

Report from the fieldJanuary 13th, 2009 / KHRG #2009-F1**Rural development and displacement: SPDC abuses in
Toungoo District**

The SPDC has continued to militarise larger and larger swaths of Toungoo District under the false banner of 'development', subjecting local villagers to forced labour and extortion and forcing others to flee into hiding. Life is hard for villagers both under and outside of SPDC control: villagers living within SPDC-controlled areas are often forced to work for the SPDC rather than focus on their own livelihoods while villagers in hiding continue to struggle with a shortage of food. Ultimately, many residents of Toungoo face a mounting food crisis that is a direct result of SPDC policy. This report discusses incidents that occurred between May and September 2008.

Since early 2008, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has made a concerted effort to expand its control over Kler La and other areas of Toungoo District, Karen State. The SPDC's militarisation campaign has involved myriad abuses, including the conscription of local villagers into forced labour and restricting villagers' movements around the region. Life is equally hard for villagers who choose to live in hiding and outside of SPDC control. Life in hiding is a constant struggle as villagers try to maintain their livelihoods and grow enough food to eat while evading Burma Army forces.



Above, a photograph taken on May 25th 2008 of internally displaced villagers from Sih Daw Koh. These villagers have lived in hiding from the SPDC since late 2007.
[Photo: KHRG]

Forced labour

According to KHRG field researchers, forced labour and extortion are the primary human rights abuses that occur in areas of Toungoo under SPDC control. Though the SPDC often claims that their demands on villagers are used to promote 'development' in the region, such abuses are actually being employed to further militarise Karen State. Such militarisation is evidenced by the fact that villagers in Toungoo District are often forced to help construct army camps, roads, fences, and trenches and also by the conscription of villagers into serving as Army porters.

For example, SPDC Military Operation Command (MOC) #10 – which is commanded by Ko Ko Lat – has subjected residents of Kler La to extortion and forced labour on a regular basis. On July 22nd 2008, Ko Ko Lat gathered residents from twelve villages in the Kler La area to discuss an upcoming SPDC development project. These twelve villages were

#	Village name
1	Kler La
2	Ler Gkoh
3	Gkaw So Koh
4	Wa Tho Koh
5	Maw Pah Der
6	Koo Bplaw Der
7	Bpeh Gkaw Der
8	Maw Gkoh Der
9	Gha Muh Der
10	Der Doh
11	Gkaw Thay Der
12	Gklay So Kee

During the meeting, Ko Ko Lat told the villagers that they would have to give 8 million kyat [US \$7,111.11] to the SPDC in order to support the construction of a road that runs through Kler La. Villagers who owned cars were required to give 100,000 kyat [US \$88.88] and villagers who owned motorbikes had to give 20,000 kyat [US \$17.77]. Villagers who wished to obtain a year-long motorbike license were required to give 200,000 kyat [US \$177.77]. On August 7th 2008, Ko Ko Lat returned to the area and required all villagers who owned a car to use their vehicles to transport pebbles from Toungoo to the nearby road construction site. 30 more local villagers were required to place pebbles on the road between Maw Pah Der and Gkaw So Koh twice a week. Rather than allowing villagers to use their cars to take betel nut leaves, durian fruits, mangosteen fruits, as well as vegetables to sell in the market at Toungoo, villagers who owned vehicles were instead required to fill their cars with pebbles for the SPDC's new road. The fruits and vegetables that were grown and intended to be sold in the market were left to rot and Kler La villagers told KHRG researchers that they lost an estimated 1 million kyat [US \$888.88] in potential revenue.

Villagers are also often forced to act as porters for the SPDC. On September 2nd 2008, SPDC soldiers based out of the Play Hsa Loh area forced civilians from several villages (shown in the table below) to porter materials from the SPDC's Play Hsa Loh camp to its Htee Bplah Day camp.

#	Village name	Women	Men	Total
1	Play Hsa Loh	2	18	20
2	Yer Loh	5	10	15
3	Lay Oh Loh	0	10	10
4	Bplaw Baw Der	4	8	12
	Total	9	46	57

"We had to dig a road and do other work. We didn't receive any payment for that labour. If we couldn't go or if we became sick and couldn't go, we had to pay other people to go instead of us. We have to pay these other [replacement workers] 5,000 kyat [US \$4.44] a day."

- Saw L--- (male, 23), Hs--- village, Tantabin Township (April 2008)



The above photographs, taken on April 6th 2008, show the construction of an SPDC-sponsored school in Toungoo District. Though the SPDC paid wages to several builders to construct the school, those builders did not do the work themselves but instead demanded *loh ah pay* [forced labour] from villagers. The villagers in the left photograph were conscripted into the labour by the SPDC-paid builders. [Photos: KHRG]

Movement restrictions

"We didn't have a chance to do our work, because they [the SPDC] didn't allow us to go outside the village. So we just stay in our village. The military is based in Kler La, Wah Tho Ko and Gkaw Tha Koh – not in my village. We couldn't leave the village for almost 3 weeks... We didn't know what happened to our cardamom fields."

