



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field

February 15th, 2008 / KHRG #2008-F2

Militarisation, violence and exploitation in Toungoo District

While the SPDC leadership proposes dates for a constitutional referendum and eventual multiparty elections it nonetheless continues without the slightest hesitation the violent subjugation of villagers in northern Karen State. The area of Toungoo District is now saturated with SPDC troops and the local civilian population living under military control as well as those living in hiding are facing constricting options for their lives. The SPDC has continued to increase the military build-up of the area deploying more troops, building new camps and bases and constructing and upgrading vehicle roads to facilitate troop deployment and the stocking of army camps. In this context attacks on villages, arbitrary detentions, killings, forced labour and extortion have continued consistent with the regime's policy of civilian subjugation and in opposition to its claims of a potential return to civilian rule through the current constitution-vetting process.

"Yes, there are now many Burmese Army soldiers who have arrived in the village and they have tried to set up their military [camps] in villages like Kaw Baw So, Htoh Kee, Wah Baw Kee, Thay Koh Hso and along the hills. Therefore, our villagers haven't been able to stay in our village and have fled to other places. When they catch anybody they kill them all. We were afraid of them so we had to flee from them."

- Naw Y--- (female, 32), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (December 2007)

The militarily saturated conditions of Toungoo District have reached new heights. The increase in troop deployment, number of camps and bases and military-controlled vehicle roads, much of which occurred over the previous year, are all indications of this. At the start of 2007, SPDC Military Operations Command (MOC) #4 established itself at Play Hsa Loh village in the Maw Nay Bpwa area of southwestern Toungoo District. Following this, the SPDC deployed MOC #5, under the command of Kyaung Mya, in the area of Kler La town and then Light Infantry Division (LID) #88 at Yoo Doh Gkoh camp in the Buh Hsa Kee area. In November 2007, the SPDC dispatched MOC #10 to join military operations in Toungoo District and sent MOC #4 further east. MOC #4 comprises eight battalions including Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) #703, 704, 705, 706, 707 and 710 and



A displaced hiding site in the Th'Ay Kee area burns on December 4th 2007 following an attack from soldiers of SPDC MOC #4. [Photo: KHRG]

has been active in the area of Kler La town and south along the vehicle road to Buh Hsa Kee.

MOCs #4, 5, and 10 continue to be the primary military units operating in Toungoo District. These troops have set up operations at camps and bases along the main transport routes such as the Toungoo to Kler La; Kler La to Mawchi; and Kler La to Buh Hsa Kee vehicle road and their offshoots. From these sites soldiers have been operating checkpoints, patrolling along the roadways and conducting search and destroy sorties into the surrounding forests targeting displaced communities in hiding.

To make matters worse, the SPDC has continued to increase its troop numbers in the area, deploying even more soldiers despite the already militarily saturated state of the region. On December 28th 2007, for example, the regime sent an additional 300 to the area of the Mawchi to Buh Hsa Kee vehicle road. Some of these troops and others deployed in Toungoo District are reportedly intended to reach Papun District via the soon to be completed Buh Hsa Kee to Pwa Ghah vehicle road.

More recently deployed troops have, in turn, joined those already operating in Toungoo District to take part in the systematic policy of militarily targeting civilian communities living in areas outside of SPDC control. In line with this agenda, SPDC troops continue to attack displaced villagers' hiding sites, firing 120 mm mortars and machine guns from a distance, before entering on foot to shoot anyone spotted and loot or destroy any buildings and possessions left behind including food supplies. The following is a partial list of villages, or communities of displaced villagers, whom SPDC forces attacked in Toungoo District during the latter half of 2007.

