



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**News Bulletin**

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## **Toungoo Situation Update: Tantabin Township, January to March 2012**

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*This report includes a situation update submitted to KHRG in March 2012 by a community member describing events occurring in Tantabin Township, Toungoo District. It provides information on rations resupply operations by Tatmadaw MOC #9 along the vehicle road from Kler La army camp to Bu Hsa Hkee army camp from January to March 2012, in which soldiers from MOC #9 and LID #66 burnt the vehicle road and the roadside in order to clear vegetation for security purposes, resulting in the destruction of villagers' cardamom and betelnut plantations. The community member also described attacks on villagers' livelihoods and food supply, with the burning of 177 acres of villagers' cardamom plantations by LID #66 alone at the end of March 2012. Recent evidence of abuse by IB #35, under the control of LID #66, in forced relocation sites, such as using villagers for forced labour to clear weeds around military camps, is also provided. In one instance, Y--- villagers responded to the burning of the vehicle road by clearing away dry leaves in order to prevent the fire from spreading to their adjacent plantations, however, MOC #9 soldiers proceeded to burn the villagers' plantations nonetheless.*

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### **Situation Update | Tantabin Township, Toungoo District (January to April 2012)**

*The following situation update was written by a community member in Toungoo District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Burma Army Situation**

There are two Burma army [Tatmadaw] troops operating in Tantabin Township, Toungoo District. In January 2012, Military Operations Command [MOC] #9 was sending rations between military camps in Toungoo District. During the time that MOC #9 was responsible for sending rations, Light Infantry Division [LID] #66 was responsible for road security. In late February 2012, MOC #9 went back [to Kler La army camp] and LID #66 was still in control of the area. LID #66 is based in Kler La army camp and their commander's name is Win Bo Shwe.

Under LID #66, there are two Tactical Operations Commands [TOC]. TOC #1 is based in Play Hsa Loh army camp and TOC #2 is based in Bu Hsa Hkee army camp. Under these two TOCs, there are seven battalions currently occupying villages in Tantabin Township. Infantry Battalion

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<sup>1</sup>KHRG trains villagers in eastern Burma to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When writing situation updates, villagers are encouraged to summarise recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important, and present their opinions or perspective on abuse and other local dynamics in their area.

[IB] #1 soldiers are based in 16-miles and 20-miles army camps, and in the villages of P---, P'Leh Wa, A--- and H---. Light Infantry Battalion [LIB] #5 is based in K--- and in 48-miles. LIB #6 was based in Y---, Naw Soe and Thee Muh Paw Soe villages. IB #11 is based in Kay Bpoo village. IB #35 is based in T--- and O--- villages. IB #14 is based in Ht--- and W--- villages. IB #80 is based in Th---, R--- and B--- villages.

The Tatmadaw and KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] made an agreement that the Tatmadaw soldiers are not allowed to go further than 150 yards from vehicle roads. Likewise, the KNLA soldiers are not allowed to go closer than 150 yards to the vehicle roads. However, sometimes the Tatmadaw soldiers go into the restricted area to fish in the river. Sometimes, they have encounters with villagers.

## **Villagers Livelihood Situation**

In Tantabin Township, Toungoo District, the main occupation for villagers is growing cardamom, betelnut and betelnut leaves<sup>2</sup>, durian, and mangosteen plantations. A very few number of villagers farm hill fields. After the ceasefire talks between the KNU [Karen National Union] and the Burma Government in 2012, the situation started to become more flexible and the villagers became more confident in talking to local Tatmadaw officers. However, human rights abuses continue, such as villagers being forced to porter military rations when the Tatmadaw transports rations between army camps. When this happened, villagers were also still forced to provide wood, thatch and bamboo to the local Tatmadaw army camp. Villagers are still forced to do work, such as transporting things for soldiers that were sent to them from their families. Movement restrictions [by the Tatmadaw] also still occur for villagers.

On April 28<sup>th</sup> 2012, IB #35, based in Play Hsa Loh army camp, forced nine T--- villagers (five women and four men) to cut and clear overgrown weeds around the Play Hsa Loh army camp. On the next day, April 29<sup>th</sup>, IB #35 soldiers forced four T--- villagers (one woman and three men) to clear the weeds around the camp.

