



Report from the Field

March 7th, 2008 / KHRG #2008-F3

Village-level decision making in responding to forced relocation: A case from Papun District

As part of its campaign of militarisation in Northern Karen State the SPDC has had as a principle strategy the forcible relocation of villagers from areas outside of its control to relocation sites close to Army camps or vehicle roads where civilian control can be firmly established. Over the years, villagers in Papun District and across Karen State have come to learn well that SPDC control means regular abuse and exploitation and, therefore, have sought to avoid such control wherever possible. This report presents one recent example from January to February 2008 of the courageous and varied response strategies villagers use to resist forced relocation and abuse and evade control by SPDC soldiers. Interestingly, this case also hints at some internal dissent and corruption within the SPDC ranks.

Gk--- village, located in Bpa Heh village tract of Bu Tho Township, Papun District, has had to deal with an abusive relationship with soldiers from the Burmese military ever since 1997 when the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)¹ began a campaign to eradicate all hill villages and other rural settlements in Papun District not under direct Army control and relocate their populations to military-controlled sites near camps, bases and vehicle roads. Due to the proximity of SPDC forces (most recently Infantry Battalion (IB) #60), based at Thee Muh Hta, the village head of Gk--- village has since then been frequently summoned to attend meetings at the Army camp and respond to the demands of the soldiers for labour and supplies. However, to a great extent, the village has been able to remain on the periphery of SPDC control, having fled encroaching Army units to hiding sites in the forest four times in the past and the rest of the time having been able to negotiate with SPDC soldiers in order to remain in their village and conduct their livelihoods. At the same time, the village has retained contact with local Karen National Union (KNU) personnel. However, in March 2007 SPDC troops began pushing through with the construction upgrade of a vehicle road that aims to connect SPDC camps leading from Papun town on to Gk'Hee Kyo and Kaw Bpoo (Kaw Boke in Burmese) and then to Dah Kway (near Kyauk Nyat) in order to send rations and other supplies to the construction sites of the proposed dams at Weh Gyi. This construction saw a troop build-up in the area and an increase in attempts to flush out displaced communities in hiding and forcibly relocate them to military controlled villages and relocation sites, where villagers can more easily be exploited as a source of labour and supplies.² At the end of December



This wooden church in Gk--- village stands empty in February 2008 after villagers moved to a hiding site in the forest to avoid forced relocation to an area under SPDC control. [Photo: KHRG]

¹ Late in 1997 the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), but with no significant change in policy or tactics.

² For more information on the construction of this road see *Increased roads, army camps and attacks on rural communities in Papun District*, KHRG, November 2007. Available online at <http://www.khrg.org/khrg2007/khrg07f10.html>.

2007, the prospect of forced relocation also became an imminent reality for the villages of Bpa Heh village tract close to Thee Muh Hta. This report documents the case of Gk--- village, presenting the villagers' words on how the demand to relocate was issued, why they chose displacement in a forest hiding site over forced relocation and their hopes for the future.

"The SPDC view our village as a black area because now we don't live under their control and we just made an understanding with them. [We are] not fully under their control. When the SPDC enter our village, if we can run, we run, but if we can't run, we have to face them."

- Saw P--- (male, 28), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Jan 2008)

The prospect of forced relocation

As of January 2008, there were 40 houses with more than 250 villagers in Gk--- village, including more than a hundred children. When interviewed at this time, residents of Gk--- village were aware of imminent plans to forcibly move them to a relocation site close to Thee Mu Hta Army camp and were carefully monitoring the situation in order to assess whether to stay or leave their village. On December 30th 2007, SPDC Military Operations Command (MOC) #16 Commander Kyaw Kyaw Soe had summoned the Gk--- village heads and representatives to meet with him at T'Khaw Hta Army camp. Four men from the village followed the order and travelled to T'Khaw Hta. At this meeting, the village leaders were ordered to relocate their village to a small plain area close to the SPDC Army camp at Thee Muh Hta, starting initially with the relocation of ten households. The SPDC also told them at this time to send villagers to start building the necessary houses at the relocation site immediately. Kyaw Kyaw Soe told the villagers that he had no choice but to relocate these households as he had already promised his division leaders that he would do so and was required to send a report and photographs following the relocation to prove it had been successfully completed. However, through negotiation, the village leaders were able to convince Kyaw Kyaw Soe that they would no longer be able to farm their hill fields and conduct their livelihoods if ten households were to move immediately to Thee Muh Hta and would therefore require food support. In this way the village representatives were able to reduce the number of households required to move immediately.

