



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Report from the Field

September 8, 2009 / KHRG #2009-F14

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### **Abuse in Pa'an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang**

*This report presents information on abuses in eastern Pa'an District, where joint SPDC/DKBA forces continue to subject villagers to exploitative abuse and attempt to consolidate control of territory around recently taken KNLA positions near the Ler Per Her IDP camp. Abuses documented in this report include forced labour, conscription of porters and human minesweepers as well as the summary execution of a village headman. The report also provides an update on the situation for newly arrived refugees in Thailand's Tha Song Yang District, where at least 4,862 people from the Ler Per Her area have sought refuge; some have been there since June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009, others arrived later. This report presents new information for the period of June to August 2009.*

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Almost 5,000 people have fled conflict and exploitative abuse in Pa'an District since a joint force of Burma Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) troops began attacks on Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) positions near the Ler Per Her Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camp in eastern Dta Greh Township. Attacks began on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009. By June 7<sup>th</sup>, more than 3,000 villagers from the area - including the entire population of the Ler Per Her IDP camp - had fled to Thailand. On June 13<sup>th</sup>, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and DKBA soldiers took camps headquartering KNLA 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade Battalions #101, 21 and 22.

The KNLA camps were located just a short walk from the Ler Per Her IDP camp – close enough for at least twelve shells to fall inside or just short of civilian areas – and many villagers fled to avoid open fighting. The majority of villagers who spoke with KHRG, however, highlighted ongoing exploitative abuse by the SPDC and DKBA as their reason for leaving. Villagers reported, as causes of flight and obstacles to return, fear of landmines placed by the DKBA, forced military recruitment and conscription as forced labourers building military camps, portering military supplies and walking ahead of military patrols as “human minesweepers.”



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows a child at the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site for refugees from the Ler Per Her IDP camp area in Pa'an District. Of the 4,861 people that have sought refuge since June, at least 2,145 are under 12 years old. [Photo: KHRG]

These exploitative abuses continue. Though the intensity of fighting has lessened since mid June, the SPDC and DKBA continue to occupy and patrol the newly acquired parts of Dta Greh Township. Three months after the first attacks, KHRG researchers report that 4,862 refugees remain in new arrival sites at Noh Boe, Oo Thu Hta and Mae Salit villages in Thailand's Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province. Of this total, 2,145 refugees are children under 12 years old. It is also important to note that KHRG researchers have encountered villagers who fled abuse in the Ler Per Her area, but have sought work inside Thailand rather than refuge in one of the new arrival sites. Equally affected by the Ler Per Her crisis, these refugees are not, however, counted in the totals shown below.<sup>1</sup>

#	New arrival site	# of households	# of new arrivals			# of children under age 12		
			female	male	total	female	male	total
1	Noh Boe	325	1,012	990	2,002	482	491	973
2	Oo Thu Hta	304	1,002	986	1,988	426	387	813
3	Mae Salit	157	452	420	872	181	178	369
<b>Totals</b>		<b>786</b>	<b>2,466</b>	<b>2,396</b>	<b>4,862</b>	<b>10,89</b>	<b>1,056</b>	<b>2,145</b>

## Continued SPDC and DKBA operations and abuse in Pa'an District

*"The reason for coming here [a new arrival site in Tha Song Yang District] is that the SPDC tried to catch us and make us porters and the DKBA tried to recruit us as their soldiers. Both DKBA and SPDC came to our village. I dare not go back. Most villagers in the village are afraid of serving as porters for the SPDC. In the past, I had to serve as an SPDC porter. I had to carry rations and ammunition."*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 30), W--- village, Dta Greh Township (July 2009, new arrival site, Thailand)

*"Because the SPDC has been cruel to us, when the DKBA joined with the SPDC and came to my village, I fled to here [a new arrival site in Tha Song Yang District]."*

- Saw D--- (male, 38), W--- village, Dta Greh Township (July 2009, new arrival site, Thailand)

