



News Bulletin

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SPDC shelling destroys villagers' rubber plantations in Dooplaya District

Two villagers have lost nearly 3,000 rubber trees in a fire started when SPDC soldiers from IB #548 fired mortars into their plantations as the men fled in anticipation of fighting between IB #548 and a patrol of KNLA troops on April 23rd 2010. The men will attempt to replant their plantations, but have each effectively lost four-year investments of labour and money.

On April 22nd 2010 two columns of soldiers, consisting of 70 men in total, from State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Infantry Battalion (IB) #548 arrived in P1--- village, Waw Raw (Win Yaw) Township in Dooplaya District as part of a larger series of patrols through the area around P1---.¹ The next day on April 23rd the columns, led by Commander Aung Kyaw Soe, entered P2--- village, a one-hour walk from P1---. At approximately 10 am they approached two field huts near rubber plantations belonging to Saw T---, 27, and Saw M---, 37, two villagers from P2---.²



This photo, taken in April 2010, shows burned rubber trees in the plantation belonging to Saw T---. All 1,370 trees on his plantation are damaged and need to be replanted. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo, taken in April 2010, shows the field hut and burned rubber trees belonging Saw M---. His entire plantation of 1,600 trees is now damaged and needs to be replanted. [Photo: KHRG]

¹ Standard KHRG practice when censoring the names of locations for security purposes is to retain the first initial of village names while obscuring the remaining letters with a series of three dashes. The villages mentioned in this report have similar names; for the sake of clarity “P1--- village” and “P2--- village” have been used rather than multiple instances of “P--- village”.

² Many villagers keeping farms or plantations in rural Karen State build such huts to be able to stay near their fields or plantations during important points in the agricultural cycle, to protect crops from wild animals, and to reduce time spent travelling between their homes and their farms. The practice of constructing field huts has been described in previous KHRG reports documenting the manner in which movement restrictions imposed by SPDC authorities constrain the livelihoods activities of villagers living under SPDC control. See for example: “Patrols, movement restrictions and forced labour in Toungoo District,” KHRG, September 2009.

Saw T--- and Saw M--- said they saw a group of five soldiers from Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Battalion #16 patrolling near their plantations immediately prior to the arrival of the group of soldiers from IB #548. KNLA Battalion #16 is active in the area around P2--- village and, although most of Dooplaya has been under SPDC control since a large-scale military offensive in 1997, the KNU/KNLA remains active in all townships in the district.³ Saw T--- and Saw M--- told a KHRG field researcher that they fled from their field huts because they were worried that they might be endangered by a clash between IB #548 and the KNLA patrol.

Saw T--- and Saw M--- may also have feared being accused of providing support to the KNLA. Field huts belonging to farmers and plantation owners are sometimes used as shelter by KNLA patrols. In response, SPDC soldiers have accused plantation owners, particularly those that own field huts, of allowing KNLA soldiers to take shelter on their lands. Villagers accused of such actions, particularly following clashes with the KNLA or injury of SPDC soldiers by KNLA landmines, have been beaten, tortured or had their belongings destroyed.⁴ SPDC soldiers have also burned or destroyed huts, or demanded that villagers dismantle them.⁵ Following an engagement with the KNLA south of Pa Pra in Lay K'Er village, for instance, troops from SPDC IB #36 threatened a family living near where the skirmish occurred and burned a hut containing all of their possessions.⁶ As a strategy for protecting themselves from such reprisals, villagers have sometimes made appeals to the KNLA requesting that they not engage SPDC soldiers or lay landmines in their area.⁷

As Saw T--- and Saw M--- escaped from possible fighting through their plantations, they were spotted by troops from IB #548; the soldiers shot and fired mortars at them as they fled. Though KHRG could not confirm why IB #548 fired on the villagers, IB #548 appears to have taken the villagers' flight as an admission of guilt. That this was sufficient to warrant an attack indicates that the SPDC continues to view some parts of Dooplaya District as 'free fire' zones.



