

### Briefing Paper

April 2009

## Food crisis: The cumulative impact of abuse in rural Burma

Systematic militarisation and widespread exploitation of the civilian population by military forces have created poverty, malnutrition and a severe food crisis in Karen State and other parts of rural Burma. This crisis requires urgent attention by the international community – with intervention shaped by the concerns of villagers themselves. This briefer outlines the human rights abuses which have caused the food crisis; the combined impacts of these abuses upon civilian communities; the ways in which villagers have responded to and resisted abuse; and the actions that can be taken by the international community to alleviate the current crisis and to prevent future cycles of abuse and malnutrition in rural Burma.



Forcibly relocated children in the plains of Nyaunglebin District work tending paddy fields to help their families cope with food insecurity. [Photo: KHRG]

Rural villagers in Karen State are currently facing a food crisis, as a direct result of human rights abuses inflicted upon them primarily by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta currently ruling Burma, and its allied armed groups. Villagers face not only the day-to-day abuses commensurate with the SPDC's militarisation campaign, but also the long-term combined impacts of those abuses. However, there has been a glaring lack of attention on this issue by the international media.

This briefer considers the widespread and sustained human rights abuses at the root of this crisis, the compounding consequences of these abuses and the ways in which villagers have attempted to resist abuse, maintain their livelihoods and survive despite the food crisis. Recognising the strategies that villagers are already using to address food insecurity, the briefer gives recommendations to the international community on actions that can be taken to alleviate the current crisis and prevent future abuse and malnutrition in rural Burma.

It is the compounding nature of systematic civilian exploitation and regular human rights abuses, combined with the absence of State social services or welfare provisions, which has served to so severely undermine the humanitarian situation of rural

communities in Karen State. In areas under SPDC control, villagers' traditional livelihood activities and means of producing and purchasing food are being increasingly eroded over time under the combined burden of military demands for labour, food, money, land and other resources:

- Regular forced labour cuts into time needed for agriculture or other work;
- Extortion and looting of food and livestock by patrolling military units undermines villagers' own nutrition and household needs;
- Paddy and other crop quotas force villagers to hand over significant portions of their crop yields to procurement officers, meaning a loss of potential revenue as well as directly reducing community food supplies;
- Arbitrary taxation and demands for money deplete villagers' limited savings, weakening their ability to purchase food from neighbouring towns;
- Land confiscation for so-called 'development' projects, such as the building of roads and dams, leaves villagers with decreased land on which to grow their crops;
- Forced agricultural projects require that villagers replace traditional food crops with non-edible crops, such as castor bean (used to create bio-fuel) or rubber;
- Forced relocation places villagers in fenced compounds, in barren plain lands, with small plots of land which are insufficient for meeting a family's food provision needs;
- Finally, restrictions on movement, employed to more efficiently control the population, limit opportunities for trade and work outside of village confines and prevent villagers from evading the demands imposed upon them.

Any one of the above military demands taken alone undermines the ability of civilian communities to address nutritional needs. However, when experienced in combination over a sustained period of time, villagers' options for managing even their basic subsistence needs become highly constrained. In order to meet the combined financial requirements of military demands and household subsistence, and with limited local employment options in a cash economy, villagers are frequently pushed towards selling off personal possessions and/or incurring debt. The consequent increase in rural poverty (in terms of diminished fiscal liquidity; loss of personal possessions and food supplies; and loss of access to a means of production, as agricultural land is sold off to pay, or avoid taking on, debts) has created a pervasive food crisis in rural

SPDC-controlled Karen State.

*"Only two villagers out of ten have enough rice. They're borrowing from each other just to stay alive. During the dry season, they go to other villages to look for work and try to save food for the rainy season. Most of the villagers are doing this. [But] from the time we finish with the [seasonal] farm work, we're ordered to repair four furlongs [approx. 800 meters] of the Lay Gkay car road... Some villagers have become weaker because they've had to do a lot of forced labour."*

- Saw P--- (male, 68), S--- village, Thaton District  
(May 2008)

In areas outside of SPDC control, the SPDC employs a variety of measures to prevent the distribution of crucial food supplies to hiding villagers in order to undermine civilian efforts to evade military control. Well aware of the abuses and livelihood restrictions they will face under military control (as described above), villagers actively avoid SPDC attempts to force them into relocation sites or military-controlled villages and instead flee into the forested mountains in advance of approaching military units.

Although villagers generally prioritise food supplies and cooking equipment when they flee into hiding, they are limited as to the amount they are able to carry and, therefore, must return home to collect further supplies or access alternative food sources within several weeks of displacement. However, as villagers flee, soldiers regularly fire mortar rockets into villages and then enter the villages in order to torch homes, food storage barns and fields, kill livestock and destroy agricultural and cooking equipment – often leaving villagers with little left to salvage. Even so, soldiers also plant landmines around villagers' homes, community buildings and fields in order to prevent villagers from returning. Furthermore, hiding villagers are deemed 'enemies of the state' and soldiers are issued a 'shoot-on-sight' policy for any civilians encountered in areas outside of consolidated military control, making it even more dangerous for villagers to leave their hiding sites and return to harvest remaining crops or collect hidden food supplies.

Even though many villagers remain close to their home areas and often return after the troops have departed, this pattern of attack and displacement disrupts traditional planting and harvesting cycles, leading to failed or much reduced harvests. Moreover, crops left behind during displacement are often overtaken by weeds or destroyed by wild

animals and insects, while livestock – particularly buffalos used to plough and harvest fields – are killed when they trigger landmines laid by SPDC soldiers.

In addition to the destruction of abandoned food supplies and agricultural fields and the measures employed to prevent villagers from being able to return, movement restrictions upon those under SPDC control effectively prevent hiding villagers from being able to access food supplies elsewhere. Fences around villages, strict rules on villager movement, road blocks and the SPDC's shoot-on-sight policy all work to prevent trade between controlled and non-controlled communities. Together, these measures diminish flows of crucial food supplies into non-SPDC-controlled areas – a result intended by a military force that hopes to starve villagers out of the hills and into SPDC-controlled areas in the plains.



Poverty, malnutrition and the dire food crisis in the region are the direct consequence of systematic military predation in rural Karen State – a pattern which is repeated across much of rural Burma.<sup>1</sup> Reduced harvests resulting from excessive military demands, the extortion and destruction of food stocks, and restrictions upon the movement of food, amongst other abuses, leave villagers with insufficient food supplies and a lack of diversity in their diets. The global economic crisis, climate change and rising world food prices only add to the difficulties villagers are already facing in providing enough food for their families. The consequent malnutrition of a large portion of the rural population has far-reaching social, economic and political implications both within and beyond Burma's borders. Malnutrition makes villagers more susceptible to illness and disease. At the same time, living hand-to-mouth leaves communities without the necessary savings to purchase medicines or food stockpiles to fall back upon whilst caring for the sick or injured, creating a deplorable health situation. Meanwhile, families already struggling to meet their nutritional needs are unable to send their children to school and are instead often forced to put their children to work for the family's livelihood or to meet military demands, undermining education and child development. Combined with the food crisis itself,

<sup>1</sup> For information on the food crisis in western Burma, see Chin Human Rights Organization, July 2008, *Critical Point: Food Scarcity and Hunger in Burma's Chin State*; and Human Rights Watch, January 2009, *We Are Like Forgotten People: The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India*.

these factors create large-scale internal displacement and refugee and migrant worker flows into neighbouring countries.

However, in highlighting this food crisis, it is important to note that villagers in rural Burma are not just helpless victims. Rather, they are actively resisting abuse and are constantly developing and honing strategies to address their nutritional needs. These strategies are surveyed towards the end of this report. Nevertheless, without external support for these strategies, the food crisis will continue to constrain villagers' abilities to evade SPDC control, resist abuse and address other social and economic needs.

The food crisis in rural Burma has been acknowledged by both the World Food Program and Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations and necessitates urgent action by the international community.<sup>2</sup> Given the efforts of local communities to address food security issues themselves, all such action must be conducted in a manner supportive of the strategies that villagers in rural Burma are already using to resist abuse. Thus, the international community's response to the crisis must be informed and shaped by the concerns of rural villagers themselves. The imperative to act is underpinned by the internationally-recognised right to food. As explained by Jean Ziegler, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food,

*"The right to food means that Governments must not take actions that result in increasing levels of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition... The right to food is a human right and is a binding obligation well-established under international law, recognised in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights."*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, January 28<sup>th</sup> 2009, "UN: Burma Faces Food Crisis." Accessed at [www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=15018](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15018) on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009;

UNOCHA – IRIN, April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, "Myanmar: Rohingya face rising food insecurity." Accessed at <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83733> on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Right to Food*, "What is the right to food?" Accessed: [www.righttofood.org/new/html/WhatRighttofood.html](http://www.righttofood.org/new/html/WhatRighttofood.html) on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009.



## Key Recommendations

- Listen to the voices of villagers and incorporate their concerns and suggestions into ongoing humanitarian programming and policy making in Burma
- Scale up humanitarian aid to reach those communities currently facing a food crisis, increasing support for cross-border aid and local civil society organisations in those areas not regularly accessible by Rangoon-based agencies
- Acknowledge the political implications of aid delivery in Burma and refrain from activities which strengthen military control over civilians (such as aid to relocation sites or SPDC-implemented humanitarian or development projects)
- Conduct human rights impact assessments as an integral part of all humanitarian and development programmes implemented in Burma
- Support local food security protection measures and efforts to resist the abuses underpinning the crisis
- Report the current food crisis and include the voices of rural villagers in ongoing international journalism and advocacy efforts



On June 4<sup>th</sup> 2008, Burma Army troops from Infantry Battalion #240 attacked and burnt down Day Muh Der village in northern Papun District. During the attack the soldiers tipped out and burnt the rice supplies shown here. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## The food crisis in areas under SPDC control

In SPDC-controlled Karen State, the regime-imposed 'live off the land' policy for its troops has created a situation where local army units are dependent on the routine exploitation of the civilian population, both for maintaining their control and for their own survival. With insufficient rations provided to battalions, this 'live off the land' order has always been implicit and in fact became explicit in a 1997 War Office order to the country's 12 Regional Commanders that troops were "to meet their basic logistical needs locally, rather than rely on the central supply system."<sup>4</sup> This order has burdened local villages with the costs of supporting local military units and has burdened the largely rural civilian population of Burma with the strain of supporting the system of militarisation as a whole. Villagers are therefore faced with an extensive array of exploitative demands from the military.

