



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## Report from the Field

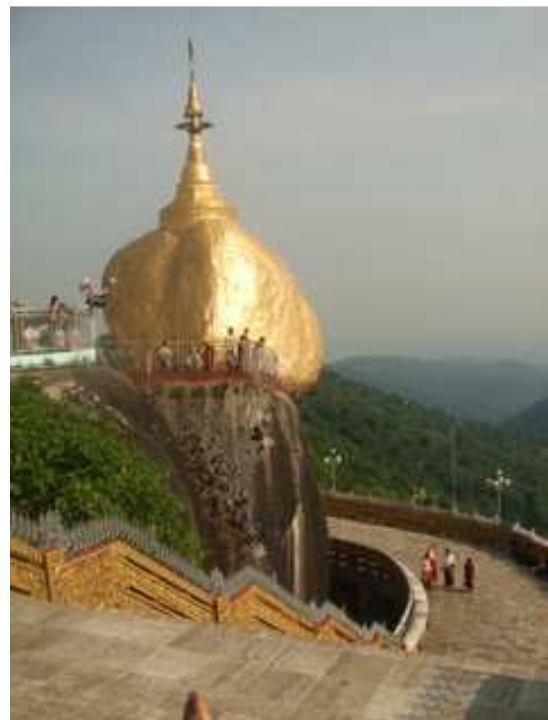
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### Exploitative abuse and villager responses in Thaton District

*SPDC control of Thaton District is fully consolidated, aided by the DKBA and a variety of other civilian and parastatal organisations. These forces are responsible for perpetrating a variety of exploitative abuses, which include a litany of demands for 'taxation' and provision of resources, as well as forced labour on development projects and forced recruitment into the DKBA. Villagers also report ongoing abuses related to SPDC and DKBA 'counter insurgency' efforts, including the placement of unmarked landmines in civilian areas, conscription of people as porters and 'human minesweepers' and harassment and violent abuse of alleged KNLA supporters. This report includes information on abuses during the period of April to October 2009.*

Thaton District is Karen State's most eastern district and the area where State Peace and Development (SPDC) control is most consolidated. Primarily flat agricultural land, the district sees only intermittent activity from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), which holds no fixed positions. Visits from foreign tourists are even a casual occurrence at a few sites in the eastern and southern parts of the district, including boat trips up the initial reaches of the Salween River and to the famous Kyaiktyo "Golden Rock" Pagoda in Kyaikto Township. This contrasts starkly with other Karen areas, where access by foreigners is chiefly limited to aid groups operating covertly from Thailand.

In spite of its picturesque tourist sites, Thaton District continues to see a variety of abuses by SPDC and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) soldiers. Villagers are frequently placed under movement restrictions, limiting their ability to regularly access fields and conduct work necessary for successful agriculture and livelihood operations. In 2009, these movement restrictions took an especially heavy toll: villagers report that heavy rains and flooding during May and unusually large numbers of rats in September destroyed crops.<sup>1</sup> While these are natural parts of an agricultural economy, they took an unnatural toll because farmers



This photo, taken by a KHRG researcher in April 2008, shows the Kyaikhtyo "Golden Rock" pagoda in northeastern Thaton District. Though foreign tourists are able to visit a few scenic sites in the area, villagers continue to suffer a variety of abuses. [Photo: KHRG]

<sup>1</sup> KHRG researchers say the unusual number of rats destroying paddy in September 2009 are attributed to flowering bamboo. They are likely referring to the *melocanna baccifera* bamboo, which flowers only once every five decades. The flowering bamboo provides rich nutrients for the rats, which then boom in population and devastate crops. This

have been prevented from responding by movement restrictions and competing demands on their time from forced labour.

These already precarious livelihood conditions in Thaton District, in large part resulting from SPDC and DKBA abuse, must support the weight of exploitative demands for forced labour, arbitrary taxation as well as conscription of soldiers for the DKBA. Though the area has been under consolidated SPDC control since the beginning of the decade, villagers must also still contend with abuses that are ostensibly part of SPDC and DKBA 'counter insurgency' efforts. Villagers continue to report that the SPDC and DKBA place unmarked landmines in civilian areas, conscript people as porters and 'human minesweepers' and harass and violently abuse alleged KNLA supporters.



These photos, taken during February 2009, show gold mining operations in Shwegyin and Dweh Loh townships, bordering northern Thaton District in Nyaunglebin and Papun districts. In October 2009, the DKBA began expanding similar mining operations in Bilin Township, Thaton District. [Photo: KHRG]

## SPDC and DKBA patrols, harassment and landmines

*"They [the DKBA] accused me of taking rice to the KNLA soldiers. [DKBA officer Than Htun] asked me, 'Why didn't you come home this afternoon?' I answered him that I was just finding my buffalo, that's why I came home late [after an evening curfew]. He said, 'Don't you lie to me.' And I said, 'I'm not lying.' Then he told me that he would kill me. I said to him, 'What I can do? Even if you kill me, I'm telling you the truth: I didn't take any rice to them [the KNLA]. That's all.' At that time, one of his soldiers came and hit me in the head with his gun two times and I started getting dizzy. I asked him, 'Why do you do this to me when even the SPDC is leaving me alone?' He answered me, 'The SPDC may not kill you, but we will.'"*