"The SPDC asked ten households to go and build their houses in Thee Muh Hta. These ten households would have to actually move [to Thee Muh Hta]. I told them that we are hill tribe people living on the mountain side and it would not be easy for us to move our place immediately, so we could only build three or four houses at first. They agreed and said 'We won't force you to move now. Do it slowly and little by little there will be more and more houses.' ...We are under their control so we can't do anything, we can only say 'Amen, Amen' to whatever they say. [However] we tried to say as much as we could and they let us build [just] three to four houses."

- Saw Le--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Jan 2008)

On January 15th, 15 villagers went to Thee Muh Hta to start building the houses and on January 16th ten villagers went again, seven of these villagers were women. However, this was obviously not considered sufficient as that night the village head was detained at Thee Muh Hta and ordered to send information back to the village that all of the villagers from Gk--- village should go and participate in the building work the next day and stay until the houses were completed. At first the villagers refused to go, arguing that they did not want to go and stay in such a limited area and that if they were going to have to relocate, they would rather move the entire village than be split apart – an offer that was curiously refused. However, the SPDC camp commander of Thee Muh Hta, A---, seemed to be more concerned with personal promotion than with the actual relocation and offered the villagers a compromise in order to encourage them to comply with the building work. He suggested that once they finished the building work, three or four families came and stayed in the houses temporarily until the MOC Commander Kyaw Kyaw Soe came to inspect the relocation site and take his photographs and then they could return to their village. If after

that occasion any SPDC officers came to inspect the village again, he would claim the villagers had gone back to work at their old village for the day, but still lived at the relocation site by night.

"Tomorrow we will all go and build those three or four houses until they are finished and then when the Operation Commander comes, he will take pictures. The camp commander, A---, told us 'when you finish the houses, three or four families should come and stay in the houses and when the Operation Commander returns if you want to go back and stay in your village and do your work there, you can go back and stay there. If they come again without you there, I can say that you all went back to do your work at the village'."

- Saw Le--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Jan 2008)

"[At the meeting] they spoke about moving the village to Thee Muh Hta for Su See Ywa [grouping the villages together in a relocation site]. In my understanding, the commanders tried to do this because they would like to improve their rank. If they can organise the villagers then they will be promoted. They said that we could go and stay there and then return when the Operation Commander left. The Operation Commander hoped other nearby villages would also move to the relocation site. [The camp commander told us that] if other LIDs [Light Infantry Divisions] come he would tell them not to burn those villages, that they were already in his area, and that the villagers would not need to run when troops were coming. ... Now the Operation Commander is about to come, so they [the Thee Muh Hta camp leaders] are hurrying – they are trying to show what they have done so that they will be promoted."

- Saw L--- (male, 39), former VPDC³ village head, Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)

This case does seem to show some internal dissent within SPDC ranks. However the villagers did not trust the words of the SPDC officer and feared that they would eventually be forced to move to the relocation site permanently, as they had learnt that Kyaw Kyaw Soe also aimed to relocate all the other villages in Bpa Heh village tract to Thee Muh Hta within four months, including Per Ler Der, Lay Ther Koh, Tha Thwee Der, Way Naw Der and Lay Wah Der villages. Having experienced significant abuse, exploitation and restrictions even under intermittent SPDC control, the villagers were naturally reticent about relocating to an area where soldiers would have constant access to and control over them and therefore committed to delay and evade such relocation for as long as possible.

"They [the SPDC officers] told us to come and stay [at Thee Muh Hta] because they love our civilians and take pity on the civilians, but we already see through them... We already see their intestines [know what they are really like]... If the SPDC come to our village, we can't sleep during the night. We worry that they will fuck [sic] our daughter or fuck our wife and if they fuck our daughters and wives to whom will we put the crime. Then if we go and stay among them, it's [our life's] finished! Now they eat our pigs and we can't do anything about it... We want our leaders [KNU] to arrange some [alternative] way for us... We will delay the SPDC plan as much as we can while our leaders are organising plans for us... We will try to do things softly and slowly."

