



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## Report from the Field

March 31<sup>st</sup> 2008 / KHRG #2008-F5

### SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District

*According to reports from KHRG field researchers working in the forested mountains of Toungoo District, local SPDC forces have recently begun utilising spies operating under the guise of escaped convict porters to locate civilian hiding sites. These individuals have reportedly utilised their cover to gain information on the location of displaced hiding sites, farm fields and food storage containers. This information has, in turn, allowed for the rapid deployment of SPDC patrols to target particular displaced communities in military attacks. Alongside this strategy, the SPDC has maintained heavy movement restrictions and imposed persistent forced labour in those areas already under its control. This report examines the human rights situation in Toungoo District up to March 2008.*

Faced with a resistant civilian population which continues to evade military control in the forested mountains of Toungoo District, the SPDC has been unable to locate all displaced communities in hiding. On those occasions when they have been able to locate a given hiding site, local villagers have often been able, through the use of local communication networks and advanced warning systems, to escape into the forest before the arrival and armed attack of SPDC troops. As a consequence, while the army has continued to locate, shell and raze displaced hiding sites, many other communities go undetected. Therefore, KHRG field researchers have reported that SPDC forces operating in southern Toungoo District have since late 2007 begun sending spies, under the guise of escaped convict porters, into displacement areas in an attempt to track down communities in hiding and pass information on their locations back to local SPDC Army units which can then more quickly advance onto hiding sites and thereby reduce the time in which villagers are able to flee. As a KHRG field researcher described the situation in March 2008,



Having fled to escape a series of attacks on villages in the Th'Ay Kee area by soldiers from SPDC MOC #4 at the start of December 2007, the villagers shown here on January 21<sup>st</sup> 2008 subsequently built this makeshift shelter at a forest hiding site. [Photo: KHRG]

*“Before the SPDC soldiers have taken action, they have first sent spies dressed like villagers and have secretly collected information about villagers' locations. When they have been caught, they have said that they are convict porters... People noticed that after they saw the spies wandering around, not long afterwards three or four SPDC columns came to conduct operations. Because the spies had seen the*

*places where the villagers hid their food and belongings, when the SPDC soldiers came they went directly to those spots, burnt down and destroyed the food and belongings and took some as well. This situation has created big doubts for the villagers because, whether living in the village or in the jungle, it has become a problem for them."*

Given that large numbers of convict porters have been escaping from SPDC patrols and finding refuge in local civilian communities in Toungoo and other areas of northern Karen State, especially over the past couple of years, the arrival of escaped convict porters has become something of a regular occurrence for villages in the area. The use of spies acting as convict porters, therefore, not only threatens displaced communities in hiding but also – since large numbers of actual escaped convict porters have so far relied on the good will of local communities for crucial assistance – the continued survival of escaped convict porters. Future escapees may face growing distrust and an unwillingness on the part of the local community to provide any assistance.

Alongside the use of spies, SPDC forces in Toungoo have continued with their regular programme of developing networks of vehicle roads as integral components of military infrastructure. Since the first week of February 2008, Military Operations Command (MOC) #4 has overseen the widening of the Kler La to Buh Hsa Kee vehicle road. This north-south corridor leads into northern Papun District and eventually connects with Pwa Ghaw, where the SPDC operates a military base and a growing forced relocation site.

SPDC military units currently operating in Toungoo District include MOC #4, MOC #21, MOC #10, under the command of Ko Ko Lat and MOC #5, under the command of Kaung Mya. Kaung Mya and MOC #5 have been active in and around Kler La town since the first half of 2007. Kaung Mya in particular has become notorious amongst the local population due to his aggressive military operations and stringent restrictions on movement and trade.

