



## Report from the field

August 5<sup>th</sup> 2008 / KHRG #2008-F10

### Military expansion and exploitation in Nyaunglebin District

*With the SPDC Army's continued expansion in Nyaunglebin District, local villagers not under military control have had to once again flee into the surrounding forest while troops have forcibly interned other villagers in military-controlled relocation sites. These relocation sites, typically in the plains of western Nyaunglebin, alongside army camps or SPDC-controlled vehicle roads, serve as containment centres from which army personnel appropriate labour, money, food and supplies to support the military's ongoing expansion in the region. Extortion by military officers operating in Nyaunglebin District has included forced 'donations' allegedly collected for distribution to survivors of Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta. This field report looks at the situation in Nyaunglebin up to the end of May 2008.*

Nyaunglebin District of northern Karen State has been heavily affected by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)'s northern Karen State offensive which has been ongoing since the end of 2005. The district has seen an expansion of troop numbers, camps, bases, relocation sites and vehicle roads. The Burma Army has primarily established relocation sites in the plains areas of western Nyaunglebin, next to army camps or alongside military-controlled vehicle roads. Those villagers now living under SPDC control are facing persistent demands for labour, money, food and supplies which have cut into their own work time, financial savings and nutritional needs. The main SPDC military units currently operating in Nyaunglebin District are Military Operations Command (MOC) #21 and Light Infantry Division #101.



A family of displaced villagers from Mone township, Nyaunglebin District eats a meal at a hiding site on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008. [Photo: KHRG]

### Burma Army expansion

*"We arrived here [at an IDP hiding site in Nyaunglebin District] on the first of December [2007]. The SPDC soldiers attacked our village, so we had to come here. One villager died when the army attacked our village. The child [who died] was just 17 years old."*

- Naw P--- (female, 45), Ny--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

Throughout 2008, Burma Army troops have been conducting military operations in Nyaunglebin District as a continuation of the SPDC's northern Karen State offensive, which is now in its third year. In April and May 2008, for example, Burma Army troops expanded

into the vicinity of T'Gkaw Der village, Kheh Der village tract, in the Thaw Ngeh Der area. Soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #276 of MOC #21 entered the area of T'Gkaw Der village and set up a new camp on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2008. Following this, troops from LIBs #253, 257 and 335, of Tactical Operation Command (TOC) #2, LID #101, also arrived in the area of T'Gkaw Der village and established a camp on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2008.

Prior to the arrival of these military units, residents of both T'Gkaw Der village and nearby Thaw Ngeh Der village had received information about the imminent incursions and were therefore able to flee prior to the arrival of the soldiers. In some cases, villagers had prepared hidden food stores in the forest in expectation of having to flee.

*“Now, the soldiers are near to us so we dare not to do anything. When they came to our village, we had to flee for our lives into the forest. We built our rice storage [shed] secretly in the forest. If the SPDC army soldiers hadn't come to our village to disturb us, we wouldn't have needed to worry about our survival.”*

- Naw Hs--- (female, 48), T--- village, Kyauk Kyi township (May 2008)

The villagers also took some other food and belongings with them when they fled to the hiding sites in the surrounding forest. While these villagers had wanted to return to their abandoned farm fields in order to conduct agricultural work, they were impeded by the continued presence of Burma Army troops.

Subsequently, on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2008, Burma Army troops from MOC #21 attacked and burned down 11 homes as well as villagers' personal belongings at Meh Lay Kee village, which is also located in the area of T'Gkaw Der village. As a result of the continued presence of the soldiers and ongoing attacks, the local displaced communities in hiding – including the previously displaced communities from T'Gkaw Der and Thaw Ngeh Der villages – were prevented from accessing their farm fields and thus engaging in their livelihoods work. As the period of May to June coincides with the start of the rainy season, the villagers had to rush to build new shelters at their displaced hiding site. Due to the hurried preparation, these structures were, at least initially, inadequate to keep out the rain. Furthermore, most displaced communities lack sufficient medical supplies. Some pregnant women at displaced hiding sites in Nyaunglebin have had no more than the warmth of a fire while they delivered, while others have not even been able to employ to this minor comfort. Many of the displaced villagers in this area have also developed diarrhoea due to the poor conditions at their hiding sites.