- Naw P--- (woman, 45), village head, Gk--- village, Pa'an Township, Thaton District (May 2009)

SPDC control of Thaton District is enforced by a variety of civilian and military actors. All government orders in the area are ultimately backed by the SPDC Army, under the command of Light Infantry Divisions (LIDs) #11, #22 and #44.<sup>2</sup> The DKBA is also increasingly active in the district, especially in the eastern townships of Bilin and Pa'an, which border Pa'an and Papun

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cyclical phenomenon has lead to periodic famines in northern Burma's Chin State and India's northeastern states of Mizoram and Manipur, where *melocanna baccifera* is significantly more common than eastern Karen State. For more on *melocanna baccifera*, rats and famine in Chin State see, *On the Edge of Survival: The Continuing Rat Infestation and Food Crisis in Chin State, Burma*, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), September 2009; *Critical Point: Food Scarcity and Hunger in Burma's Chin State*, CHRO, July 2008.

<sup>2</sup> SPDC Light Infantry Divisions, as with Military Operations Commands, are typically made up of 10 battalions and command their operations in combat areas.

districts. Pa'an District is, following attacks on positions held by KNLA 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade in June 2009, almost wholly controlled by the DKBA and the group's central headquarters is located just across the Salween River at Myaing Gyi Ngu, in the northeastern part of the district's Lu Pleh Township. Papun, meanwhile, has in recent months become home to rising levels of DKBA activity. A variety of civilian, parastatal and militia groups also continue to enforce SPDC control of Thaton.<sup>3</sup> These include the *pyithusit* 'People's Militia' and *Tha Gka Hsa Pa* 'Anti-insurgency Group'.<sup>4</sup> Below are details regarding groups active in Thaton District during 2009, organised by Township:

<b>Bilin Township</b>
LID #11 is headquartered in Law Gkay village, and commands battalions operating in both Thaton and Papun districts from this camp, as well as Bpa Nwee Gkalah. SPDC battalions are also based in camps in Yoh Gkalah, Meh Bplay Kee and Ta Bpaw. SPDC battalions in Bilin Township are also cooperating with DKBA Brigades #999, #555 and #333. These battalions are also active in Dweh Loh Township, just across the Salween River in western Papun Township. Starting in October 2009, the DKBA has been attempting to increase business activities in the area. Villagers have reported increased logging and mining for gold, including the use of heavy earth moving machinery. These activities have been reported in places from the Na Kyi area in Bilin Township northeast towards Meh Way, in Dweh Loh Township, Papun District.
<b>Pa'an Township</b>
SPDC LID #22 is based in Myaing Galay Town, on the western bank of the Salween across from Pa'an Town in Pa'an District. SPDC battalions are chiefly operating out of Ka Ma Maung town. Notably, Myaing Galay is the end-point of a 180-mile gas pipeline that traverses much of Burma's southern coast. <sup>5</sup> DKBA Brigade #333 also controls sizeable sections of Pa'an Township, operating out of a headquarters in Oh Daw village. Brigade #333 commands three battalions in Thaton, which operate out of Oh Daw, Law Bpoo and Taw Theh Gkoh villages, as well as in villages along the Koh Loh River. SPDC battalions under LID #11 including Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #219, 220 and 221 are also cooperating with DKBA soldiers in this area. Village militias, police and <i>Tha Gka Hsa Pa</i> also operate in areas near to vehicle roads, checkpoints and large villages.
<b>Kyaikto Township</b>
LID #44 is headquartered at the Gkay Mu camp. LIB #2 is at the Aay Wa camp, LIB #3 is near the Kah Gkyoh bridge, LIB #96 is in Kyaikto town and LIB #2 in Thein Za Yar town. DKBA soldiers are also active in Kyaikto, based at a small pagoda in the Ta Hsee Kee area just south of Nyaunglebin's Shwegyin Township. At least a company of DKBA soldiers are also always based below the Kyaiktyo Pagoda. As in Pa'an Township, <i>Tha Gka Hsa Pa</i> and People's Militia also operate throughout the township.
<b>Thaton Township</b>
In Thaton Township, LIB #24 of LID #44 located at the Doo Yin Hseit camp was recently rotated out and replaced by a heavy artillery unit. Frontline operations command Artillery Battalion #314 is based in northern Zee Wah village. LIB #1/118 is based in Thaton town, LIBs #3 and #8 are in Bilin Town and LIB #9 in Way Bpar. Battalion #3 of DKBA Brigade #333 commanded by Saw Bplay Poe is located in Bpa Nwee Gkalah, and cooperates with the SPDC Army for operations in the Naw Gk'Toh, T'Rweh Kee and T'Rweh Wah areas.

In addition to the SPDC and DKBA forces described above, KNLA 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, commanded by Saw Kyaw Lay, is also active in all townships of Thaton District, particularly Bilin Township, though its operations are limited because the brigade no longer controls any fixed positions. According to data released by the KNLA in August 2009, 11 clashes between the KNLA and SPDC occurred from January to June 2009; 4 occurred between the KNLA and DKBA during the same period. These are the lowest numbers reported by the KNLA in any district, and contrast starkly with totals released for neighbouring Papun and Pa'an districts, which saw

<sup>3</sup> For more on non-military actors helping to enforce SPDC control in Thaton District, see "State agencies, armed groups and the proliferation of oppression in Thaton District," KHRG, September 2007.

