



Report from the field

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Patrols, movement restrictions and forced labour in Toungoo District

This report documents the situation for villagers in Toungoo District, both in areas under SPDC control and in areas contested by the KNLA and home to villagers actively evading SPDC control. For villagers in the former, movement restrictions, forced labour and demands for material support continue unabated, and continue to undermine their attempts to address basic needs. Villagers in hiding, meanwhile, report that the threat of Burma Army patrols, though slightly reduced, remains sufficient to disrupt farming and undermine food security. This report includes incidents occurring from January to August 2009.

On May 11th 2009, an explosion in Toungoo District, the northernmost in Karen State, killed Burma Army commander Kaung Mya (sometimes written Kaung Myat). Subsequent reports identified the explosion as part of an ambush by soldiers from the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA's) 2nd Brigade.¹ Based in the Kler La area in central Toungoo since early 2007, Kaung Mya's command of Military Operations Command (MOC)² #5 had earned him infamy amongst local villagers, due to his aggressive military operations, heavy use of forced labour and stringent restrictions on movement and trade.³



This photo, taken on June 14th 2009, shows displaced children from T--- village studying at a temporary school set up by villagers hiding in Toungoo District. [Photo: KHRG]

¹ Both the Free Burma Rangers and the Irrawaddy have reported on the death of Kaung Mya (sometimes also written Kaung Myat). While FBR reported his death to have been caused only by an "explosion" without reference to any actor, the Irrawaddy has attributed his death to an attack by the KNLA. KHRG has been unable to confirm further details on the incident. See, "Three villagers killed and 500 new IDPs forced to flee homes as Burma Army launches attacks in Northern Karen State," Free Burma Rangers, July 2009; "Senior Burmese Commander Killed by Karen Rebels," *The Irrawaddy*, June 2009. Accessed online at http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15766 on September 21st 2009.

² A Military Operations Command (MOC) typically consists of ten battalions. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

³ Villagers in Toungoo began reporting abuses by Kaung Mya and MOC #5 at the start of 2007. According to these reports, he was responsible for orders involving abuses including forced labour, movement restrictions, arbitrary arrest of civilians and summary execution. "[T]he villagers didn't have enough food so they had to eat rice porridge. The villagers have faced this problem since Kaung Mya and MOC #5 came..." said one Karen villager. "He said that he hated Karen people." For more on abuses carried out under orders from Kaung Mya, see "SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District," KHRG, March 2008 and "Provoking Displacement in Toungoo District: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks," KHRG, May 2007.

Unfortunately for villagers in the area, the death of Kaung Mya has not materially improved human rights conditions in Toungoo District. Khin Maung Hsint, a subordinate who previously operated in the Play Hsah Loh area, Tantabin Township, has replaced Kaung Mya. Long time observers have described Khin Maung Hsint as even more repressive than his predecessor and, since assuming control of MOC #5, he has issued new orders for forced labour and restrictions, as well as harassed and sexually assaulted female villagers in areas under SPDC control. “[Khin Maung Hsint] is the one who has power,” a KHRG field researcher recently reported. “After the commander [Kaung Mya] died, he took responsibility for MOC #5... [and now] there is no one above him. He does not respect the villagers. He demands things from them and forces them to do things again and again.”

For the thousands of villagers who remain displaced and in hiding due to a State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) offensive against villagers (which started in Toungoo District at the end of 2005) the situation remains tenuous as well: KHRG researchers report severe food shortages and continued patrols that target villagers and undermine their attempts to support themselves. Villagers in areas under SPDC control, meanwhile, report movement restrictions, forced labour and demands for material support that significantly undermine their ability to meet basic needs.

Continued vulnerability for IDPs in hiding

Beginning on November 26th 2005, SPDC forces began in Toungoo District what KHRG has subsequently referred to as the ‘northern Karen State offensive.’ For the next three years, during all seasons, the Burma Army has conducted an extensive campaign against villagers in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Papun districts. Thousands of troops flooded the area as the SPDC attempted to consolidate control over the region. Areas that could not be brought within SPDC control have been depopulated, with villagers forcibly moved to SPDC-controlled villages, towns and relocation sites. Villagers that have escaped relocation have been subsequently targeted, and the SPDC army has employed tactics designed to force them out of hiding or bring about their demise. Villages, food stores and farm fields have been destroyed while groups in hiding have been hunted by SPDC patrols, shelled and shot on sight.⁴