- Saw M--- (male, 58), L--- Village, Tantabin Township (April 2008)



The SPDC demanded residents of Taw Gkoo to build the above fences around their village so that the SPDC could more easily monitor the villagers' movements. These photographs were taken on April 9th 2008. [Photos: KHRG]

Restricting the movements of villagers is another common abuse perpetrated by the SPDC in Toungoo District. Such restrictions not only violate these villagers' right to free movement, but also disrupt important livelihood activities in the region. If villagers decide to secretly leave their villages to cultivate their crops, they risk being arrested or even shot on sight by SPDC forces. In one incident in May 2008, MOC #10's Ko Ko Lat, operating out of Kler La, demanded local villagers begin constructing fences around villages in the area so that the SPDC could better monitor villagers' activities. Villagers who left their homes to oversee their crops were no longer allowed to spend time in their fields after nightfall, but instead had to constantly walk back and forth between their fields and homes, wasting valuable farming time. In order to ensure enforcement, the SPDC prohibited farmers and field workers from carrying uncooked rice (which they could use to cook while staying overnight in their fields).

Instead, villagers could only carry around bags of cooked rice (which would spoil if not consumed by the end of the day). Villagers risked being arrested and imprisoned for four years if they were caught with uncooked rice.

SPDC forces have further restricted movement by burning down any huts that are close to these crops. Beginning on September 12th 2008, MOC# 10 commander Ko Ko Lat ordered Tactical Operation Command (TOC) #3 commander Yeh Naing to burn down all the huts that were found too close to the farm fields. Villagers whose huts were destroyed are

	Villager's name	Approximate value of the hut
1	Saw Dt---	500,000 kyat (US \$393.70)
2	Saw K---	500,000 kyat (US \$393.70)
3	Saw M---	300,000 kyat (US \$236.22)
4	Saw D---	300,000 kyat (US \$236.22)

Soldiers burnt down these huts just as villagers were beginning to harvest their cardamom crops. As a consequence, the villagers found it difficult to properly harvest their crops and transport them to the market.

"Now, because we're afraid of the SPDC, we don't have a chance to travel. We stay in our homes more than we go outside"

- Saw Ah--- (male, 52), Gk--- village, Tantabin Township (April 2008)

Condition of displaced villagers

There is also an ongoing food crisis for internally displaced villagers who have chosen to live in hiding from the SPDC. In May 2008, a group of displaced villagers took up residence in the forest near M--- in Tantabin Township. The villagers cultivated hillside paddy fields at their new hiding site, but the extreme weather in the area substantially weakened the crops. In June, the villagers began to replant their paddies again, but grasshoppers and crickets then destroyed the new paddy plants. Such planting difficulties will mean long-term hardship for these displaced villagers, as their already low food supply will be further diminished. Moreover, from May to late June 2008, the active patrolling of SPDC MOC #10 and #21 exacerbated displaced villagers' living circumstances as villagers had to constantly evade the patrolling troops.



Shown above on June 19th 2008 is the abandoned hill field of a Toungoo District villager who decided to flee from the SPDC. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo, taken on June 21st 2008 in Toungoo District, shows displaced villagers who were forced to cross this river in order to evade a nearby SPDC patrol. [Photo: KHRG]

“Every time I went to my hill field to cut the grass, I had to be afraid of the enemies [SPDC soldiers]. I had to climb up a tree [to see if there were any soldiers approaching]. Twice a month, they [Burmese soldiers] arrived in my village. When they arrived in my village, if they saw pots, plates, or spoons, they took them with them. And also, if they saw our money, they took it.”

- Saw T--- (male, 35), M--- village, Tantabin Township (April 2008)

Conclusion

The SPDC continues to use its ‘development’ projects to justify systematic abuses against the residents of Toungoo District, including forced labour, extortion and movement restrictions. These abuses place unacceptable physical, financial and emotional strains on villagers and prevent them from properly cultivating and selling their crops – the main means of survival for villagers living under SPDC control. The SPDC’s military expansion in Toungoo is also exacerbating an already dire situation for villagers who choose to live in hiding, forcing internally displaced villagers to constantly move their hiding sites and preventing these villagers from growing sufficient consumable and saleable food. Overall, the expansion of the SPDC in Toungoo has worsened the region’s food crisis and villagers living both within and outside of SPDC control are constantly struggling to grow and buy enough food to survive. Border aid groups and the international community must take more comprehensive measures to address the food crisis in Karen State by better supporting cross-border relief efforts that can directly supply villagers with the provisions they need to survive. Cross-border relief is especially crucial given the fact that Rangoon-based agencies are currently prohibited from accessing Toungoo District. Just as the food crisis is a result of years of SPDC abuse and neglect, so too will there be long-term consequences of the crisis, including worsened malnutrition among Karen State villagers, if the international community fails to act.

