



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Field Report

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Routine forced labour in Pa'an District

For those villagers living under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District, certain forms of forced labour have now become routine. Such 'routine' forced labour includes: cultivation of rainy season and dry season rice crops on fields owned by DKBA officers, maintaining rubber plantations, roadside clearance of forest overgrowth following the rainy season, portering military supplies out to soldiers operating at 'frontline' army camps, collecting, preparing and delivering bamboo and thatch for use in the repair and construction of the region's many army camps, and temporarily serving as camp-based messengers. Combined, these various forms of forced labour significantly cut into crucial time villagers need for their own agricultural and other livelihoods activities. This report looks at cases of forced labour from July to September 2008.

Lu Pleh and Dta Greh townships, of northern and eastern Pa'an District, respectively, cover areas where State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forces all operate. The Dawna mountain range runs north-south through the eastern portions of both of these townships, while the western portions are comprised of plains. The plain areas of both townships are more firmly under SPDC and DKBA control and local communities confront a now-routine series of forced labour demands by local military personnel. Such demands are particularly harmful when they occur during labour-intensive times in the crop cycle, such as in the initial planting and transplanting period at the start of the rainy season in May/June and harvest time, which comes around November. Forced labour at these times means that villagers must take time away from their own livelihoods, which suffer as a result. During the rainy season, when local villagers need to plant and tend to their own paddy crops, such forced labour has obstructed them from freely doing so. Instead, DKBA forces have required villagers tend to paddy fields belonging to local DKBA officers. During the dry season, once the ground has more or less dried out from the preceding rains, SPDC and DKBA personnel force villagers to clear weeds and forest growth from alongside vehicle roads and around army camps. The collection, preparation and delivery of bamboo and wooden poles and bamboo slats for use in constructing and repairing army camps is also most concentrated at the



In August 2008, Burma Army Colonel Yeh Htut ordered the Meh Tha Moo villagers to collect 500 bamboo slats, six bamboo poles and four wooden poles and to deliver these to his army unit. The villagers of Meh Tha Moo are shown above on August 31st preparing to deliver the items demanded. [Photo: KHRG]

start of the dry season. Likewise, military units force villagers to porter military supplies out to 'front line' army camps most intensely at this time of year. On top of these seasonal concentrations of forced labour, military forces continue to make demands intermittently throughout the year. Furthermore, SPDC soldiers in Lu Pleh and Dta Greh townships have ordered villages to supply individuals to serve as *set tha* based at army camps on a rotational basis. *Set tha* duty officially involves delivering messages from army officers to local village heads, but it also typically involves a variety of menial tasks such as cooking, collecting water and cutting firewood.

"The DKBA and SPDC force us to do their work. We always have to do their work and so we can't devote time to our own work. Even though we don't have time to go [to do forced labour], we have to go to do their work."

Saw D--- (male, 35), --- village, Lu Pleh township (July 2008)

Forced paddy cultivation

DKBA officers who own agricultural land in Pa'an District have chosen to force local villagers to cultivate their personal crops rather than paying wages to hired labourers. These villagers face their own seasonal cultivation requirements, which they are unable to address so long as they are taking part in forced labour cultivation on DKBA-owned fields.

In an incident that occurred on July 16th 2008, DKBA officers Meh Dteh Leh and Shwe Tha Kyaing of Brigade #555 ordered 35 villagers (including 12 women and 23 men) from Gk'Mah Hta village in Lu Pleh Township to plant paddy crops on their flat field farms in the Tha Po Meh Hta area. The land is about 20 acres in area and the villagers had to sleep two nights in the field over the course of the labour. On a separate incident that occurred on July 29th 2008, DKBA officer Meh Dteh Leh ordered residents of Meh Tha Moo village to go and plant paddy in a farm field at western Gkwee Lay village.

"They [DKBA forces] ordered villagers to go and plant paddy for them at Ywa Ler Koh [area, near] Gkyoh Bp'Neh Nee [village]. There were 41 villagers who went, including 18 women and 23 men. It [the agricultural land] was 30 acres in area. They [the DKBA] didn't provide assistance to our villagers. The commanders' names were officers Meh Dteh Leh and Shwe Tha Kgyeh of Brigade #555, based at Meh T'Moo Hta. We don't know yet how many times we'll have to do [forced farm labour]. I think that again during harvest time [around November] we'll have to go and harvest paddy for them. We can't rest during work time [while doing farm labour for the DKBA]. We can take rest at 12:00 noon. We have to start at 7:00 am and take rest at 12:00 during lunch time and finish the work at 5:00 pm."