Date of attack	SPDC unit	Operation area	Village name	Details
September 13 th	MOC #5	Th' Ay Hta	Ha Hto Bper	Fired mortars
September 14 th	MOC #5, LIB #375, Column #1	?	Bplaw Baw Der	Fired on villagers in farm huts; destroyed property
			Yer Loh	
September 20 th	MOC #5	Noh So, Ter Too Soh and Koo Ler Der	Hsaw Wah Der	Fired 20 mortar shells into a community of displaced villagers
September 20 th	MOC #5	Ter Too Soh	Ha Hto Bper	Fired five mortar shells into the hiding site; fire two more shells the following day
October 13 th	LID #88	Yoo Doh Gkoh	Khaw Hta	Fired four mortar shells and machine guns at village; entered on foot and burnt down eight homes
October 23 rd	MOC #5, LIB #563	Pah Der Gka bridge	Pa Weh, Pa Der Gkah and Thay Ya Yoo	Fired 14 mortar shells at, villages, plantations and field huts.
November 29 th	MOC #4, LIB #703, 707 and 710	See Khee Der area	?	Destroyed villagers' plantations
December 1 st	MOC #4, LIB #703, 707 and 710	Th' Ay Kee area	Thay Wah Bper Htee	As part of a single operation from November 30 th to December 10 th soldiers burnt down villagers' homes at these and other smaller displacement sites
December 2 nd			Ka Loh Hta and Aee Gker Hta	
December 5 th			Buh Kee	



Soldiers of SPDC MOC #4 burnt down this displaced hiding site in the Th'Ay Kee area on December 4th 2007. Two days later, on December 6th, villagers returned to collect food and other supplies left behind when they fled, only to find the remains of burned buildings and rice supplies lying in ashes. [Photos: KHRG]

In order to support this intense military build up, the SPDC has been sending in convoys of convicts taken from prisons across the country to serve as porters for local military units. While army personnel operating in the area continue to force villagers to serve in this capacity, the sheer scale of SPDC operations in Toungoo and the army's inability to catch sufficient numbers of villagers for this work means that the regime's reliance on convict porters is extensive. One escaped convict porter described his experience to KHRG:

"On February 21st 2007, they sent [me] from Mandalay to Toungoo. I had to sleep one night in the Toungoo prison. Approximately, there were around 240 prisoners who were sent to Toungoo. When we were in Mandalay prison, we were taken out by the police and when we arrived in Toungoo prison we were taken out by military soldiers... I had to carry rice sacks and a sack of rice sack was about 20 kg."

- U K--- (male, 51), convict porter, Toungoo District (December 2007)



Displaced villagers from eastern Day Loh village, shown here on August 28th 2007, flee through the forest following an attack by LID #88 and MOC #5. [Photos: KHRG]

Detentions, torture and killings

"The Burmese soldiers sometimes arrive in our village and when they see the villagers they catch and kill them. They have already killed two friends of mine. Their names are Htar Lar Loo and Kwe Klo Htoo; and another three were arrested by

the enemies [SPDC]. The three of them were men and one escaped. He was beaten by the Burmese soldiers and two of his teeth were broken. He was taken in handcuffs. He escaped when fighting happened between the Burmese soldiers and their enemies.”

- Saw K--- (male, 32), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (December 2007)

While many civilians are simply shot on sight when spotted by SPDC soldiers, others have been detained, tortured and then either released or summarily executed. Such violence serves to cultivate a culture of compliance with military demands. As such, it is frequently the village head whom SPDC soldiers detain and torture, whether for interrogation, threat or punishment because it is this individual who must take primary responsibility for implementing military demands on villagers. On August 13th 2007, two SPDC military columns from LIB #9, forcibly detained villagers Tay La Way (male, 50), Saw Gkyaw Moo Ya (male, 50), Saw Tar Tay (male, 19) and Maw

La Lay (male, 45). These four villagers were subsequently beaten unconscious by the SPDC soldiers. KHRG has received no information on whether these villagers were subsequently released. On November 4th 2007, an officer from SPDC MOC #5 operating at Gklay Soh Kee demanded that the village head of Gha Muh Der come to meet him. Upon arrival the officer made accusations against the village head, slapped his face, beat and punched him. Lacking any tangible charge against the village head, the officer ordered him to return to his village. Even though it was already being dark, the officer would not allow the village head to use a flashlight on his way home.