<sup>4</sup> According to local sources, the *Tha Gka Hsa Pa* is chiefly active in Pa'an, Kyaikto and Thaton townships. These sources say the group may have been formed with KNU/KNLA members who left the group in the 1970s or 1980s. The group's purpose appears to be very similar to that of the *Pyi Thu Sit*, and they chiefly function as a source of information and guides for the SPDC Army. For more on the *Tha Gka Hsa Pa* in Thaton, see "Thaton District: SPDC using violence against villagers to consolidate control," KHRG, March 2001.

<sup>5</sup> For information regarding human rights abuses related to this pipeline project, see *Laid Waste: Human rights along the Kanbaw to Myaing Kalay gas pipeline*, The Human Rights Foundation of Monland, May 2009.

respective combined totals of 223 and 72 clashes.<sup>6</sup> SPDC and DKBA patrols frequently accuse villagers of offering the KNLA support; accused villagers are often threatened, fined, beaten, tortured or even killed. All three armed groups also continue to place landmines in Thaton, including in areas used by civilians including roads, forest paths and agricultural land. It is important to note, however, that villagers consistently report that the KNLA warns them of landmine locations. According to villagers, SPDC and DKBA soldiers do not notify villagers of landmine placements, even when asked directly by villagers frightened of mines on or near their farms.

*“DKBA soldiers plant landmines around our village. And, they do not tell us where they plant the landmines. Therefore, villagers are afraid of stepping on landmines and they dare not to go out to collect vegetables. Even when they go to their own hill fields, they have to go only on one path. We asked the DKBA to show us where they planted the landmines. We told them that the KNU informs us when they plant landmines, but the DKBA does not. Then, they [the DKBA] replied to us that they did not plant any landmines and that the mines do not belong to them. But a buffalo and a boy from another village [near Ht--- village] stepped on landmines which were planted by DKBA soldiers this year.”*

- Naw W--- (woman, 47), Ht--- village, Pa'an Township (May 2009)

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009, for instance, DKBA soldiers ordered residents of Bpaw T'Bproo village to help construct a bridge and road connecting Bpaw T'Bproo and Thay La Bpaw villages, Pa'an Township. For the next month, every day 75 villagers from Bpaw T'Bproo were required to work as labourers aiding the construction, as were residents of four other area villages.<sup>7</sup> Worried that the KNLA might attack the construction project, the DKBA placed stringent movement restrictions on villagers, who were told they would be shot on sight if seen outside their villages at night or in the evening. Soldiers commanded by DKBA officer Than Htun then planted landmines in the area, around Bpyoh, Meh Theh, Ta Bpaw, and Gkah Meh villages. Officer Maung Bar Chah also planted landmines in areas around Pya Ghaw, Gkroo See, Maw Gka Lay and Kyaw Gkay Kee villages. Officer Maung Nyoh planted landmines in areas around Htee Poe Neh, Bpaw T'Bproo, Ler Kheh Khaw, and Gkwee T'Kaw villages. The officers did not notify villagers of the mines' locations, nor did they remove the mines after the project was completed. As late as six months later, in June 2009 KHRG confirmed that the DKBA had not removed the mines, nor had they notified villagers of their locations. Villagers told KHRG that, even though the KNLA had removed some of the mines, they were still afraid to move outside their villages. As of June 2009, the DKBA mines had wounded at least 30 cattle, though no injuries to humans were confirmed by KHRG.

## **Forced military recruitment and conscription of porters**

The DKBA continues to forcibly conscript villagers in Thaton as the group prepares for its transformation into a government-controlled Border Guard Force. Following a meeting on May 7<sup>th</sup> at Myaing Gyi Ngu in which senior DKBA leaders discussed the transformation, DKBA Brigade #333 commander Maung Gyi ordered more than 170 village heads from eastern Thaton District to attend a meeting at which he discussed DKBA recruitment. Every village was required to meet a DKBA recruitment quota, Maung Gyi told the assembled village heads, and provide one recruit per 20 households.

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<sup>6</sup> “Summary Report on Military Engagements in KNLA Areas,” August 2009, received via email and on file with KHRG.

<sup>7</sup> Other villages required to provide unpaid forced labourers for the project include Thay La Bpaw, which had to provide 25 villagers daily, Noh T'Ray, which had to provide 20 villagers, Htee Poe Neh, which also provided 20 and Gkoh Dah Gyi, which provided 15.

Following this meeting, villagers have reported a variety of methods used to select men and boys to meet the DKBA recruitment quota. The most common method has been a village lottery, in which male villagers have taken numbers akin to the draft lottery used by the United States and other countries. Unlike the systems used internationally, however, these lotteries are not providing soldiers for an army attached to a democratically elected or accountable government. Instead, they are to provide soldiers for an armed group that unilaterally assumed power in an area via military force, is not accountable to villagers and which now largely functions to carry out orders given by the SPDC, which is also unaccountable to villagers. It is also important to note that the DKBA does not distinguish based upon age, and young boys have been recruited and forced to join and even serve in frontline conflict areas.<sup>8</sup> On July 8<sup>th</sup> 2009, for instance, Deputy Battalion Commander Thoung Ma Na of DKBA Brigade #333, Battalion #1 ordered villagers from Bp--- and T--- village tracts, Pa'an Township, to attend a meeting at T--- village to discuss the recruitment quota. Thoung Ma Na ordered villagers to record all male residents of the area between ages 12 and 50 so they could be made eligible for recruitment.

