



Report from the Field

June 12th 2008 / KHRG #2008-F6

Burma Army attacks and civilian displacement in northern Papun District

Following the deployment of new Burma Army units in the area of Htee Moo Kee village, Lu Thaw township of northern Karen State, Papun District, during the first week of March 2008, at least 1,600 villagers from seven villages were forced to relocate to eight different hiding sites in order to avoid the encroaching army patrols. These displaced communities are now facing heightened food insecurity and an ongoing risk of military attack. This report is based on in-depth interviews with displaced villagers from Lu Thaw township regarding the recent Burma Army operations and the resultant effects on the local communities. It also includes information on the recent military attack on Dtay Muh Der village, Lu Thaw township, Papun District which Burma Army forces conducted during the first week of June 2008 and which led to the further displacement of over 1,000 villagers.

In order to extend military control over all civilian communities in Karen State, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has increased military operations by establishing more camps, deploying more army units and attacking displaced communities in hiding, especially in Papun District and other areas of northern Karen State. As a result, the local communities in areas not under SPDC control are now at a higher risk of future Burma Army attacks and subsequent displacement. To evade this expanding military control, some villagers have decided to flee into the forest and continue their lives in hiding whilst others have decided to travel south-east across the Thai-Burma border to access Thailand-based refugee camps.



The burnt remains of a home in Gheh Yuh Der village, Kay Bpoo village tract, Lu Thaw township, as seen on April 10th 2008, which SPDC Army soldiers earlier burnt down on March 4th 2008. [Photo: KHRG]

"Plah Koh Doh and Saw Gker Der villagers started to flee on March 4th 2008. The SPDC Army came and based its camp in Htee Moo Kee. It's been 32 days already but the villagers haven't had a chance to go back to their village yet... The villagers who fled haven't been able to work at their workplaces [farm fields]."

- Saw M--- (male, 42), S--- village, Plah Koh village tract (April 2008)

On March 4th 2008, SPDC Army Columns #1 and #2 of Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) #323 and 552 based their camp at Htee Moo Kee village, which lies in an area of Saw Muh Bplaw village tract of Lu Thaw Township where large numbers of internally displaced people

(IDPs) remain in hiding. These army columns, which have 102 soldiers combined, were previously active in the Dteh Boh Bplaw area of Saw Muh Bplaw village tract. As a result of this troop movement, the villagers from eight villages in the Plah Koh and Saw Muh Bplaw village tracts were forced to flee to eight different IDP hiding sites. The table below indicates the number of households and villagers from Plah Koh and Saw Muh Bplaw village tracts who fled from the SPDC forces on this occasion.

| # | Village tract | Village name | # of households | Male | Female | Total |
|---|---------------|---------------|-----------------|------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Plah Koh | Saw Gker Der | 25 | 95 | 100 | 195 |
| 2 | | Plah Koh Der | 10 | 83 | 113 | 196 |
| 3 | Saw Muh Bplaw | Haw Lah Htah | 22 | 78 | 80 | 158 |
| 4 | | Htoh Htee Kee | 31 | 111 | 119 | 230 |
| 5 | | Htee Baw Kee | 51 | 174 | 163 | 337 |
| 6 | | Kyaw Gaw Loo | 37 | 132 | 141 | 273 |
| 7 | | Dteh Neh | 34 | 107 | 104 | 211 |

Also on March 4th 2008, troops operating under SPDC Military Operations Command (MOC) #4 attacked Gheh Yuh Der village, in Kay Bpoo village tract of Lu Thaw township. The soldiers burned down nine houses belonging to Saw Nay Htoo, Saw Nyah Hay Muh, Naw Bpree, Naw Shwe Htoo, Pah Way Bpaw, Saw Bluh Doh, Pah Mer Khuh, Saw Oh Htoo, and Saw Nay Htoo. On the following day, March 5th 2008, these same troops burned down three hillside farm fields in the area belonging to Naw Bpoh Gay, Naw Beh Htoo and Naw Gkweh Khay.

"In 2008 we have already had to flee two times. We fled when SLORC¹ [SPDC] came and burned down Lay Poh Der and Gheh Yuh Der. We fled on March 4th 2008. On the other occasion we fled during the night when we heard the SPDC crossing the river."

- Saw L--- (male, 45), --- village, Kay Bpoo village tract (April 2008)



When this photo was taken on April 5th 2008, local villagers had already dismantled the farm hut shown above in Lu Thaw township and taken away its material to a hiding site as they were aware that SPDC forces were likely going to imminently attack the village. [Photo:KHRG]

According to the Free Burma Rangers, on June 4th 2008, SPDC troops from Infantry Battalion (IB) #240 attacked Dtay Muh Der village in Lu Thaw township, Papun District. During the attack the soldiers burned down rice barns, looted homes, badly damaged the church and destroyed farms. Over 1,000 people from this village and the nearby Dt'Kaw Htoh Baw and Th'Dah Der villages were forced to flee in to the forest.²

¹ 'SLORC', the acronym for the State Law and Order Restoration Council, was the title for Burma's military junta, prior to 1997, at which time it was renamed to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Many villagers continue to use both names in reference to the military regime.

² *Burma Army Attacking and Displacing over 1,000 Karen People*, Free Burma Rangers, June 5th 2008. Accessed at www.freeburmarangers.org/Reports/2008/20080606.html on June 11th 2008. Village names have been changed to fit KHRG spelling conventions.

Landmines and food insecurity

Leaving their homes and farm fields behind, the newly displaced villagers in Lu Thaw township now face serious humanitarian threats at their new hiding sites. When they fled their homes in Plah Koh and Saw Muh Bplaw village tracts, the displaced villagers abandoned 127 hillside farm fields and 94 flat fields. These newly displaced communities have been unable to safely return to their farm fields in order to collect rice stores or tend their farm fields because these fields are located amidst the recently deployed SPDC Army units. The troops from SPDC LIBs #323 and 552 now based at Htee Moo Kee and Plah Koh are able to observe the abandoned hillside and flat field farms from their camps. Villagers who return to their farms to collect hidden rice stores or cultivate their crops risk being shot on sight or stepping on landmines deployed by the displaced communities.



Displaced residents of S--- village in Papun District return to their hiding site on April 5th 2008 after retrieving rice supplies from their abandoned village which they are shown here carrying on their backs. Earlier, the villagers had fled following the SPDC's establishment of a new camp close to their village. [Photo: KHRG]

soldiers in order to prevent the return of the displaced communities.

"Our enemies [SPDC] came and mistreated our villagers. We had to flee and move during the night. We had to build new houses for our families and at the same time, we had to go back and secretly take rice from our rice barn. We also had to clear new hill fields in order to survive. We didn't have much time to cut down the forest for our hill fields so we could only clear a small area. We couldn't do more than that because we had to build new houses... We could only clear an area in which we could plant just two or three big tins [25 kg. / 55 lb. to 37.5 kg. / 78 lb.] of paddy seed."

- Saw K--- (male, 19), T--- village, Saw Muh Bplaw village tract (April 2008)

During the SPDC's recent military operations in Saw Muh Bplaw village tract, soldiers also deployed landmines in the area surrounding the burnt down villages in order to prevent the return of those villagers who had fled their homes.

"Yes, one villager was injured by an SPDC landmine. Her name is Naw D--- and she was injured at T--- on March 15th 2008 at about 7:30 am. She's single."

- Saw K--- (male, 19), T--- village, Saw Muh Bplaw village tract (April 2008)

As a consequence of the SPDC's landmine deployment in Saw Muh Bplaw village tract, Naw D---, a 16-year-old girl from Htee Baw Kee village stepped on a mine when she returned to her abandoned village on March 15th 2008 in order to collect her family's hidden stores of rice. The landmine blew off the lower portion of her right leg leaving the remaining stump mangled. Medics at Day Pu Noh hospital were subsequently able to amputate the mangled portion and save what remained of the leg. The risk of such injuries by landmines continues for displaced villagers in many areas of Lu Thaw township.



16-year-old Naw D--- from Htee Baw Kee village, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, recovers after medics amputated the mutilated lower part of her right leg, after she was injured by an SPDC-deployed landmine on March 15th 2008. [Photo: KHRG]

The impact on education

Due to the increased deployment of SPDC troops and their attacks on civilian communities across much of northern Karen State, many students, including those in Saw Muh Bplaw and Plah Koh village tracts as well as other areas of Lu Thaw township, have been unable to remain in school for extended periods. While some of these students have been able to continue their education at displaced hiding sites, many have had to flee repeatedly to other areas in order to maintain their evasion of Burma Army patrols; a situation that has, in some areas, continued for years. Some parents have told KHRG that they do not feel their children are secure because each year, on average, villagers have to flee three or four times. To remove their children from areas of ongoing SPDC troop patrols and attacks, some parents have made arrangements for their children to study in more secure locations, whether at larger IDP sites inside Karen State or in Thailand-based refugee camps.

"Because of the SPDC operations, we cannot count how many times we have fled in the forest. There was one year when we had to leave our school and we couldn't study at all for the whole year. I had to repeat the same grade the next year... I have decided that after I finish grade 10, I will attend medical training so as to be able to look after patients... I will try my best to accomplish my goal no matter the difficulties I face."

- Naw D--- (female, 19), T--- village (April 2008)

Conclusion

While the international media remains focused on the SPDC's post-cyclone intransigence regarding relief aid in the Irrawaddy Delta, the Burma Army has continued military attacks against civilians in northern Karen State. This continuation of military expansion and attacks is disastrously undermining the health, education and livelihood options for villagers in these areas; areas in which the regime has restricted relief efforts, even more tightly than the Irrawaddy Delta.

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

- *Village-level decision making in responding to forced relocation: A case from Papun District* (March 2008)

- *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 2008 (June 2008)*; *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