The body of 38-year-old U Chit Hlaing, whom SPDC soldiers from LID #88 and MOC #5 operating under the command of Win Htain Oo killed on July 7th 2007. [Photo: KHRG]



An ethnic Arakan SPDC army deserter from IB #124, pictured here in August 2007, who fled his unit after witnessing other soldiers in his battalion torturing local villagers in Toungoo District. He told KHRG that he surrendered to the KNLA because he did not want to remain with the SPDC Army, having initially enlisted in 2004. [Photo: KHRG]

Despite the threats of violence for non-compliance the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Karen State means that many villagers living under SPDC control must violate orders, typically regarding movement restrictions, simply to maintain a livelihood and feed themselves. Regardless of the occasional availability of SPDC authorisation documents permitting villagers to travel to agricultural fields these restrictions are nevertheless debilitating to successful agricultural practices. Farmers in Karen State typically sleep out in their fields during peak times in the cultivation cycle in order to maximise time spent tending crops which may also be located a long distance from communities which the SPDC has forcibly

relocated. In some areas of Toungoo villagers have reported that travel passes cost 200 kyat and are only valid for two days. As villagers may be unwilling or unable to pay such fees every two days or otherwise unable to get back in time, they risk detention and killing for violating the stipulated conditions of their travel documents. In other cases villagers have simply been shot dead when spotted by SPDC soldiers who do not even bother to check whether or not they are in possession of valid SPDC-issued travel documents. The complete impunity with which these soldiers can murder local civilians also serves to strengthen threats against non-compliance with military demands. The following is a partial list of civilians whom SPDC forces either shot dead or killed with landmines between July and December 2007.

#	Date of incident	Name	Age	Village Name	SPDC Army unit	Injury or death
1	July 5 th	Saw Sha Poh Tha	25	Shah See Boh	MOC #9, IB #30	Shot and injured while harvesting betel nut
2	July 5 th	Saw Poh Tay	60	Mwee Loh	MOC #5 soldiers under Yeh Aung	Shot dead while harvesting betel nut
3	July 7 th	U Chit Hlaing	38	?	LID #88, MOC #5	Shot dead
4	July 19 th	Saw Day Poh	27	See Kheh Der	LID #88	All three shot dead on the same occasion
5		Saw Dtee Gkoo Loo	25			
6		Saw Wah Wah	35			
7	July 27 th	Saw Gkoh Tee Noh	38	Tha Bah Rah	?	Arrested and killed
8	August 17 th	Saw Maw Htoo Say	23	Blah Kee	MOC #5	Stepped on SPDC landmine and died
9	August 20 th	Saw Nah Doo	?	Kheh Der	MOC #9	Shot dead
10	November 11 th	Saw Tar Too Dtoo	48	Saw Wah Der	MOC #5	Shot dead at Saw Wah Der Village
11	November 13 th	Saw Ha Ree	27	Hoo Muh Der	LIB #541	Shot dead
12	November 30 th	Saw Maw Gkya	55	Ha Htoh Bper	MOC #4	Killed by landmine
13	December 2 nd	Saw Pler Poh	32	Kheh Der	MOC# 9	Shot dead

Forced labour

The attacks on villages, destruction of hiding sites, arbitrary detention, torture and killing of civilians all function to entrench a system of military control and exploitation where threats of violence serve to enforce compliance with demands for money, labour, food and other supplies. The most prevalent form of exploitation in areas of Karen State under SPDC control is forced labour. In Toungoo District such coerced and uncompensated work has primarily involved the portering of military rations and other supplies. Other recent incidents of forced labour have involved portering carrying injured SPDC soldiers, road construction, clearing away brush from the sides of



Plaw Mu Der villagers do forced labour clearing a roadway and repairing a bridge at an SPDC Army camp at Ay Hta on September 7th 2007. [Photos: KHRG]

vehicle roads, army camp construction or repair,

sentry duty, *set tha* (messenger duty) and the fabrication and delivery of building supplies. According to the estimate of one KHRG field researcher operating in southern Toungoo District, at least 2,000 villagers in the area had to partake in forced labour during December 2007 alone. Example cases of recent incidents in Toungoo District presented below show some of the variety of forced labour which local SPDC Army personnel have been demanding.