Fighting in the area around the Ler Per Her IDP camp decreased following the withdrawal of KNLA 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade Battalions from camps in the area in mid June. SPDC and DKBA forces now occupy the former KNLA positions and continue to patrol the area. According to KHRG researchers, Burma army soldiers are only active in SPDC-controlled villages and near army camps. On August 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, SPDC Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) #202 and 205 were replaced by LIBs #28 and 203. LIB #28, with 160 soldiers lead by Zaw Win, is currently operating in the area along the Moei River from Meh Lah Ah village, north through Kyaw Gkay Htar to the Ler Per Her IDP site. LIB #203, numbering 180-200 soldiers, is operating well north of the Ler Per

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the relationship between what is often called "economic" migration and factors normally understood as pushing villagers to become refugees, see *Abuse, Poverty and Migration: Investigating migrants' motivations to leave home in Burma*, KHRG, June 2009. In July, KHRG interviewed two teenage boys who deserted from the DKBA after being forcibly recruited. Rather than return to their villages or seek support in a refugee camp, the boys are seeking employment in Thailand. See, *Forced recruitment of child soldiers: An interview with two DKBA deserters*, KHRG, August 2009.

Her area on the Burma side of the Moei River adjacent to Mae Salit, up through Thay Bay Htar, Lay Wah, Mu Ay Bpoo and Meh T'waw to Gklaw T'Tee. DKBA soldiers are also occupying areas recently taken from the KNLA, as well as conducting regular patrols in "front line" contested areas. On August 21<sup>st</sup> 2009, DKBA soldiers from Brigade #999 and 555 divided control of the newly taken areas along the Moei River. Sandwiched between LIBs #203 and 28 are Battalions #4, 5 and 7 from DKBA Brigade #999, which are currently operating in the immediate vicinity of the recently vacated KNLA camps. This area includes villages north of the Ler Per Her IDP site until Mu Aay Bpoo, Battalions #1 and 2 from Brigade #555, meanwhile, are operating in relatively the same area as LIB #203.



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows refugees at the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site. The woman at right is filling water buckets, which she must carry across the site to her family's sleeping area. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows men from the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site as they carry roof thatching from the Thai Karen village of Htee Nu Hta. August saw a momentary pause in the normally heavy monsoon rains, but the thatching is still vital for their local clinic. [Photo: KHRG]

Although SPDC and DKBA forces now control the former KNLA positions around Ler Per Her, KNLA soldiers continue to make brief hit-and-run attacks and place landmines near DKBA/SPDC camps. According to KHRG researchers, DKBA soldiers on patrol are bearing the brunt of the attacks. SPDC and DKBA forces both also continue to plant landmines near their camps as well as in abandoned villages. KHRG researchers have been closely monitoring new arrivals to the sites in Tha Song Yang, and report that villagers say they are fleeing because of ongoing SPDC and DKBA demands for forced labour and military recruitment. KHRG researchers operating in Pa'an District, meanwhile, report that villagers remaining in their villages regularly face exploitative abuse by the SPDC and DKBA.

DKBA and SPDC soldiers have been demanding that villagers work as porters, carrying supplies including rations and ammunition, as well as to walk in front of military columns where they serve as human minesweepers. In War Mee Gklah village, Dta Greh Township, for instance, nearly 100 villagers remained through the end of June as they attempted to negotiate demands placed upon them by the SPDC and DKBA. As June drew to a close, however, remaining villagers decided that they could no longer work their farms and meet basic livelihood requirements while at the same time meeting SPDC and DKBA forced labour demands. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, villagers began leaving. By June 26<sup>th</sup>, the village was empty. A few days before villagers began to flee, SPDC soldiers based in Gka Teh army camp ordered a villager to provide uncompensated forced labour. Told that he would only have to work for three days and thinking he would be able to return in time to flee with the rest of his village, the villager obeyed the SPDC order. He was forced to stay and work for a week. By the time he returned home, his

village had been abandoned. Unsure of what to do or where to go, he let himself be recruited by the DKBA. A week later, he requested, and was granted permission, to visit his village, where he subsequently stepped on a landmine laid by the DKBA during his absence. DKBA soldiers removed him soon after and KHRG has been unable to confirm the extent of his wounds.