The DKBA recruitment is highly ad hoc, and villagers also report that families without a household head, fathers with young children and men in other contexts in which they would normally be granted an exception are not always being protected from the lottery. *"Some villagers have to join DKBA army even if they have a new baby in their family because of the voting and it helps the village,"* a DKBA deserter told KHRG in an interview in October. *"We can do nothing under the rule of the DKBA."*<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the severity with which commander Maung Gyi informed village heads that they were required to provide recruits, villagers report that they have worked to avoid conscription in a variety of ways.<sup>10</sup> In the months following the May 18<sup>th</sup> meeting at Oh Daw, it appears that a significant number of villages have been able to negotiate cash payments rather than provision of recruits. While men from these villages have been able to avoid serving for the DKBA, this came at a high price; sums paid by the villages are shockingly large, given the weight of other exploitative demands by the SPDC and DKBA as well as restrictions on villagers' livelihood opportunities. Sums paid by 40 villages and confirmed by KHRG are summarized in the table below:

No.	Village name	Amount paid to DKBA
1	Ta Gkaw Bo	5,200,000 kyat (US \$5,416) per village
2	Baw T'pru	
3	Weh Bpya	4,000,000 kyat (US \$4,166) per village
4	Noh Aw La	
5	Pwa Khaw	
6	Weh Bpy Hta	3,900,000 kyat (US \$4,062)
7	Aee Heh Po	3,000,000 kyat (US \$3,125) per village
8	Aee Heh Pa Do	
9	Ler Gka Gkya	
10	Noh Naw Wah	
11	Toh Taw	
12	Noh Ma Gkwee	
13	Thay Wah	

<sup>8</sup> For firsthand accounts of forced recruitment of child soldiers by the DKBA, see interviews with three DKBA deserters ages 14-17 in the following bulletins: "Forced recruitment, forced labour: interviews with DKBA deserters and escaped porters," KHRG, November 2009; "Forced recruitment of child soldiers: An interview with two DKBA deserters," KHRG, August 2009.

<sup>9</sup> For a full transcript of this interview, see "Forced recruitment, forced labour: interviews with DKBA deserters and escaped porters," KHRG, November 2009.

<sup>10</sup> KHRG first reported on resistance to the DKBA's May 2009 recruitment quota in July 2009. See, "Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance," KHRG, July 2009.

14	Gkaw T'yer	
15	Law Bpoo	
16	Meh Hsee Hta	
17	Bplaw Po Toh	
18	Gko Ta Gkyee	2,600,000 kyat (US \$2,708) per village
19	Noh Gkyaw	
20	Bpwoh	2,400,000 kyat (US \$2,500)
21	Noh Law Bplaw	2,000,000 kyat (US \$2,083)
22	Meh Gka Na	1,500,000 kyat (US \$1,562) per village
23	Meh Theh	
24	Thay La Baw	1,300,000 kyat (US \$1,354) per village
25	Mer Rer	
26	Leh Bpa Tah	
27	Meh Bpoo	
28	Meh Leh Hta	
29	Meh Leh Kee	
30	Htee Meh Baw	
31	Gkwee T'kaw	
32	Ler Kheh	
33	Noh T'ray	
34	Htee Po Neh	
35	Ha T'reh	900,000 kyat (US \$937)
36	Htee Gkyaw Kee	800,000 kyat (US \$833) per village
37	Tar Thoo Kee	
38	Htee Gkyoo	
39	Gkyaw Gkay	
<b>Total</b>		<b>90,300,000 kyat (US \$93,092)</b>

Because Thaton is flat and largely devoid of the mountainous or forested upland areas that provide hiding places for villagers protecting themselves from abuse in other Karen areas, villagers are not usually able to use hiding and flight as a method for resisting DKBA recruitment. In spite of the geographic obstacles, however, at least one village from Bilin Township – in its entirety – has decided to go into hiding rather than provide the DKBA with recruits. In June 2009, the headman of this village summarized the situation as follows:

*“On May 18<sup>th</sup> 2009, DKBA Brigade #333 Commander Maung Gyi ordered one villager from every 20 households to join their military group. And he also said that anyone who is unable to carry out this order will be arrested and punished. All the villagers of Ht--- village decided to escape to the safe place because no one would like to join the DKBA military group. The villagers will agree to join the DKBA only if they are arrested. But the word ‘escape’ will never disappear from their minds.”*

The DKBA's push for recruits in Thaton has also coincided with ongoing conscription of villagers who are forced to act as porters. These villagers are required to carry equipment, as well as act as guides and walk in front of DKBA patrols as human minesweepers. Notably, it appears that the practice of conscripting porters, normally followed by both the SPDC and DKBA in rural areas, has also been occurring in Thaton Town. According to a resident of the town who spoke with KHRG, on July 11<sup>th</sup> the DKBA began seizing residents of Thaton Town to serve as porters. According to the woman who spoke with KHRG, at least 10 men from the area around her home hid themselves at night so they were less vulnerable to being seized by the DKBA. As of August 4<sup>th</sup>, these men continued to hide themselves. Notably, foreign tourists travelling from middle Burma to the southern peninsula must pass through Thaton town, which lies along the main motor road and railway line connecting Rangoon, Burma's former capital and largest city, with Moulmein, which is just 43 miles (70 km) to the south, Burma's third largest city and the capital of Mon State.