The displaced children shown here at a hiding site in Mone township are removing paddy seeds from amongst the already husked rice while their parents are out working on their hillside farm field. [Photo: KHRG]

*“They [the displaced villagers] don't have good shelters and also don't get enough food to eat. They are facing different kinds of diseases such as fever, headaches and diarrhoea. They have had to look after each other. Some of the villagers haven't had enough food or good quality medicine, so they've died in the forest. Some pregnant women have had to deliver their babies in the forest. They were only able to use a fire [to keep warm after delivery], as they didn't have any medicine when they gave birth to their babies. They usually treat themselves with traditional medicines, but some have died when they've delivered their babies.”*

- Saw P--- (male, 42), T--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

*“Every time when the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers have arrived at our village, we’ve had to flee. So, we haven’t had time to take care of our paddy plants in the fields. They [the farm fields] are covered with weeds. If the SPDC didn’t disturb us, we’d have enough food every year. For me, I dare not go and check my betel nut plantation because the SPDC Army camp is located beside my plantation.”*

- Naw K--- (female, 23), Gk--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

Education for the children of these displaced communities has also been obstructed, as the newly displaced villagers had to shut down their schools when they fled their homes. Some of the teenage students from these communities have been able to attend schools in other areas and the displaced communities from T’Gkaw Der and neighbouring villages have, furthermore, built a new school at their displacement site in order to continue their children’s education.



The picture above left shows a partially constructed school at a displaced hiding site in Nyaunglebin District shortly after villagers fled from their homes. In the photo to the right, villagers are preparing bamboo posts for the construction of new homes at the same hiding site. Both photos were taken on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008. [Photos: KHRG]

*“[The Burma Army soldiers attacked the village] three times, and they took all of our things. The first time, I had just delivered my baby five days before and I had to flee from the soldiers. I couldn’t carry anything with me and when I was in the forest I wasn’t allowed to make a fire to warm myself. We were afraid that the soldiers would see the smoke from the fire. I had to tell [myself] that I was a strong woman. The SPDC Army soldiers have already arrived in our village eight times. Each time they’ve taken our pigs, chickens and ducks. And they’ve also cut down our mango trees; not just taken the fruit. The second time when we fled into the forest, we had to sleep there for two nights and, when the soldiers left the village, we came back to our village. Sometimes, when I fled into the forest, I didn’t have anything [brought from the village] to eat and I also couldn’t find any food [in the forest] to eat. We’ve always had to flee for our lives, so we haven’t had time to conduct our hill field [agriculture] work... Since I was 22 years old... I’ve had to flee from the SPDC army soldiers. Now I’m already 53 years old. I can say that I’ve had to flee from the army soldiers for the whole of my life. Sometimes, when I’ve slept in the forest, I’ve had to sleep under the trees and even when the mosquitoes have bitten me, I haven’t cared about it. Also, I’ve had to eat uncooked rice at the hiding sites. If the SPDC Army soldiers stay to control us, we’ll never be able to see peace and freedom in our lifetime.”*

- Naw Gk--- (female, 53), Gk--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

In conjunction with the ongoing expansion of Burma Army operations in Nyaunglebin District, SPDC personnel have been forcibly relocating communities closer to military-controlled vehicle roads and army camps. This relocation campaign has been continuing gradually for years. Relocation sites have therefore been expanding as new communities are forced to join those previously relocated. This has meant that the available arable land –

itself extremely limited – has been further reduced, leaving the newest residents even worse off. Facilities are typically inadequate, especially for the first arrivals at the relocation sites, although in some cases schools and health clinics have later been established. On top of the land constraints which hinder livelihoods, local Burma Army troops make use of the interred populations for regular forced labour carrying food supplies, cleaning and repairing army camps and other tasks. Sometimes, villagers are able to negotiate with local Burma Army officers to return to their former homes. This is especially the case where livelihoods can simply not be maintained on the limited land available at a given relocation site. The following testimony by a local villager, who spoke to KHRG in April 2008, illustrates the conditions of life in Tha Bpyay Nyunt, a relocation site in Mone township, Nyaunglebin District.

*“The SPDC came to our village and forced us to relocate to Tha Bpyay Nyunt [relocation site]. We have faced big problems surviving. We don’t have any land to do our work here and also we dare not to go back to work at our [abandoned] homeland. We moved here over two years ago. Another issue is that they [the local Burma Army soldiers] always order us to do loh ah pay<sup>1</sup> [forced labour], such as clearing [the forest growth from the sides of] their vehicle road and carrying their rations. The orders have come from [SPDC] LIB #320. It [LIB #320] is based at Tha Bpyay Nyunt and the commander’s name is Soe Win. We’ve had to carry their rations from Tha Bpyay Nyunt to Gk’Moo Loh. They also ordered two people from each village to serve as set tha<sup>2</sup> [messengers] for three days [at a time]. Every time when we went to do their work, they guarded us with guns. Both old and young people have to go for loh ah pay. The oldest people were above 50 and the youngest were around 12. They didn’t give us any payment or provide us with food. Now we don’t have time to do our own work. We always have to be afraid of the SPDC army soldiers. Nobody dares confront them. When we moved to the relocation site, they gave each household an area of land 30 feet [9.14 metres] by 50 feet [15.24 metres]. The space was very small for us, but we couldn’t do anything about it. And the other villages have also had to do loh ah pay like us as well. They’ve been ordering us to do forced labour work from January until now [April]. People who serve as set tha must clean the army camp and carry their [the soldiers’] rice as well. Sometimes they [the villagers doing set tha duty] also carry their [the soldiers’] rations. They [the Burma Army] built their army camp at Gk’Moo Loh village... [At the relocation site] there is a school that goes up to 10<sup>th</sup> standard. Luckily, the students haven’t needed to pay for the school fees, but they’ve had to pay for the textbooks by themselves.”*