Villagers continue to be forcibly recruited by the DKBA, which has been undertaking a consistent push for new recruits since August 2008. This push was renewed in mid May 2009 following a decision to transform the DKBA into a “Border Guard Force” under at least the partial control of the SPDC army.<sup>2</sup> According to leaked minutes of a May 7<sup>th</sup> meeting between DKBA officers, this transformation will entail expanding the DKBA to 9,000 troops. According to the minutes, this will require conscription of at least 3,000 additional soldiers.<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of the third week in May, DKBA commanders Pah Nwee and Maung Chit Thoo of Brigade #999 had issued orders for villages across Lu Pleh, Dta Gre and T’Nay Hsah townships, Pa’an District, to provide them with recruits. Two days later, on May 18<sup>th</sup>, Brigade #333 commander Maung Gyi explained to 180 village heads ordered to attend a meeting at the Brigade’s headquarters in Oh Daw that they would each have to provide conscripts as well.<sup>4</sup> Villagers have also reported to KHRG that they have been told the new recruits would be used for attacks on KNLA 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Brigades, in Dooplaya and Pa’an Districts. “*Their [the DKBA’s] aim is [to send the] new soldiers to Dooplaya District,*” one villager told KHRG. “*I heard [this] from a village head. The DKBA has signed an agreement with the SPDC that this year [2008] they will attack Dooplaya District until they win.*”<sup>5</sup> The two teenage boys who deserted from the DKBA after being forcibly recruited in July 2009, meanwhile, told KHRG that they were to be sent to join attacks on KNLA 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Pa’an.

The recruitment drive has met with resistance from some villagers, who have said they do not wish to join the DKBA for reasons including opposition to “Karen fighting Karen” and attacking the KNLA as well as mistrust and frustrations born of previous forced recruitment and low or unpaid salaries. “*I can’t find any villagers to join with the DKBA because Karen will have to fight with other Karen,*” one of the village heads told DKBA commander Maung Gyi during the meeting in Oh Daw. “*[But] If you fight with the SPDC, even if you demand one villager, we’ll give you five.*” Speaking with apparent freedom and clear bravery, another village head directly challenged the



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows a woman as she carries a fishing pole to a river near her new arrival site. Though the refugees are receiving food support, some families attempt to augment their rations. [Photo: KHRG]

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<sup>2</sup> For more on forced recruitment into the DKBA as well as the group’s transition into a Border Guard Force, see *Forced recruitment of child soldiers: An interview with two DKBA deserters*, KHRG, August 2009. See also, *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa’an District*, KHRG, May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Minutes to this meeting, dated May 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, are on file with KHRG.

<sup>4</sup> See, *Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance*, KHRG, July 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See, *Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa’an District*, KHRG, September 2008.

DKBA commander: "[Arrest is] the only way you can get villagers to join your army. But if people who've been caught by you desert with their guns and fight back against you or shoot you dead, don't come and hassle our village... If you want to kill us, you can kill the whole village. We'll die with pleasure. Then the history of the DKBA will remain good [this was said with sarcasm]. I'm telling you this openly in the meeting now and many people attending the meeting here have heard it. You've given us permission to speak out, so I've said what I think."<sup>6</sup>

Villagers have also fled or gone into hiding to avoid the recruitment. By May 25<sup>th</sup>, 119 people had fled to Ler Per Her IDP camp, where they found only brief respite before again having to flee.<sup>7</sup> At the end of July 2009, meanwhile, a KHRG researcher spoke with a DKBA deserter who said that villagers in T'Nay Hsah Township who had already been conscripted by the DKBA and served their terms had been ordered to return. Some men had already served stints of one and half, three or even seven years, he told KHRG, and they did not want to serve again. According to a village headman from T--- village, T'Nay Hsah Township, men from his village who have already served for the DKBA are now sleeping in the forest at night to avoid being forcibly recruited again.