In the final week of March 2012, LID #66 soldiers from Kyee Chaung military camp encountered two villagers; one villager was from Hp--- village and another villager was from N--- village. LID #66 soldiers threatened the villagers and took away the net that they had brought for fishing. Kyee Chaung military camp is based close to K---, Hp---, N--- and M--- villages. Soldiers from Kyee Chaung often go to Tha Aye Loh River and Klay Loh River to fish, and they use poison to catch fish. During March 2012, LID #66 used poison to catch fish. Three people from Th--- village caught and ate the fish in the river, and after that they vomited.

In the last week of March and in early April 2012, 200 soldiers from LID #66 arrived at Kyee Chaung military camp in K--- village, and some others went to 48-miles camp. They came to repair their camp and they brought a handsaw.

On February 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, LID #66 burned two Y--- villagers' cardamom plantations. These plantations covered three acres of land, with one acre belonging to one villager and two acres belonging to another villager. On February 26<sup>th</sup> 2012, LID #66 burned four cardamom plantations, destroying 52 acres of land belonging to D--- villagers.

On March 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, MOC #9 burned an area of plantations in C--- and D--- villages, including 110 acres of the villagers' cardamom plantations. The owners of the plantations in H--- and D--- villages had fled from their villages in 2005 and were not present when their plantations were

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<sup>2</sup>In Burmese, "betelnut" and "betel leaf" are referred to as "konywet" and "konthih," as if they are from the same plant. The Burmese names are also commonly used by Karen language speakers. "Betel nut" is the seed from an Areca Palm tree, areca catechu; "Betel leaf" is the leaf of the Piper betel vine, belonging to the piperaceae family. See "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

burned.<sup>3</sup> The next day, on March 15<sup>th</sup>, MOC #9 burned 35 acres of cardamom plantations belonging to eight villagers' from H--- village. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, MOC #9 burned 12 acres of cardamom plantations belonging to three S--- villagers. On March 18<sup>th</sup> 2012, soldiers from MOC #9 were transporting rations from Y--- village to Bu Hsa Hkee army camp. While returning to Kler La army camp, the soldiers began to burn the forest beside the vehicle road connecting Bu Hsa Hkee and Kler La army camps. The Y--- villagers tried to *wa may* [clear the dry leaves], but MOC #9 soldiers went and burned the villagers' cardamom plantations.

Also in March 2012, LID #66 burned four E--- villagers' cardamom plantations and three of their betelnut plantations in the Ta Thoo Hta plantation area. The E--- villagers had also planted wild banana trees in the area that was burned. In the Wa Doh Hta plantation area, LID #66 burned three of the villagers' cardamom plantations and four of the villagers' betelnut fields. In the Baw Law farming area, LID #66 burned six of the villagers' cardamom plantations and four of the villagers' betelnut plantations. In the Na Hka Hta plantation area, LID #66 burned six of the villagers' cardamom plantations and seven of the villagers' betelnut plantations. Before the fire completely died out, eight villages' cardamom and betelnut plantations had been burned down. These villages are Y---, H---, D---, S---, L---, H---, A--- and E---. Altogether, 177 acres of cardamom and betelnut plantations fields were burned down.

As most of the villagers in Toungoo District cultivate cardamom, durian trees and betelnut trees for their livelihood, the destruction of their plantations by LID #66 and MOC #9 poses a problem for the villagers. Specifically, it causes a problem for the villagers because it takes a long time for cardamom and betelnut plants to grow fruit before the villagers are able to sell them as a source of income.<sup>4</sup> Cardamom crops take four years to produce fruit again after they are burned.

## Villagers' concerns

Villagers in Tantabin Township, Toungoo district are happy that their situation has become more flexible. At the same time, the whole community is concerned that the situation will get worse again, as they still have to do work for Tatmadaw soldiers and they still see more Tatmadaw troops being deployed in their area. Moreover, the Tatmadaw soldiers have more freedom to patrol the area compared to the past, because the soldiers do not have to worry about being ambushed or attacked by KNLA soldiers.

