



Report from the Field

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Central Papun District: Village-level decision making and strategic displacement

This report details a sequence of events in one village in central Papun District in late 2009. The report illustrates how the community responded to exploitative and violent human rights abuses by SPDC Army units deployed near its village in order to avoid or reduce the harmful impact on livelihoods and physical security. It also provides a detailed example of the way local responses are often developed and employed cooperatively, thus affording protection to entire communities. This report draws extensively on interviews with residents of Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township, who described their experiences to KHRG field researchers, supplemented by illustrations based on these accounts by a Karen artist. This is the third of four field reports documenting the situation in Papun District's southern townships that will be released in August 2010. The incidents and responses documented below occurred in November 2009.

Civilian populations in eastern Burma must frequently contend with regular threats to their livelihoods and physical security stemming from attempts by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Army to consolidate or maintain control of areas in which it continues to face low-intensity challenges by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). SPDC Army units in these areas support themselves by extracting significant material and labour resources from the local civilian population, backed by implicit or explicit threats of violence. Villagers must further contend with abuses related to KNLA activities, including conflicting demands from armed groups, threats from landmines laid by both sides and SPDC restrictions and reprisals.



In 2009, residents of Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township confronted regular and heavy demands for forced labour from SPDC LIB #219 troops based near their village, like many villages in central Papun District. [Image: STNH]

Villagers, however, have responded with a variety of individual and collective strategies for protecting themselves from these abuses, or the effects of abuse. This report, which examines in detail conditions in Pi--- village in central Papun District, is an attempt to foster better understanding of the concerns and priorities of communities that continue to face abuse, and how and why they employ particular responses. Using information from KHRG researchers and excerpts of interviews with villagers from Pi---, as well as illustrations by a Karen artist,¹ the report is

¹ All illustrations included in this report were drawn, coloured and provided for KHRG's use by Saw Taw Nay Htoo, identified below the images in the report as STNH.

designed to challenge traditional depictions of villagers as passive victims,² while indicating potential entry points for practical external support for civilian protection across conflict areas in eastern Burma.

The report details the circumstances that led the population of Pi--- village to make the collective decision to flee to several locations in Dweh Loh and Bu Tho townships. In November 2009, Pi--- villagers decided to go into hiding in order to avoid sustained abuses by soldiers from a SPDC Army battalion stationed in a camp near their village. Villagers reported that the unit, from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #219, regularly imposed heavy demands for forced labour and the provision of material support, mirroring the practices of other units from LIB #219 across central Papun, as well as other SPDC battalions deployed in eastern Burma.³

Although such ongoing demands threatened the livelihoods and physical security of villagers from Pi---, they had nonetheless attempted to pursue livelihoods activities and preserve sufficient resources to remain in their homes. On November 21st, however, a soldier from LIB #219 stepped on a KNLA landmine while walking outside Pi--- village, injuring himself and two other soldiers. The men, women and children of the village were subsequently subjected to multiple days of heavy restrictions and harsh treatment that exacerbated existing strains on their livelihoods and raised new security concerns. These concerns prompted the villagers to re-evaluate their situation and consider the best way ensure their own protection and, according to villagers interviewed by KHRG, resulted in their eventual decision to abandon the village.

Background

Pi--- village is located in Ma Htaw village tract, Dweh Loh Township, which lies southwest of Papun Town in the Yunzalin River valley, between the Bilin and Ka Ma Maung to Papun roads. The SPDC Army maintains a large and permanent presence in this lowland area, with major camps at Toung Tho Lo (aka. 'Three Mountains), Ma Htaw village, Htwee Thee Uh (*Chaw Tha Yar* in Burmese), and Ku Seik, and at strategic points along the vehicle roads; in 2009, LIB #219 was headquartered at Toung Tho Lo. Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Gk'saw Wah 'White Elephant' Special Battalion #777 also maintained a presence in the area in 2009, while units from Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 5th Brigade remained active in adjacent upland areas of Dweh Loh and Bu Tho townships, and sometimes making 'guerrilla' style attacks and placing landmines and booby traps in lowland areas.⁴