*"A few months ago the villagers didn't have enough food so they had to eat rice porridge. The villagers have faced this problem since Kaung Mya and MOC #5 came to stay in the military camp. We haven't been able to go outside of the village. He said that he hated Karen people. His subordinate commanders have sometimes checked the villagers' houses. If they saw many rice sacks, they questioned the house owner and they took the rice sacks to their camp and he [Kaung Mya] ordered us to fence in our plots."*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 30), K--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

## **Attacks and displacement**

*"It [the SPDC Army camp] is only a mile away. The villagers don't tend the hill fields because the enemies [SPDC soldiers] are so active in this area. So they have to find and buy their food in other places. They have to walk for one day in order to reach a village to buy food."*

- Saw D--- (male, 65), H--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

SPDC soldiers and officers operating in Toungoo have continued patrols into the forested mountains from bases and camps situated along vehicle roads or at towns and larger villages. Where these troops encounter hiding sites, food stores or hillside farm fields of displaced villagers, or otherwise learn of these locations from SPDC spies operating in the area, they have carried out armed attacks, shelling villages from a distance with 120 mm mortars, before entering on foot, destroying and looting property and shooting on sight

anyone spotted. In the Th'Ay Kee area, for instance, about which KHRG reported a series of attacks and the subsequent destruction of villages by soldiers of MOC #4 at the start of December 2007,<sup>1</sup> a KHRG field researcher working in the area reported that the locations of these hiding sites had been passed on to SPDC authorities from someone claiming to be a convict porter who had entered their community prior to the attacks.

*"When the soldiers arrived in the village they burnt some of my materials such as pots and plates. They burnt four pots and ten plates and two spoons; and some of my clothes were burnt. They burnt my things in December 2007. So now I have had to borrow some food from my siblings as I don't have enough money to buy food. Most villagers have gone to buy food in M---. They have had to walk for three days. The enemies [SPDC soldiers] are staying in the villagers' hill fields now. They have already burnt down seven houses in the village and some paddy."*

- Saw L--- (male, 45), T--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)



In Toungoo District the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) and the Back Pack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT) both provide medical support for local villagers. However, given restricted resources and ongoing security risks these groups cannot access all areas or all displaced communities. This picture was taken on December 12<sup>th</sup> 2007 and shows an FBR relief team delivering medicine to displaced villagers. [Photo: KHRG]

Those communities which continue to evade SPDC patrols operating in Toungoo District face ongoing challenges in addressing their health, nutritional, educational and other social needs. While many of these people have farm fields located at their abandoned villages, the presence of SPDC soldiers in the area or landmines where the soldiers have already departed, and thus the ongoing risk of detention, execution or injury hinders their return and threatens their food security, health and overall welfare. As the SPDC has been establishing more and more camps and bases in the area and deploying more troops, the conditions for a safe and secure return home for these communities remain elusive.

*"No, I dare not to go back to my village. When the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers arrived in my village they took some of my property such as a bucket and other things. Now the villagers can't tend the hill fields [while they are] in the jungle. We have to take more care about our security and go and buy food in other villages."*

- Naw T--- (female, 56), H--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

Due to ongoing SPDC patrols in search of displaced communities in hiding, villagers confront severe challenges to their efforts at evading soldiers and persevering displaced in the forest. External support in the form of food and medical aid is therefore crucial; but so too are other forms of assistance. As one KHRG researcher operating amongst the local communities in the area recommended,

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<sup>1</sup> For more background on the situation in the Th'Ay Kee area see *SPDC troops burn villages and step up operations against civilians in southern Toungoo District*, KHRG, December 2007 and *Militarisation, violence and exploitation in Toungoo District*, KHRG, February 2008.

*“The most important things which the villagers need are food and iCOMs [walkie-talkies], because now the IDPs [internally displaced people] live like rabbits. For rabbits to protect themselves from their enemies like wolves and other savage animals they don't have weapons and so they must use their ears. If they hear that their enemy is coming they have to run away. Like rabbits the IDPs don't have any weapons to prevent their enemies from destroying their property. If they had iCOMs [walkie-talkies], they could receive messages [with information of SPDC troop movements] and therefore have time to move to some other place.”*



Displaced villagers from S--- dare not stay in their village because SPDC soldiers are active in the area. Instead, they have had to build temporary shelters at their hiding site as shown here on January 19<sup>th</sup> 2008. [Photo: KHRG]

