



Report from the field
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Military movements, forced labour and extortion in Nyaunglebin District

In some areas of Nyaunglebin District, north-western Karen State, frontline army camps from which SPDC troops withdrew at the end of 2008 remain empty. Elsewhere in the district, however, the Burma Army is active with regular patrols amongst villages in both the plains and hills. In those areas where the SPDC maintains a consolidated hold on the civilian population, Burma Army personnel continue to demand forced labour and extort money and supplies from local communities. This report describes the military situation in Nyaunglebin District from January to March 2009 as well as the Burma Army's continued use of forced labour and extortion of the local population.

Local Burma Army forces operating in Nyaunglebin District of north-western Karen State are currently not as active amongst some displaced communities hiding in the hills as they have been over the previous three years. Nonetheless, Burma Army patrols continue (in some areas twice a month) as do the problems they cause for local communities. However, these patrols have focused more on communities living in the plains and the base of the hills than they have on those communities living higher up the slopes. At least this has been the case from late December 2008 until March 2009 – the period covered in this report.

"In previous years they [Burma Army troops] ordered us to carry their supplies when they went [on patrol] into the mountains, but this year they haven't asked us."

- Saw B--- (male, 46), Bp--- village, Mone Township (January 2009)

At the end of December 2008, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Military Operations Command (MOC) #1 replaced SPDC Light Infantry Division (LID) #101 as the primary Burma Army unit operating in Nyaunglebin District. Since that time Burma Army forces under the command of MOC #1 have been primarily active in Kyauk Kyi and Mone townships of central and northern Nyaunglebin District respectively, especially along the vehicle roads connecting towns and SPDC army camps and bases.

After LID #101 army units operating in Nyaunglebin District were removed in December 2008, newly deployed troops from MOC #1 were stationed at just some of the camps from which LID #101 troops had been withdrawn. The withdrawal without replacement of troops from some frontline army camps in Nyaunglebin District parallels the Burma Army's similar withdrawal of troops from 13 army camps in Papun District, further east.¹ The Burma Army has invested significant time and resources over the past three years in its efforts to extend military control and establish new army camps across Nyaunglebin District and elsewhere in northern Karen State, especially higher into the region's forested hills. It is therefore not clear what has motivated the SPDC's recent reduction, if only partial and temporary, of its military presence and abandonment of some relatively new army camps.

¹ For a previous report on the Burma Army's abandonment of army camps in Papun District, see *IDP conditions and the rape of a young girl in Papun District*, KHRG, April 2009.

Some local observers have speculated that the reason for the withdrawal (without replacement) of troops from some frontline (especially upland) army camps is motivated by the large number of casualties sustained by the Burma Army due to Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) attacks in these areas. Alternatively, it has been proposed that the SPDC intends to train and redeploy the withdrawn troops as security for the country's 2010 elections. However, there is little evidence for either of these hypotheses. It may simply be that resource and capacity deficits within the Burma Army have finally undermined operations in Karen State of the regime's long-overstretched troops.²

It is important not to overemphasise the reduction in SPDC military units from some upland areas of Nyaunglebin District. Many Burma Army troops remain in the region and continue to harass local communities. For example, troops from SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #502 have been active in the area of Gkwee Lah, Ler Wah and Gklaw Pah Hta and Meh Koh villages, which lie in the forested uplands of Kyauk Kyi Township outside of firm SPDC control. Also, starting in February 2009, SPDC LIBs #115, 501 and 503 under the command of MOC #1 began patrolling the areas of Ta Gkaw Der and Thaw Weh Der villages which are located in the hills of Kyauk Kyi Township. These patrols have remained in the area of Ta Gkaw Der and Thaw Weh Der villages for typically a week at a time before returning to their camp. However, on some occasions the patrols have remained in the area for up to two to three weeks. These patrols have continued until at least mid March 2009.

When Burma Army patrols are operating near to villages and hill fields outside of firm SPDC control, local residents are typically unwilling to risk openly tending their farm fields due to the threat of detection and attack by Burma Army forces. Therefore, in some cases villagers have remained nearby, monitoring troop movements, and returned clandestinely to tend their farm fields when the patrols have moved on.

"The SPDC Army soldiers are from W---. It's not so far from us. This military [unit] is new. They moved here recently and they're patrolling frequently. We've nearly encountered them every time we're going to our hill fields."

- Naw H--- (female, 42), Kh--- village, Kyauk Kyi Township (March 2009)

"This year [2009], I've had to flee twice when I went to my hill field. We discussed with each other [amongst the villagers] that there was no one to monitor the security situation while we were working in the fields. So we divided up groups to take responsibility for security and [now] a team of two people patrols around the hill field for security."