In 2009, LIB #219 soldiers based in Ma Htaw village tract made frequent and onerous exploitative demands from communities in the surrounding village tracts to support their presence and ongoing operations. Residents of Pi--- reported that the unit stationed at the SPDC Army camp near their village consistently issued demands for unpaid forced labour, especially for portering and messenger duty (*set tha*).⁵ Villagers were particularly concerned about the risk of death or injury from landmines while performing these duties, and reported that they would avoid travelling along roads while portering or delivering messages for the SPDC

² For more on problems related to depictions that frame villagers contending with abuse as passive victims, see *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008.

³ For details on the activities of LIB #219 in central Papun in 2009, see: "Central Papun District: Abuse and the maintenance of military control," KHRG, August 2010.

⁴ For examples of KNLA units targeting SPDC roads and road construction operations in other parts of Bu Tho Township, see: "SPDC and DKBA road construction, forced labour and looting in Papun District," KHRG, March 2009. The KNLA formally adopted the use of guerrilla tactics in 1998 at a military conference in Mae Hta Raw Tha, Dooplaya District. See, Ashley South *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*, New York: Routledge, 2009 (2nd ed.), p.56.

⁵ "*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 such as cooking, collecting water and cutting firewood.

Army because they believed that the roads had been mined by KNLA and SPDC forces; KNLA units active in central Papun often lay landmines along roads during and after the annual monsoon rains to disrupt SPDC and DKBA activities, such as troop rotations and re-supply operations. The villagers communicated their concerns about landmines to the SPDC soldiers, but reported that the labour orders were not withdrawn or revised. One villager also told KHRG that soldiers based near Pi--- often demanded, and sometimes simply confiscated food to supplement their rations, although villagers were able to preserve limited food resources by hiding rice from the troops.

“Their military camp is based in my village. There were 30 soldiers and they were led by a three-star commander. This military unit had to stay here for six months. We had to work for them every day since they arrived in the village. We had to carry their rations and vegetables to Toung Tho Lo military camp. They didn’t do anything and they just ate and slept in their military camp.”

- Saw L--- (male, 45), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (October 2009)

“Don’t talk about getting payment. They [the SPDC soldiers] asked us [to work] for the whole day, but we didn’t ever get any money for it... They never fed us [when we did forced labour]. They didn’t even get any food to eat for themselves, and they had to go and take food from the villagers. If villagers could thresh one or two bowls (1.6 – 3.1 kg. / 3.4 – 6.9 lb.) of paddy grain, they’d come and take it all to eat. They came to steal from us. When they didn’t come and ask for it, they’d call us to their camp and then they’d come to collect [food] from our houses by themselves. We had to hide our rice... Then we’d share it with each other in the evening. We shared like this, a milk tin of rice (0.2 kg. / 0.4 lb.) for each person. If we didn’t do that, we wouldn’t have had [anything] to eat anymore... [The SPDC commander at Pi--- camp] would come to order [forced labour]; he didn’t write us letters [ordering forced labour]. He himself would come and ask us to send letters [set tha]. We didn’t read his letters: we sent them to another officer, for example in Toung Tho Lo [SPDC Army camp]. We were asked to send the letter, and after we sent it, we came back. [We were ordered] to send letters and carry rice from Toung Tho Lo. We didn’t dare to go and told them that there were landmines, but they told us to go [anyways]. Even though we didn’t dare to go, we were ordered to go. They didn’t go themselves; they ordered villagers to go. When people got injured, they ordered us to carry them [to receive medical treatment]. Even though we couldn’t carry them, we had to. Our shoulders hurt and broke. We couldn’t do that anymore. It was [difficult] because we had to guide them through bushes; we didn’t dare to the follow road.”