In T'Nay Hsah Township, meanwhile, well south of the recently occupied areas around Ler Per Her and in the heart of DKBA controlled territory, soldiers from DKBA Brigade #999 'Loyalty Battalion' #1 executed a village headman on August 27<sup>th</sup> 2009. On August 26<sup>th</sup>, village headman Oo Soe Myint from Wah Gka village left his village and crossed the nearby Moei River to borrow money so that he could buy seeds and herbicide for his bean plantation. The next day, DKBA officer Shwe Ah See and troops from Loyalty Battalion #1 entered Wah Ka village and accused Oo Soe Myint of having contact with the KNU/KNLA. After beating Oo Soe Myint, the soldiers took him through Htee Hsa Ra village and eventually to Shwe Gko Gkoh, where Brigade #999 Special Operations Commander and 'Loyalty Battalion' commanding officer Maung Chit Thoo is based. There, Oo Soe Myint received no medical treatment and was eventually executed.

*"I think the DKBA doesn't have rules for their soldiers. They think the villagers are only animals. They kill people like killing animals. They killed this man for no reason and without asking any questions."*

- Saw G--- (male, 41), M--- village, Dta Greh Township (August 2009)

DKBA officer Shwe Ah See subsequently returned to Wah Ka village, where he threatened Oo Soe Myint's wife and children, telling them that they would be killed if they attempted to cross into Thailand. The family has subsequently been unable to repay the loan taken Oo Soe Myint took out so he could purchase farming supplies.

Local sources say that the DKBA's accusations were unfounded, especially given the extent to which the DKBA has controlled the area since January 2007. Oo Soe Myint was an SPDC appointed village headman, reports a KHRG researcher from the area, and over his three year term had always been careful to comply with SPDC orders:

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<sup>6</sup> For more on responses by village heads during the meeting in Oh Daw, see *Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance*, KHRG, July 2009.

<sup>7</sup> See, *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts*, KHRG, May 2009.



*"This village head didn't have any connection with the KNU/KNLA, he didn't even know any KNU/KNLA soldiers. The SPDC and DKBA appointed him to be the village head and represent them. It wasn't the villagers who appointed him to be the village head. He was a village head for the SPDC and DKBA for three years already and during his time as village head, he was a village head who did his work well, because he followed what was ordered by both the SPDC and DKBA. Moreover, when the DKBA started recruitment, he complied and arranged [recruits] as the ordered. During his term as village head, he had to work for his family's survival, because he didn't received support from the SPDC or DKBA. Every year, he planted beans on his plantation. When it was time to harvest the beans, he got some profit and used it for his family. However, before he planted any beans, he had to borrow bean seeds from his boss and at the end of year, when he sold the beans, he would give back the money that he had borrowed."*

A villager from the region who spoke with KHRG, meanwhile, said that that Oo Soe Myint was killed because DKBA officer Shwe Ah See owed him money:

*"After the village head was harmed, the soldiers took him with them to Htee Hsa Ra village and later to [Shwe] Gko Gkoh. The soldiers didn't want this village head to stay alive, because the soldiers didn't want to cure him and spend money on the village head, so later he was killed. Regarding his death, the village head was probably killed because the DKBA official Shwe Ah See had borrowed money from the village head. Last time, when the village head asked for the money back from this official, it seemed like the official wasn't happy about it. Also, he [Shwe Ah See] didn't want to give the money back to the village head. Therefore, the DKBA official created a case so that no one could object to the killing of this village head."*