This photo, taken in April 2010, shows Saw T---, whose rubber plantation was destroyed in a fire caused by mortars launched by IB #548 on April 23rd 2010. The gas powered brush cutter he used for maintaining his plantation, pictured left, was also damaged in the fire. [Photo: KHRG]

³ *Setting up the Systems of Repression: The progressive regimentation of civilian life in Dooplaya District*, KHRG, September 2006; "SPDC soldiers arrest and kill villagers on allegations of contacting KNU/KNLA," KHRG, January 2008. Note that the SPDC-allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) also controls some parts of Dooplaya District and has in recent years been stepping up efforts to expand its area of control; see: "Insecurity amidst the DKBA – KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts," KHRG, February 2009. KHRG has also documented harassment and violent abuse by the DKBA of villagers accused of supporting the KNLA. See, "Cross-border DKBA attack displaces households in Thailand," KHRG, April 2010.

⁴ See, for instance, "Livelihood consequences of SPDC restrictions and patrols in Nyaunglebin District," KHRG, September 2009. SPDC soldiers have used similar tactics in southern Dooplaya District, where ethnic Mon armed groups remain active as well. See, "'I have no more left in my hands:' Human rights conditions in southern Ye Township and northern Tavoy District," HURFOM, November 2008. <http://rehmonnya.org/archives/502>

⁵ "Rural development and displacement: SPDC abuses in Toungoo District," KHRG, January 2009. "Battalions in Kyauk Kyi Township tax fishpond owners, order huts destroyed," The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), November 2008. <http://rehmonnya.org/archives/523>

⁶ See, *Setting up the Systems of Repression: The progressive regimentation of civilian life in Dooplaya District*, KHRG, September 2006, pp.60-61

⁷ See, for instance, "Insecurity amidst the DKBA - KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, February 2009.

April is the dry season in Karen State; leaves that had fallen from the rubber trees and grass covering the ground between the trees were extremely dry and caught on fire when some of the shells fired by IB #548 landed in Saw T---'s and Saw M---'s plantations and exploded. The fire spread rapidly, engulfing both men's plantations. Although the trees themselves were not totally burned, they were effectively destroyed because they will now not be able to produce rubber and must be replanted.

