



## Report Briefer

August 2010

### Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses

Understanding and supporting civilian self-protection in northern Karen State

Villagers residing in upland northern Karen State continue to be targeted by Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Army. SPDC Army attacks are carried out against both civilians and their livelihoods, and severely undermine humanitarian conditions for local communities.

In response, communities have employed a variety of self-protection strategies that have enabled tens of thousands of villagers to survive and remain close to their homes while evading military attack or forced relocation.

Local capacities for self-protection have, however, become strained, even insufficient, as humanitarian conditions worsen under sustained pressure from the SPDC Army. Such circumstances have prompted some individual villagers and entire communities to re-assess local priorities and concerns, and respond with alternative strategies – including uses of arms and landmines.

External actors wishing to promote human rights in conflict areas of eastern Burma should seek detailed understandings of villagers' self-protection activities and the concerns and priorities that inform these activities. Such a detailed understanding is

necessary for developing practical support that broadens villagers' range of feasible options for responding to abuse and military attack.

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), in its report *Self-protection under strain*, seeks to foster better understanding of the concerns and priorities of communities that continue to face violent abuse, and how and why they employ particular responses.

*Self-protection under strain* focuses on one particularly affected area in northern Karen State, known locally as Lu Thaw Township, Papun District (roughly corresponding to northern Hpapun Township, Kayin State). Lu Thaw is currently home to a displaced population of more than 27,000 villagers who continue to face regular attacks and deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

Drawing on over 212 interviews and 85 field documents submitted by KHRG field researchers since January 2009, the report provides a detailed picture of the dynamics of abuse and local responses – and also indicates potential entry points for practical external support for civilian protection across conflict areas in eastern Burma.

This document is a summary of KHRG's full report *Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State*. The report is based upon information including 212 interviews and 85 field documents collected in Papun District during the period January 2009 to April 2010. The report seeks to encourage increased support for local self-protection efforts by fostering better understanding of the concerns and priorities of communities that continue to face violent abuse, and how and why they employ particular responses. The full report in digital format is available online at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org). Printed copies may be obtained by sending a request to [khrg@khrg.org](mailto:khrg@khrg.org)

**SPDC Army practices include deliberate attacks on civilian lives and livelihoods.** SPDC Army practices documented by KHRG in this report include shelling of villages and farm fields, both with knowledge of civilian presence and without attempts to distinguish civilians from fighters; destruction and mining of civilian settlements and objects; indiscriminate killing of civilians; destruction of agricultural projects and food stores; and restrictions on access to humanitarian support.

**SPDC Army attacks on civilians continue.** In the weeks between printing *Self-protection under strain* and releasing the report, SPDC Army battalions shelled, burned and mined another village in Lu Thaw Township. The SPDC Army attack displaced more than 1,000 villagers and destroyed homes, a clinic, a school and a church.

**Local capacities for self-protection indicate entry points for external support.** Tens of thousands of displaced villagers continue to be able to survive attacks because of local self-protection activities. Seeking a detailed understanding of community responses to attacks and related humanitarian concerns should be the starting point for any actor interested in promoting humanitarian protection for civilians in conflict areas of eastern Burma.

**Armed civilian self-protection activities emphasise the need for increased support.** Detailed understanding of the concerns and priorities that lead villagers to employ armed protection strategies should be sought. This understanding should be used to develop practical methods of support that broaden villagers' range of feasible options for responding to abuse and military attack.

## Self-protection under strain:

Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State



**KHRG** Karen Human Rights Group  
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

**Advocacy and engagement towards the SPDC should focus on local protection priorities and support for civilian self-protection activities.** Difficulties related to changing SPDC military practices emphasise the need for changes that support local self-protection activities even if only partially implemented. Any actors looking to improve human rights conditions should seek input from rural peoples so that they better understand the way their policies can or should interact with villagers' protection concerns and the strategies they use to respond to abuse.

### Key recommendations

- External actors wishing to promote human rights in conflict areas of eastern Burma should **provide practical support for civilian self-protection** activities based on a detailed understanding of local dynamics of abuse
- Locally driven civilian protection measures should be incorporated into humanitarian programming and extreme care should be taken to ensure that no humanitarian activities undermine local self-protection efforts
- Governments, funding bodies and NGOs should **increase assistance** to actors that can **consistently access at risk populations**, including actors operating 'cross-border'
- Armed self-protection activities emphasise, rather than obviate, the need for practical support that **broadens civilians' range of feasible options for self-protection** beyond uses of weapons
- Advocacy and engagement towards the SPDC should **focus on villagers' own protection priorities** and be designed to support civilian self-protection activities