SPDC LID #88 soldiers march with forced civilian porters in February 2007. [Photos: KHRG]

Portering

On November 24th 2007, MOC #4 soldiers based at Play Hsa Loh forced 16 villagers to carry army rations to the SPDC camp at Tha Bpyay Nyuh.

Road construction and maintenance

On September 15th 2007, SPDC soldiers based at Buh Hsa Kee ordered Gkaw Thay Der villagers to carry army rations and cut away a new route through the forest from Buh Hsa Kee to Gka Muh Loh army camp. Some of villagers had to carry the rations and some had to cut away the forest. The new route which the SPDC forced the villagers to cut was two arm spans (3.66 m / 12 ft) wide.

On October 23rd 2007, SPDC MOC #5 soldiers operating under the command of Kaung Mya based in Kler La town forced 12 villages from the Kler La area to cut away the forest overgrowth to a depth of 20 feet [6.1 m] along the sides of the Kler La to Mawchi vehicle road. Individual villagers from each house had to start clearing the roadsides on October 24th. Following this, the soldiers forced villagers to cut away the overgrowth along the Gkaw Thay Der to Bu Hsa Kee vehicle road.

Army camp construction

On September 29th 2007, soldiers from SPDC Battalion #8, having taken over from SPDC LIB #439 ordered villagers to dig the post holes for the construction of buildings at the camp site of LIB #439.

Sentry duty

On October 22nd 2007, SPDC IB #73, based at Sa Ya Gkyee, ordered individual villagers from each house in Shwe Ta Hsaw village and Ay Gkaw village to serve as sentries taking

security along the nearby vehicle road. Those unable or unwilling to partake in sentry duty were forced to pay a fine of 500 kyat.

Fabrication and delivery of building supplies

On November 20th 2007, SPDC IB #73, based at Tar Ba Kee, forced 5 villagers from Sha See Boh village, 5 villagers from See Pyoo Gkoh and 21 villagers from Toungoo town to cut down and deliver bamboo poles for fencing the army camp.

On November 27th 2007, company commander Than Tun Aung of SPDC LIB #463, forced Loo Ghee Koh Der Kah villagers to cut down 1,000 bamboo poles 10 to 18 hand spans (2.3 m / 7.5 ft – 4.12 m / 13.5 ft) in length and deliver them to the army camp.

Conclusion

Ongoing militarisation and abuse in Toungoo District tangibly illustrate the SPDC's unflinching efforts to expand military control and cultivate a culture of compliance to army demands through the use of violence. The regime's assertions about its proposed constitutional referendum thus appear all the more discredited as its remains dependant on violence to counteract civilian rejection and resistance to military control. While the junta states, in reference to the proposed constitution that "*it is most appropriate to transform the administration of Tatmadaw into democratic administration of the people*",¹ the SPDC Army nonetheless continues to deploy more troops, attack villages, and confine whole communities in military-controlled relocation sites where the violently enforced system of civilian subjugation involves restrictions on movement, forced labour and extortion.