This photo, taken on December 29th 2008, shows IDP villagers crossing a river to avoid an SPDC patrol near T--- village, just across the Toungoo border in Lu Thaw Township, Pa’pun District. [Photo: KHRG]

The offensive has displaced tens of thousands of people, who have subsequently been living lives of incredible vulnerability. Possessions, food supplies and farms have been repeatedly abandoned or destroyed, undermining villagers’ attempts to address health, nutritional, educational and other social needs. Many villagers have ultimately fled to refugee camps in Thailand. Thousands, however, remain in hiding in Karen State’s northern three districts, including Toungoo District. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) describes the area as the most “heavily militarised” in eastern Burma and home to the highest rates of

⁴ For more details on the northern Karen State offensive, see *One Year On: Continuing abuses in Toungoo District*, KHRG, November 2006.

displacement. According to TBBC, in northern Karen State, 27,000 people were displaced in the 12 months leading up to October 2008; 60,000 remain in hiding.⁵

In Toungoo District, thousands of villagers displaced by the northern Karen State offensive continue to live in areas not controlled by the SPDC. Ongoing army patrols force them to remain in dangerous hiding places, often going without food for days at a time. In some cases, hiding sites are far away from home villages and farms. In other cases, hiding sites are close to fields. In either case, the potential presence of SPDC patrols limits access to fields; KHRG has repeatedly documented the shooting of villagers while they work on their farms. This has disrupted planting cycles, undermining villagers' attempts to restore food supplies depleted by repeated flight. The arrival of Commander Kaung Mya in 2007 further undermined villagers' livelihoods, as he ordered restrictions movement of food and medicine within Toungoo in an attempt to limit their access to necessary goods.⁶

At the end of 2008, KHRG field researchers began reporting that SPDC operations in some upland areas of northern Karen State had been slightly reduced. In Nyaunglebin and Papun districts, KHRG was able to confirm that battalions posted to the districts had been rotated out. Scheduled rotations are normal SPDC practice, but the new battalions reduced the number of patrols and abandoned some frontline positions, limiting their actions to areas near major roads, army camps and SPDC-controlled villages.⁷ Though KHRG does not have information regarding battalion rotations in Toungoo District, researchers in the area say they have seen a similar reduction in SPDC activity, including the abandonment of some SPDC camps. In January 2009, a KHRG researcher in Toungoo was able to enter and photograph a camp recently abandoned by SPDC soldiers. According to the researcher, SPDC mines remain in the area though the camp is no longer in use.



This photo, taken on January 3rd 2009, shows fencing surrounding the Sih Daw Koh Burma Army camp in Tantabin Township. SPDC soldiers had recently abandoned the camp, though they left mines behind and continue to patrol the area. [Photo: KHRG]



Villagers hiding in upland Toungoo still face severe food shortages in spite of the reduced SPDC presence. Villagers in this photo, taken on July 3rd 2009, wait to receive support from an aid group based in Thailand. The group lives at the Ht--- hiding site in Tantabin Township, a full day walk from the meeting place shown here. [Photo: KHRG]

While SPDC activity has decreased, it has by no means ceased and SPDC patrols in all three districts continue to create security concerns and undermine the livelihoods of internally

⁵ *Internal Displacement and International Law in Eastern Burma*, Thailand Burma Border Consortium, October 2008, p.30.

⁶ See, "SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District," KHRG, March 2008.

⁷ See, "IDPs, land confiscation and forced recruitment in Papun District," KHRG, July 2009 and "Livelihood consequences of SPDC restrictions and patrols in Nyaunglebin District," KHRG, September 2009.

displaced people (IDP). After two consecutive rainy season agricultural periods were disrupted by SPDC patrols in 2007 and 2008, the 2009 farming period stands little chance of restoring food security for villagers. As the rainy season draws to a close, villagers report that they have still been unable to access their fields with the regularity necessary to protect them from encroachment by weeds and destruction by insects and wild animals. Consequently, severe food shortages are likely to continue unabated in Toungoo and, in spite of their efforts to support themselves, IDP villagers will remain heavily reliant on outside support from local aid groups delivering supplies brought across the border from Thailand.