### Military demands

SPDC demands upon villagers usually fall under three categories: 1) forced labour, 2) arbitrary 'taxation' and 3) looting and *ad hoc* demands – each of which will be explored below. When combined, these demands place severe financial, time and physical burdens on villagers, constraining their livelihood activities, their ability to meet their families' nutritional needs and, ultimately, their survival. Moreover, these demands have become systematised and regularised so that the more common demands require compliance on a daily, weekly, monthly or seasonal basis, leaving communities with little respite to conduct their own work activities or replenish food supplies depleted by military extortion. At the same time, village communities are also under pressure to meet the demands of other armed groups – particularly the SPDC-allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), but also the Karen Peace Force (KPF) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>5</sup> – worsening the consequences for villagers' incomes and food supplies.

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<sup>4</sup> Selth, A. 2002, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*, Norwalk: Eastbridge, p. 136; Callahan, M. 2007b, "Of kyay-zu and kyet-zu: the military in 2006," pp. 36-53 in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds.), *Myanmar – The State, Community and the Environment*, Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> The armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU).

### Forced labour

*"They [the villagers] usually do agriculture and maintain plantations. We haven't had a good opportunity to do our plantation work. The SPDC army camp is located beside our village, so we always have to do loh ah pay<sup>6</sup> [forced labour] for them. We don't have much time to do our own work. Now we're doing their work, such as cutting bamboo poles and delivering them to their [SPDC] camp."*

- Saw B--- (male, 24), Th--- village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2008)

In SPDC-controlled villages and relocation sites and areas regularly patrolled by SPDC soldiers, villagers face frequent demands for forced labour. This forced labour takes a variety of forms. In order to directly support military units, soldiers frequently force villagers to porter military rations and supplies between army camps on foot or by bullock cart; fabricate and deliver building materials and construct and repair buildings at army camps. Villagers are also forced to serve as sentries or as *set tha*<sup>7</sup> (messengers) at the army camps. For soldiers' security, villagers frequently have to guide army patrols as human shields and, sometimes, as human minesweepers. Villagers must also regularly clear forest overgrowth alongside vehicle roads – a practice that serves to prevent the ambush of military patrols and convoys, but also civilian evasion of military control and exploitation. In the name of 'development', but rather facilitating the extension of militarisation, military units furthermore force villagers to construct, repair and resurface vehicle roads; conduct agricultural work or rear livestock; construct fences, clinics, schools or libraries; participate in 'meetings', ceremonies and rallies; and participate in parastatal organisations.

In almost all kinds of forced labour, no compensation is provided either for the labour itself or for the time lost in which villagers would otherwise have been conducting their own livelihood activities. Villagers are generally provided with no food or water during the labour and are instead expected to bring along their own provisions. What is more, much of

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<sup>6</sup> *Loh ah pay*; A Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour. The term traditionally refers to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects.

<sup>7</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.



this forced labour has become systematised and regularised so that, for example, villagers are expected to repair and resurface vehicle roads following every rainy season and to provide sentries and messengers to army camps every day on a rotational basis. Each forced labour demand involves an opportunity cost<sup>8</sup> in terms of time lost for farming fields or tending livestock or a direct financial cost in terms of lost incomes from wage labour. Combined over time, forced labour demands serve to severely undermine villagers' livelihoods – jeopardising their incomes and leading to failed harvests as fields are left unplanted, untended or harvested late.

*“We had to carry their [SPDC] rations from Tha Bpyay Nyunt to Gk'Moo Loh village. They didn't allow us to return to our homes and check on our plantations. Therefore, we didn't have time to do our own work anymore. Some of our durian plants and betel nut plants died because they didn't get enough water... Even though we've [now] returned home to work, we believe that we won't have time to do our own work. We realise that we'll have to spend our time doing work for the SPDC soldiers who are based at our village now.”*

- Saw Bp--- (male), Y--- village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2008)

The DKBA also regularly demands forced labour in the areas which it controls, in much the same way as the SPDC. Villagers may also be expected to carry supplies for KNLA soldiers. This duty places an increased burden on villagers' livelihoods.

One type of forced labour – forced agriculture – has its own particular problems in relation to the food crisis. While forced labour on SPDC or DKBA-owned fields or rubber plantations entails the same opportunity cost in terms of time lost for their own cultivation efforts as other kinds of forced labour, villagers have also been forced to take part in agricultural programmes on their own land, directly preventing the production of food on that land. This has particularly been the case with the new bio-fuel initiative introduced by SPDC Senior General Than Shwe in December 2005, with the reported objective of planting 8 million acres of castor bean (*Jatropha curcas*) across Burma within three years.<sup>9</sup> In order to meet this objective, villagers in Karen State have been forced to purchase castor seeds from military officials at their own expense and cultivate the plant on any available land, even to the extent of replacing their traditional food crops. Furthermore, despite being told by military officials that they would be able to use the biofuel for their own farm machines or that they would be able to sell the surplus, castor cultivation has had little to no benefit for the villagers.



In the above photo, residents of Pa'an District plant paddy in July 2008 as ordered by DKBA officers. These villagers had to sleep two nights in the field while completing the work and thus lost crucial labour time for use on their own livelihood activities. [Photo: KHRG]

<sup>8</sup> The value of the next best alternative foregone as the result of making a decision or, in this case, as a result of being forced to do something else. Opportunity costs are not restricted to monetary or financial costs but instead refer to the real cost of output forgone – lost time, pleasure or any other benefit that provides utility.

<sup>9</sup> Ethnic Community Development Forum (ECDF). 2008. *Biofuel by Decree: Unmasking Burma's bio-energy fiasco*, p.1.

The majority of rural villagers do not use fuelled farm machines, but instead traditionally use carts and ploughs pulled by bullocks. Moreover, military officials have not provided the villagers with technical advice on how to cultivate the plants and therefore many of the castor plants have failed. The plant is also highly toxic, containing the deadly poison *ricin*, and as little as one castor bean can kill an adult human. With no safety information provided by the military when forcing villagers to purchase and cultivate these seeds, children and livestock have become severely ill or have died from ingesting castor beans. The crop therefore provides little benefit to the villagers and instead crowds out traditional food crops while also leaving villagers with less time to produce food.

*"The SPDC ordered us to plant castor. We don't want to do it because we have so much other work to do. They told us to give them 3,300 kyat [US \$3.30] for each bowl of castor seed and they ordered our village to plant 14 bowls.<sup>10</sup> They said that this year, 2006, we have to plant 83 acres, then 166 acres in 2007 and 166 acres again in 2008. They ordered that each household has to plant 200 castor bushes each year, 600 castor bushes over three years. We have to plant this on our own land."*

- U A--- (male, 58), W--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

In order to intensify rice production for export, to profit local military officials and to feed local troops, the SPDC has also instituted a practice known as 'double-cropping' across much of rural Burma, involving forced cultivation of a second dry-season rice crop in addition to the traditional crop cultivated during the rains. Again, villagers are forced to purchase the seeds, and often also fertiliser and tractors, from military officials in order to plant this paddy crop<sup>11</sup> on their own land. In some regions of Burma where there is sufficient irrigation during the dry season, 'double cropping' can be effective means of increasing farm revenue by adding a second harvest. However, with little understanding of local growing conditions and no consultation with local farmers, military bureaucrats have instituted a system that has largely failed due to inadequate irrigation systems. Hence,

<sup>10</sup> A *Bowl* or '*thalaw*' in Karen is a Burmese unit of measurement equal to 255.71 millilitres in volume.

<sup>11</sup> A special species of paddy with a shorter growing cycle, most commonly a variety known by its Burmese name *Shin Thweh Lah*.

villagers have lost not only the initial investment from the forced purchases, but have also been forced to pay money to the SPDC in lieu of the paddy crops they were expected to provide to SPDC soldiers. Double-cropping neither provides villagers with increased food supplies nor additional income and instead hobbles them with increased debts and further undermines their ability to produce or purchase food for their families.

*"In December 2005, the SPDC forced nine villages surrounding my village to do dry season planting. They wrote to us and called us to a meeting at Kya In Seik Gyi. In the meeting the Agriculture Group, under the SPDC, told us to do dry-season planting. They told us buy paddy at 2,500 kyat [US \$2.50] per basket and plant it by ourselves. Nine of our villages have to plant 15 acres each of the dry-season paddy, but we haven't started the planting yet because we don't have much water in the dry season. We don't want to do that because we know we won't get any profit and we will lose all of our invested money. We have already told them that it won't be of benefit for the villagers and we will lose our invested money, but they still force us to do it."*

- Ko U--- (male, 33), chairperson, K--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

Furthermore, villagers are almost never given any payment and rarely provided with food during forced agricultural work and are expected to either go without or bring with them all that they will need to eat.

*"They [DKBA] didn't give us any wages or food. We had to bring our own food and equipment to do the work for them. I think that he [deputy battalion commander Thaw M'Nah] has authority, because even though he sold off some logs [i.e. conducted business for personal benefit], the commander [above him] didn't say anything. Their [DKBA] businesses bring them profit, but the villagers have to do [the work] for them for free."*

- Saw G--- (male, 70), G--- village, Thaton District (May 2008)

Babies are also directly threatened with malnutrition from forced labour demands, as forced labour takes mothers away from their homes and prevents them from breast feeding their babies for long periods at a time. Some women travel backwards and forwards to

the forced labour site during the day in order to return home to feed their babies. However, villagers are often forced to conduct labour far from their villages, so it may not be possible for mothers to return home until the end of the day – potentially life-threatening for babies who are dependent on regular feedings for their survival.