- Saw D--- (male, 35), --- village, Lu Pleh Township (July 2008)

Some villagers have recognised that, if they comply with these forced labour demands, they will not have sufficient time to do their own cultivation or other livelihoods work. In such situations, these individuals have sought to make arrangements with local DKBA officers in order to get out of the labour requirements. As part of such negotiations, some villagers have offered payments of harvested paddy to DKBA officers in lieu of labour. In an incident on July 18th 2008, DKBA officers Meh Dteh Leh and Shwe Tha Kyaing ordered 41 villagers from T'Ree Po Gkwee, Htee Thaw Bluh Hta and Gkyaw T'Lay Koh villages in Lu Pleh township to plant paddy at Gkyaw Bp'Neh Nee. Villagers at Htee Thaw Bluh Hta and Gkyaw T'Lay Koh villages, however, did not

immediately comply with the stated demand. Instead, they negotiated with the DKBA commanders and provided them with 100 baskets of paddy in lieu of the labour. Although this paddy was a significant quantity of the villagers' own limited supplies, the payment nevertheless allowed the villagers to tend to their own crops in full. The photos below show those villagers from T'Ree Po Gkwee who, unlike the residents of the other two villages, ended up having to comply with the order to cultivate the paddy fields.



The above photos shows residents of T'Ree Po Gkwee village, Lu Pleh township planting paddy at Gkyaw Bp'Neh Nee in July 2008 as ordered by DKBA officers. These villagers had slept two nights in the field while completing the assigned work. [Photos: KHRG]

Forced collection, preparation and delivery of bamboo and wood

Following the end of the rainy season, around September to October, SPDC troops based in Lu Pleh and Dta Greh townships routinely force villagers to collect bamboo poles, cut them to specified lengths and deliver them to designated 'frontline' army camps in the area. SPDC authorities in Pa'an District have also been demanding that villagers prepare bamboo slats and wooden poles. These supplies are typically used for constructing and repairing fences and structures at the camps. This year, SPDC forces in Pa'an District have been demanding this type of forced labour since August. On September 1st 2008, SPDC Colonel Yeh Htut, based at Gklaw Gk'Dtuh camp, Lu Pleh township, ordered local villagers to deliver bamboo slats, bamboo poles and wooden poles for use in constructing a perimeter fence around his army camp at Gklaw Gk'Dtuh village. The table below lists the relevant villages, numbers of villagers involved in the forced labour and the numbers and types of supplies demanded.



The photo above shows T'Ree Poh Gkwee villagers delivering 350 bamboo slats to the SPDC army camp at Gklaw Gk'Dtuh on August 31st 2008. [Photo: KHRG]

#	Village name	# of villagers	Items demanded
1	Meh Tha Moo	30	500 bamboo slats, six bamboo poles and four wooden poles
2	T'Ree Poh Gkwee	N/A	350 bamboo slats, six bamboo poles and four wooden poles
3	Gkyaw T'Lay Koh	257	A combined total of 4,850 bamboo slats
4	Gk'Mah Hta		
5	Htee Tha Bluh Hta		
6	Gklaw Gk'Dtih		
7	Meh Gk' Dtaw Kee		
9	T'May Gkyo		
10	T'Wih Hta		

"They [villagers] had to carry [bamboo poles] to the SPDC army camp at Gk'Mah Koh because officer Myo Min Thoo ordered it. He was camp commander of Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #565. Sometimes [they have to do forced labour] five times, six times or seven times [per month]. We have to go and carry things for the camps at Gk'Mah Koh and Gklaw Gk'Dtih and sometimes we also have to go and work at Meh T'Moo Hta [SPDC army] camp. We have to cut down bamboo, make fences, cut down wooden poles and clear the camp compound."

-Saw D--- (male, 35), --- village, Lu Pleh Township (August 2008)

In another incident on August 17th 2008 – well before the end of the rainy season – SPDC LIB #565 officer Myo Min Thoo forced residents of Htee Tha Bluh Hta, Gk'Mah Hta, Gkyaw T'Lay Koh and T'Ree Po Gkwee villages to deliver bamboo poles measuring three hand-spans and 15 cubits [7.54 m / 24.75 ft] in length. Myo Min Thoo was reportedly planning on using these poles to construct a fence around his camp. Each village had to provide three bamboo poles. In a similar incident involving DKBA troops on September 6th 2008, DKBA Brigade #555 officer Gkyaw Dih ordered local villages (listed in the table below) to deliver bamboo poles to his army camp at Meh Tha Moo Hta for use in constructing a perimeter fence.

#	Village name	# of bamboo poles
1	T'Ree Poh Gkwee	120
2	Htee Tha Bluh Hta	600
3	Gkyaw T'Lay Koh	600
4	Meh Tha Moo	600
5	Gk'Mah Hta	600

Roadside brush clearing

At the end of August and the beginning of September 2008, villagers in Lu Pleh and Dta Greh townships reported to KHRG field researchers that they were being forced to clear weeds and brush growing alongside vehicle roads. Such roadside brush clearance reportedly serves to reduce the KNLA's ability to ambush SPDC and DKBA troops, but also hinders the efforts of civilians attempting to evade army forces. In one incident on August 27th 2008, SPDC commander Nya Lway Htoh of LIB #565 column #2 ordered villages in Lu Pleh township to clear the sides of the area's main vehicle road. The villages that had to comply and the areas where they worked are listed below.

#	Village name	Section of roadside cleared
1	Meh Tha Moo	Meh Tha Moo Hta to Meh Dtaw Day
2	T'Ree Po Gkwee	Gk'Mar Koh to Htee Nyah Ah Gkloh
3	Gk'Mah Hta	
4	Htee Tha Bluh Hta	Htee Nya Ah Gkloh to Htee Thay Htaw Kee to Gklaw Gk'Dtih
5	Gkyaw T'Lay Koh Koh	
6	Meh Gk' Dtaw Kee	Htee Thay Htaw Kee to Gklaw Gk'Dtih military camp
7	Bpaw Baw Kee	

Subsequently, on September 9th 2008, Saw Hlah Gkwah of DKBA Brigade #999 forced 12 women and six men from Bp'Dtuh Gklaw Bplaw village to go and clear weeds and brush from the area around his army camp at Noh Kah Ree. Saw Hlah Gkwah also demanded that Bplaw Nya Thee, Bpay Dtoo Hta, Htee Moh Hta and Nya Bp'Dtay Kee villages provide individuals to clear the area around his camp. A total of five women and five men from these three villages went to do this work.



The pictures above show residents of T'Ree Poh Gkwee village clearing the sides of a vehicle road in Lu Pleh township on August 26th 2008 as ordered by SPDC LIB #565 column #2 commander Nya Lway Htoh. [Photos: KHRG]

Forced portering of military supplies

The period following the ends of the rainy season – when roads in Pa'an District have sufficiently dried out – is also when demands for civilian porters are most intense. As rainy season conditions make some roads in Karen State unusable and transportation generally inconvenient, the Burma Army uses the relatively drier conditions immediately following the rainy season to resupply 'front line' army camps located in eastern Pa'an District and elsewhere. SPDC authorities therefore order local communities to provide individuals to serve as porters, carrying military rations and munitions to these camps. However, as all-weather roads are becoming increasingly common in Karen State, such supply operations can now be carried out during the rainy season as well. On July 22nd 2008, for example, SPDC LIB #565 captain Myo Min Thoo, based at Gk'Mar Koh army camp, ordered Gkyaw T'Lay Koh, Htee Tha Bluh Hta, Gk'Mah Hta and T'Ree Po Gkwee villages to each provide four villagers to serve as porters for one day in order to carry military supplies to his camp. Then, on September 11th 2008, Colonel Myo Min Thoo ordered five more people from T'Ree Po Gkwee village to carry supplies from Meh Tha Moo Hta to Moe Bpya army camp. In a separate incident on September 5th 2008, SPDC LIB #565 battalion commander Hlaing Htun Oo ordered four Gklay Moh Kee villagers to go and

collect four baskets of rice from Kler Day army camp and bring them back to Bpoo Loo Dtoo camp within the space of one day.

Conclusion

Both SPDC and DKBA forces have relied on forced labour in their campaigns to militarize and consolidate control over Pa'an District. Threatened with violence for non-compliance, villagers have been pressured into meeting the SPDC and DKBA demands. Notwithstanding cases of in-kind payments in lieu of compliance, the now-routine forms of forced labour in Pa'an District persistently cut into villagers' own work time. The resulting livelihoods vulnerability and displacement pressures have convinced some local residents to leave the area and seek paid labour in Burma, Thailand or even further afield.

For more information on the human rights situation in Pa'an District and the recent joint SPDC-DKBA attacks in Pa'an District, see the following KHRG reports:

- *Human minesweeping and forced relocation as SPDC and DKBA step up joint operations in Pa'an District* (October 2008)
- *DKBA soldiers attack Karen village in Thailand* (October 2008)
- *DKBA bans alcohol consumption to justify human rights abuses in Pa'an District* (October 2008)
- *Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (September 2008)
- *Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (September 2008)
- *DKBA soldiers burn down Ler Bpoo village, Pa'an District* (August 2008)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG website at <http://www.khrg.org>.



Karen Districts



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