- Saw Le--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Jan 2008)

"The SPDC asked us to go and cut wood for them to make bunkers and asked us to go and clear the weeds around their camp. Women and children also had to go and do this work [forced labour]. We have already done it three or four times. They didn't give any payment to the villagers, [even though] the village head dared to ask for it. They give us food but it's not enough. If we have to carry rations for them, we

³ VPDC (Village Peace and Development Council) is the local village-level administrative unit in the SPDC civilian hierarchy. VPDC village heads are designated by regional SPDC authorities to serve as go betweens with orders from township officials to the rest of the village community.

have to sleep there, especially when the rations arrive. For example, they assign us six or ten sacks of rice to carry and we have to carry it all [to the camp] until we are finished. We can't go back to our village if we don't finish. If we go and stay there in their limited area, it is sure that we will always have to do their work! Even now, we have to inform them where we will go and when we will be back. We think that if we go and stay there, they will make a fence with barbed wire around the area."

- Saw P--- (male, 28), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Jan 2008)

The SPDC soldiers had already proved to the villagers their propensity for forced labour, extortion, sexual abuse and civilian movement restrictions and the villagers believed the situation could only get worse under SPDC control and therefore asked local KNU leaders for advice and support to avoid the forced relocation.

Displacement to evade SPDC control

"Now we live here in the forest and we have many problems, but we will stay like this because we couldn't handle the SPDC enforcing [demands]. ...The KNU leaders also said that we needed to escape from there and get out of our village, in order to escape from the SPDC who would force us to be their slaves. We believe that the KNU leaders are our people and they love us and would make arrangements for us, so we left our village."

- Saw Le--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)



An 11-year-old girl from Gk--- village helps her mother in taking care of her younger siblings and carrying the chickens after school at the forest hiding site. [Photo: KHRG]



Villagers in temporary canvas shelters before they decided to build more permanent houses at the forest hiding site. This photo shows a man preparing a fire for the family to cook food upon. [Photo: KHRG]

After travelling to meet with KNU leaders and receiving information from them that the SPDC had subsequent plans to later move all the villagers who relocated to Thee Muh Hta to the mass relocation sites at Pwa Ghaw and Mu Theh in Lu Thaw township and Nyaunglebin District respectively, the village leaders determined not to relocate the village and made plans to move the village to a hiding site outside of SPDC control. On January 26th 2008, all of the villagers in Gk--- village abandoned their village and fled into the jungle with security provided by the KNLA soldiers, carrying with them as many of their belongings and food supplies as they could manage. The majority have since been living in a forest hiding site in Bu Tho township, but some of the villagers decided to cross the border into Thailand and stay in a Thai Karen village.

"Our village representatives who came back from the meeting told us that the SPDC tried to persuade the villagers to go and stay at Thee Muh Hta and that they will then build a school for the village in order to develop the village, but we didn't see the SPDC words as true and real, so we didn't go there. ... The KNU leaders said that the SPDC had a plan to persuade villagers here to go down and stay at Thee Muh

Hta and then when all the villagers are there, they will send the villagers to Mu Theh and they will build a city [mass relocation site] there."

- Saw B--- (male, 29), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)

Now that the villagers are displaced and in hiding they are no longer able to buy supplies from the trading families at Thee Muh Hta as they could previously and instead have to walk two hours to the nearest location where they can purchase food – the journey takes three hours on the way back due to the steep uphill climb. Per Ler Der and Tha Thwee Der villages have also been affected by the displacement of Gk--- village as although they are currently located outside of SPDC control, villagers from these villages had previously been able to accompany Gk--- villagers on trips to Thee Muh Hta to purchase supplies. To make matters worse, much of the region has experienced unseasonable rain during the period shortly after the villagers fled, creating increased difficulties for the displaced villagers. With January and February being part of the regular dry season and the rains not expected to begin until at least May, the villagers had not thought to roof their rice barns and all of their rice was soaked when the rains fell. In the village the villagers farmed both hill fields and flat fields and had plantations of sugar cane, betel nut palms, coconut trees and banana trees, along with other palms they were able to use for roofing materials. Although the villagers have been able to sneak back occasionally during the day to farm their hill fields, they have not been able to farm their flat fields or gather the fruit from their plantations as these are located too deep into the SPDC-controlled area. Nevertheless, as the prospect of being able to return to live at their village in the near future seemed very narrow, Gk--- villages decided to start cutting bamboo and building more long-term shelters at their forest hiding site on February 7th 2008.

"We dare not go back and stay in our village and do our work. If we go back, we need soldiers to come and provide security for us. In the village we still have coconut trees and betel nut palms. We don't know how to go back and collect their fruit."