### *Arbitrary taxation*

Military taxation of villagers in Karen State is widespread and systematised. Yet, as the amounts demanded are still at the whim of individual military officials and the ‘taxes’ rarely have any benefit for the communities they are collected from, this taxation is still largely arbitrary. As examples, villagers in rural Burma face demands for quotas of their paddy harvest or other crops; ‘taxes’ on their land, saw mills, rice mills, livestock, tractors or other farm equipment or belongings; frequent checkpoints along roads and river banks where soldiers ‘tax’ villagers based on the quantities or types of goods they are carrying; entry fees for obligatory enrolment into parastatal organisations, such as the Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWWAF) or Myanmar Red Cross; and other forms of official extortion. Much of this ‘taxation’ is systematised through obligatory household registration, whereby villagers are forced to detail the numbers of people in their household as well as the land and belongings they possess. These household registers then form a basis for both forced labour and taxation demands.

*“[SPDC] IB [Infantry Battalion] #48 headquarters is based at Ohtwin in Bago Division. Every year they send a representative to come and collect the field taxes. For one acre we must give them eight baskets of un-husked rice.”*

*- Saw L--- (male, 37), P--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)*

Moreover, taxation demands come from all ‘sides’ – in Karen State one village may be obliged to provide crop quotas or land taxes not only to the SPDC, but also to any of the following armed groups – the DKBA, the Karen Peace Force (KPF), which are allied to the SPDC, as well as the opposition KNLA – often in combination. In Kawkareik Township of Dooplaya District, for example, both DKBA and KNLA forces tax local villagers’ corn harvests. Villagers reported that the KNLA have taxed their harvests at a rate of 10 Thai baht per sack while the DKBA have taxed the same harvests at a much higher rate of 56 baht per

sack and have also taxed their corn seed at a rate of 700 baht per sack.<sup>12</sup> While SPDC and DKBA demands are the most substantial across Karen State as a whole, overlapping demands from any of the groups nevertheless augment the burden upon villagers’ already strained livelihoods.

*“When I stayed in the village they [SPDC authorities] taxed the villagers who traded artificial meat. For one stove for [preparing] artificial meat [the villagers] had to pay 20,000 kyat [US \$20]. For one viss [1.63 kg. / 3.6 lb.] of artificial meat [the villagers] had to pay 2,500 kyat [US \$2.50]. They had to pay taxes to both sides; the SPDC and the DKBA. The DKBA demanded the same amount as the SPDC. As for saw mill owners, for individual saw mills [the owners] have to pay 100,000 kyat [US \$100] each month to the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers, they have to pay 10,000 kyat [US \$10] per month to the DKBA and they have to pay the KPF 10,000 kyat per month as well. Also, we have to pay a sugar cane tax. For one acre of [sugar cane] field, we have to pay 6,000 kyat [US \$6] to the DKBA and the KPF each year. As for the rice mills, [the owners] have to pay 50,000 kyat [US \$50] per year to the DKBA and the KPF. To some groups of Burmese [SPDC] soldiers we’ve had to pay the fees, but to some [others] we haven’t needed to pay.”*

*- Saw B--- (male, 44), P--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2007)*

Civilians in Karen State find they have to put more time and effort into forced labour for local SPDC and DKBA forces than into their own livelihood activities. Then what little they can earn or produce in their fields in the remaining time is subject to extortion and arbitrary taxation by those same troops and others. While crop quotas directly diminish the food supplies available to a given community, financial demands deplete villagers’ cash savings, restricting their options to counter the negative effects of forced labour on agriculture by buying food elsewhere.

*“When I lived in our village, there were a lot of demands and taxes placed upon us. I have two young children and I have to look out for my family’s livelihood. I didn’t have the*

<sup>12</sup> US \$1 is approximately equal to 35 Thai baht. For more details of this incident, see *DKBA soldiers attack Karen village in Thailand*, KHRG, October 2008.



*money to pay taxes or pay soldiers and if I went somewhere to find work, we had to pay money along the way [to clear the checkpoints]. I couldn't handle this kind of oppression and so came to live in L--- village [a displaced hiding site in Karen State]."*

- Saw D--- (male, 32), G--- village, Pa'an District  
(July 2008)

### **Looting and ad hoc demands**

*"I didn't have enough rice, or even chilli, salt or MSG powder to eat at every meal. The money we earn, we have to give [to the SPDC]. They often come and demand chickens and pigs from our villagers."*

- Naw--- (female, 29), G--- village, Pa'an District  
(July 2008)

On other occasions, soldiers abandon any pretence of taxation and simply loot, steal or demand the items which they require/desire. While patrolling military units that enter villages by day often demand items through the village head or directly from villagers, looting is particularly prevalent at night-time when villagers are sleeping and unable to protect their livestock or other belongings. Soldiers also regularly steal from villages when villagers have temporarily left the village in order to evade forced labour or other demands; when villagers have been forcibly relocated to other locations and have had to leave many belongings behind; and after attacks on villages, when villagers have fled into hiding in the forest. Items regularly demanded or stolen include livestock such as chickens and pigs, rice, cooked food, alcohol, cooking equipment and money. While villagers struggle to meet such demands or recover financially after lootings, soldiers operate in an environment of impunity as the Burma Army's live-off-the-land policy allows such acts to go unpunished.

*"They [SPDC and DKBA] usually order me to find chicken, rice and porters for them. Whenever they come, they demand these things and sometimes I can't find time to have a meal – even day and night... Sometimes when they come they ask me to collect up to four or five baskets of rice. Even though the villagers have nothing to eat, they have to look for rice to give [the] SPDC."*

- Naw M--- (female, 49), N--- village, Thaton District (Jan 2008)

### **Land confiscation**

Another important factor contributing to the food crisis is the confiscation of land for SPDC 'development' projects and the profit of individual military officers and soldiers. When the military plan road or camp construction they do not consult with villagers as to where the roads should be built and instead simply bulldoze roads through paddy fields and plantations or force villagers to construct the roads themselves on their own lands. Villagers are not compensated for the land lost or provided with alternative land for their fields and plantations. One particularly high profile case of land confiscation for road construction has been the construction of the Asian Highway. Once constructed, this highway will link 32 Asian countries along a network of 140,479 kilometres of roads.<sup>13</sup>



This track marks the route of the Asian Highway as it crosses through Thaton District. The section shown here was built over rice fields belonging to 60-year-old U M--- of Bee Lin Kyo village, who was given no compensation for the loss of his land. Local villagers were forced to construct both the road and the drainage ditches running alongside. [Photo: KHRG]

In Karen State, this highway will pass through Pa'an and Thaton Districts as it runs from the Mae Sot/Myawaddy border crossing on the Thai-Burma border to Rangoon and the SPDC has increasingly employed the DKBA as a proxy to take control of the civilian population in the area of the highway and implement the construction. In Thaton District, KHRG has received reports of DKBA confiscation of farm fields belonging to local villagers, which the SPDC and DKBA have consequently forced the villagers to clear, construct sections of the road upon and dig irrigation ditches alongside – with no compensation provided in return.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Asian Highway*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Accessed at [www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TIS\\_pubs/pub\\_2303/intro%20ah.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TIS_pubs/pub_2303/intro%20ah.pdf) on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009.

<sup>14</sup> For more information see *Development by Decree*, KHRG, April 2007 and *SPDC and DKBA extortion and forced labour in Thaton District*, KHRG, November 2008.

This immediate loss of farmland, along with the burden of increased forced labour, has heightened the food crisis in Karen State. As the Burma section of the highway is also planned to link Burma to India, to two border crossings in China and to another, more-northern, border crossing in Thailand, it can be expected that land confiscation and forced labour for the highway is occurring in other parts of rural Burma as well.

In the name of development, the SPDC has also confiscated land for the construction of dams in Karen State. Many small-scale dam projects across Karen State have led to the loss of villagers' farm fields and forced labour on dam construction. However, the larger Weh Gyi, Dagwin and Hat Gyi dams on the Salween River, for which preparations have already begun, are already generating, and set to produce, even larger consequences. In order to clear and control the area ready for the dam construction, the SPDC has carried out widespread attacks on non-SPDC-controlled villages and conducted a large-scale forced relocation programme in the area since late 2005. Whether villagers flee into the forest to escape attacks and military control or are forced to relocate to the plains, this attempt by the SPDC to clear the area has left many villagers without access to the fields and plantations which had previously been their primary resources for food.<sup>15</sup>

The construction of these dams has also meant further land confiscation for road construction in order to link towns and SPDC Army camps to the dam sites. For example, in eastern Papun District, SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #8 began constructing three roads in December 2006 in order to connect the Weh Gyi and Dagwin dam sites with the SPDC Army camps at Kaw Boke (Kaw Pu) and Maw Moh Kyo – villagers were not compensated for the paddy fields and plantations destroyed by the road construction. Most worryingly, however, it seems that the biggest loss of land is still to come. Once completed, the Weh Gyi, Dagwin and Hat Gyi dams will create three vast reservoirs, turning most of the territory along a 200 kilometre stretch of the Salween River into an inland sea, leaving countless communities homeless and without their former agricultural lands. Moreover, the obstruction of the Salween – the last major free-flowing river in Southeast Asia – will destroy the local ecosystem, threatening fish stocks, wildlife and plants which communities depend upon, both around the dam sites and further downstream. This therefore points to an

even larger-scale food and humanitarian crisis still in the making.

Furthermore, in Karen State, SPDC and DKBA officers have established their own rubber, fruit, sugarcane, coconut and cashew plantations, as well as fish farms and market gardens, almost always on land confiscated from villagers without payment. Soldiers frequently then force the former owners of the land and other local villagers to labour on the confiscated land. While some of the food produced may be used to feed local army units, produce is often sold on the market for the profit of local commanders. In addition, other confiscated land has been sold off to private business interests, mainly for the creation of large-scale paddy and rubber plantations, sometimes in joint ventures with the SPDC or with the SPDC taking a share of the profits. In some cases, villagers have been able to buy back some or all of their confiscated land, but the high prices charged by military officials is largely prohibitive and villagers are left conducting forced labour, or at best wage labour, on their own land and struggle to maintain their livelihoods.

Moreover, even where land is not directly confiscated, many fields and plantations are damaged/destroyed, as the SPDC neglects villagers' property during various development construction projects and when stipulating forced labour demands. For example, when SPDC soldiers constructed the Papun to Ka Ka Maung vehicle road in 2005, they took stones for the construction from the irrigation dykes which diverted water into villagers' rice fields and partially dismantled the Bilin river dam which controlled irrigation for the whole area. The soldiers then piled the stones on top of the villagers' fields and later transported some but not all of the stones to the roadways, preventing the villagers from planting their fields without first moving the stones and risking punishment for doing so. Then the road itself was ploughed straight through rice fields around the areas of Ma Htaw and Ku Seik. These actions ensured that villagers in the area would face a food shortage.