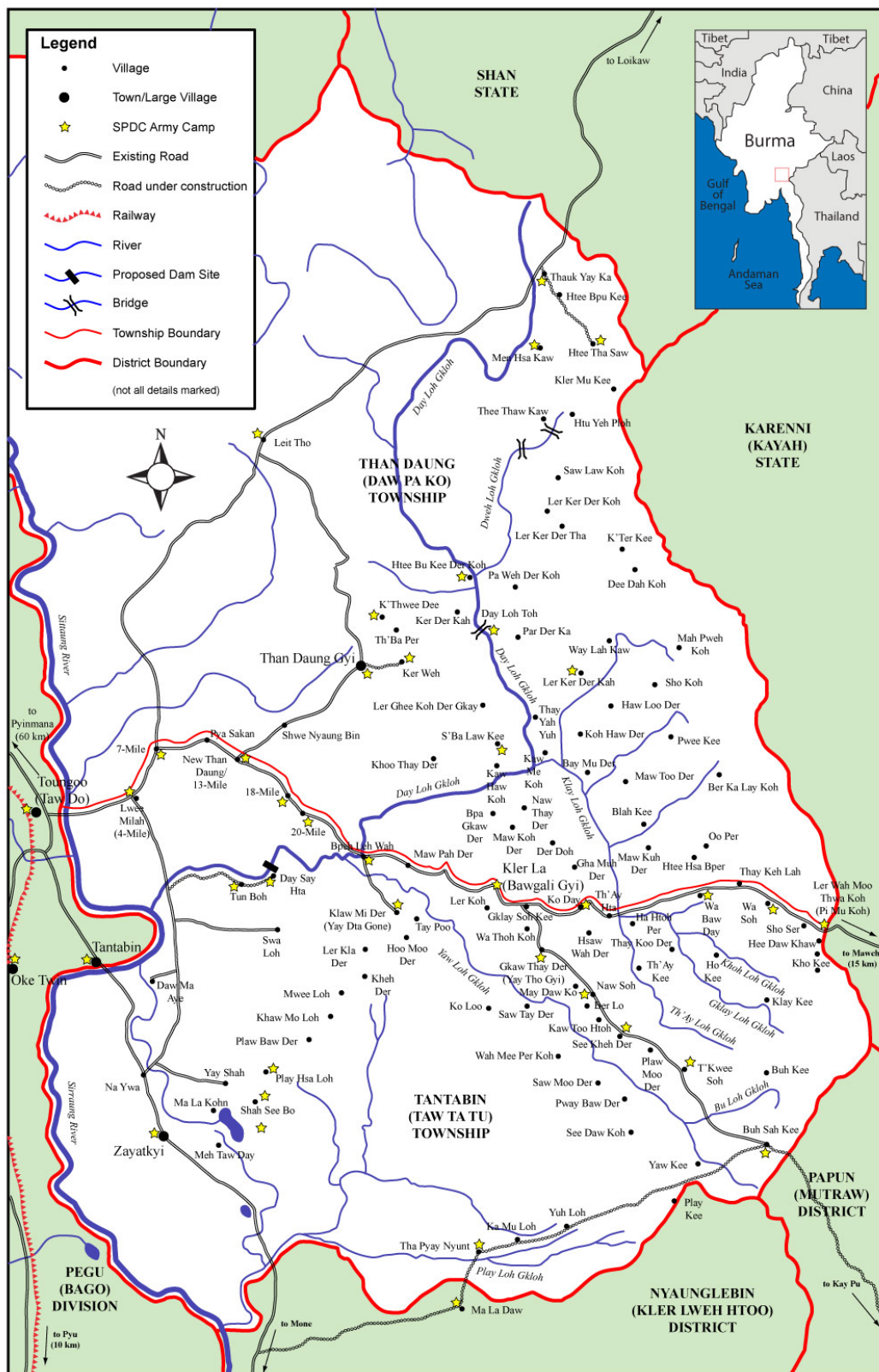
Further background on the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- *SPDC troops burn villages and step up operations against civilians in southern Toungoo District* (December 2007)
- *Villagers risk arrest and execution to harvest their crops* (December 2007)
- *Landmines, Killings and Food Destruction: Civilian life in Toungoo District* (August 2007)
- *Provoking Displacement in Toungoo: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks* (May 2007)
- *Bullets and Bulldozers: The SPDC offensive continues in Toungoo District* (February 2007)
- *One Year On: Continuing Abuses in Toungoo District* (November 2006)
- *Toungoo District: The civilian response to human rights violations* (August 2006)
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (July 2006)
- *Without Respite: Renewed Attacks on Villages and Internal Displacement in Toungoo District* (June 2006)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

¹ "Announcement Nos 1/2008 and 2/2008 issued, Approval of the Constitution draft will be sought in a National Referendum to be held in May 2008, In accordance with the forthcoming State Constitution, the multi-party democracy general elections will be held in 2010," *The New Light of Myanmar*, February 10th 2008.

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



Karen Districts



© Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005

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