- Saw L--- (male, 39), former VPDC village head, Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)



Shown here on February 7th 2008, Gk--- villagers began cutting bamboo to build shelters at their forest hiding site. At times of displacement, Karen women take as much responsibility as men for building houses. [Photo: KHRG]

"We have difficulties to face. It was actually the time of year to build houses, but we had no time to build houses because we had to gather and carry our belongings [to flee]. [Now] it is time to cut the hill field, but we have to build houses. These [difficulties] are because of the SPDC. If not for the SPDC, we could have cut our hill fields already."

- Saw B--- (male, 29), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)

Impacts on health and education

Living in the forest has also impacted health and education for the villagers. Due to the rain and the initial lack of shelter, many of the villagers suffered from colds and fever. The villagers reported that some of the women who had recently delivered their babies also got sick because they had to sleep outside in the cold, at a time when in Karen culture they would normally be resting and kept warm in front of log fires. The KNU leaders therefore sent a health care worker to stay with the villagers in the displaced hiding site and treat their illnesses until they have finished building their new houses.

"We have a lot of people who have gotten sick because they have to stay in the open air like this... The children were sick because of the SPDC's forced relocation and because we had to flee to the forest and sleep on the ground without cover. The children have mostly suffered fever. We have no money to buy medicine. Now we have a KNU medic [most likely from the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)] and it is better for us."

- Saw B--- (male, 29), Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)

Before the villagers were displaced, they had a school in the village which had two teachers and taught up to Grade Four. Two of the villagers with which the KHRG field researcher spoke to as well as the researcher himself reported that the school had from 25 to 28 students, although one of the villagers reported that there were originally 39 students. The teachers have continued to conduct their lessons in the forest. However, the KHRG researcher reported that, as some of the villagers fled to other hiding sites or across the border, there are now only 19 students left to sit this year's school exam.

"We have a school in our village and it teaches up to Grade Four. When we fled it was nearly time for the students to sit their exams. The students already did their revision. Now the students are sitting their exams in the forest."

- Saw L--- (male, 39), former VPDC village head, Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)



These photos show children from Gk--- village school continuing to study in a forest shelter in February 2008 after the teachers, parents and local KNU leaders arranged for the children to finish their lessons and take their school exams. [Photo: KHRG]

Conclusion

"The Burmese government has tortured and oppressed our Karen people, not only in our time, but since our grandparents' time. There is no way that we want to go back and live under their control. So we hope that our leaders will arrange some way for us. We would like to live among our people."

- Saw P--- (male, 28), Gk--- village, Bu Tho Township (Jan 2008)

This report provides an example of one of many cases of attempted forced relocation, as the SPDC troops aim to bring all villagers into areas under their control. However, this case is slightly different from others as it shows some internal dissent, or at least self-interested corruption, within SPDC ranks. Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties the villagers have been facing living in the forest, they still believe that displacement in hiding was a better choice for them than moving to the relocation site where they knew well they would be subject to constant exploitation and abuse. They hope that in the future they will be able to return to their village, reclaim their houses, fields, plantations and school and live free from SPDC control.

"It is good for our village head that our leaders cut the rope [that tied us] to the SPDC, because we could only fight the SPDC with our tongue and it would not have been good for us in the long-term... This year we planned to plant long term crops, but we couldn't because of this situation. We hope that the situation will become better and that we will be able to live in our village [again]... We don't want to go to another country. We hope that our country will get freedom."

- Saw L--- (male, 39), former VPDC village head, Gk--- village, Bu Tho township (Feb 2008)

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

- *Video evidence of forced labour in Papun District* (December 2007)
- *Increased roads, army camps and attacks on rural communities in Papun District* (November 2007)
- *SPDC Army atrocities in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract in the words of a local resident* (October 2007)
- *Road construction, attacks on displaced communities and the impact on education in northern Papun District* (March 2007)
- *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (October 2006)
- *SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response* (September 2006)
- *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005 – 2006 Northern Karen State Offensive* (August 2006)
- *SPDC military begins pincer movement, adds new camps in Papun District* (August 2006)
- *Forced labour, extortion and abuses in Papun District* (July 2006)
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (July 2006)
- *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo Districts* (June 2006)
- *SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun District* (June 2006)

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Papun District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* (updated November 2007) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (updated March 2007). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

Karen Districts



©Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005

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