- Naw M--- (female, 37), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

In October and November 2009, villagers in Pi--- and the surrounding villages were heavily affected by measures imposed by SPDC forces to secure roads in the area for rations delivery. In October, tight movement restrictions on all villages in Ma Htaw village tract prevented villagers from travelling freely between their homes and agricultural projects. Although individuals with land near their villages were able to work their fields and plantations for limited hours during daylight, crops in 16 plantations and two paddy fields belonging to residents of Pi-- were destroyed because they could not be properly maintained by their owners. On October 25th, every household in Ma Htaw village tract, including Pi---, was ordered to send one person to clear brush and grass from sections of the Ka Ma Maung to Papun vehicle road near their villages, despite the risk of death or injury by landmines laid along roads by SPDC and KNLA forces active in the area.⁶

⁶ For more on road clearance as a form of forced labour see: *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008, pp.49-50.



Pi--- villagers were forced to clear grass overgrown along the Ka Ma Maung to Papun vehicle road and porter supplies for soldiers from LIB #219 after the end of the 2009 rainy season, despite the risk of death or injury from KNLA or SPDC landmines involved in both activities. The villagers told the SPDC troops that they were afraid of landmines, but the orders were not withdrawn. [Images: STNH]

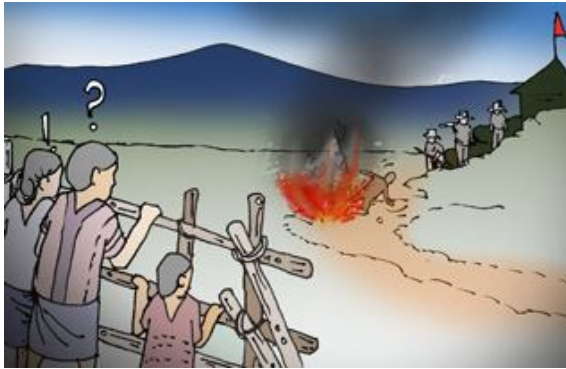
SPDC and DKBA forces also recognised that KNLA landmines and ambushes along the road were a serious concern in the area around Pi---. Beginning on November 9th, residents of Pi--- were ordered to send villagers to serve as round-the-clock sentries at the SPDC Army camp near the village as an additional security measure due to fears about KNLA attacks and landmines; Pi--- was told to supply three villagers at a time, and rotate those on duty with fresh sentries every morning and evening. On November 15th, DKBA soldiers under the command of Saw Pah Soo, a monk, and Company Commander Soe Myint Oo, also ordered bullock cart owners in Ma Htaw village to drive their carts from Ma Htaw to Pi--- and back, in order to clear the road of landmines. The villagers were instructed to place heavy loads, but not military equipment or rations, on their carts to ensure that any existing mines were triggered.

Worsening SPDC abuse and village-level responses

Despite efforts to clear landmines and otherwise secure roads for annual delivery of rations after the end of the rainy season, on November 21st 2009 a soldier from a unit of 30 men from LIB #219 based at the Pi--- SPDC camp stepped on a landmine while walking between the camp and Pi--- village, injuring himself and two others. After the incident, the residents of Pi--- village were ordered to assemble in the camp and subjected to harsh treatment and tight restrictions, apparently as punishment. Locally deployed SPDC units often tell villagers that they will be held accountable for KNLA landmines and ambushes near their homes, regardless of whether or not the villagers have any contact with KNLA forces in their area; for this reason, village heads have asked local KNLA commanders not to carry out operations near their communities. At least one villager from Pi--- interviewed by KHRG field researchers expressed surprise and frustration that landmines had been planted so close to their village without consulting the villagers or considering the impact on the community.

“We go [to meet with the KNLA] and our leaders tell us to stay in unity. Each village has to understand about the troops [in its area], has to meet with its village tract secretary, and often we have to work together. If we can’t work together, there’ll be conflicts for us. We can work with them, but even though we [are willing to] work with them, most of the time the [KNLA] leaders don’t come and work with us. This time, we didn’t meet with them... They [the KNLA soldiers who planted the landmine near Pi--- village] said they were targeting the enemy [the SPDC]... It was like they didn’t work with us and came to do that [place the landmine] secretly near our houses. We don’t know whether they were targeting us or the Burmese [the SPDC Army]. The Burmese blamed it on us.”