*"They [the DKBA] came and called 17 villagers to go as messengers for them. Those villagers had to go for three days and then the soldiers let them to come back to their villages. They [the villagers] said they had to carry military equipment as porters and they had to walk in front of the DKBA soldiers [to test for landmines and ambushes]."*

- Saw H--- (male, 36), Gk--- village, Pa'an Township (February 2009)



This photo, taken on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008, shows Naw Ma---, age 60, from H--- village, Thaton Township. She told KHRG that her nephew was killed after being conscripted as a porter for SPDC LIB #8, under the command of Thoung Myit. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo, taken on November 24<sup>th</sup> 2008, shows Naw Me---, age 60, from H--- village, Thaton Township. Her son was also conscripted as a porter by SPDC commander Thoung Myit. She told KHRG that she heard her son had been wounded, but she has been unable to find him. [Photo: KHRG]

## Forced labour and arbitrary 'taxation'

*"Our village faces many kinds of demands, such as for money from the SPDC. Every year, we have to pay 15,000 kyat (US \$15.60) as a tax for the township football competition. We also have to pay about 10,000-12,000 kyat (US \$10.40 to 12.50) for a football competition in our village every year. And, we have to pay 7,000-10,000 kyat (US \$7.30 to 10.40) for the Done Dance<sup>11</sup> every year, too."*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 44) M--- village, Pa'an Township (May 2009)

In addition to conscripting soldiers and porters, the SPDC and DKBA continue to burden villagers in Thaton District with a variety of other exploitative abuses. During the period of April to October 2009, villagers reported being forced to provide bamboo, thatching and other fabricated materials, work constructing and repairing SPDC or DKBA road projects, as well as provide cash payments. In some cases, specific causes or uses were cited to justify this 'taxation,' such as the provision of educational facilities or the hosting of a football tournament. In other cases, payments were simply demanded without even a superficial justification. Abuses of these types are detailed below; they should be taken as examples, and represent only a small fraction of the exploitative demands placed upon villagers in Thaton District.

Villagers report periodic requirements to provide roofing for SPDC and DKBA army camps. Materials for the thatching, including grass and bamboo, have to be collected, sometimes from places far from the village. These materials then have to be cut and woven into roof thatching. Once finished, the thatching must be carried, again sometimes long distances, to the army camp that issued the order. The process, which can take days and involve scores of villagers, keeps all involved away from doing the work needed for villagers' subsistence. On April 14<sup>th</sup>

<sup>11</sup> A traditional form of Karen dancing involving a large group and often performed at annual festivals like Karen New Year.

2009, for instance, DKBA soldiers forced residents of B--- village, Bilin Township, to collect materials for, fabricate and transport 1,000 thatched roofing shingles by bullock cart. The next day, also in Bilin Township, on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2009 Captain Aung Thu of SPDC LIB #220 forced villagers around the Yoh Gklah SPDC army camp to provide thatching as well. Villagers told KHRG that SPDC soldiers based in this camp make periodic demands for materials. Naw K---, from H--- village, described providing materials for the Yoh Gklah camp in February 2009:

*"Our villagers have to do forced labour such as cutting bamboo and wood for constructing or repairing the military camps and going as set tha<sup>12</sup> for the SPDC and DKBA soldiers. They also demand thatch, bamboo, wood etc. from us. We have to deliver those things to the Yoh Gklah SPDC camp. It takes about one and a half hours on foot to walk there from our village. LIB #220 of LID #11, led by column commander Aung Than Oo, came to our village in December 2008. They have demanded bamboo three times this year [January-February 2009]... They did not pay us for the bamboo. We had to do it for free... They used that bamboo to repair their camp. They demand things from us whenever they need something. We dare not refuse to do it."*

Villagers also describe being made to work on 'development' projects like the bridge and road projects near Bpaw T'Bproo and Thay La Bpaw villages described above. On May 19<sup>th</sup> 2009, Second Lieutenant Moh Der of DKBA Brigade #333 Battalion #1 ordered villagers in the areas mined by Officer Maung Bar Chah and others in January 2009 to construct another road. In this case, villagers from Noh T'Ray, Htee Poh Neh, Ler Kheh Khaw, Kwee T'Kaw and Htee Meh Baw villagers were required to build a road connecting Ler Kheh Khaw and Noh T'Ray villages. Villagers were required to bring tools and materials by bullock cart to the site of the 2-mile (3.2 kilometre) long road, and were unable to convince the DKBA to reduce the number of villagers required to work on the project. Moh Der also demanded villages provide cash payments, which he said he would use to buy curry for the workers. Htee Poe Neh, T'Ray village, Ler Kheh Khaw, Gkwee T'Kaw, and Htee Meh Bpaw were each required to pay 15,000 kyat (US \$15.60), while Bpaw T'Bproo had to pay 20,000 kyat (US \$20.80). After the payments, no curry was provided for any of the workers.