It is important to note that, while the preponderance of SPDC activity focuses on consolidating control of villager's lives, clashes with the KNLA continue. Underscoring the fact that the Burma army has, in northern Karen State, most often targeted villagers rather than the KNLA, these clashes are most frequently the product of KNLA ambushes and brief, hit-and-run style attacks. When these attacks are successful, KHRG researchers report that villagers have been accused of supporting the KNLA, arrested, tortured and, in some cases, summarily executed. In other cases, villages have been shelled or shot at with rifles. On May 10th 2009, KNLA soldiers ambushed a Burma Army patrol between Baw and Yaw Sa Lo villages, Tantabin Township. Two SPDC soldiers were hurt. In response, SPDC soldiers shelled a nearby village and flat farm fields; a KHRG field researcher reports that soldiers fired 15 rounds from an 81 mm mortar and 20 rounds from a 60 mm mortar. At the end of July, the same researcher reported that mortars fired by the SPDC at a village in the Play Hsa Loh area had recently injured several villagers.

Movement restrictions

In areas of Toungoo District where villagers live under SPDC control, KHRG researchers report that the Burma Army continues to impose stringent movement restrictions. These restrictions are not new. During the northern Karen State offensive, villagers have been required to build bamboo fences around the perimeters of their villages, limiting entry and exit points to a few easily monitored locations. Curfews have also been imposed, preventing villagers from sleeping near their fields. Traditionally, many farmers build small huts and stay near their fields during key moments in the agricultural cycle, so that they can both protect crops from wild animals and avoid wasting daylight making labour and time intensive trips between home villages and farms.

Daytime travel has also been restricted, with people sometimes confined to their villages and entirely prevented from accessing their fields or visiting nearby villages or larger towns like Toungoo and Kler La for business or to see relatives. In other cases, travel permission has been granted on a case-by-case basis to 'trusted' villagers, those who could purchase official travel documents or those who could negotiate and make bribes. Villagers caught outside their villages without permission or during curfew times have risked, at a minimum, being fined or, in many cases, suffering arrest, detention, torture or summary execution.

KHRG researchers report that the travel restrictions and punishments described above continue. In the Kler La area, for instance, villagers must pay 5,000 kyat (approx. US \$4.72) to travel by motorbike, 10,000 kyat (approx. US \$9.43) to go by bicycle and 500 kyat (approx. US \$0.47) to leave their villages on foot.⁸ Checkpoints on larger roads, such as the motor road connecting Kler La to Toungoo Town, also charge extra fees to villagers regardless of whether they have already purchased travel permission. Many villagers attempt to avoid making these payments. On March 9th 2009, SPDC soldiers from the Y--- army camp arrested villagers from Th--- village for driving three bullock carts to collect leaves for roof thatching without permission.

⁸ For further details on movement restrictions in Toungoo, see "Attacks forced labour and restrictions in Toungoo District," KHRG, July 2008.

The villagers were taken to the Y--- army camp. Soon after, the Th--- village head was ordered to arrange payment of 150,000 kyat (approx. US \$141.51) for the release of the men and their bullock carts.



These photos, taken on March 13th 2009, show men from Sh--- village, Tantabin Township, as they return from collecting firewood and roofing materials. Travelling without permission from the Burma Army, they had to be wary of encountering soldiers. Four days earlier, SPDC soldiers near Th--- village had seized a group of villagers also transporting thatch by ox cart. The villagers and oxen were held at the Y--- army camp until the Th--- village head could arrange payment of 150,000 kyat (approx. US \$141.51) to secure their release. [Photo: KHRG]

Forced labour, demands for material support and sexual assault

Like in other areas under SPDC control in Karen State, KHRG field researchers report that forced labour and demands for ‘taxes,’ food and other supplies remain the primary human rights abuse suffered by villagers in Toungoo District. These abuses are designed to enable the day-to-day operation of the Burma Army, which supports itself based upon an explicit ‘live off the land’ policy. Commanders are instructed to meet their basic logistical needs locally, rather than through the central supply system.⁹ The predictable result of such a policy, especially when coupled with the general impunity and lack of accountability with which the military operates, is an extensive array of exploitative demands that burden local villagers on a daily basis.

Highlighting the frequency with which villagers in SPDC controlled areas of Toungoo suffer exploitative abuses, a KHRG research recently remarked that he had little forced labour to report, because villagers felt it pointless to comment upon. “*The villagers in Toungoo have to face forced labour continuously,*” he wrote in August. “*Because it is so frequent, it is not good to ask the villagers about it every day. The villagers are fed up with providing us information about forced labour, because they have reported it so many times and it still does not stop.*” This should not be taken to mean that forced labour is not worth remarking upon: instead, it is a distressing indicator of the perverseness with which forced labour is utilised by the SPDC, and the frustration felt by villagers who, year after year, have had to work as unpaid labourers for the army, fixing roads, clearing brush, gathering materials, building and repairing army camps and portering equipment; While at the same time attempting to meet their basic livelihood requirements.