## **Forced labour**

*“We’ve had to repair the vehicle road in the area of Gk---. They [SPDC soldiers] ordered us to clear the side of the road and fill in the holes [in the road]. We had to sleep there for a day. They didn’t give us any payment. We had to bring along our own food. The order was from Battalion #237 which is based at Maw Gkeh Tha Bper Koh and the commander’s name is Ko Ko Aung. Some people didn’t go to do loh ah pay [forced labour], so they hired people and paid them 40,000 kyat for four days...For the people who aren’t able to hire others, they must go themselves. During that time, a man injured his leg. The soldiers didn’t take care of him. That man was over 30-years-old and he has two children.”*

- Saw Th--- (male, 40), --- village, Mone township (April 2008)

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<sup>1</sup> *Loh ah pay*; A Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour; although traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects.

<sup>2</sup> *Set tha*; Forced labour 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.

Along with those villagers residing in SPDC-controlled relocation sites, residents of other communities that may not have had to relocate but have nevertheless come under SPDC control also face regular demands for forced labour. Recent examples of the types of forced labour which SPDC soldiers have demanded include: clearing the forest overgrowth from the sides of vehicle roads, repairing and resurfacing vehicle roads, repairing buildings at army camps, *set tha* duty as messengers, fabricating and delivering building supplies and carrying army rations. For example, Soe Win, commander of LIB #320, Military Operations Command (MOC) #21, based at Tha Bpyay Nyunt relocation site (mentioned above), forced the residents of Gk'Moo Loh, Ma La Daw and Maw Gkeh Tha Bper Koh villages to construct a vehicle road from Tha Bpyay Nyunt to Buh Hsa Kee, in southern Toungoo District.

*"We must always work for the SPDC, such as by repairing the vehicle road. They gave the order to us [and the villagers went to do the forced labour] on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2008, and [the villagers finished the work and] came back on March 18<sup>th</sup> 2008. The order was from [SPDC] LIB #320. At that time there were 10 people who went for loh ah pay. When we constructed the road, the SPDC military soldiers guarded us. They were worried that we would escape. We had to do the road construction for the whole day. It went from 7:30 [am] to 5:00 [pm]. On another day, we had to do the other things. They [SPDC soldiers] accused us of planting landmines, so we're [caught] in between the two armed groups [SPDC and KNLA]. The commander's name is Soe Win. He led Column #2. And the other two leaders were both younger than me. On the last day [of the four days of labour], they provided us with some food to eat... We started to do loh ah pay in March [and have continued] until April. They haven't given us anything for payment."*

- Saw Gk--- (male, 42), M--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

Incidents of forced labour, while enforced with the (often implicit) threat of violence, entail other risks to those villagers who do comply. For example, due to the heavy landmine deployment in sections of Nyaunglebin District (and other parts of Karen State), particular forced labour tasks can require villagers to traverse landmine-contaminated areas. In March 2008, SPDC authorities ordered Saw Gk---, a 34-year-old villager in Mone township, to collect, prepare and deliver bamboo poles. While collecting the bamboo at 3:30 in the afternoon of Monday, March 31, Saw Gk--- stepped on a landmine and was badly injured. Fellow villagers took him to a hospital where the doctors had to amputate the mangled end of his leg in order to prevent infection and allow the wound to heal.

Persistent forced labour, such as that described above, cuts into villagers' time for work on their own livelihoods. For agriculture (which is the predominant form of livelihood in Karen State), loss of work time can be disastrous, especially during crucial periods in the crop cycle.

*"They [the villagers] usually do agriculture and maintain plantations. We haven't had a good opportunity to do our plantation work. The SPDC army camp is located beside our village. So we always have to do loh ah pay for them. We don't have much time to do our own work. Now we're doing their work, such as cutting bamboo poles and delivering them to their [SPDC] camp."*

- Saw B--- (male, 24), Th--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

*"We had to carry their [SPDC] rations from Tha Bpyay Nyunt to Gk'Moo Loh village. They didn't allow us to return to our homes and check on our plantations. Therefore, we didn't have time to do our own work anymore. Some of our durian plants and betel nut plants died because they didn't get enough water... Even though we've [now] returned home to work, we believe that we won't have time to do our own work. We realise that we'll have to spend our time doing work for the SPDC army soldiers who are based at our village now."*