- Naw M--- (female, 37), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)



On November 21st 2009, an LIB #219 soldier stepped on a KNLA landmine outside Pi--- village, injuring himself and two other soldiers. The villagers had not been told by KNLA forces active in the area that landmines had been placed near their community, but the local LIB #219 commander blamed them for the explosion. [Images: STNH]

After assembling the population of Pi--- in the SPDC camp, the villagers were interrogated about the landmine and forced to stay in the sun for the remainder of the day without food or water, until 5 pm. Adult villagers who were not already serving as forced porters⁷ were ordered to clear brush from along the vehicle road while the children, including infants, were forced to sit in the sun unattended while their parents worked. Villagers told KHRG that they were not allowed to feed or otherwise take care of their children. Male villagers, many of whom had already been regularly serving as porters prior to the explosion, were forced to continue portering SPDC rations and faced increased hostility from the soldiers.

While Pi--- village was empty, some of the SPDC soldiers entered homes and looted rice, oil, salt, fish paste, and some of the villagers' animals. After being denied food for the day, the villagers returned in the evening to find almost no food in their village. The LIB #219 commander⁸ issued an order forbidding locals from pounding rice paddy that evening. For the next two or three days⁹ the residents of Pi--- were again ordered to work clearing roadside brush while their children and women not working as labourers were forced to sit in the sun. The villagers were only permitted to return to their homes for a short time each evening, after which they had to return to sleep inside the SPDC Army camp.

"Since the landmine exploded, we were ordered to porter rice and the women were dried under the sun for three days. They were ordered to clean the vehicle road... They dried the women under the sun and ordered them to carry water, clean overgrown grass beside the vehicle road, and carry rice. They also dried children under the sun and the children were crying. They took villagers' belongings and killed the animals and ate them."

- Saw W--- (male, 26), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

"The Burmese [the SPDC Army] called every single person to the camp and didn't allow anyone to stay at home. They released us to come back at 5:00 pm. It started from 6:00 am. They detained us in the camp and didn't feed us during the day time, for the whole day... They didn't choose [consider] anyone. Even children, including infants who

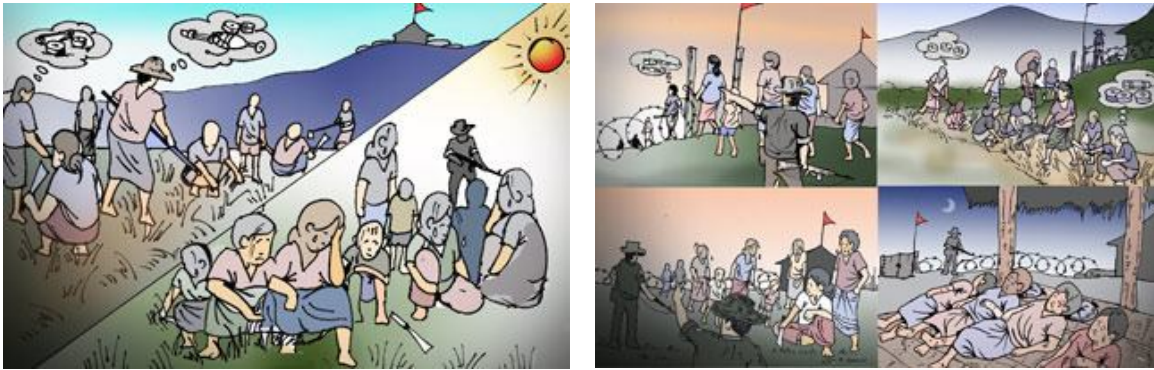
⁷ Some male villagers had already been regularly serving as porters prior to the explosion. They were forced to continue portering SPDC rations but were not permitted to return to sleep in their village for five nights and faced increased hostility from the soldiers.

⁸ Villagers interviewed by KHRG field researchers identified commanding officers in LIB #219 as Ba--- and Ho---. These names have been censored for security reasons.