Villagers' fields and plantations are also frequently damaged and reduced by road-side brush clearance. Every year, following the rains, SPDC officials force villagers to clear brush and other forest growth along long sections of roadways in the areas surrounding their home villages. Large swaths of forest growth must be cut back on both sides of the road in order to prevent ambushes on military patrols and make it more difficult for villagers evading military forces to cross these roads without being spotted. In some cases these roadside clearings may have to be as wide as 50 feet / 15.2 metres, thus cutting into villagers' plantations, vegetable gardens and fields.

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<sup>15</sup> Forced relocation and displacement then bring further problems for food insecurity, as will be explored below.

*“We had to clear the vehicle road from Meh Bpoo to Dta Gkaw Poh. Not only my village had to do this, but another 12 villages had to do this as well... Many people have lost their farms and gardens [due to the clearance of land alongside the road]. In our garden, plants such as coconut trees, mango trees and betel nut bushes were destroyed. The width of the road is 25 feet [7.62 metres]. Some houses were dismantled. Also, the SPDC soldiers’ columns have sold the bamboo poles which we cut for them in the city.”*

- U T--- (male, 44), ---village, Thaton District (June 2007)

Logging is furthermore big business in Burma and, in Karen State, has primarily profited large companies from central Burma, as well as individuals amongst the SPDC, DKBA and KNU leadership. Logging is conducted on land traditionally belonging to local communities, without consultation with, or benefit to, local people. On the contrary, private logging leaves rural villagers’ with reduced supplies of building materials and firewood, devastates agriculture and frequently means further road construction for logging trucks. Ultimately, such logging leads to more land confiscation or destruction and increased military abuse as soldiers gain improved access to the villages in the area – ensuring the persistence of the cycle of abuse and malnutrition.

*“We didn’t have big businesses here, [but] we have one now. People are buying and selling logs but the poor people aren’t able to. The logs are from near our village. All of the logs are going to the town. It benefits only those people who can do [this kind of work], but those people who can’t, have to [just] watch those people [who are logging]. The logs are being carried by truck and now the road [that was built for the logging trucks] has reached our village. The road hasn’t benefited the villagers. I think that after the logs have been traded, the SPDC will come and do something [using the road built for the logging trucks]. Now the big trees have been cut down and only the small trees are left behind. Now, because the big trees have been cut down, the area is getting hot and we can’t get enough water for our rice fields.”*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 51), D--- village, Papun District (Feb 2008)

## Movement restrictions

*“We have over 300 households [in the village] and our population is over 1,000 people. Villagers are cultivating hill and flat fields for their livelihoods. Some get enough food and some don’t. This is because of the [SPDC-imposed] movement restrictions and the enemy’s [the SPDC’s] oppression.”*

- Naw W--- (female, 27), L--- village, Pa’an District (July 2008)

Restrictions on movement are employed across large areas of SPDC-controlled Karen State largely on the pretext of ‘counter-insurgency’ operations, though in reality they function primarily as a means to prevent villagers from evading the demands placed upon them. Restrictions on movement also prevent trips outside the village to trade with neighbouring communities; to collect firewood, naturally available foods and stream water from nearby forests; or to tend agricultural fields.

*“This year we haven’t been able to travel freely to do our work [hill field agriculture]. We’ve only been able to travel with their [SPDC authorities’] permission. If they don’t give us permission, we can’t travel... This is really a very big problem. It’s difficult for some people to get food everyday. Even people who usually have plenty of food are suffering, not to mention ordinary working people. If you can’t travel, you have nothing to eat... We’re keeping our hearts calm and staying here, but it’s causing us trouble and we can’t get anything to eat.”*

- Naw L--- (female, 37), M--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Aug 2006)

Orders issued by military officers typically stipulate that villagers can only leave village confines during daylight hours and only then with a written permission document from local SPDC authorities or occasionally from the village head. It is particularly common for villagers to be told that they are not allowed to sleep at farm field huts – 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 be located a long distance from the village (especially if the community has been relocated). This order may sometimes be backed up with a prohibition against carrying uncooked rice (which farmers and field workers could use to cook while staying overnight in their fields). Instead,



villagers can only carry bags of cooked rice, which would spoil if not consumed by the end of the day. And, in order to ensure enforcement, SPDC soldiers have forced villagers to dismantle their field huts altogether or have simply burnt them down. Without being able to sleep in their farm field huts, villagers instead have to walk back and forth between their fields and homes every day, wasting valuable farming time and undermining harvests.

*“They [the villagers] can’t work smoothly. The SPDC doesn’t let us go and stay at our work places [farm fields] during the night time. If we need to go, we have to let them know and then they don’t let us light any fires in the farm houses and they don’t allow us to catch the wild pigs and buffalos which come to eat our paddy crops. So, we can’t get enough rice [as the harvest is poor] and we have to buy [rice] from outside.”*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

To even further restrict the movement of villagers, the SPDC has forced villagers across much of SPDC-controlled Karen State to construct fences around their villages. These typically spiked bamboo fences must surround the entire village and have only one or two entrances/exits. In fact, villagers are often forced to build two parallel fences to make it even more difficult to exit/enter the village and to potentially allow for security patrols to walk between the two fences. The primary purpose of such fencing is to prevent villagers from being able to quickly leave the village (when soldiers arrive) and avoid demands for forced labour, money or supplies, but they also make it more difficult for villagers to evade movement restrictions placed upon travel to their fields and trade with neighbouring towns or villages, as these fences make it more difficult to sneak in or out of the village without being seen. Such fences, therefore, compound the effects of movement restrictions and exacerbate the food crisis.

Movement restrictions are backed up by a very real threat of violence and villagers evading movement restrictions risk being shot on sight, interrogated under torture or imprisoned on accusation of aiding the KNLA. 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 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, restrictions on travel hours are nevertheless debilitating

to successful agricultural practices and villagers may be unwilling or unable to pay travel pass fees every day or every week as required. Moreover, soldiers do not always bother to check whether or not villagers are in possession of valid SPDC-issued travel documents before shooting them on sight, meaning villagers risk execution when travelling outside the village confines even when respecting the rules imposed upon them.



SPDC authorities ordered residents of Taw Gkoo village of Toungoo District to build the above fence (shown here in April 2008) around their village so that Burma Army soldiers could more easily monitor the villagers’ movements. [Photo: KHRG]

*“[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 daytime. 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... 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.”*

- Saw G--- (male, 66), --- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2008)

This need for villagers to violate the movement restrictions imposed upon them and risk their lives has also led to a secondary impact of the loss of family ‘breadwinners’. Families who have lost the primary working parent or an elder working child find it harder to meet their livelihood needs, further deepening the food crisis, or have to pull their children out of education to work in the fields or to look after younger children and conduct household chores while the remaining parent goes out to work.

## Forced relocation

The SPDC has long employed the practice of forced relocation as a central facet of its military operations in Karen State. Forced relocation has served to depopulate difficult-to-control hill areas and consolidate the entire civilian population in the easier-to-control plains. Communities are typically relocated to fenced sites close to SPDC army camps and vehicle roads, thereby creating a readily exploitable pool of labour, food, money and supplies. Communities which do not comply are deemed enemies of the state and face military attacks.

For many, relocation to such a site spells humanitarian disaster. Barren and insufficient land, strict movement restrictions and constant exploitation means food insecurity and malnutrition are particularly rampant in relocation sites, while at the same time healthcare services are virtually non-existent.

Immediately upon being relocated, villagers often lose access to their former agricultural lands whether due to distance, destruction or movement restrictions, thereby losing their previous means of livelihood. To make matters worse, relocation sites are often built upon dry and barren plain lands which are difficult to cultivate and, moreover, households are typically allotted very small plots of land on which to build their houses and possibly a small garden. These small plots can in no way compare to the traditional agricultural lands on which villagers have farmed paddy, betel nut, fruit, cardamom or other crops. These plots are also typically insufficient to fit or sustain larger livestock like cattle, which may therefore have to be abandoned. Also, as relocation campaigns continue, relocation sites are constantly expanding with new communities forced to join those previously relocated. This has meant that the already limited arable land has been further reduced. Furthermore, good harvests depend on adequate land preparation, paddy and other crops can generally only be successfully planted at a certain time of the year and plantations may take years to mature. Therefore, even if sufficient land were available, re-establishing fields and plantations soon enough to ensure livelihood continuity is simply impossible.

In addition, villagers also face increased movement restrictions at relocation sites. Travel outside of the relocation site confines is heavily restricted. Temporary travel passes are arduous to acquire and the cost of repeated purchase of such documents adds up and undermines the benefit of maintaining external farm fields. Double-row fences are also frequently patrolled by villagers who are forced to act as sentries monitoring all arrivals and

departures. Moreover, even if villagers are able to gain permission to return to former agricultural fields and plantations, they typically find that soldiers have mined villages, pathways and fields in order to prevent such a return. Villagers furthermore risk being shot-on-sight if spotted by other soldiers operating in what has been designated a 'black area' by the SPDC – villagers remaining in depopulated areas are deemed 'insurgents' or 'enemies of the state'. As a result, crops are only intermittently tended if at all, leaving them in danger of being consumed by animals or insects or becoming overgrown with weeds. Travel restrictions further prevent villagers from foraging for wild foods or firewood in nearby forests, from trading goods for food with neighbouring communities and from taking wage labour in nearby villages or towns.