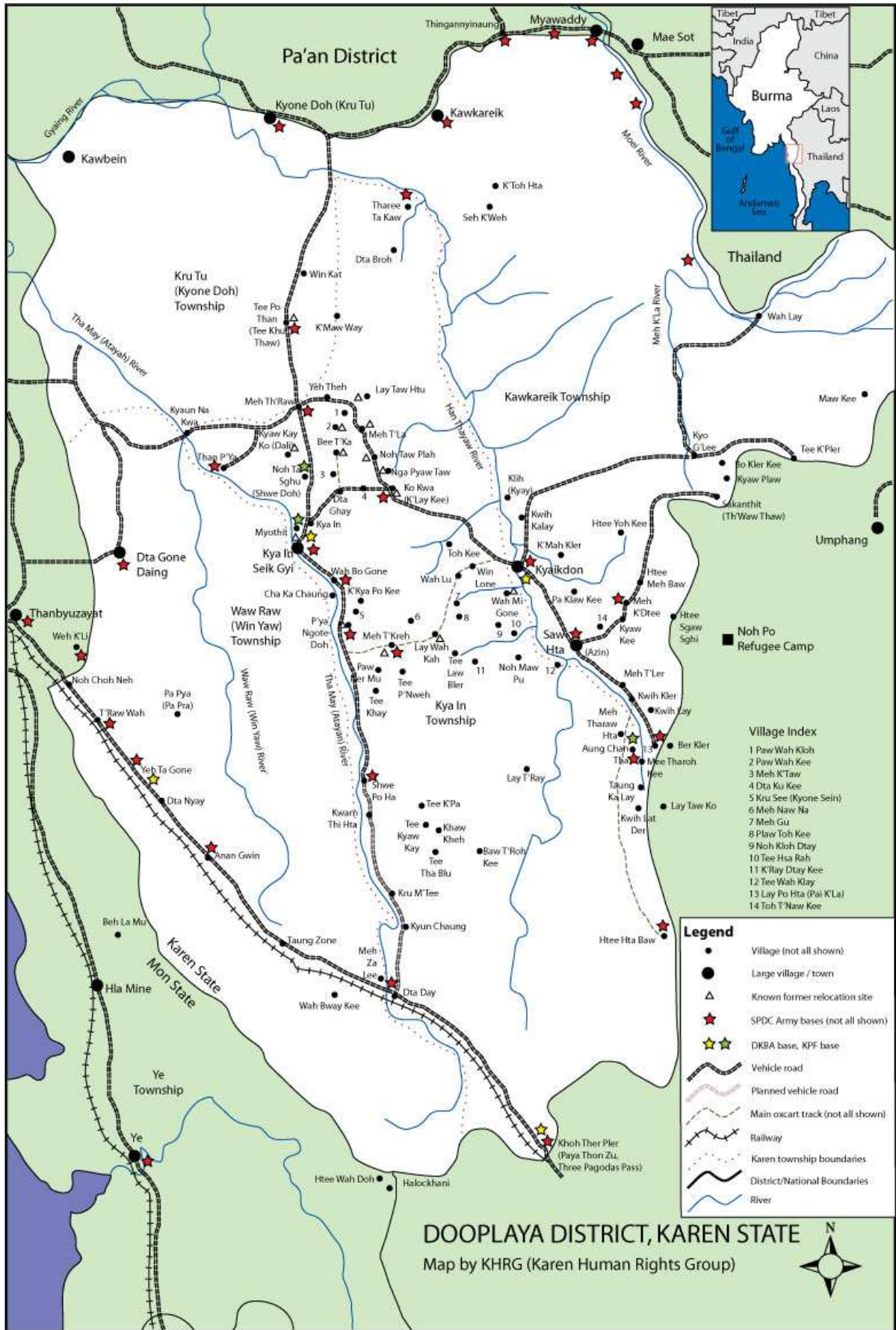
The men told KHRG that Saw T--- had 1,370 rubber trees and Saw M--- had 1,600 trees on their respective plantations. Both men had been maintaining their plantations for the last four years and their trees were just a few years from maturity, at which point they could have been tapped to produce rubber.⁸ This means that they have lost not only their initial financial investment in their plantations, but also an investment of four years of labour. Saw T--- and Saw M--- said that they would now start their plantations again, but they expect to have to wait another six or seven years before they are able to harvest rubber from their new trees.

Further reading:

- *Insecurity amidst the DKBA - KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts (February 2009)*
- *DKBA soldiers burn down huts, detain villagers and loot property in Thailand (January 2009)*
- *DKBA soldiers attack Karen village in Thailand (October 2008)*
- *Exploitative governance under SPDC and DKBA authorities in Dooplaya District (July 2008)*
- *SPDC Soldiers arrest and kill villagers on allegations of contacting KNU/KNLA (January 2008)*
- *Forced labour, extortion and the state of education in Dooplaya District (October 2007)*
- *State repression and the creation of poverty in southern Karen State (February 2007)*
- *Setting Up the Systems of Repression: The progressive regimentation of civilian life in Dooplaya District (September 2006)*

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2009* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrq.org>.

⁸ According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), rubber trees can be tapped as early as five years after planting, provided that the trunks of the trees are at least 50 centimetres at a height of one metre from the ground. See: *The Rubber Tree*, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 1977. This assessment is reflected by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Secretariat, "Depending on conditions, the rubber tree takes 5-10 years to reach maturity – that is, the stage when tapping can be started (the criterion for this is a specific circumference of the trunk, 50cm at 1 m height)." See: UNCTAD, "Market Information in the Commodities Area: Plant profile (Hevea brasiliensis)," Last modified April 30th 2008. [<http://www.unctad.org/infocomm/anglais/rubber/crop.htm>] [Accessed May 13th 2010]



Karen Districts



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