## **Fears of repatriation and security concerns for new arrivals**

*"No, I dare not go [back to Karen State] because the villagers in the village are afraid of serving as porters. In the past, I used to serve as an SPDC porter. I had to carry rations and ammunition... if there were no DKBA and SPDC abuses, I'd go back to my home. In reality I don't want to stay in this country [Thailand] because I can't cultivate hill fields. Now my farm remains in my village. My farm can provide 100 baskets [of paddy] per year."*

- Saw G--- (male, 30), W---village, Dta Greh Township (July 2009, new arrival site, Thailand)

*"I won't go if they [Thai army] force us to go back to our village. I think if they order us to go back, for me I'll find a safe place near to the place [in Thailand] that we're living now."*

- Saw D---(male, 38), W--- village, Dta Greh Township (July 2009, new arrival site, Thailand)

The majority of the refugees at the three new arrival sites in Tha Song Yang District have been there for about three months. For the last two months, some residents have worried about rumours that the Thai authorities would forcibly repatriate villagers or move them to Mae La, the largest and most established camp in the region. Refugees who spoke with KHRG said that they would like to return home, but only if they could be sure that they would not have to worry about issues like forced recruitment, portering and unmarked landmines. Rumours concerning DKBA treatment of returning refugees also worry some villagers. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, for instance, a DKBA officer called a village secretary who had fled to Thailand and encouraged him and other

villagers to return home, promising that he could protect villagers from SPDC abuse.<sup>8</sup> In July, however, some villagers said that friends who remained inside Pa'an District had called to warn them that they should not return, because Company Commander Bper Gkay of DKBA Battalion #7 of Brigade #999 had ordered his soldiers to arrest any returning villagers and assume they were in cooperation with the KNLA.



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows temporary shelters at the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site, currently home to 1,988 people. The roofing tarps are stamped with the logo of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows men pulling a transport raft across the Moei River, which forms the Thai-Burma border near their new arrival site in Tha Song Yang District. When the water level drops following the rainy season, their site will become more vulnerable to DKBA attack. [Photo: KHRG]

In mid July, Thai authorities decided that refugees would not be forced to return to Burma or move to Mae La. Instead, they would be allowed to stay in temporary sites until the end of the rainy season. On August 26<sup>th</sup>, however, the Karen language news agency *Kwekalu* reported that 26 households had been forced to leave Noe Boe. The families were not new arrivals from the Ler Per Her area. Rather, they were families that over the last two years had fled to T'Law Aw Gklah and Kler Koh villages in Thailand, located alongside the border, though they still worked on fields inside Burma. Afraid of the fighting, landmines and conscription, in June the families were cut off from their farms and had run out of food, so they eventually moved to Noe Boe. KHRG researchers have not yet been able to confirm whether the 26 families have returned to their villages on the Thai side of border. Four days after they were forced to leave Noe Boe, however, at 10:00 pm on August 30<sup>th</sup>, soldiers from DKBA Brigade #999 crossed the Moei River and entered into Kler Koh village. When the remaining residents received advanced warning of the approach by DKBA soldiers, they fled. Though the DKBA soldiers fired on the villagers with automatic weapons as they left, no one was injured. The soldiers then stole all the chickens from the village as well 9,000 baht (approx. US \$264) from one of the homes. The villagers now say they are afraid to return to their villages closer to the Thai border, but cannot stay in Noe Boe.

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<sup>8</sup> See, *Over 700 villagers flee to Thailand amidst fears of SPDC/DKBA attacks on a KNLA camp and an IDP camp in Pa'an District*, KHRG, June 2009.