⁹ Villagers' and KHRG field researchers' accounts differ as to the number of days the residents of Pi--- were subjected to harsh treatment before fleeing; one villager and KHRG field researchers said the abuse continued for three days, while another villager said they suffered for four and a half days.

were still red [very young], were ordered to stay under the burning sun. Some had been born for only a month and were kept [in the sun].”

- Naw M--- (female, 37), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)



The residents of Pi--- village were subjected to harsh treatment for three days by LIB #219 as punishment for the landmine. Adults were ordered to porter heavy loads and clear grass in the sun along the Ka Ma Maung to Papun vehicle road, while children were forced to sit unattended under the sun. All of the villagers, including children, were denied food and water; soldiers entered their homes and looted food and other materials during the day, the villagers were forbidden from pounding paddy in the evenings, and the entire village was ordered to sleep in the SPDC Army camp at night, again preventing them from eating. [Images: STNH]

“They ordered us to go to porter and we went. We came back after we went to porter. We didn’t know that there’d been an explosion. The Burmese [SPDC] Army asked us [about the explosion] and we replied that we didn’t know. When we arrived to our village, we saw people were drying in the sun and the Burmese [SPDC] Army told us that we weren’t allowed to come in [the village]. We were ordered to take knives and had to cut grass under the sunshine until 4:00 pm. Then, we went to eat dinner and had to come back at 6:00 pm. It was already dark. They warned us that everyone had to come back after having dinner. If we didn’t come back, they’d punish us... I want to say that we had to go to porter for them, but we weren’t allowed to cook rice to eat when we came back. We had to go and cut grass beside the road till the evening, but we weren’t allowed to come back [to sleep in the village]. When we came back to our houses, there was no rice and we had to pound the paddy again. Our children were crying and there was no water. We had to go and carry water even though it was already getting dark. Then, they came to see us with their guns and told us that we had to go again at 6:00 pm. If we went late, we’d be abused by them. They only oppressed us. For us, we have to be afraid of them because they have their guns and we don’t have any guns.”

- Saw T--- (male, 26), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

“They ordered me to go and porter for them after the landmine explosion. I was forced to porter for them for five days and I had to sleep five nights with the army. My four children were left in the village... After the landmine exploded they ordered [us] to keep children under the sun and ordered other people to clean grass overgrown beside the road. They also ordered us to go and porter at Toung Tho Lo army camp. The battalion commander questioned us about the explosion. We didn’t know about it, but he didn’t want to hear that we didn’t know. He pointed his gun at us and oppressed us. We were afraid of them very much, so we had to tell them something. It took a week. We had to go and work for them. We couldn’t do our livelihoods anymore.”

- Saw R--- (male, 30), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

As explained by Saw R---, for the residents of Pi--- village the abuses perpetrated by LIB #219 soldiers after the landmine incident made life in the face of ongoing abuse unsustainable; while the villagers had apparently been able contend with earlier exploitative demands imposed by

LIB #219, such as by hiding food stores, the harsh restrictions and treatment after the landmine incident were a new development that could not be borne. At least one individual interviewed by KHRG said that while the adults could endure the punitive forced labour, exposure and deprivation of food imposed on the village, their children could not. Some villagers reported that they appealed directly to the soldiers about the harsh treatment, but that their complaints were ignored. After the third or fourth day of harsh treatment, the villagers held a meeting to discuss their situation, and potential responses. They decided to leave Pi--- that night. A KHRG field researcher reported that 105 villagers in total, including 47 children, escaped to hiding sites in Ma Htaw village tract, and east across the Ka Ma Maung to Papun road in Meh Nyu and Meh Gku village tracts in Bu Tho Township.