-Saw Bp--- (male), Y--- village, Mone Township (April 2008)

On top of the forced labour for SPDC personnel, villagers in Nyaunglebin may also be expected to carry supplies for KNLA soldiers operating in the area. Their views towards this work, however, tend to be much less critical than towards the persistent and varied duties enforced by SPDC personnel. For example, Saw Th---, a 40-year-old villager from Mone township, responded to KHRG’s questions about KNLA operations in his village in the following way:

*“Yes [KNLA soldiers have arrived in the village], but they haven’t forced us to do things for them. Sometimes they’ve asked us to carry their rations. If they have any food, they share [it] with us.”*

42-year-old Saw Gk---, also from Mone township, responded in the following way to the question of whether residents of his village had to do work for KNLA soldiers:

*“Yes, but they’re not like the SPDC soldiers. We’ve sometimes had to carry their rations. We can share our food with each other while we are on the trip. We are happy to do things for them [the KNLA soldiers].”*

## Extortion

*“They [SPDC soldiers] always come to the village and order us to provide them with food such as pigs, goats, chickens and vegetables. They never give us any payment. We dare not to say anything to them even though they take our things without our permission.”*

Saw B--- (male, 24), Th--- village, Mone township (April 2008)

Villagers living in SPDC-controlled areas of Nyaunglebin face regular demands for money, food and supplies which soldiers have sometimes tried to justify with a variety of excuses. Following the destruction wrought by Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta on May 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> 2008, Ko Ko Oo, commander of SPDC LIB #590, ordered villagers in northwestern Nyaunglebin District to hand over money by May 26<sup>th</sup> 2008, which Ko Ko Oo said would be sent to victims of the cyclone. In other areas, villagers were given until the start of June 2008 to provide the money. Some of the villages forced to provide this money along with amounts required of them, where available, are listed in the table below.

	Village name	Amount demanded (kyat)
1	M---	350,000
2	A---	350,000
3	Ht---	700,000
4	Bp---	400,000
5	K---	N/A
6	Bp---	N/A
7	S---	N/A
8	Bpa---	N/A

This appropriation of funds was inappropriate not only because Ko Ko Oo enforced them on communities already overburdened by regular demands for labour, money, food and supplies, but also because it is unlikely that this money will reach the survivors of Cyclone Nargis.<sup>3</sup> A KHRG researcher operating in the area described the event as follows:

*“Recently, they [SPDC officials] came to collect money from [the villagers] and they said that they would distribute it to the [Cyclone] Nargis victims. Some villagers*

<sup>3</sup> Burma tied Somalia for last place (ranked 179<sup>th</sup>) in the world according to Transparency International’s 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index ([http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2007](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007)).

*couldn't pay it, but they couldn't refuse the order. For example, the villages such as K---, Bp---, S--- and Bpa--- had to provide money. For the villagers who were quite rich, they had to provide 20,000 kyat each, and for the daily workers, they had to provide 3,000 kyat. No one could refuse it and [the villagers] had to give the money by June 1<sup>st</sup> 2008."*

Enforced donations, where the money collected may actually be used on the stated objective, are in fact common across Burma; with SPDC officials typically using the Pali term *dana*, or meritorious giving, and couching the extortion in a Buddhist worldview. However, the enforced character of such 'donations' undermines much, if not all, of their legitimacy in the eyes of the populace.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Nyaunglebin District has seen some of the largest programmes in Karen State of forced relocation into SPDC-controlled villages and relocation sites over the past few years. At the same time, the Burma Army has continued to expand its presence in the area and oversee the construction of camps, bases and roads using primarily the uncompensated labour and resources of the local civilian population. This enforced and uncompensated appropriation of labour, money, food and supplies from civilians under SPDC-control has undermined villagers' efforts to maintain their own means of livelihood.

For background on the human rights situation in Nyaunglebin District see the following reports:

- *Attacks, killings and increased militarisation in Nyaunglebin District, (KHRG, January 2008).*
- *SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response, (KHRG, September 2006)*
- *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005 – 2006 Northern Karen State Offensive (KHRG, August 2006)*
- *Forced relocation, restrictions and abuses in Nyaunglebin District (KHRG, July 2006)*
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee (KHRG, July 2006)*
- *SPDC operations in Kler Lweh Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District (KHRG, April 2006)*
- *Attempted rapes and other abuses in northern Karen Districts (KHRG, March 2006)*
- *SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians (KHRG, January 2006)*
- *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts (KHRG, October 2001)*

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

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<sup>4</sup> Ingrid Jordt writes that SPDC officials seek to accumulate merit for themselves by enforcing such donations on the populace. (See Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Social Construction of Power*. Athens: University of Ohio Press. p.133).



# Karen Districts



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