*"They didn't provide food and rice and such things [at the relocation site]. They didn't even give us the right to go back and work in our fields. We had to go back secretly without them noticing. We couldn't go and work in other villagers' fields for wages because by the time we'd get there it would already be noon. So people don't want to call us to work on their fields."*

- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Sept 2007)

On top of all these constraints which already greatly hinder livelihoods, local Burma Army troops make use of the interred populations for regular forced labour carrying food supplies, cleaning and repairing army camps and other tasks which help support the expanding military presence and extort from villagers the limited food supplies and belongings they have remaining. Food insecurity is therefore severe and widespread amongst Burma's forcibly relocated population. The following testimony by a local villager, who spoke to KHRG in April 2008, illustrates the conditions of life in Tha Bpyay Nyunt, a relocation site in Mone township of Nyaunglebin District:

*"The SPDC came to our village and forced us to relocate to Tha Bpyay Nyunt [relocation site]. We have faced big problems surviving. We don't have any land to do our work here and also we dare not to go back to work in our [abandoned] homeland. We moved here over two years ago. Another issue is that they [the local Burma Army soldiers] always order us to do loh ah pay [forced labour], such as clearing [the forest growth from the sides*

of] their vehicle road and carrying their rations. The orders have come from [SPDC] LIB #320. It [LIB #320] is based at Tha Bpyay Nyunt and the commander's name is Soe Win. We've had to carry their rations from Tha Bpyay Nyunt to Gk'Moo Loh. They also ordered two people from each village to serve as set tha [messengers] for three days [at a time]. Every time when we went to do their work, they guarded us with guns. Both old and young people have to go for loh ah pay. The oldest people were above 50 and the youngest were around 12. They didn't give us any payment or provide us with food. Now we don't have time to do our own work. We always have to be afraid of the SPDC army soldiers. Nobody dares confront them. When we moved to the relocation site, they gave each household an area of land 30 feet [9.14 metres] by 50 feet [15.24 metres]. The space was very small for us, but we couldn't do anything about it."

### Compounding consequences

The extortion of staple foods and livestock far beyond what could be considered 'surplus' has combined with land confiscation, forced labour, movement restrictions and disastrous agricultural programmes to stifle household income and entrench village-level poverty at the same time that local rice and other commodity prices have been increasing. Despite fertile environmental conditions, extensive local knowledge of agriculture and a culturally embedded agricultural tradition, exploitative policies imposed by the SPDC and allied military forces have effectively stunted agricultural development in Karen State and prevented many rural communities from meeting even their basic nutritional needs. Many villagers have, therefore, chosen to flee from relocation sites and other SPDC-controlled villages into situations of displacement in hiding. As many villagers in Karen State have a strong attachment to their land, they have typically sought (at least initially) to flee to hiding sites located within non-SPDC controlled areas of their home districts in order to remain as close as possible to their home villages. However, as will be demonstrated in the next section, those living in these areas face their own unique set of humanitarian and human rights challenges.

### *The villagers are facing so many difficulties...*

"My occupation is hill field farming, but at the moment we're not able to work on our hill fields because landmines have been planted along the path and around our village. Now, in my village, the villagers are facing so many difficulties that I don't know how to describe it. Villagers haven't been allowed to go outside of the village since last month [April 2008]. Last year the livestock which the villagers sold in my village was very cheap, because if they didn't do like this [keep the price low] when the DKBA came, they shot the villagers' livestock dead and ate them without paying any compensation. So the villagers thought that something was better than nothing, so they did like that [reduced the price]. At the moment, the cows and buffaloes also step on the landmines every day.

Now the villagers have to live in the village and can't do anything. [They] just sit around and look at each other in the face. We can start our hill field cultivation after they [the DKBA soldiers] leave and take out all of the landmines that they have planted, but we don't know when they will depart... When DKBA soldiers see anyone outside of the village they accuse them of being a spy for the KNU and of having contact with the KNU. They force the villagers to be porters and they forced 50 villagers from villages such as Noh Poe, Htee Moo Hta and Meh Ker Neh [to serve as porters], because if they [DKBA soldiers] go without porters the KNU [KNLA] soldiers can attack them...

Villagers also have to do loh ah pay [forced labour] every five days. If they don't go, then they have to pay 20,000 kyat [US \$20] for three days [to avoid forced labour duty for three days]. For the loh ah pay [forced labour], the villagers must cook for the DKBA soldiers, travel with them and follow them wherever they go. The DKBA soldiers also demand rice from the villagers. Each house has to give three big tins [48 kg / 105.6 lb] of rice to them. There are more than 200 houses in my village."

- Naw K--- (female, 40), --- village,  
Dooplaya District (May 2008)



## The food crisis in areas outside of SPDC control

When SPDC abuse and exploitation become too much to bear or when faced with the prospect of increased abuse and exploitation at a relocation site, villagers frequently choose instead to flee into the forested mountain areas and maintain a life in hiding as close to their home areas as possible. However, the SPDC deems all those who evade its control to be enemies of the state and those communities which do not comply with forced relocation orders are subject to military attacks. Such attacks themselves cause heightened food insecurity – when fleeing into the forest, villagers can only take with them what food supplies and cooking equipment can be carried on their backs as they move from place to place; soldiers regularly target food storage barns, agricultural fields and livestock for destruction in order to prevent displaced villagers from returning and resettling in the village after their departure; and planting cycles are disrupted when villagers are away from their land and, without regular care, crops become rapidly overgrown with weeds or consumed by wild animals and insects. Moreover, villagers face increased risks to their food security once in situations of displacement. The SPDC's shoot-on-sight policy for villagers seen in areas outside of its control makes it difficult for displaced villagers to return to tend their fields or plantations or to travel to nearby towns or villages to purchase rice and other food supplies, while landmines laid in agricultural fields by departing soldiers increase the danger of returning and frequently kill livestock that have been left behind. Furthermore, in order to starve villagers into leaving their hiding sites and submitting to a life under SPDC control in the plains, SPDC soldiers actively search out and destroy villagers' hidden food stores and covert plantations in the forest, leaving villagers with increasingly limited options for addressing their nutritional needs.

### Attacks

When villagers fail to comply with relocation orders and evade SPDC control and demands, military patrols attack villages by first shelling communities from a distance with high-powered mortars and subsequently approaching on foot and torching homes, schools, churches, farm fields, food supplies and food storage barns. Any villagers spotted during the attack are fired upon and it is usually the elderly, sick and those caught unaware, for example while tending farm fields, who are killed at this time. Other

villagers are usually able to get away prior to the actual attack by employing advanced warning systems. An estimated 30,000 villagers fled from such attacks from January 2006 to the start of 2008.<sup>16</sup> Survey data on Eastern Burma collected by the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) also indicates that 3,386 villages have been destroyed, forcibly relocated or abandoned in the area from 1996-2008 and 66,000 were newly displaced during 2008, bringing the total displaced population to 451,000 in rural areas of Eastern Burma alone<sup>17</sup> – figures that are likely lower than the true numbers due to the difficulty of reaching widely dispersed and constantly moving displaced communities.

### Only what can be carried

*“When the Burmese came, we would have died if we hadn't run away. We are afraid of them [the SPDC] because they will beat us, shoot us, or stab us to death. We cannot endure that kind of torture and I don't want to die yet. The Burmese come just to kill people. Last year, I [harvested] 120 baskets of rice. I couldn't even take a handful of rice from those 120 baskets because I fled to [Gk---village] when the SPDC came.”*

- Naw D--- (female, 45), Gk--- village, Papun District (June 2008)



Villagers in Toungoo District flee a Burma Army attack in 2008 with as many belongings as they can carry. [Photo: KHRG]

<sup>16</sup> Eubank, D. 2008. “Under attack: A way of life,” *Forced Migration Review* 30: 10-11, p.11.

<sup>17</sup> TBBC. 2008. *Internal Displacement and International Law in Eastern Burma*, pp. 18-21.

When fleeing into the forest, villagers can generally only take with them what belongings they can carry on their backs and still move with speed through the forest. Although villagers typically prioritise food supplies and cooking equipment, food supplies are still liable to run out within days or weeks unless villagers are able to access alternative sources of food.

*"We stay in our village and don't disturb the SPDC, but they disturb us. It becomes difficult to do our work because we normally have to move around. Moreover, when we flee, our food runs out... We have to carry our food through the fighting, which is dangerous for us. All boys and girls have to climb the mountain [in order to temporarily flee] and hardly have time to do the farming. But if we don't do the farming, we don't have any food to eat."*

- Saw B--- (male, 18), K--- village, Papun District (June 2008)

#### **Destruction of food stores, fields and livestock**

*"When the soldiers arrived in the village they burnt some of my materials such as pots and plates... So now I've 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've had to walk for three days. The enemies [SPDC soldiers] are staying in the villagers' hill fields now. They've already burnt down seven houses in the village and some paddy."*

- Saw L--- (male, 45), T--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2008)



Paddy and tools salvaged by villagers after the Burma Army unit which attacked their village departed. [Photo: KHRG]

*"When the SPDC doesn't come, we work very well. When the SPDC comes, we have to stop working and flee to the forest. Sometimes we can't even work for one week. Then they [SPDC soldiers] enter into our workplaces and eat our plants and destroy our belongings. If they arrive during the dry season, they burn the forest and the fire destroys our crops and plantations."*

- Saw D--- (male, 60), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)

When soldiers enter the village after a mortar attack, they typically loot and destroy villagers' belongings, particularly food stores, fields and plantations, agricultural and cooking equipment and livestock, in order to make it difficult for villagers to return and maintain a life outside of SPDC control.

*"Throughout my life I've been able to raise my family with my cardamom field. I've had nothing [else]. I've only had a cardamom field. Now I can't do anything because they burnt down all of my cardamom plants in the field. I'm very sad about it. Every year, I got money from it [the cardamom plantation]. I didn't need to worry for my daily food. But now I don't know what I must do for my family."*

- Saw H--- (male, 40), ---- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

#### **Failed harvests**

Even when crops are not destroyed outright by the SPDC, when villagers flee into hiding they lose valuable time that could be used for farming and tending their crops. This loss of work time is particularly disruptive to agriculture and crucial points in the crop cycle – burning and clearing of old growth, planting and harvesting all need to be carried out at particular times of year based on the temperature and rain fall at those times. Carrying out these activities at other times of year can lead to reduced or failed harvests and villagers who cannot return to their land for significant periods of time may miss these crucial parts of the crop cycle. Moreover, agricultural fields and plantations which are left unattended quickly find their crops consumed by ants, grubs, termites, birds, rats or other wild animals or become overgrown with weeds which undermine plant growth, thus reducing the eventual harvest and diminishing food supplies.