“We became internally displaced persons because we were disturbed, abused and forced to do forced labour. We were forced to porter again and again. It never ends, [the demands] to porter. As we had to comply longer and longer, we couldn’t afford to do it anymore so we fled... As the villagers could no longer suffer the abuses, they told the village head that they couldn’t suffer anymore and if we continued to stay there, we’d face more problems. Then, they discussed together and fled at night. There were many belongings left in the village... The Burmese [SPDC] Army committed many different kinds of abuses. Due to their operations, we couldn’t do our hill fields and we didn’t have a chance to eat our bananas that we planted in our village, because we had to leave the village. We were forced to do forced labour and to go to porter. Five or six people had to go to porter per day. We were very tired of doing this as we were forced to do it longer and longer. Everything that we faced was difficult and a problem. So, we discussed with each other and fled... We couldn’t respond to them because we don’t have any guns or weapons. We have only the knives in our hands. We can’t do anything with only knives; we can just use them to cultivate hill fields. We can’t do other things. We just had to leave our belongings and find ways to flee, and do our livelihoods in new places.”

- Saw T--- (male, 26), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

“How could we stay? If we stayed [hid] in our own houses we could’ve stayed, but we didn’t dare to stay. They called us [to work] like this and we didn’t have rice to eat and they didn’t feed us rice. They came and took all our rice to eat... They asked mothers to cut [grass beside] the road and kept the children in the road, and the children were crying a lot. Therefore, we couldn’t suffer anymore... We dared to stay [as long as we could] but they didn’t feed us rice and we couldn’t eat anymore, and our children cried all day long... Because it was for four and a half days, the children couldn’t starve [go without food for so long]. The adults could stave. They also didn’t provide us with water to drink and they didn’t allow us to go and carry water.”

- Naw M--- (female, 37), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

“Yes, they’ve instructed us to go back and stay in our own village, but no one went back... [Before the SPDC arrived in the village] We were able to live and do our livelihoods; we could do our livelihoods well. Since this year, we don’t dare to stay due to the SPDC’s heavy operations. They oppressed us and we fled. They ordered us four or five times per day. They ordered both men and women to work for them. They kept children in the army camp and under the sun. They looted our food and didn’t allow us to pound paddy. They called us to attend a meeting. They also pretended that they didn’t hear us although we complained.”

- Naw N--- (female, 32), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)



The villagers reportedly complained about their sustained harsh treatment to LIB #219 troops, but the soldiers did not address their complaints. After multiple days of abuse that jeopardised their livelihoods as well as the well-being of their children, the residents of Pi--- gathered in the evening to discuss what steps they could take to protect the community from further harm. [Images: STNH]

When they were interviewed by a KHRG field researcher shortly after fleeing Pi---, the villagers expressed sadness that they had had to leave their homes and land, but said at the time that they did not want to return to face further abuses. At least two interviewees said that SPDC authorities had attempted to contact the villagers in their hiding sites to encourage them to return to Pi---, but that they did not yet feel that they could safely go back. The villagers had not yet set up permanent shelters, and were actively monitoring the situation to determine whether to return to their homes, remain in their present locations and integrate into their host communities, or remove themselves to more secure hiding sites further from SPDC control. Many villagers said that they had insufficient food and limited sources of income in their hiding sites, but were surviving as best they could with support from local communities in the areas to which they had fled. A number of villagers were taking employment as daily labourers, harvesting rice on farms owned by members of their host communities in return for a small amount of un-threshed paddy to sustain themselves and their families. Although most had invested significant labour into their own hill fields in Pi--- during 2009, they did not feel safe to return to maintain their agricultural projects. Villagers said they were continuing to discuss their options among themselves, but it appears likely that different households may arrive at different conclusions about how to address their concerns.

“Currently, I can’t do anything and I met with my older sibling. If he can help us a little we can continue to survive. If we have to find ways [to survive] and afford everything on our own, we can’t find any way to do it. Even though we’ve cultivated our hill fields [this year], cows and buffalos will eat all we’ve left behind, as we don’t dare to go back and look after [our fields] because the SPDC Army still stays close to us. The village headwoman, Saw S---’s wife, here in Na--- village called us to come... So, we’ve come to stay in Bu Tho Township. We work as daily paid workers in order to get some income. If people hire us to harvest paddy, we do it, and if people ask us to do things and give us some food [in return], we do it.”

