequence, villagers have often been accused of contacting KNU/KNLA personnel who operate in the area. In some cases, these accusations appear to be simply pretexts to extort money and ensure compliance with forced labour and other demands.



The nine-year-old boy shown here is minding cattle as a form of wage labour in order to support his family. He told KHRG that he wanted to go to school but his parents could not afford to send him. [Photo: KHRG]



These two students – one of whom is enrolled in a nearby town and the other in the village – are shown helping with their parents' farm work and collecting firewood during the school holidays. [Photo: KHRG]

On July 30th 2008, 60-year-old Saw B--- of B--- village left his village to purchase an ox. As he was travelling, he encountered a group of DKBA soldiers at Htee Gkyoo Gkyo. A DKBA soldier named Saw So Leh interrogated Saw B--- and, while searching his belongings, discovered the money with which Saw B--- had intended to purchase the ox. The DKBA soldiers accused Saw B--- of having contact with the KNU/KNLA and of planning to deliver this money to the KNU. Saw B--- explained his intention of purchasing an ox, but Saw So Leh wouldn't accept his explanation and instead punched Saw B---, hit him on the head with his gun, and kicked him in the side. The DKBA soldiers then stole the 125,000 kyat [approx. US \$101.63] Saw B--- needed to buy the ox.

In another incident on July 18th 2008, Column #1 of SPDC IB #24 under column commander Aung Gkyaw Gkyaw and DKBA Battalion #2 of Brigade #333, under deputy battalion commander Tha Myint, combined their forces. The resulting joint unit of 60 SPDC and DKBA soldiers entered T--- village and began interrogating villagers about whether anyone in the community had family ties to the KNU/KNLA. These soldiers remained active in the village area for 15 days. While staying at T--- village, the soldiers demanded three chickens, 20 eggs and one viss [1.63 kg. / 3.6 lb.] of sesame paste from the villagers.

Extortion

Despite the relatively low intensity of confrontations between SPDC, DKBA and KNLA forces operating in Thaton District, the SPDC and DKBA continue to patrol the area and regularly utilise their military positions to extort money, food and supplies from local villagers.

On June 20th 2008, for example, DKBA Brigade #333, Battalion #1 Deputy Battalion Commander Thaw M'Nah entered G--- village and demanded one pig from the local villagers. The pretext was that the payment of the pig was a fine for not informing DKBA

personnel about the date of a memorial, thus not inviting them, to honour a local monk who had died.

On July 15th 2008, at around 8:00 pm, DKBA deputy battalion commander Thaw M'Nah reportedly ordered his soldiers to dress up as KNLA soldiers and travel to W--- village where they demanded 500,000 kyat [approx. US \$406.50] from Saw B---, the local village head. The village head initially would not give the money as demanded. But, after intimidation and threats, the village head gave 300,000 kyat [approx. US \$243.90] to the soldiers.

Villagers' responses to human rights abuses

"[The soldiers at] the DKBA camp on top of Meh Gyi hill demanded bamboo from us, but we haven't cut it for them yet. I told them 'we also have to work at M--- pagoda and you've also ordered us [to do work] here, so we can't [prepare and deliver the bamboo poles]."

- Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

Villagers in Thaton District regularly confront forced labour, extortion, restrictions and related threats for non-compliance with SPDC and DKBA orders. Villagers in the area have frequently complained to KHRG that they don't have time to support their own families because they have to spend so much of their time doing forced labour for military personnel.

Despite such regular abuse, local villagers in Thaton District have actively responded with various strategies aimed at mitigating or wholly evading compliance with military demands. In some cases these villagers have, for example, initially ignored order documents that have been delivered by messengers to their villages. If subsequent orders have followed and some level of compliance has appeared inevitable, village heads have negotiated with local military authorities for a reduction in demands, stressing the already burdensome obligations imposed by army units on their communities. These local villagers have become deft at finding ways to resist abuse and minimise compliance without incurring violent retribution by soldiers.

In discussions with KHRG, local villagers in Thaton District have spoken of the diverse strategies they use to resist abuse and how they can continue to refine these measures. In the midst of heavy SPDC and DKBA militarisation, as well as ongoing KNLA patrolling, villagers in Thaton District have had to negotiate a fine balance between competing military pressures and their own household's livelihood needs. Local villagers have spoken to KHRG about their efforts to organise their strategies to more effectively minimise abuse. These strategies include: negotiation, bribery, outright refusal, various forms of delayed or false compliance and – when the burden of demands becomes too great – displacement to non-military-controlled areas. Aside from these more direct forms of local resistance, villagers in Thaton District continue to report the abuses to human rights groups and other organisations operating covertly in the area so that the international community may know about their situation. Some local SPDC and DKBA officials have become concerned that local abuses are being reported internationally as well as on Burmese-language radio and have confronted local villagers about their concerns. In some cases, villagers have openly acknowledged to local army personnel that human rights abuses against them may be reported and in this way made an implicit threat of their own against soldiers and officers.

"The DKBA [officer] said that the villagers had reported on the [forced] labour that they [the soldiers] had demanded and that the BBC had broadcast this news. I told [the officer], 'We didn't go [to the BBC], they came to get the information.' They

asked and we answered: 'It's a fact that's you're demanding forced labour, so we have to report what's true.'"