⁹ Though long a de facto mode of operation, in 1997 Burma’s War Office made the “live off the land” policy explicit in an order to the country’s twelve Regional Commanders. See, Andrew Selth, *Burma’s Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*, Norwalk: Eastbridge, 2002 p. 136; Mary Callahan, “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, 2007 p. 46.

For the period covered by this report, KHRG researchers said that frequently soldiers from MOC #5 based in Kler La have ordered villagers to cut bamboo and transport it using their personal trucks and ox carts. Twice a month, villagers were also ordered to use the bamboo to make fences around villages and military camps, as well as clean the camp and carry water. On each occasion, 30 villagers from Gk---, Gkl---, W---, Gko---, M--- and K--- villages are required to participate. Villagers say that they are required to cut bamboo for the soldiers with such frequency that it has become difficult to find pieces large enough to satisfy the soldiers; since Khin Maung Sint assumed command of MOC #5, villagers in the Kler La area have been ordered to cut down their durian and mango trees to provide wood in addition to bamboo for the construction of army barracks. Having to cut these trees down is particularly injurious to villagers, as the trees serve as a source of income and food and have already had to grow many years before being able to produce fruit.

According to KHRG researchers in Toungoo District, the Burma Army also continues to demand that villagers provide money, food and alcohol. Infantry Battalion #73, for instance, led by Battalion Commander Than Soe Oo, based in Zayatkyi army camp, Tantabin Township, has been making daily demands for rice, fish paste, pigs and chickens from at least three villages in the area, including Mah Lah Gone, Thah Yah Gone and Thay Chah Shay Lay Tih. Residents of Thah Yah Gone and Mah Lah Gone have also been required to provide porters to carry equipment, or make payments of 45,000 and 50,000 kyat (approx. US \$42.45 and \$47.17), respectively.



In this photo, taken on December 16th 2008, villagers from T--- village prepare leaf thatching. In this case, villagers were able to use the thatching to repair the roofs of their huts in preparation for the 2009 rainy season. Villagers are also often required to prepare such materials for the SPDC army.

[Photo: KHRG]

Since August 6th 2009, meanwhile, Khin Maung Sint, the new commander of MOC #5, has been active in the Kler La area. In every village he encounters, KHRG researchers say he makes demands for food and other support. He also demands whiskey or other alcohol from shopkeepers; an expensive demand, given that a bottle of whiskey typically costs 30,000 kyat (aprox. US \$28.30). KHRG researchers also report that Khin Maung Sint frequently gets drunk, sometimes harassing or assaulting female villagers. On three separate occasions since August 18th, KHRG has documented Khin Maung Sint drunkenly assaulting women, including ordering them to drink alcohol, strip for him and, in two cases, kissing and fondling them. While KHRG has not confirmed any cases of rape by Khin Maung Sint, on September 4th 2009 the Free Burma Rangers [FBR] reported two other cases in which he had raped women. In the same report, FBR also said the he had arrested and detained male villagers after losing games of cards or snooker.¹⁰

Conclusion

Like many people across Karen State, villagers in Toungoo District continue to be faced with difficult questions about how and where they can best survive. Villagers in places under SPDC control must contend with the daily burdens of exploitative SPDC rule. These villagers must attempt to meet their basic needs while working under severe restriction, with limited access to

¹⁰ "Burma Army Troops Rape Four Women as Abuses Continue Against Villagers in Northern Karen State," Free Burma Rangers, August 2009.

farms and with working hours and resources consistently siphoned away by SPDC demands for forced labour. Villagers attempting to avoid SPDC control, meanwhile, must attempt to meet their basic needs while avoiding SPDC patrols, which actively seek to kill them. Though KHRG researchers report that SPDC activity decreased in some upland areas of Toungoo District after the end of 2008, the Burma Army remains active enough to undermine IDP villagers' livelihoods and keep them in positions of intense vulnerability. Continued abuse in SPDC controlled areas, meanwhile, indicates that villagers suffer not only when there are attacks and offensives; the daily burdens intrinsic to the presence of the Burma Army are sufficient to severely undermine human rights in rural Karen State.

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

- *Rural development and displacement: SPDC abuses in Toungoo District* (January 2009)
- *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)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2009* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008*. 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