The picture on the left, taken on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2008, shows a hill field belonging to residents of Tantabin Township, Toungoo District, before the arrival of the SPDC. The photo on the right shows the same hill field on June 14<sup>th</sup> 2008. Due to an SPDC patrol in the area, villagers could not return to work the land and weeds have since overgrown most of the field. [Photos: KHRG]

*“Every time when the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers have arrived at our village, we’ve had to flee. So, we haven’t had time to take care of our paddy plants in the fields. They [the farm fields] are covered with weeds. If the SPDC didn’t disturb us, we’d have enough food every year. For me, I dare not go and check my betel nut plantation because the SPDC Army camp is located beside my plantation.”*

- Naw K--- (female, 23), Gk--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

As described above, the SPDC maintains a shoot-on-sight policy for all those found in areas outside of its consolidated control. Those villagers returning to cultivate their relatively open hill and flat fields are much more visible to patrolling soldiers and therefore face the constant risk of military detection and execution. This risk is heightened during labour-intensive times in the crop cycle, such as during initial planting in May-June and harvesting in November-December. At these times, villagers must spend long hours in their fields in order to finish the harvest quickly. The likelihood of being spotted and fired upon thus increases during these periods.

## **During displacement**

In addition to these initial threats, villagers face further threats to their food security during displacement. Living in temporary shelters in the forest and having to be constantly prepared to move in response to approaching army patrols, it is often very difficult for villagers to settle in one place long enough to grow crops and provide for their families in the same way that they would have done in their home villages. Many, therefore, either risk travelling to their former fields or plantations to harvest crops or collect fruits or to buy food from nearby towns or rely on foraging for naturally available foods in the forest. These activities entail significant dangers and difficulties.

### **Shoot-on-sight policy**

*“The SPDC doesn’t see us as villagers. They identify us as their enemy. So, when they see us, they shoot to kill us all.”*

- Saw Bp--- (male, 57), Gk--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Nov 2007)

Although, the SPDC usually uses the pretext of ‘counter-insurgency’ operations to justify such summary executions, the targeting of villagers (including children) obviously tending their farm fields, clearly undermines this claim. Moreover, villagers whose farm fields have already been destroyed frequently have to travel far in order to reach towns where they can purchase food – up to three days in some cases – increasing the risk of running into military patrols along the way.

*“We live in the forest, which isn’t close to our workplaces. We can’t go back to work in the fields. We have 21 households in the village and there used to be 81 villagers. All the villagers had been working the fields. They can’t grow enough rice to survive and we have to go to other places to look for rice.”*

- Saw K--- (male, 50), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)





On May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007, soldiers from SPDC LIB #88 of LID #78 arrived at the Bpay Baw Dter area of Tantabin Township, Toungoo District. Upon reaching the local paddy fields, soldiers opened fire on those tending their crops. At this time the soldiers shot and wounded 14-year-old Naw K---, shown above. [Photo: KHRG]

### Landmines

In addition to being shot on sight, villagers also risk death or injury from triggering landmines when returning to their home villages to collect food supplies or tend agricultural fields. After an attack, departing soldiers frequently lay landmines in and around villages and fields and in the surrounding forest area, particularly on foot paths, in order to prevent successful return by villagers. These landmines therefore make it even more difficult for displaced villagers to harvest their crops. Nevertheless, many have seen this as a necessary risk to take given that they would otherwise face starvation. Villagers have, moreover, requested that the KNLA plant landmines around their hiding sites or have done so themselves in order to protect themselves from patrolling Burma Army troops. Landmine deaths and injuries are therefore frequent in Karen State, leading to secondary impacts upon food security and nutrition as families lose their key workers or breadwinners.

*"I've had to face a lot of problems since my husband died. My children can't work very well. I can't work for our survival very well myself. I have five children: three girls and two boys. The youngest child is one year and seven months old. Two children go to school. The oldest one had been working with his father and couldn't work very well yet but, since his father died, he's had to work alone. He doesn't know much about the work yet. The crops have become worse and my son told me he doesn't know what to do. If his father was alive, he'd know how to rejuvenate the crops."*

- Naw L--- (female, 37), H--- village, Papun District (May 2008)

Children who lose both parents to landmines or shoot-on-sight killings and have no other immediate guardians may become particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and poor health. For babies still reliant on their mother's milk, the death of their mother is a catastrophe for their own survival since obtaining powdered milk to replace breast milk is prohibitively expensive. This means that not only is malnutrition a serious threat, but death and susceptibility to illness and disease are also very likely.

Villagers have also reported to KHRG that their cattle and buffalos have been injured and killed by landmines laid near their villages – frequently in large numbers as the sound of the explosion from the first landmine detonated by one of the animals frightens the rest and, as they run around to escape, they trigger even more landmines. It is generally too dangerous for villagers to retrieve their livestock in such a situation and they therefore lose valuable animals which they would have been able to use to work their fields and transport food supplies, as well as a potential source of meat or dairy.

### Restrictions on trade

Movement restrictions imposed upon those under SPDC control largely function to prevent trade with displaced communities, which could aid their efforts to remain in hiding. Together with destruction of covert rice storage barns and hillside farm fields, the restriction of trade serves to starve hiding villagers out of the hills and into the SPDC-controlled plain areas. In addition to preventing the movement of controlled villagers, the SPDC has therefore also restricted the transport of food and other supplies along vehicle roads in areas, especially of northern Karen State, where large numbers of displaced communities

remain in hiding. For example, from March 2007, SPDC forces operating under MOC #5 began to restrict goods at the P'Leh Wa checkpoint between Kler La and Toungoo towns. Food supplies on the list of restricted items included rice, fish paste, salt, tea leaves, onions, garlic, edible oil, chilli and MSG.<sup>18</sup>

*"Now we also can't buy rice in Kler La and Toungoo [town], because they've blocked our way there. If we run out of food, we don't yet know what we'll have to do... Now we have to eat [watered down] rice porridge. We need our siblings to help us as much as they can."*

- Saw N--- (male, 27), K--- village, Toungoo District  
(Sept 2007)

Where items are not banned outright, SPDC and DKBA soldiers also regularly set up tax gates along roadways in order to collect fees on the items carried – arbitrary and excessive fees for the transport of food and other supplies increasingly stifle trade and undermine the rural economy, making it even more difficult for both displaced and non-displaced villagers to purchase food supplies.

## Cumulative Impacts

In combination, the attacks, abuses and restrictions cited above have seriously undermined displaced communities' food security. Families which flee from military attacks take with them whatever food supplies they can carry and may even prepare hidden rice storage containers in the forest in preparation for such flight, but these food supplies are also subject to destruction by military search-and-destroy missions and are anyway not sustainable without free access to agricultural land and the possibility of future harvests. Many displaced communities are therefore facing malnutrition and the threat of starvation. A medical survey conducted in 2006 found that over a quarter of the displaced population sampled in Papun District of Karen State alone was displaying signs of moderate-to-severe malnutrition.<sup>19</sup> Food is typically shared amongst families in order to ensure nobody is left without while there is still food available and, in order to stretch out meagre supplies, many are forced to eat

<sup>18</sup> For more information on this incident, see *Provoking Displacement in Toungoo District: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks*, KHRG, May 2007 and *SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District*, KHRG, March 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Back Pack Health Worker Team. 2006. *Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, p.38.

heavily watered-down rice porridge mixed with whatever vegetables or edible foliage they can gather in the jungle. Although this porridge may stem hunger for a while, it has little nutritional value and cannot sustain families for the long-term. The diets of displaced villagers are frequently sub-standard, lacking enough protein, fruit, vegetables and dairy products, and they rarely eat more than once or twice a day.<sup>20</sup> Many meals consist of only rice and salt. The results are vitamin, protein and iron deficiencies and increased vulnerability to disease, as will be further discussed below.



The child on the left in photo above comes from a village in Toungoo District and was suffering from malnutrition at the time this photo was taken on December 15<sup>th</sup> 2007, because his parents ran low on food supplies while living displaced in the forest. [Photo: KHRG]

*"Now I'm living at a displacement site. It's not so far from my village. We can cultivate hill fields here [but] we can't buy rice from any other villages. The SPDC military blocks our way where we usually travel secretly to buy food. We have to eat [watered-down] rice porridge as we have nearly run out of our food. We realise that we can't stay here for so long. If we stay here without any food we will starve. We can't find food anywhere now. If they [SPDC soldiers] see us on the way, they will kill us, so we dare not go anywhere. If we have no food to eat, we've decided that we'll go to a refugee camp. We have to leave our place secretly."*

- Saw S--- (male, 32), K--- village, Toungoo District (Aug 2007)

Nevertheless, despite dire food insecurity and the risk of starvation, villagers continue to weigh their options and often still choose to evade control and resist

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



abuse rather than submit to a life of forced labour, extortion and other forms of exploitation under SPDC control. Most also endeavour to remain close to their homelands for as long as possible, only choosing to flee further to other more distant hiding sites or refugee camps as a last resort. However, the ability of displaced communities in Karen State to maintain their evasion of SPDC troops is directly tied to their ability to sustain some measure of food security, so their options decrease as the food crisis deepens.

*“I really want to say that, for us civilians, we need peace and freedom of movement. If we were able to work freely and could go anywhere freely, then we could earn our livelihoods very well. As I said before, if the situation becomes worse and worse, there will be a big problem and difficulties for us. It will be very difficult for us to get even a single mouthful of rice.”*

- Saw L--- (male, 37), P--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)



Villagers carrying food and supplies flee from Burma Army soldiers in Papun District. [Photo: KHRG]



## Village agency

Despite the extensive abuses and severe food insecurity they are facing, villagers in rural Burma are not helpless victims – they have developed a wide range of strategies to resist abuse and improve their food security. In SPDC-controlled areas, such strategies have largely functioned to reduce or wholly evade compliance with the exploitative demands and restrictions which, as we have seen above, obstruct and undermine villagers' livelihood activities and ability to provide food for their families. Displacement itself is a tactic employed to evade the abuses and commensurate food insecurity that are synonymous with life under SPDC control. Moreover, once in hiding, villagers have developed an array of other strategies to maintain a level of food security that allows them to continue evading SPDC control. Although, at first glance, these strategies may seem like survival tactics amidst a food crisis, it is important to recognise that they are more than just coping strategies. By implementing strategies that allow them to remain on or close to their homelands, villagers are resisting abuse, evading SPDC control and exploitation, and upholding their dignity. KHRG therefore calls these village-level initiatives and villagers' capacity to resist abuse *village agency*.