## Restrictions on movement and trade

For both villagers living under SPDC control and those at displaced hiding sites outside of such control, SPDC-enforced restrictions on movement and trade have undermined livelihoods, nutrition, health and other areas of community development. For civilians living in Toungoo District SPDC forces have increasingly restricted the import of food and other supplies from Toungoo town in Pegu Division down the vehicle road leading to Kler La town. This route is the primary conduit for goods coming into the area from central Burma. In May 2007, KHRG reported that soldiers were restricting civilians from bringing in many items, including specific foods and medicine.<sup>2</sup> SPDC soldiers from MOC #5 were enforcing these restrictions at P'Leh Wah checkpoint along the Toungoo to Kler La vehicle road in an apparent attempt to prevent supplies from reaching displaced villagers in the forested hills of Toungoo. More recently SPDC authorities in the area have strengthened these restrictions so that villagers are no longer allowed to purchase any food in Toungoo town. Instead they must buy whatever they need at the 'Four Mile' point along the Toungoo to Kler La vehicle road, where SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #39 has set up a market for this purpose. At this market the cost of one sack of rice (64 kg. / 140.8 lb.) is 20,000 kyat; where as one sack of rice can be purchased in Toungoo town for 18,000 kyat. To make matters worse, after buying rice at 'Four Mile' market, villagers must pass the SPDC Army camp at Bper Leh Wah in order to cross the bridge over the Day Loh River on their way back to Kler La town. At this point the villagers must pay a rice 'tax' of 10 percent of their purchase. So if the villagers have bought ten sacks of rice they must hand over one of these to the soldiers.

<sup>2</sup> See *Provoking Displacement in Toungoo District: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks*, KHRG, May 2007.



For villages under SPDC control, local authorities have maintained movement restrictions which prohibit all night time travel outside of village confines and only allow day time travel during specified hours with the possession of a travel document purchased from an SPDC officer or in some cases with a letter of guarantee from the local village head. This letter of guarantee confirms the residence of the document's holder. In the first case, the acquisition of SPDC-issued travel documents depends on the whim of the issuing officers who are not always willing to provide them. In the second case, villagers must obtain such letters of guarantee from the local village head. However, this requirement is not applied everywhere in Toungoo District and some villagers appear to have first learned of it when they have been caught with no such documents in their possession.

*"Every time when we go to our cardamom fields we have to get a written permission letter from the village head. [In one instance] when they [SPDC soldiers] arrested us in the jungle without a permission letter, they beat us and brought us in front of the village head and asked whether we were really villagers from K---. We can get a permission letter for a week's duration not including night time."*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 30), K--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

Such restrictions obstruct agriculture and trade and thus undermine the livelihoods of local communities. Villagers have, therefore, often sought to evade these restrictions by covertly leaving their villages to farm or trade outside. However, as some villagers have reported to KHRG, those caught violating restrictions on movement risk being shot on sight by SPDC soldiers operating in the area; as was the case with the murder of 70-year-old Saw Po Tay whom SPDC soldiers killed in the Shah See Boh area in late 2007.

*"[The SPDC commander based at Shah See Boh] is named Thaung Sain and there are 40 or 50 soldiers staying with him. They only allow the villagers to go to check their farm fields and hillside fields during the day time. They came and arrested one family in their field. They shot and killed the father in the field but they arrested the wife and the daughter. The father's name was Saw Po Tay and he was over 70 years old. That family had been staying at Mwee Loh and was relocated to Shah See Boh. They [SPDC soldiers] accused them of disobeying their orders. They didn't allow the villagers to go and work outside day or night so they [the villagers] were shot when the SPDC soldiers saw them in their field. Now the soldiers have put them [the mother and daughter] in Toungoo #2 police station. The army soldiers who shot and killed the man were from [SPDC battalion] #75. Before they sent them [to the police station] they kept them in Shah See Boh army camp for three days."*

- Saw G--- (male, 66), --- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

In a separate incident from December 2007, SPDC soldiers operating in Tantabin township of southern Toungoo District killed Taw Too Too, who was over 40 years old, and also shot, but did not kill, 20-year-old Buh Ler Taw when they were spotted violating restrictions on movement.

*"Recently they shot a villager named Buh Ler Taw. It was in 2007. He was 20 years old and single. The Burmese soldiers [then] arrested him. There was also another villager named Taw Too Too. He was over 40 years old. He had family and he had four children. He was shot and killed in Wah Baw Hta. The villagers found his body after the Burmese soldiers had left."*

- Saw D--- (male, 65), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

*"They killed a villager named Taw Too Too. He had family and he had three children. He was killed in December 2007."*

- Naw T--- (female, 56), Hs--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

## Forced Labour

*"We always have to labour for the SPDC and if we don't have [specific] work, we have to go and wait as a set tha<sup>3</sup> [messenger]. We have no time to work for ourselves. We have to wait as a set tha at four locations... I am the only person who can work for the family and we always have to go. So I have no time to work for my family's livelihood."*

- Saw N--- (male, 25), Y--- village, Tantabin township (Dec 2007)

In those villages and relocation sites in Toungoo where the SPDC is able to enforce restrictions on movement with some degree of effectiveness, local authorities have been regularly demanding forced labour from the civilian population in order to support the day-to-day operations of the Army. Recent forms of forced labour which SPDC authorities have demanded in Toungoo District include duty as *set tha*, service in the *pyithusit* ('People's Militia'), portering of army rations on foot, transport of army supplies by bullock cart, clearing forest growth from the sides of vehicle roads, widening vehicle roads, constructing buildings at army camps and bases, preparing and delivering bamboo poles and fencing in village confines. In some cases villagers who are very busy may be able to hire others to take their place in specific forced labour projects, but this option depends on their own financial resources and is not always possible.

*"Sometimes the villagers have had to hire people to do loh ah pay<sup>4</sup> for them while they were busy. For one person it costs 30,000 kyat. The youngest age of anyone who has had to do loh ah pay was 15 and the eldest age was over 50. They have had to bring along their own food."*

- Saw T--- (male, 28), K--- village, Than Daung township (Jan 2008)

The following list of recent cases of forced labour is necessarily incomplete since, as one KHRG field researcher operating in Toungoo District recently said, if he were to document every recent case of forced labour his list would run fifteen pages.

From December 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 to January 20<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC MOC #5 commander Kaung Mya and MOC #10 commander Ko Ko Lat forced residents of 12 villages from Kler La village tract to clear the sides of the vehicle road running south from Kler La to Gkaw Thay Der. The SPDC authorities then commandeered seven civilian trucks and ordered their drivers to transport rations from Kler La to Gkaw Thay Der, Naw Soh and Pee Mee Koh army camps. Each car had to make this trip carrying army rations 12 times. Altogether, the cars carried 2,517 sacks of rice, cooking oil, salt, fish paste, yellow beans, diesel fuel, gasoline, and tins of milk and beef, with a total weight of approximately 2,000 viss (3,266 kg. / 7,200 lb.). They also forced 60 civilians from Kler La town to transport 12 rice sacks each on their personal motorcycles; making a total of 720 sacks along with 100 tins of milk.

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<sup>3</sup> *Set tha*; forced labour as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases and serving as a go between to deliver orders from army officers to village heads, but also involving other menial tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

<sup>4</sup> A Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour; although traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects.



SPDC soldiers ordered villagers in the Gkaw Thay Der area to fence in their community as shown here on December 24<sup>th</sup> 2007. SPDC forces use such fences to support movement restrictions and prevent villagers from evading demands which soldiers place on them. [Photo: KHRG]



SPDC troops used this army truck, shown here on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007, to transport rations from Kler La town to Gkaw Thay Der army camp. Following this, local SPDC forces began forcing civilians with trucks to transport army rations down this same road. [Photo: KHRG]

On January 18<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC authorities in Tantabin township forced villagers from Lay Dtee, Thee Kya Say, Nah Tha Gka Rah, Chaung Kya, Na Ywa and Mya Ywa Thit villages to widen a vehicle road to a width of three meters.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008, SPDC MOC #21 soldiers operating out of Play Hsa Loh forced 30 villagers living in the Play Hsa Loh area to carry rations to Htee Nyah Peh Loh army camp. On January 24<sup>th</sup> 2008, these same soldiers forced 40 villagers in the Play Hsa Loh area to carry army rations to Htee Nya Bpeh Loh army camp and forced 12 Play Hsa Loh villagers to fetch the food from Htee Nya Bpeh Loh army camp. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, these soldiers again forced 20 villagers from Play Hsa Loh and 20 convict porters to carry army rations to Htee Nya Bpeh Loh army camp.

On February 14<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC soldiers operating under IB #30 deputy commander Thant Aung Zin forced residents of the following villages in Than Daung township to widen a section of the main vehicle road:

#	Village name	# of villagers
1	Sauk Tha Kauk	10
2	Kler Muh Kee	15
3	Lah Meh Poh Lee	25
4	Tha Bah Rah	20
5	Haw Thaw Bplo	25

On February 15<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC IB #30 soldiers forced 12 villagers from Ler Baw Soh and 13 from Bplah Dee Saw village to work on the construction of the army camp at Haw Thaw Bplo. The next day on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2008, the soldiers forced 15 villagers from Meh Thaw Poh Lee and 15 from Ther Kaw Htee village to take part in this construction work at Haw Thaw Bplo army camp.

Also on February 15<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC IB #73 troops based at Shah See Boh forced 60 men and 36 women villagers to widen the vehicle road from Lay Dtee to Shah See Boh. On the same day, soldiers living at Gklay Soe Kee forced one person from each house in Gklay Soe village to porter rations from Kler La to Wah Thoh Koh village army camp. SPDC MOC #10 commander Ko Ko Lat forced 500 villagers from Kler La village tract to porter rations from Kler La town to Meh Dtaw Koh army camp.

On February 18<sup>th</sup> 2008, soldiers from SPDC IB #73 then forced 71 men and 64 women from Shah See Boh village, and 40 men and 20 women from Yay Sha village to widen the vehicle road leading to Shah See Boh.

On February 24<sup>th</sup> 2008, SPDC soldiers from MOC #10 and LIB #366 based in Kler La town ordered residents of Ler Gkoh village to provide a truckload of bamboo poles which they had the villagers pile on the truck as high as was physically possible.

On February 25<sup>th</sup> 2008, police from Kler La town forced residents of Ler Gkoh village to cut down 200 large bamboo poles and deliver them to Kler La town.

*"I always saw the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers order the villagers to do things for them. They had to cut bamboo poles and carry things for the Burmese soldiers in Hsaw Wah Der. The villagers also had to build a bridge for the Burmese soldiers. Both men and women and also children and old people had to do loh ah pay [forced labour] for the Burmese soldiers."*

- Saw M--- (male, 52), K--- village, Tantabin township (Jan 2008)

*"I was a village head, I had to collect villagers to do loh ah pay [forced labour] such as carrying rations, constructing roads, cutting bamboo poles and tree posts and cooking food for them [Burmese soldiers]. We have had to do these things once a month".*

- Saw T--- (male, 28), K--- village, Than Daung township (Jan 2008)

## Conclusion

Amongst other widespread and systematic abuses, SPDC forces continue to intentionally destroy food supplies and restrict access to food and medicine in Toungoo District in an attempt to flush out those civilians attempting to evade military control in the region's forested mountains. This deprivation of access to food and medicine constitutes a Crime against Humanity, and thus places obligations on the international community. Irrespective of the SPDC's unwillingness to sign the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court which includes as a Crime against Humanity under Article 7.2(b), "*the intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population,*" the responsibility of the international community to protect this population remains in the face of the SPDC's intransigence. While the international community equivocates on its responsibility to protect, IDP villagers living in the mountains of Toungoo are employing their own measures to survive and resist abuse at the hands of SPDC soldiers. Were members of the international community to act on their responsibility, they could begin by listening to



Due to the ongoing SPDC offensive, children in Toungoo District face severe challenges to food, health and education. The child on the left, shown here on December 15<sup>th</sup> 2007, comes from Y--- village and is suffering from malnutrition because his parents ran low on food supplies while living displaced in the forest. [Photo: KHRG]



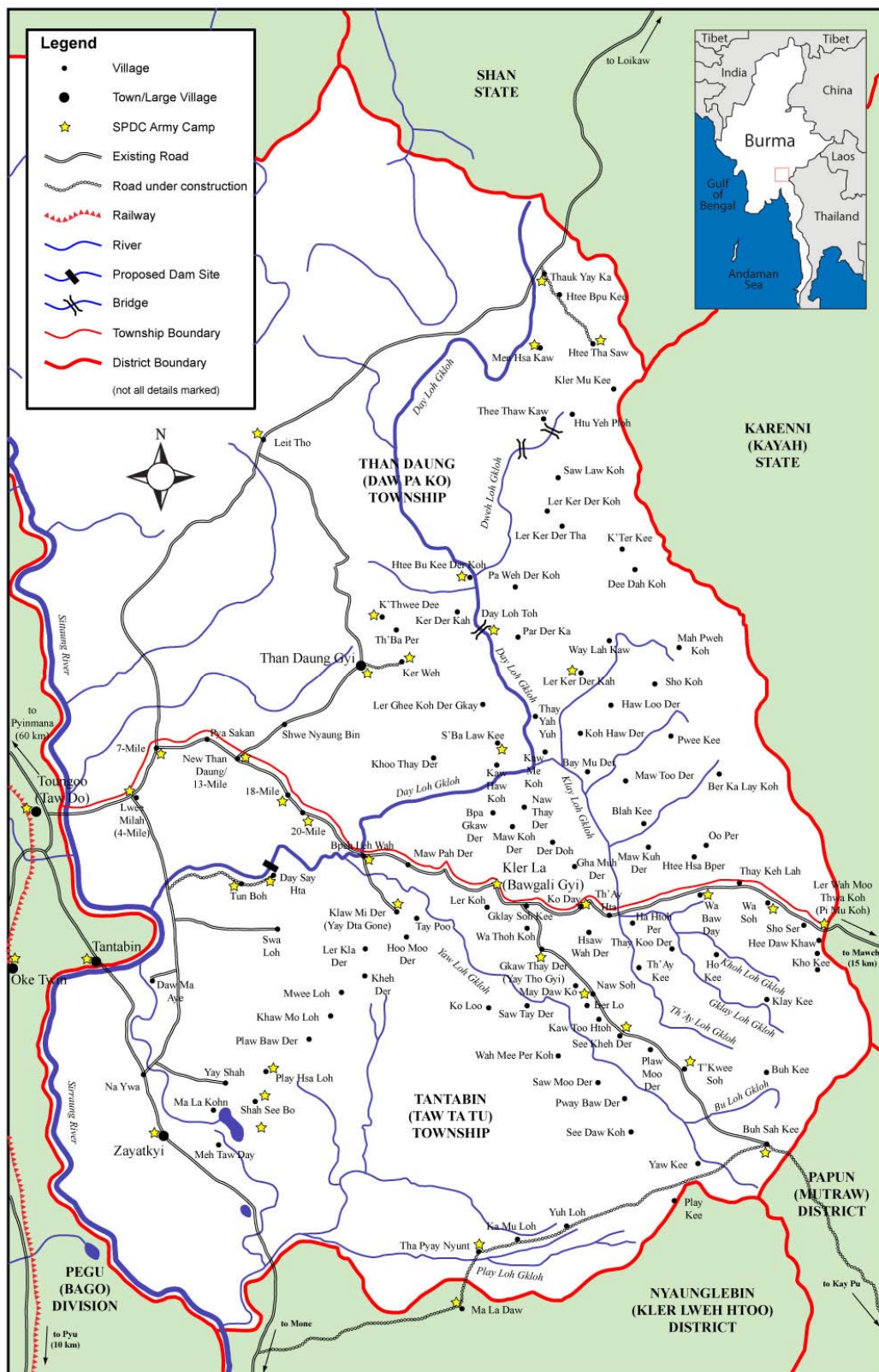
local people describe their own efforts to respond to and resist abuse and then work to support these strategies.

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

- *Militarisation, violence and exploitation in Toungoo District* (February 2008)
- *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)

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>.

# Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



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# Karen Districts



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