In other cases, villagers report being required to make cash payments. KHRG has generally described payments of this kind as 'arbitrary,' because they vary in frequency and amount depending on the discretion of local officials. Though demands for such 'taxation' are sometimes flagged as being for projects supporting local communities, villagers often complain that money is skimmed by corrupt officials or spent on projects designed and implemented without their input. On September 20<sup>th</sup> 2009, for example, village tract leader U Tin Maung Win ordered residents of the area around Pa'an Town to provide payments for a rainy season football tournament.<sup>13</sup> Payments required of villages in Thaton District shown in the table below:

No.	Village name	Amount paid to DKBA
1	Taw T'lay Koh	40,000 kyat (US \$41.67) per village
2	Htoh Taw	
3	Noh M'gwee	
4	Thay Wah	
5	Baw T'pru	
6	Gko Tah Gyee	

<sup>12</sup> Set tha' is a Burmese term for forced labour duty 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.

<sup>13</sup> Such football tournaments are often mandatory, and villages must field teams or face fines for not participating. See, for instance, *Economic predation: taxation, extortion and commandeering in Mon State*, The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), March 2009. According to HURFOM, Kaw Line village, in southern Mon State, was fined 500,000 kyat for refusing to play after disputing an umpire's call during a mandatory tournament in October 2008.

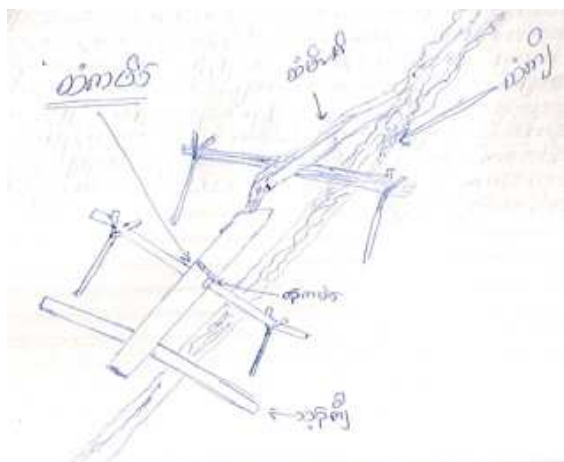


7	Meh Bpoo	30,000 kyat (US \$31.25) per village
8	T'gkaw Bo	
9	Noh Gkwaw	
10	Thay La Baw	
11	Htee Meh Baw	
12	Gkwee T'kaw	
13	Ler Kheh Baw	
14	Noh T'ray	20,000 kyat (US \$20.83) per village
15	Htee Po Neh	
16	Wah Gklu Ko	
17	Noh Po Mo	
18	Meh Leh Kee	
19	Meh Leh Hta	
<b>Total</b>		<b>620,000 kyat (US \$646)</b>

In other cases, SPDC and DKBA authorities do not attach their demands for 'taxation' to even casual promises for services or development activities. On August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009, for instance, in Bilin Township SPDC LIB #214 and DKBA Brigade #333 ordered owners of rice mills in the area of Ht--- village, Bilin Township, to make cash payments. Payments, made in response to a verbal order issued by DKBA commander Kyaw Min, were as follows:

No.	Name of villager	Village name	Amount paid
1	Pastor N---	Ht---	7,000 kyat (US \$7.30) per person
2	W---		
3	Gk---		
4	M---		
5	Saw Bp---		
6	Saw N---	Ht---	10,000 kyat (US \$10.42) per person
7	Pah R---		
8	Naw M---		
9	Maw Ht---		
10	Saw M---		
11	Saw A---		
12	Saw A---		
13	Saw Ht---		
14	Saw M---		
15	Maw Ch---		
16	Saw Ht---	Y---	10,000 kyat (US \$10.42) per person
17	C---		
18	Naw M---		
19	P---		
20	Ht---		
21	Maw T---		
22	Pa M---		
23	Ht---		
24	Saw M---		
25	Saw Ht		
26	Maw A---		
27	Naw H---		
28	Naw H---	T---	5,000 kyat (\$ US 5.21) per person
29	Saw Gk---		
30	Saw S---		
31	Saw K---		
32	Saw P---		
33	Saw G---		
Total		285,000 kyat (US \$297)	

Payments like those demanded from owners of rice mills described above may appear small, if taken out of context and in terms of their foreign exchange value. For paddy farmers who operate at or near to a basic subsistence, however, such demands represent a potentially dire strain on income that threatens to push them below the level at which they can survive. In Thaton District, 'taxation' on the owners of threshing machines came as they neared the end of the rainy season, after money had been spent and loans incurred to pay for a crop not yet harvested or profited from. Remaining funds, meanwhile, needed to be saved for hiring labourers to help with the harvest in October. Worse, these farmers had already had crops damaged by early, heavy rains and flooding in May. Soon, these farmers would face more damage from rats and wild pigs as their efforts to protect their crops were hamstrung by movement restrictions that prevented them from regularly accessing their fields.