This photo, taken on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009, shows a family from Pa'an that fled to a village just across the border in Thailand. Though they have continued to work on a farm located inside Karen State, they have been unable to access it since June 2009 due to fears of abuse by SPDC and DKBA soldiers now active in the area. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo, taken on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows a young woman with her son as she leaves one of the new arrival sites to retrieve rice left behind at her village near the Thai-Burma border. Though her village is located in Thailand, she fled to avoid DKBA soldiers who had crossed into the country from Karen State. [Photo: KHRG]

Though refugees at the temporary new arrival sites in Thailand do not wish to be moved to Mae La because they hope to return home, they say they are worried about their security and potential DKBA attacks at their current locations. The sites are only a two hour walk from the border, and will be even more easily accessible as the water level in the Moei River drops after the rainy season. Such an incursion would not be unusual; since January 2009, KHRG has received six reports of the DKBA or mortars fired by the DKBA or SPDC crossing into Thailand. These include incidents in which small arms fire was exchanged with soldiers of both the KNLA and Thai army.<sup>9</sup> Most recently, at 8:00 pm on August 30<sup>th</sup>, soldiers from Battalion #4 of DKBA Brigade #999 fired one 60 mm shell on the Oo Thu Hta new arrival site. No one was injured and the mortar missed the camp, though it reached close to the Thai Karen village of Htee Nuh Hta. Refugees in Oo Thu Hta told KHRG that they spent the rest of the night worrying there would be more shells or a ground attack by the DKBA.

## Conclusion

Though fighting has lessened since concentrated attacks at the start of June by joint SPDC/DKBA forces on KNLA positions in eastern Dta Greh, isolated skirmishes continue to occur as the SPDC and DKBA occupy, patrol and mine the area. Villagers, meanwhile, continue to be targeted for exploitative abuse by SPDC and DKBA soldiers, who force them to work as forced labourers at military camps, porter supplies or act as human minesweepers. Widespread conscription by the DKBA is also continuing, as the group attempts to significantly enlarge its force in preparation for a transformation into a Border Guard Force.

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<sup>9</sup> DKBA soldiers have also harassed Thai-Karen villagers, stolen boats, livestock and cash as well as forced villagers to carry a wounded soldier and commandeered a car. For more, see *DKBA soldiers burn down huts, detain villagers and loot property in Thailand*, KHRG, January 2009. For more on shells and RPGs fired into Thailand during the attacks in the Ler Per Her area, see *Update on SPDC/DKBA attacks at Ler Per Her and new refugees in Thailand*, KHRG, June 2009.



The resulting situation is intensely difficult for local villagers, as they attempt to negotiate the demands placed upon them by SPDC and DKBA forces while at the same time meeting their own basic livelihood needs. In the last three months, this situation has led almost 5,000 villagers to flee their homes and seek refuge in Thailand. While these newly arrived refugees have temporary permission to stay in Thailand, this will expire at the end of the rainy season. Though many refugees who spoke with KHRG have said they would like to return home, they have also said that they worry about large numbers of unmarked landmines newly placed by the DKBA, as well as forced labour and military conscription. These are legitimate concerns that should be respected. Any discussions of repatriation or relocation, consequently, should not only include Thai authorities and international aid agencies but, most importantly, the refugees themselves.

For more information on the impact of the SPDC and DKBA on villagers in Pa'an District, see the following previously published KHRG reports:

- *Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District* (KHRG, June 2009)
- *Update on SPDC/DKBA attacks at Ler Per Her and new refugees in Thailand* (KHRG, June 2009)
- *Over 3,000 villagers flee to Thailand amidst ongoing SPDC/DKBA attacks* (KHRG, June 2009)
- *Over 700 villagers flee to Thailand amidst fears of SPDC/DKBA attacks on a KNLA camp and IDP camp in Pa'an District* (KHRG, June 2009)
- *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts* (KHRG, May 2009)
- *Extortion and restrictions under the DKBA in Pa'an District* (KHRG, March 2009)
- *Insecurity amidst the DKBA - KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts* (KHRG, February 2009)
- *Forced recruitment by DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (KHRG, September 2008)
- *Daily demands and exploitation: Life under the control of SPDC and DKBA forces in Pa'an District* (KHRG, September 2008)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2009*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>



# Karen Districts



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