- Saw Kh--- (male, 24), M--- village, Kyauk Kyi Township (March 2009)

Ongoing Burma Army patrols have posed a tangible threat to local communities in the hills of Nyaunglebin District due to the SPDC's continued shoot-on-sight policy and deployment of landmines in and around civilian areas. On January 16th 2009, soldiers from Column #1 of SPDC LIB #115, under the command of Moe Zaw Hla, shot and killed Cho Bpyo, a resident of Hsaw Mee Loo village, Mone Township, while he was resting in a field hut at his betel nut plantation. After he Cho Bpyo was shot, his body was removed from the area. Local villagers were thus unable to retrieve it and conduct funeral rites. Before he was killed, Cho Bpyo had been the primary breadwinner supporting his single mother.

Both SPDC and KNLA forces continue to deploy landmines in Nyaunglebin District, threatening civilians living in the region and in some cases preventing them from travelling

² For more details on resource problems within the Burma Army and their effects on intra-military dynamics, see the many KHRG reports on SPDC deserters, including *Forced recruitment, child soldiers and abuse in the army: Interviews with SPDC deserters*, KHRG, April 2009.

to earn their livelihoods. Some local villagers have explained to KHRG that while KNLA soldiers have informed them of the locations of mined areas, SPDC soldiers have not. On February 26th 2009, at around 1:00 am, 23-year-old Saw Maw Gkya, a resident of Hsaw Mee Loo village, Mone township, stepped on an SPDC-deployed landmine at Bla Lay Koh while he was walking to his betel nut plantation. When the mine exploded Saw Maw Gkya was killed.

Forced labour



Villagers engage in forced labour repairing an SPDC-controlled vehicle road from Htaik Htoo relocation site³ to Kyauk Kyi Town on April 2nd 2009 as ordered by Burma Army personnel based at See Bpay Tha Ya army camp, Kyauk Kyi Township. Those ordered to comply with the forced labour include villagers previously relocated from Ay Neh, Bpa Ta Lah, Thoo Gka Bee, Noh Gkaw and Weh Lah Taw village tracts. Burma Army personnel ordered one person from each household to contribute to the road repair. Women and children were amongst those engaged in the forced labour. [Photo: KHRG]



³ For more details about the SPDC's forced relocation of civilians to Htaik Htoo and other relocation sites in Nyaunglebin District, see *Cycles of Displacement: Forced relocation and civilian responses in Nyaunglebin District*, KHRG, January 2009.

Forced labour is one of the most common abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Karen State, including Nyaunglebin District. Forced labour is used by SPDC soldiers active in contested frontline areas as well as by soldiers based in areas under more established SPDC control, such as in the plains and along vehicle roads. A KHRG field researcher operating in Nyaunglebin District explained that forced labour is, in some areas, a daily occurrence which local villagers have had to learn to deal with. Being a frequent abuse, forced labour has significantly impacted the wellbeing households and communities as individuals must repeatedly take time away from their own livelihoods in order to meet the demands for labour imposed upon them.

Local SPDC personnel in Nyaunglebin District appear to be aware of the widespread documentation of forced labour and the international dissemination of evidence of such abuse. According KHRG field researchers, SPDC personnel have threatened local villagers against informing anyone about the continued use of forced labour.

In one case, on January 10th 2009, Min Thu, commander of the SPDC's Gkyo Bpay Seit army camp in Mone Township, ordered villagers in the area to provide thatch shingles and bamboo poles and to build bunkers at the army camp with these materials. Residents of See Pah Leh, Noh Nya Lah, Gko Nee, Haw Hta Bplaw, Aung Laung Say and Wah Doh Gkla villages engaged in this work on January 10th, 11th and 12th 2009. Each village was responsible to build one bunker using the supplies they had brought. The villagers were also responsible for bringing their own food for the duration of the work.

“Yes, we have to do it [forced labour], [including] both women and children. Some of the children are just 11 or 12 years old and they’ve had to go in place of their parents... They [SPDC] have ordered us to work for them such as by building their army huts and cleaning out the compound of their army camps. We sometimes feel weary of working for them. They don’t do their work themselves. They don’t pay us and also don’t feed us anything when we work for them. We have to bring along our own food and water.”

- Saw B--- (male, 46), B--- village, Mone Township (January 2009)

Villagers in Nyaunglebin District have also reported to KHRG that they have had to serve as porters carrying supplies for KNLA patrols operating in the area. While some villagers have said that they are willing to porter for the KNLA, those engaged in this work must nevertheless take time away from their own livelihoods for the duration of the labour.

“Yes, that [portering for the KNLA] is our duty to them. We agree to do it for them. They provide us with food when we work for them. As for the SPDC, we have to bring along our own food [while portering], but sometimes when we walk on a long trip they feed us just one time per day.”