This sketch, drawn in November 2009 by a villager from Dweh Loh Township, Papun District, shows a decoy he builds to try and keep pigs away from his paddy field during times when SPDC movement restrictions prevent him from accessing his field. When the piece of bamboo shown at the bottom left fills with water it flips forward, emptying its contents and crashing back down in a sound designed to scare pigs. [Photo: KHRG]



This sketch, drawn by a villager from Thaton District during November 2009, shows current issues undermining villagers' livelihoods. Pigs and rats are shown destroying crops in the bottom left, while the top left shows a DKBA soldier enforcing movement restrictions and demanding cash payments. Above the pig is a sitting post, built to encourage owls to live near the field and eat the rats. [Photo: KHRG]

Travel restrictions and exploitative demands have a significant impact on the livelihoods of rural villagers in Thaton. In response, villagers have described using a variety of strategies to respond to abuse. In some cases, these strategies consist of agricultural techniques. A villager from Thaton described his neighbours building sitting posts to encourage owls and other birds of prey to sit, watch their fields and frighten away or kill rats during times when movement restrictions prevent them from accessing their farms. Another villager, from Gk--- village, Dwe Loh Township, Papun District, who was also prevented from staying at his field and said wild pigs had in the past destroyed his paddy, described fashioning a kind of decoy from pieces of bamboo placed in a nearby stream. Sections of bamboo, left with an open end in the stream and balanced on an axis, fill with water until they flip over, emptying their contents and coming crashing back down with a sound designed to frighten pigs. Though these strategies are ingenious, the villagers said they were not sufficient substitutes for sleeping near their fields, as is traditional practice.

In other cases, villagers described resisting exploitative abuse more directly. In these cases, villagers sometimes negotiated or used forms of discreet false compliance to reduce the burdens placed upon them by SPDC and DKBA soldiers. In the following two quotes, villagers from Bilin and Pa'an Townships describe facing demands placed upon them by the SPDC and DKBA. In both cases, the villagers describe partially acquiescing to the demands, which were

backed by implicit or explicit threats of violence. But in both cases, even when threatened at gunpoint, the villagers describe working to reduce the burden placed upon them.

*“They [the SPDC] ordered the villagers to provide them thatch and money. The first time they ordered us to give them 150,000 kyat (US \$156), but I didn’t give it to them. Then they said, if the villagers couldn’t pay as they ordered, to give them just 50,000 kyat (US \$52). I continued to act like I’ve lost my hearing; even though they reduced the amount money [demanded from villagers], I didn’t give them any. The DKBA also demanded thatch. I sent it to them.”*

- P--- (Male, 38), village head, Hta--- village, Bilin Township (June 2009)

*“Some DKBA soldiers are like robbers, because they come to our village at night and demand alcohol or money by threatening us. One night, two DKBA soldiers came and called me to come out from my house. They pointed at me with their guns and ordered me to find them five bottles of alcohol. Then, one of them said that if I could not find the alcohol for them, I had to give them 5,000 kyat (US \$5.20). I told them I had only 3,000 (US \$3.13) kyat at that time and I could not give them money as they demanded. They told me that I must give them what they had demanded. The same night, another woman had to give them 3,000 kyat, too. We dare not to refuse them because we have to be afraid of them. After that, they asked me to find a motorbike and take them to their camp. I told them that I couldn’t find a bike for them as it was too late at night. Then, they told me if I couldn’t find the motorbike for them, I had to carry them to their camp. Finally, they couldn’t do anything when I refused to do that [carry the soldiers]. They just went back on their own.”*

- Naw W--- (woman, 47), Ht--- village, Pa’an Township (May 2009)

Efforts like these should be recognized as examples of the way that villagers work on a daily basis to resist and reduce abuses by the SPDC and DKBA.<sup>14</sup> That villagers are sometimes able to reduce demands should not, however, be taken to imply that they are always able to do so. In many cases, the force backing demands made against villagers is simply too strong, and frightening. Even when communicated only with a letter.

*“They [DKBA soldiers] rarely come to our village now, but they send order letters and demand things when they need them. Then, we have to go and deliver the things that they demand. They usually demand thatch, but we have to give them money for the thatch. They ask each household to pay 500 kyat (US 50 cents). After we collect the money, we have to deliver the money to them. They also demand thatch from the other villages such as Y---, T---, N---, T---, and Ht---... We have to pay them money for the thatch every year. They also order us to give rice instead of money if we don’t have any money to pay them. We have to do it without fail.<sup>15</sup> We can’t refuse to do it anymore.”*

- Naw K--- (female, 47), village head, Ht--- village, Bilin Township, (February 2009)

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the strategies used by villagers to protect themselves and resist abuse, see *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008.

<sup>15</sup> At this point in the interview, Naw K--- appears to be quoting language commonly used in written order documents issued by both the SPDC and DKBA. Threats in these order documents are most often implied, and phrases like “do it without fail” are sufficient to communicate the force implicitly backing the order. Other common phrases include “it is the village chairperson’s responsibility,” implying that the village head, rather than the SPDC or DKBA, will be to blame if the village suffers a punishment for non-compliance. “The villagers’ lives depend on it,” is another common, though more explicit, threatening phrase seen in written orders. For more on written orders by the SPDC and DKBA, including 75 translated order documents, see *SPDC and DKBA Order Documents: August 2008 to June 2009*, KHRG, August 2009.