What follows is a brief survey of village agency in Karen State in direct relation to the food crisis – the ways in which villagers are both resisting the abuses creating the food crisis and working to meet their nutritional needs in an increasingly challenging environment. A more comprehensive analysis of villagers' resistance strategies can be found in KHRG's *Village Agency* report, published in November 2008.

### Resistance in SPDC-controlled areas

In order to mitigate or evade compliance with exploitative demands, villagers in SPDC-controlled Karen State have actively responded with various resistance strategies. As a first approach, villagers have often initially ignored order documents for forced labour or supplies that have been delivered by messengers to their villages. If subsequent orders have followed and some level of compliance has appeared inevitable, village heads have negotiated with local military authorities for a reduction in demands, stressing the already burdensome obligations imposed by army units on their communities. Sometimes such negotiation has been accompanied by bribes of money, alcohol or food, particularly where the opportunity cost of carrying out

forced labour, in terms of time lost for agricultural work or wage labour, would be higher than the cost of the bribe. Other villagers have temporarily fled the village in advance of approaching military units to avoid being conscripted into on-the-spot forced labour duties, such as portering military supplies or 'guiding' army units. Furthermore, lying, fast or shoddy workmanship or other discrete forms of false compliance can enable villagers to postpone forced labour until a less crucial time in the crop cycle or more quickly finish forced labour and get back to their fields.

*"[The soldiers at] the DKBA camp on top of Meh Gyi hill demanded bamboo from us, but we haven't cut it for them yet. I told them 'we also have to work at M--- pagoda and you've also ordered us [to do work] here, so we can't [prepare and deliver the bamboo poles]'."*

- Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Thaton District (May 2008)

Confronted with movement restrictions which have proved debilitating for agriculture and other livelihood activities, villagers have found ways of secretly leaving their villages or relocation sites to tend their fields or purchase food supplies from neighbouring communities, while often still risking arrest or execution for doing so. Villagers have also used this tactic to retrieve food supplies left behind during the hurried process of military-enforced relocation. In addition, as it becomes apparent that relocated communities cannot sustain themselves on the limited land on which they are contained, villagers have often been able to exploit the logistical limitations of relocation sites in order to negotiate with local army officers and persuade them to relax restrictions on humanitarian grounds, thereby allowing them to return to their former homes and farm fields either temporarily or permanently.

*"We now face a lot of difficulties because the SPDC relocated us far away from our workplace [farm fields]. Now we can't work very well to earn our livelihoods... They [SPDC] didn't provide us with any food, rice or otherwise [at the relocation site]. Nor did they even give us permission to return to work at our workplace [abandoned farm fields]. We had to return secretly without them knowing... They haven't given us any work [travel] permits. We've just gone and come back secretly by ourselves. If we can work for an hour, then we work for an hour, but we also worry about our security. If the situation isn't*

*good or the SPDC soldiers approach, we return to the relocation site. The SPDC has shot dead eight people [for violating movement restrictions]... Some were still young."*

- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Sept 2007)

These strategies have frequently proven successful in achieving a reduction in demands, if not full avoidance, and local villagers have become deft at finding ways to resist abuse and minimise compliance without incurring violent retribution by soldiers. Such reduction and avoidance has been particularly important in areas controlled or patrolled by both the SPDC and other allied military groups, particularly the DKBA. In some areas, villagers may also have to negotiate with KNLA soldiers in order to avoid providing soldiers, porters or taxes to the KNLA as well. In this way, villagers in militarised areas of Karen State have negotiated a fine balance between competing military pressures and their own households' livelihood needs.

### Resistance in non-SPDC-controlled areas

However, when the burden of demands becomes too great, villagers have chosen displacement to non-military-controlled areas over continued exploitation under SPDC control. Villagers regularly cite food insecurity, which has directly resulted from unremitting military demands and restrictions, as a major reason for this decision. By reducing the exploitable populace controlled by local military forces, such evasion also undermines the logistical capacities of local military units and the wider structures of militarisation. Displacement in this context should, therefore, not be understood as victims fleeing for their lives from attacks, but as an overtly political *resistance* strategy aimed at retaining control over land, livelihoods and personal dignity.

*"The SPDC Army orders us to carry loads. If we don't do this, they say we are rebels. So we have to constantly labour for the SPDC Army and we have no time to do our own work. So our families are faced with food problems as we have no food to eat... I had to carry loads for the SPDC, but the last time I didn't comply and I fled."*

- Naw S--- (female, 36), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2007)

Villagers have, moreover, frequently established hiding sites and hidden food stores in the forest prior to expected displacement. These food stores have proved vital in providing a temporary buffer against malnutrition, enabling villagers to remain in hiding in the period before they have established longer-term methods of acquiring food in the forest. Once in hiding, villagers have developed a wide variety of resistance strategies to meet the nutritional requirements needed in order to continue evading military control. These strategies include secretly travelling back to their former villages to collect food supplies left behind at villages during flight, often under the cover of nightfall; taking great risks to travel to towns or SPDC-controlled villages to purchase rice and other supplies or to find daily wage labour; and foraging for locally-available foods in the forest, such as roots, fungi or foliage.

*"Whenever the SPDC soldiers approached, we ran away from our village and we had to carry clothes, rice and some other things such as salt and chilli. When we ran to escape into the jungle, it sometimes took about one month. When we ran we carried as much rice as we could and when the rice was finished, we went and took it [more rice] from our secret stores in the jungle where we had hidden our things before the SPDC came. We had to go back during the night to retrieve the rice from our secret place. At that time I was only ten years old... I had to carry water, collect firewood and sometimes cook the rice. The SPDC could not ask us for forced labour, because whenever they came we ran away."*

- Saw D--- (male, 16), L--- village, Papun District (Feb 2007)

Villagers also cultivate covert agricultural fields and plantations, adapting to their environment by growing new types of crops – small-scale plantations that can be cultivated inside the forest are preferable as they are easier to conceal. Cardamom cultivation is a common means of livelihood for displaced villagers in Northern Karen State as it can be grown on small plots of land in mountainous areas and produces a small and durable crop and is thus also a convenient trade commodity. Food supplies are carefully shared amongst families to make sure no-one goes without and stretched out by watering down rice into a type of porridge or combining it with whatever locally-available foods that can be foraged. Communities also actively seek out indigenous organisations providing cross-border food or cash-based assistance

in order to extend the period of time they can remain in hiding in the forest. Secret communication with villagers living under SPDC control and the monitoring of troop-movements has furthermore allowed villagers to establish temporary 'jungle markets' in order to covertly trade with villagers from SPDC-controlled areas. These temporary markets provide a venue for villagers to sell their covertly-cultivated crops, such as cardamom, or other belongings enabling them to purchase rice and other foods to supplement their diets.

*"They [displaced villagers] couldn't get enough rice, so we had to go to other places to look for rice. We have to look for money in these difficult circumstances. We have to go back and forth secretly. We carry things [work as porters] for the residents of Gh--- village and they give us money and [with this money] we buy rice... We're hiding in the forest... We cultivate hill fields [hillside paddy fields] for our survival."*

- Saw K--- (male, 50), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)



Villagers in Lu Thaw Township, northern Papun District, collect rice from a Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) distribution centre at a regional KNU office. The systematic destruction of hillside rice fields, food stores and food storage containers has forced large numbers of villagers to rely increasingly on alternative sources of food such as these cross-border provisions. [Photo: KHRG]

## Implications and Recommendations

The food crisis in Karen State and much of rural Burma has further consequences and wider ramifications beyond food insecurity alone. To explore but a few of these implications, the following sections consider the impacts of the food crisis upon migration and refugee flows, health and education.

### Migration and refugees

*"The SPDC soldiers would like to make it more difficult for us to get food so that we'll be hungry. Because of this, more villagers are fleeing from the villages and some are going to the refugee camps in Thailand."*

- Saw R--- (male, 66), T--- village, Toungoo District (March 2006)

Despite the numerous strategies rural villagers employ to enable them to stay close to their homelands for as long as possible, those unable to bear the impacts of SPDC exploitation on their livelihoods or survive in hiding any longer continue to make the difficult decision to leave their homeland and travel to Thailand or other neighbouring countries where they may be able to access food rations in refugee camps.<sup>21</sup> Other Karen villagers enter migrant worker communities in Thailand or Malaysia in order to find more viable livelihood opportunities, seeking work in factories, domestic service, agriculture, retail or other fields. Although many find work in Thai border towns, others pay an agent to 'traffic' them deeper into Thailand, particularly to Bangkok, where they may then be forced to serve as bonded labourers until they have paid off the high costs of their transport and job placement, currently averaging 10,000 to 15,000 Thai Baht (US \$283-424 at the time of writing).

*"There are about 150 households doing daily wage labour. Some people don't have enough food to eat, so they have to take on daily wage labour for other people such as weeding other people's rubber plantations... There are more poor people than rich people in the village... In the past, the Burmese [SPDC soldiers] always arrived in the village, so our plantations were always burnt by them."*

<sup>21</sup> Although the refugee camps do indeed provide villagers with some relative level of food security, there are few options to grow food in the camps. Unable to provide for their families by themselves, villagers therefore often become dependent on the camp's provisions.



*It's for their survival [that villagers migrate to Thailand]. When they get money they can send it to their family. Both men and women have gone to Thailand to work for money."*

- U S--- (male, 50), M--- village, Doooplaya District (Jan 2008)

Migrant workers often send back remittances to family members who have remained in Burma and are continuing to struggle to maintain their livelihoods. However, although some of this money does indeed help support its intended recipients, providing crucial food and supplies, the SPDC confiscates much of the remittances through arbitrary taxes and other forms of extortion. Such extortion has, more recently, included fines for families whose children have left the country without completing a mandatory and expensive registration process (for those leaving to work abroad) that the SPDC has tried to implement in some areas.