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

Conclusion

"I just want to say that now we have to do a lot of work for them [SPDC and DKBA forces] even though we're not able to work for ourselves. The villagers have been complaining to me but if we don't go [to do the forced labour], they [the soldiers] will give us trouble. They have many kinds of work that [they] like to order the villagers to do for them. If we could work [without disturbances like forced labour] at our workplaces, we could develop ourselves more."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bilin township (May 2008)

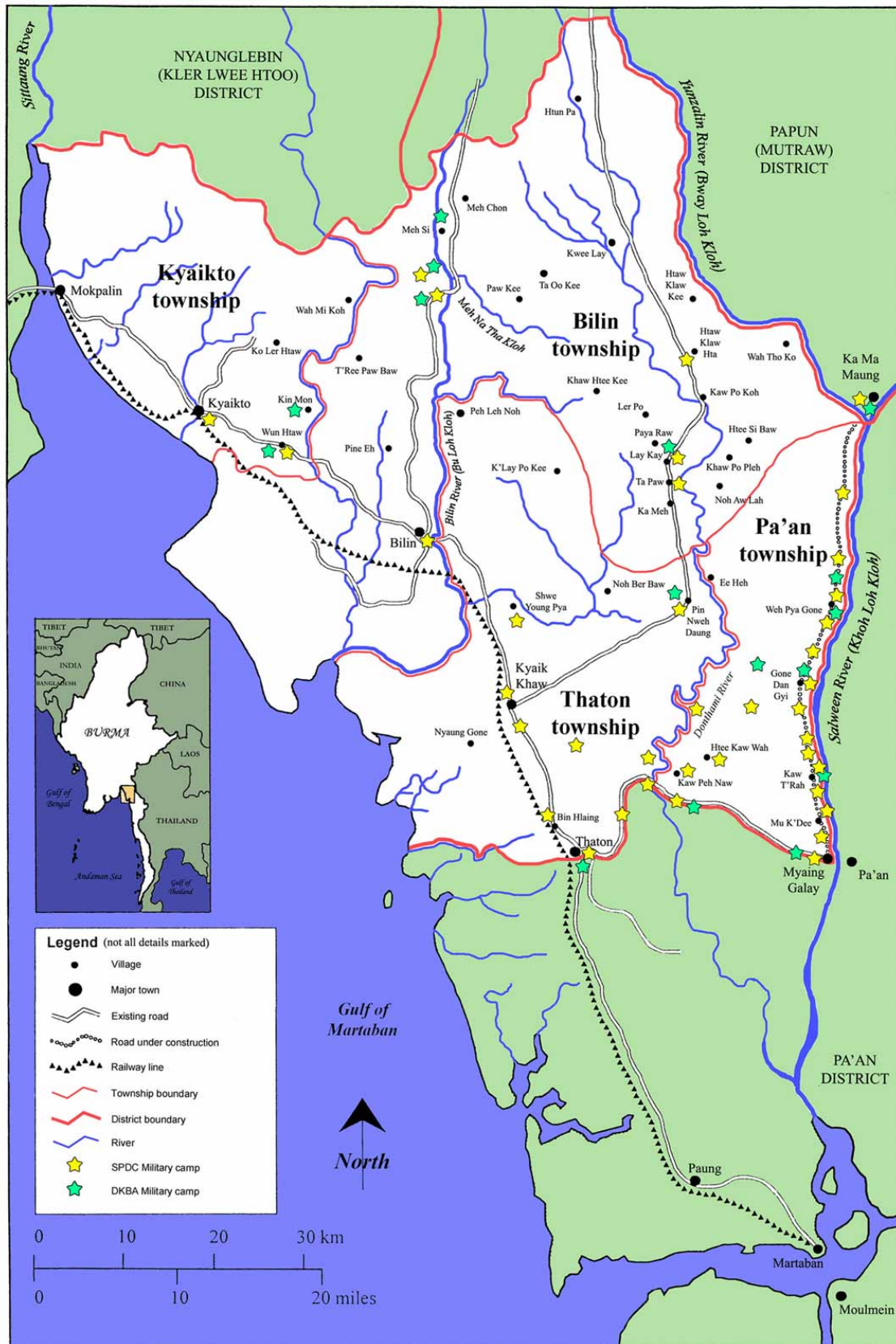
Life under militarisation in Thaton District involves persistent abuses – most commonly in the form of coerced and uncompensated demands for labour, money, food and supplies – which undermine villagers' abilities to maintain their livelihoods. In order to remain in their homes, local communities have sought ways to mediate the competing demands of military forces and their own livelihood and subsistence needs. While indigenous measures to resist abuse have been successful in individual cases, external support for such efforts by community-based organisations on the Thai border and international agencies working through Rangoon should focus more on funding initiatives that allow villagers to decide for themselves how best respond to and resist abuse.

For background on the human rights situation in Thaton District see the following reports:

- *Oppressed twice over: SPDC and DKBA exploitation and violence against villagers in Thaton District* (KHRG, March 2008)
- *State agencies, armed groups and the proliferation of oppression in Thaton District* (KHRG, September 2007)
- *The Compounding Consequences of DKBA Oppression: Abuse, poverty and food insecurity in Thaton District* (KHRG, July 2007)
- *Oppression by proxy in Thaton District* (KHRG, December 2006)
- *Surviving in Shadow : Widespread Militarization and the Systematic Use of Forced Labour in the Campaign for Control of Thaton District* (KHRG, January 2006)

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Thaton District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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