## Conclusion

Mostly flat and home to agricultural land, Thaton District is under fully consolidated SPDC control and with few spaces to which villagers can flee to seek safe refuge from abuse. Functionally captive, in some cases literally because of stringent movement restrictions, villagers must balance already precarious livelihood conditions against the exploitative demands of SPDC and DKBA soldiers. *“The villagers cannot avoid these abuses,”* a researcher reporting from the area told KHRG in June. *“There is nowhere to flee and there is no money to pay. People just have to stay poorly in their villages.”*

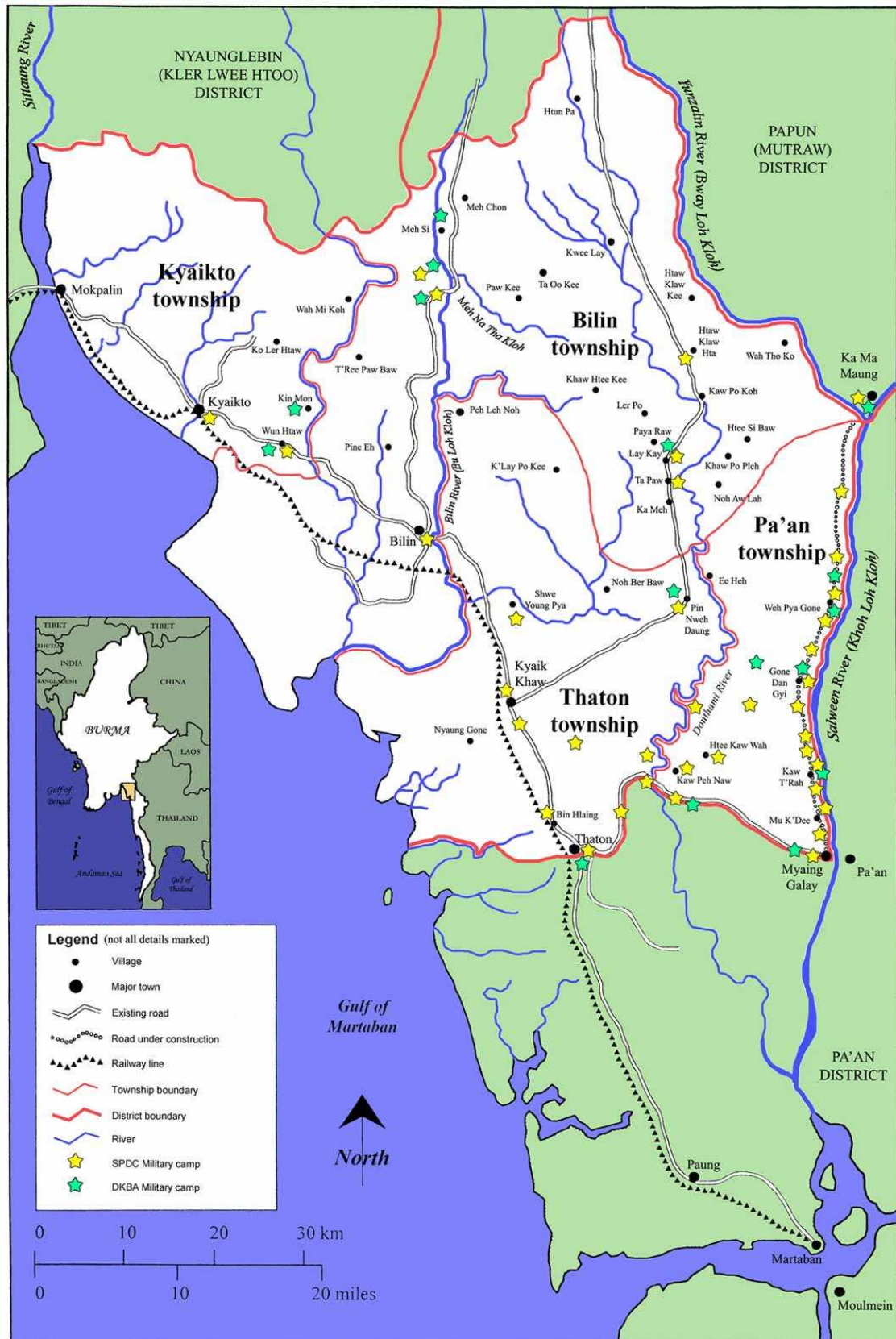
In spite of the difficult conditions, villagers continue to devise strategies to respond to and protect themselves from abuse. Sometimes these are as simple as alarms and scarecrows designed to make up for villagers’ forced absences from their farms. In other cases, these strategies are more direct attempts to resist and reduce exploitative demands issued by the SPDC and DKBA. Though seemingly minor, these are examples of protection efforts that are crucial for villagers often without any other means of responding to abuse.

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

- *Land confiscation and the business of human rights abuse in Thaton District* (April 2009)
- *SPDC and DKBA extortion and forced labour in Thaton District* (November 2008)
- *Villagers’ responses to forced labour, torture and other demands in Thaton District* (October 2008)
- *Oppressed twice over: SPDC and DKBA exploitation and violence against villagers in Thaton District* (March 2008)
- *State agencies, armed groups and the proliferation of oppression in Thaton District* (September 2007)

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Thaton District are presented in KHRG Photo Galleries for 2007, 2008 and 2009. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

# Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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A map showing Burma (Myanmar) in white, surrounded by green landmasses and blue water. Neighboring countries labeled are TIBET, INDIA, CHINA, LAOS, and THAILAND. The word 'Burma' is written in large black letters in the center of the white area. The Gulf of Thailand is labeled to the south, and the Andaman Sea is labeled to the west. A small orange-shaded rectangular area is located on the southern coast of Burma, representing the area of the 1997 cyclone.