- Saw B--- (male, 46), Bp--- village, Mone Township (January 2009)

Extortion

“Each month we have to provide them [local SPDC authorities] with two milk tins [0.39 kg] of rice from each household. We have to pay for the village militia so each year we have to send 50,000 kyat [approx. US \$48] in cash to the village head and the village head sends it to the military commander. When they needed anything they come to the village head and the village head must arrange everything that they order. The villagers must also provide them with money for their monthly salaries.”

- Saw B--- (male, 46), Bp--- village, Mone Township (January 2009)

SPDC military and civilian personnel operating in Nyaunglebin District continue to use their positions of power over civilians to extort money and supplies. While the impunity with which SPDC personnel operate contributes to extortion, so to do corruption within the military (as commanding officers often steal the rations of subordinate low-ranking soldiers who then turn to theft and extortion to feed themselves) and the military policy that local army units ‘live off the land’. SPDC troops operating near to villages demand money and food from the local residents as part of regular ‘taxation’ and on an ad hoc basis.

In February 2009, San Myit, a officer in SPDC MOC #1, ordered three village heads to collect money from 12 villages in Bpa’ Deh Gkaw village tract allegedly as contribution towards a new dam to be built on the Theh Loh River in Kyauk Kyi Township. There are a total 117 households in these 12 villages and each household was ordered to pay 2,000 kyat (approx. US \$1.90). The village heads collecting the funds were obliged to send the money to San Myit between February 22nd and 28th 2009.



The picture above shows a secondary school in B--- village, Kyauk Kyi township. The residents of B--- village were forcibly relocated to Htaik Htoo relocation site by SPDC LIB #349 in April 2006. The school then remained empty for almost three years. However, in December 2008, the former residents of B--- village were able to return to their homes and have since rebuilt the school shown above, although without any SPDC assistance. [Photo: KHRG]



In 2006, SPDC authorities forcibly relocated the residents of multiple villages in Bpa Ta Lah village tract, Kyauk Kyi Township to Htaik Htoo relocation site. Then on December 22nd 2008, SPDC authorities ordered the former residents of Bpa Ta Law village tract to relocate again. This time three of the previously relocated villagers were moved to a new site with no irrigation located in an open area between Bpa Ta Lah and Taw Koh village. [Photo: KHRG]

In March 2009, SPDC officer San Myit of MOC #1 ordered Saw W---, the head of Bp--- village, to collect taxes from resident bullock cart owners. The owners had to pay 5,000 kyat (approx. US \$4.80) for each cart. The village head delegated the responsibility of collecting the money to another villager. San Myit then reportedly took 3,000 kyat from the 5,000 kyat ‘tax’ for each bullock cart and divided the remaining 2,000 kyat equally between

the village head and the villager who did the actual collection work. San Myit also threatened the local villagers against informing anyone about this incident.

“When they [SPDC] need anything, they come and order the village head and the village head must arrange everything that they order.”

- Saw B--- (male, 46), B--- village, Mone Township (January 2009)

Conclusion

“None of the villagers have enough food to eat. If SPDC army soldiers didn’t come to disturb us, we’d have enough food from cultivating our hill fields as in the time of our grandparents. We believe that we could get sufficient food as they did. Now we dare not cultivate our hill fields [that are] far away from our homes. We just cultivate our hill fields [that are] near our homes [where] the soil isn’t rich enough with [natural] fertilizer to produce [enough] paddy for us.”

- Saw H--- (male, 23), Th--- village, Kyauk Kyi Township (March 2009)

Despite the withdrawal of soldiers from some frontline army camps in Nyaunglebin District, the Burma Army presence in the area continues, as do regular patrols. Local villagers thus continue to face demands for labour, money and other supplies as troops seek to support themselves. These demands have in turn exacerbated poverty and undermined food security for villagers in the area – many of whom now rely on food and medical aid from local aid groups such as the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD) and the Backpack Health Worker Teams.

“They [CIDKP] have come to provide [aid] for us twice per year. KORD has come to provide [aid] for us more than twice per year. As for medicine, Backpack [Health Worker Teams] have sometimes come to supply us.”

- Saw H--- (male, 23), Th--- village, Kyauk Kyi Township (March 2009)

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

- *IDP responses to food shortages in Nyaunglebin District* (April 2009)
- *Cycles of Displacement: Forced relocation and civilian response in Nyaunglebin District* (January 2009)
- *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State* (November 2008)
- *Military expansion and exploitation in Nyaunglebin District* (August 2008)
- *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State* (April 2008)
- *Supporting IDP resistance strategies* (April 2008)
- *Attacks, killings and increased militarisation in Nyaunglebin District* (January 2008)

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



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