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

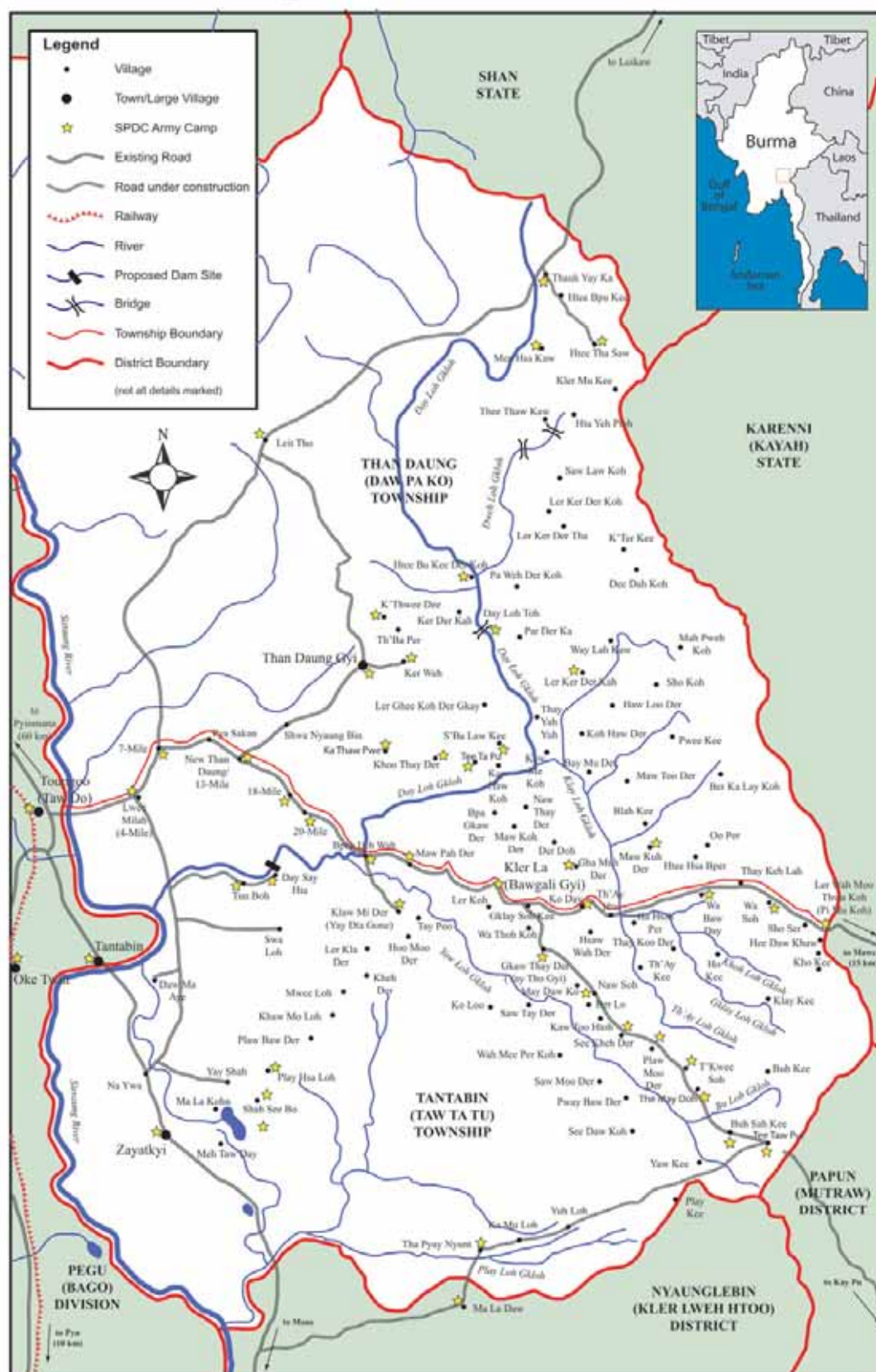
- "Toungoo Situation Update: Received in November 2011," (April 2012)
- "Toungoo Interview: Saw E---, September 2011," (April 2012)□
- "Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw L---, December 2011," (April 2012)□
- "Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw M---, December 2011," (March 2012)□
- "Ongoing forced labour and movement restrictions in Toungoo District," (March 2012)□
- "Incident Report: Forced labour and killing in Toungoo District, July 2011," (March 2012)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: November 2011 to January 2012," (March 2012)

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<sup>3</sup>For more information on the Northern Offensive in Toungoo District between 2005 and 2006, please see *One Year On: Continuing Abuses in Toungoo District*, KHRG, November 2006.

<sup>4</sup>The soil quality and terrain in much of Toungoo District supports only limited rice or paddy farming. For this reason, most households are dependent on income generated from various plantation crops, such as betelnut, betel leaf, cardamom, durian and dog fruit. The loss of a year's crop can have devastating consequences for villagers' long-term food-security; see "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

## Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



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