“Now, they don’t allow us to go outside the village. If they find us outside the village, they’ll shoot us. We need peace now, but we can’t get it.”

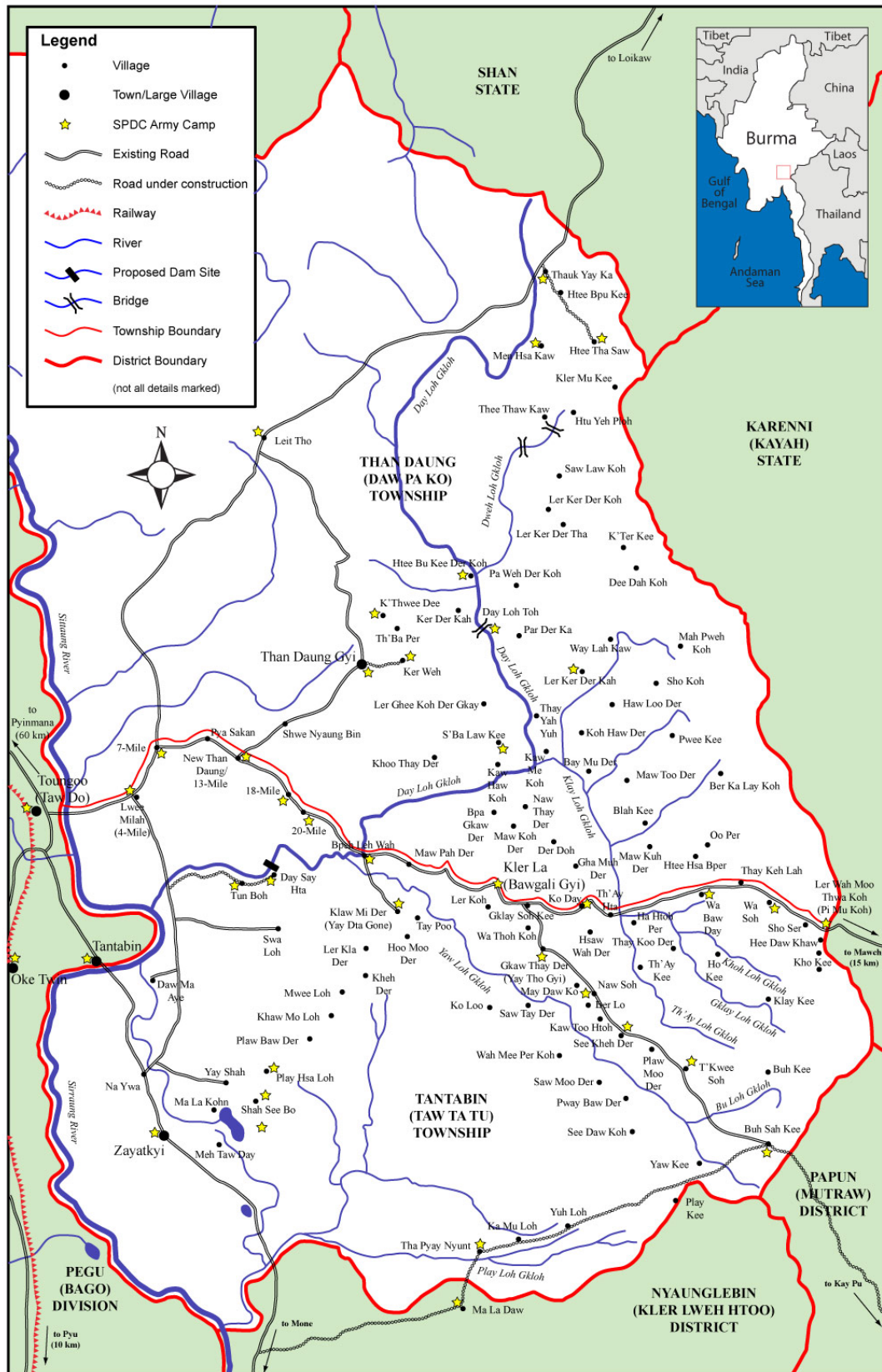
- Saw M--- (male, 58), L--- Village, Tantabin Township (April 2008)

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

- *Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Toungoo District* (August 2008)
- *Attacks, forced labour and restrictions in Toungoo District* (July 2008)
- *SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District* (March 2008)
- *Militarisation, violence and exploitation in Toungoo District* (February 2008)
- *SPDC troops burn villages and step up operations against civilians in southern Toungoo District* (December 2007)
- *Villagers risk arrest and execution to harvest their crops* (December 2007)
- *Landmines, Killings and Food Destruction: Civilian life in Toungoo District* (August 2007)
- *Provoking Displacement in Toungoo: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks* (May 2007)
- *Bullets and Bulldozers: The SPDC offensive continues in Toungoo District* (February 2007)
- *One Year On: Continuing Abuses in Toungoo District* (November 2006)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrq.org>.

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



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Karen Districts



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