*"Last rainy season, three villagers went and worked in Malaysia. Most villagers have gone to work in Bangkok, because when they stayed and worked in the village they never got enough food, so they went to find jobs in other countries. As for me, I'm now very disappointed. Even though my children have gone to work in Bangkok, I [still] can't repay my debt."*

- Naw M--- (female, 50), Gk--- village, Thaton District (Nov 2007)

## Health Implications

*"We don't have enough rice because we can't work sufficiently for our livelihood due to forced labour and demands for money. Some [villagers] are not in very good health and the villagers are in trouble in different ways."*

- Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Thaton District (May 2008)

The food crisis also has serious consequences for the state of villagers' health. As we have seen above, rural villagers are facing not only inadequate supplies of food, but also a severe lack of diversity in their diets, with many villagers having to survive for long periods of time on plain meals of just rice and salt, rice and chilli, rice porridge or sometimes even just roots and foliage foraged in the forest. Both these factors lead to a lack of vital nutrients which the human body requires for normal growth, health and

development.<sup>22</sup> This malnutrition undermines villagers' resistance to infectious diseases. Vitamin A deficiency leading to night blindness is particularly common, as is diarrhoea caused by protein deficiency or the consumption of contaminated food and water. A survey conducted by the Back Pack Health Worker Team in 2006 found that food destruction and looting was the abuse *"most closely linked to adverse health outcomes, particularly the ultimate one, mortality"*. In fact, the study found that families who had suffered destruction or looting of their food supplies within the last 12 months prior to the survey were 50% more likely to have lost family members.<sup>33</sup> Food insecurity also affects children in so far as it threatens pregnant and nursing mothers.



Forty-five-year-old Ma N--- (above) of Dweh Loh Township, Papun District, says that she and her husband have to spend so much time doing forced labour for the local SPDC and DKBA that they don't have any money to buy food or medicines for their twin babies. At two months old, both children were clearly malnourished when this photo was taken and Ma N--- said her breasts were not producing enough milk for them because of her own malnutrition. [Photo: KHRG]

<sup>22</sup> Science Clarified. *Malnutrition: Individuals at risk for malnutrition, Nutritional deficiency diseases*. Accessed at [www.scienceclarified.com/Io-Ma/Malnutrition.html](http://www.scienceclarified.com/Io-Ma/Malnutrition.html) on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Back Pack Health Worker Team. 2006. *Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, p.51. For more information on the links between military abuse and ill-health in Burma see also University of California, Berkeley and John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. 2007. *The Gathering Storm: Infectious Diseases and Human Rights in Burma*.

*“Among the families there are many problems; our children go and look for bamboo shoots and wild banana stems in the rain and are bitten by mosquitoes then when they come back they suffer from malaria, headaches and diarrhoea. Two of my children [that I teach] died, one from malaria and the other from diarrhoea. I don’t have enough food and other necessities.”*

- Naw P--- (female, 19), teacher, L--- village, Pa’an District (Aug 2007)

Secondly, poverty reduces the means through which villagers are able to finance trips to hospitals and afford medicines, medical supplies and treatment – villagers living hand-to-mouth have no savings or stockpiles to fall back on when illness or injury strikes. Meanwhile, movement restrictions prevent villagers from being able to access healthcare and medicines that treat health problems caused by malnutrition – a part of the deliberate attempt by the SPDC to starve villagers out of the hills and into SPDC-controlled areas.

*“They [the displaced villagers] don’t have good shelters and also don’t get enough food to eat. They are facing different kinds of diseases such as fever, headaches and diarrhoea. They have had to look after each other. Some of the villagers haven’t had enough food or good quality medicine, so they’ve died in the forest.”*

- Saw P--- (male, 42), T--- village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2008)

## Effects on education

The food crisis also negatively affects education in Karen State and other parts of rural Burma. As military abuse and exploitation has progressively undermined agriculture, trade and livelihoods, villagers have to spend what little income they can make on purchasing food for their families – making it impossible for many families to take on the additional burden of school fees, books and stationary. Furthermore, regular extortion and forced labour in SPDC-controlled areas mean that many families need to take their children out of school and enter them into the workforce in order to contribute to their families’ livelihoods or to carry out forced labour duties while their parents continue to work in the fields. Older children are also required to look after younger children and conduct household chores rather than attend school, as the burden of SPDC demands and

extortion increasingly forces women to invest more time and energy in subsistence work alongside their husbands, or other forms of labour, in order to secure enough food for their families.<sup>24</sup>

*“We have 50 school-aged children. At first, they all went to school but when the SPDC restricted [the transport of] food, we didn’t have food to eat and then the school also stopped and some students when down to the town to live there. Now in Gk--- we don’t have a school... The school [had always] functioned with difficulties, but in August 2007 the SPDC restricted [the transport of] food and the school stopped functioning [completely].”*

- Saw H--- (male, 50), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

Although displaced communities frequently prioritise education as a means of maintaining a sense of community and quickly set up schools under the trees at displaced hiding sites, children’s education is also undermined in these areas by the need for children to contribute to their families’ livelihoods. For example, children may be needed to forage for locally-available foods or collect water and firewood. Many are also needed to return to their former villages or hidden rice storage barns to collect food supplies or to walk to (often far-away) towns or villages to purchase rice and other foods and carry it back to the hiding site. Children are also frequently left to mill rice, prepare and cook food, or look after younger children while their parents are cultivating covert agricultural fields or conducting any of the other above livelihood activities and food security strategies.

*“If the Burmese [SPDC soldiers] come, we flee and we can’t go to school. We have to study under the trees and bamboo. We continue our schooling like this. Another problem is that we have to look for rice and have to go to far away and collect the rice and bring it back. On such days we can’t attend school.”*

- Naw H--- (female, 13), Ht--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Feb 2008)

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<sup>24</sup> For further information on the changing roles of women in Karen State in response to SPDC abuses, see *Dignity in the Shadow of Oppression: The abuse and agency of Karen women under militarisation*, KHRG, November 2006.





The nine-year-old boy shown here is minding cattle as a form of wage labour in order to support his family. He told KHRG that he wanted to go to school but his parents could not afford to send him. [Photo: KHRG]

*“There are some school-aged children in T--- village but they haven’t been able to go to school because their parents can’t cover their school fees, because the parents don’t have enough food or rice even though they work very hard. Some reasons are because the SPDC came and they fled away and couldn’t go back to do work full time. Even their paddy fields aren’t so good and also some fields were destroyed by wild animals during the time when they fled away. Then they became weak and couldn’t support their children to go to school.”*

- Saw E--- (male, 20), T--- village, Papun District (March 2007)

Families are also expected to provide rice and salaries for teachers, even in SPDC-controlled areas where the SPDC frequently only provides one funded teacher and/or provides insufficient salaries for the teachers to survive, leaving the villagers to shoulder the majority of the burden of supporting the teachers. With communities facing food shortages and poverty themselves, this is a burden that becomes increasingly impossible to bear and schools are forced to close or education can only be provided by voluntary teachers from amongst the community.

The impacts of the food crisis on education also cause further migration as families frequently send their children to boarding houses in refugee camps, internally displaced hiding sites and towns where they will have a better chance of gaining an education. As many families send their children alone while they themselves remain in Burma in order to retain control over their land, this also leads to family separation.

*“Mostly the kids in my village miss out on their student life. They don’t have a chance to learn, they can’t read and write. In the jungle they only have a chance to feed the mosquitoes... I asked my parents to continue my studies, but they couldn’t afford the school fees because they had to buy food for the family, so they decided to send me to the refugee camp... When I came back [to my village] I was aged 13 and I worked on the farm with my parents. The SPDC burnt our entire paddy store and we didn’t have any rice left, so I needed to work on the farm and go to buy rice. If you help your parents, they have more energy. But if you go to school, they lose one [worker] and they have to work more. I helped my family for over a year, then asked to return to [the refugee] camp.”*

- Saw K--- (male, 23), T--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Feb 2007)



## Recommendations

Recognising the abusive underpinnings of the current food crisis in rural Burma, this section provides specific recommendations to the international community on strategies for engagement. These recommendations aim not only to address the current food crisis, but also the abuses which underlie it. Specifically, international actors (including UN agencies, government bodies, international NGOs and the media) seeking to address the food crisis should:

- Listen to the voices of villagers and incorporate their concerns and suggestions into ongoing humanitarian programming and policy making in Burma. These individuals are the primary experts on the local humanitarian situation and their input is crucial to effective assistance.
- Scale up humanitarian aid to reach those currently facing a food crisis. In those areas where Rangoon-based agencies are restricted from delivering and monitoring aid, such as in much of Eastern Burma, this means an increase in livelihood support through local organisations that work outside of SPDC structures, often cross-border from neighbouring countries.
- Support independent civil society groups which operate in areas under the control of the SPDC and ethnic ceasefire groups, in order to increase

their capacity to deliver aid, address food security issues and support rural villagers in their efforts to resist abuse.

- Acknowledge the potential for harmful consequences due to SPDC cooption of aid delivery in Burma and refrain from activities that strengthen military control over civilians enabling the regime to commit further abuse and thereby further deepen the food crisis. (Such activities include aid to military-controlled relocation sites and SPDC-implemented humanitarian and development projects.) To this end, UN agencies, government bodies and international NGOs operating in Burma should conduct human rights impact assessments as an integral part of all humanitarian and development programmes.
- Support local efforts to address food insecurity and to resist the abuses which cause it. Such local resistance helps to redress the balance of power in favour of civilians and strengthen their position to manage their humanitarian concerns. External support for local resistance strategies need not wait for regime change or other national-level political reform.
- Report the current food crisis in rural Burma in international and local media and incorporate the voices of local villagers, including their stories of resistance and efforts to address food security concerns.



The displaced children shown here at a hiding site in Nyaunglebin District are removing paddy seeds from amongst the already husked rice while their parents are out working on their hillside farm field. [Photo: KHRG]



The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) was founded in 1992 and documents the situation of villagers and townspeople in rural Burma through their direct testimonies, supported by photographic and other evidence. KHRG operates independently and is not affiliated with any political or other organisation. All KHRG reports are available online at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org). KHRG can be contacted by email at [khrg@khrg.org](mailto:khrg@khrg.org).



Karen Human Rights Group  
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma