



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## Report from the field

March 31<sup>st</sup> 2009 / KHRG # 2009-F5

### **SPDC and DKBA road construction, forced labour and looting in Papun District**

*Late last year, during SPDC reconstruction work on two main roads leading from Papun town to SPDC camps in the Kyauk Nya and Dagwin areas of Bu Tho Township, KNU/KNLA forces took the opportunity to launch secret guerrilla attacks against the SPDC site. Believing that local Karen villagers had cooperated with KNLA forces, the SPDC began to force villagers and convict porters to work on the roads and also killed and looted villagers' animals and property when it patrolled villages in the area. DKBA forces have also recently demanded forced labour and forced recruitment from Papun villagers during this time. The incidents detailed in this report occurred between December 2008 and February 2009.*

In Papun District – especially Bu Tho and Dwe Loe Townships – the majority of villagers are living under the exploitative rule of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta that rules Burma. As an annual project beginning in the dry season, the SPDC repairs roads that have been washed out during the preceding rainy season. After the rainy season in late 2008, the SPDC began to upgrade two main roads connecting Papun town to the Salween River. When the soldiers began road construction, they used bulldozers for their work. However, the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) soldiers' constant guerrilla attacks and planting of landmines near the roads led to the destruction of many of these bulldozers. In reaction to the attacks, the SPDC decided to forcibly use local villagers and convict porters to rebuild damaged sections of the road and also required them to clear landmines that remained on the roadside. During this time, SPDC soldiers were also actively patrolling the area and entered villages and killed and looted animals belonging to local



This picture, taken on February 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows an SPDC-sponsored school in Htee Bper Kha village. After beginning construction nearly a year ago, the building remains unfinished and villagers have been informed that the SPDC expects the villagers themselves to complete its construction. [Photo: KHRG]

villagers.<sup>1</sup> These roads are being built in order to establish a more direct supply line to SPDC troops operating near the Salween River. Given the recent attacks by the KNLA, construction has slowed and SPDC forces near the river are unable to receive food and supplies. However, according to KHRG researchers, these troops were able to communicate with Thai authorities and were given food and supplies by the Thais. In addition, the Thais reportedly told KNU/KNLA forces to stop their attacks on the SPDC's construction projects.

## Road construction

KHRG researchers operating in the Bu Tho Township have reported that SPDC forces began using villagers and convict porters to rebuild roads damaged by recent KNLA attacks. In one example from December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008, SPDC forces based out of Papun town began rebuilding roads to Kaw Boke, Kyauk Nya and Dagwin. The SPDC forced villagers from the Section #3 area of Papun town<sup>2</sup> to dig the road and clear any landmines that had been planted by the KNLA. SPDC police monitor villagers who are rebuilding the roads because they suspect that villagers provide information about the SPDC for KNU/KNLA forces, despite the fact that there is no evidence that villagers cooperated with the KNU/KNLA during those attacks. In January 2009, KHRG interviewed convict porters who had worked on the road. Below is a quote from an ethnic Rakhine porter named Ko M--- who was able to escape:

*"They ordered us to carry bullets and rations. We had to climb a lot of mountains on the way. When we arrived at their [the SPDC's] military camp, they ordered us to dig a trench and rebuild their vehicle road. Sometimes, they tortured us by beating or punching us. On the way, many prisoners escaped. Some [of the prisoners who tried to flee] were killed, but some escaped."*

## Extortion, forced labour demands and forced recruitment

While road construction work was in progress, SPDC troops were also detailed to patrol areas near the construction sites. When soldiers entered nearby villages, they often shot or stole villagers' property, including pigs, ducks and goats. The villagers reported to KHRG researchers that they were too afraid to complain about the abuses because the soldiers had taken these materials at gunpoint. On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2009, SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #219, of Light Infantry Division (LID) #11, led by Commander Soe Htun, patrolled three villages in Kaw Bpoo (Kaw Boke in Burmese) village tract, Bu Tho Township. When the troops entered the villages, they shot and killed for consumption several pigs and a duck belonging to local residents. The list of the villagers who lost property is included below.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on abuses in Bu Tho Township, see *Forced labour, Extortion and Abuses in Papun District*, KHRG, July 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Papun town is separated into several different administrative sections in order to better facilitate SPDC control over area residents. Section #3 covers the northern segment of the town.

#	Villages	Villager name	Property destroyed
1	H----	Saw P---	One pig
		Naw L---	One pig
		Naw B---	One pig
2	He----	Naw H---	One pig
		Saw L---	One pig
3	G----	Saw B---	One duck

In another incident on January 19<sup>th</sup> 2009 at noon, the same group of SPDC troops patrolled the flat fields near Gkyoh Koh Der and saw a villager named Saw M---. Without questioning him, the soldiers detained Saw M--- and fired their guns close to his ear five times in order to intimidate him. They then stole two goats, one gourd, one pack of chilli and a bunch of bananas. Saw M--- was too afraid of the soldiers to complain about the looting.

Extortion and forced labour demands in Papun have also been perpetrated by members of the SPDC-allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). In one incident from January 27<sup>th</sup> 2009, the DKBA's Gk'Saw Wah Battalion, led by battalion commander Saw Hser Htih and based at Meh Mweh Hta, demanded villagers from Meh Koo village tract to collect and provide them with thatch shingles. The villages that were forced to perform this labour were Toh Muh (250 thatch shingles), Meh Koo Hta (250 thatches shingles) and Meh Koo Kee (250 thatch shingles). Villages in Meh Nyoo village tract were forced to give a total of 1,000 thatch shingles and 88,500 kyat (US \$86.76) in cash.

DKBA soldiers not only make forced labour demands on villagers, but also forcibly conscript them into military service or else fine them for non-compliance. From January 25<sup>th</sup> to January 28<sup>th</sup> 2009, DKBA forces based in the Meh Bpa area demanded Meh Bpa villagers to give them four soldiers. The DKBA told the villagers that, if they didn't provide them with the new recruits, every male member of the village would be required to attend basic army training and then fight on behalf of the DKBA. And, the threat went further to say that, if none of those male villagers attended basic military training, the villagers would have to give the DKBA 800,000 kyat (US \$784.31). The DKBA makes these kinds of threats often in order to extort money from the villagers—DKBA forces know that villagers are often unwilling to give them new recruits.



In this photograph – taken on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 – a 42-year-old villager named Saw P---, carries 25 thatch shingles to be delivered to DKBA Gka Hsaw Wah Battalion. He is shown here being followed by his son. Although he was able to travel with his friend by boat to deliver the shingles, other villagers have had to take the shingles by foot—a 6 to 7 hour walk. [Photo: KHRG]



This picture was taken on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 and shows thatch shingles that residents of M--village had stacked before delivering them to DKBA camp commander Puh Tar Thoo who is based out of Meh Mweh military camp. Villagers here had to collect 1,000 thatch shingles and deliver them to the DKBA by January 25<sup>th</sup> 2009. DKBA soldiers didn't compensate the villagers for the thatch nor for the oil used by the boats used to deliver them. [Photo: KHRG]

## Conclusion

The SPDC continues to use forced labour to repair and build roads running throughout Karen State. The recent road construction projects in Bu Tho Township are likely linked to the SPDC's Salween dams project since the two roads terminate at future dam sites.<sup>3</sup> But the primary purpose of these roads is to further increase the SPDC's militarization of Papun District and to increase the SPDC's exploitative control over district residents. Villagers who are forced to work on road construction are under the danger of either tripping a KNLA-planted landmine or being further exploited and abused by SPDC forces. Such SPDC and DKBA abuses will likely lead more villagers to decide to leave their homes and relocate to internally displaced hiding sites.

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

- *Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Papun District* (February 2009)
- *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State* (November 2008)
- *Mortar attacks, landmines and the destruction of schools in Papun District* (August 2008)
- *Burma Army attacks and civilian displacement in northern Papun District* (June 2008)
- *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State* (April 2008)

<sup>3</sup> For more information about construction-related abuses, see *SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians*, KHRG, January 27<sup>th</sup> 2006.

- *Village-level decision making in responding to forced relocation: A case from Papun District* (March 2008)

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Papun District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* (updated February 2009) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006*. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).





## A map of Burma and its surrounding regions. Burma is shown in white, with a yellow rectangular area in the south. Neighboring countries are labeled: Tibet to the north, India to the west, China to the north and east, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the south. Bodies of water are labeled: Gulf of Bengal to the west, Andaman Sea to the southwest, and Gulf of Thailand to the southeast.