- Saw R--- (male, 30), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

“Living in another place is different from living in our home. We can’t do our livelihoods and face problems. Currently, we don’t have enough food to eat. It won’t last for the next two or three days. Although we don’t have food to eat, we can’t do anything. We just have to stay in this difficult situation and continue to survive. We have to borrow from other people to support our survival... We aren’t happy to stay in other villages and houses. It isn’t as happy as staying at our village. We’re in a difficult situation. We have to struggle for food. The village head in Ro--- village told us to stay in Ro---, as we don’t dare to go back and stay in our old village. If there’s peace, we also don’t want to be IDPs.”

- Naw N--- (female, 32), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)



After meeting to discuss potential protection options, the entire village decided to flee Pi--- that night, removing themselves to several hiding sites in Dweh Loh and Bu Tho townships. When interviewed by KHRG researchers shortly after fleeing, the villagers were actively monitoring the security situation and considering their next steps. Their options included negotiating SPDC requests to return to their homes, establishing permanent homes and farms in their host communities, or relocating to hiding sites further from SPDC control. [Images: STNH]

“Currently, the villagers have to go and [find] employment, harvesting other people’s paddy as paid workers. Those who don’t have any rice have to go and [find] employment harvesting paddy for people that live in Meh Nyu Hta [village tract]. They have to harvest in order to eat each day. People hire them for a basket of paddy per day. They go to harvest and then ask their wives to thresh [the paddy received as payment] when they come back... There are no materials left [in our village]. We don’t know whether they [the SPDC] took them or Kyaw Thoo or Kyaw Wah¹⁰ [someone else] took them. Just some people went to look and check their homes secretly. Those who were brave went back to look at their homes and there was nothing left, and they fled [again]... They [The SPDC] have asked us to go back, but we don’t dare to go back. It’s likely that we won’t dare to go back [in the future]. Everyone is staying away; no one has gone back to stay.”

- Naw M--- (female, 37), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

“We’ll farm hill fields. We’ll do whatever people ask us to do because we don’t have food to eat. We’ll do the work available to us. The villagers don’t plan to go back and stay in Pi--- village. They’re thinking about continuing to flee further.”

- Saw W--- (male, 26), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

“They haven’t planned anything for security, yet. They’ll wait and see the situation. If the situation isn’t stable, they’re thinking about continuing to run away further. If the situation is stable, they’ll set up their shelters to stay. Currently, they haven’t even built any huts to stay [here], and they just stay on the ground. The children are crying noisily and it’s so difficult.”

- Saw T--- (male, 26), Pi--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

Conclusion

Villagers’ accounts of their experiences of and responses to SPDC abuse in Pi--- village before and during November 2009 illustrate how communities in rural eastern Burma often assess their local human rights situation, and how different abuses impact their livelihoods and physical

¹⁰ Karen speakers sometimes use an ordinary name in lieu of an indefinite pronoun such as ‘someone’. In the quote above, Naw M--- is using this speaking convention which has been maintained in the translation; she is not referring to actual people. An English equivalent might be, “We don’t know whether the SPDC took them or if it was Tom, Dick or Harry,” in which Tom, Dick and Harry are not actual people.

security. Prior to November, the residents of Pi--- appear to have judged that their protection needs would be best served by staying in their homes and meeting LIB #219's demands for forced labour and material support. This entailed maintaining existing agricultural projects despite restrictions on their movements, and attempting to preserve limited food resources with strategies such as hiding rice.

As abuse intensified following the injury of three LIB #219 soldiers by a KNLA landmine outside Pi--- on November 21st, however, the new livelihoods and security threats prompted the villagers to consider displacement as a better means of ensuring the community's protection. The decision to abandon their homes and land resources in favour of relocation to areas with potentially greater food and physical insecurity was the outcome of a village-level decision-making process in Pi--- that reflects the villagers' perception of the imminent and serious threats posed by LIB #219. After becoming displaced, the villagers continued to assess and discuss how they could best address protection concerns, such as by returning to Pi---, remaining in their temporary hiding sites, or relocating to alternative hiding sites further from military control.

The Pi--- community's decision to flee is an example of the way that villagers often use displacement strategically, as a method for protecting themselves from abuse. Such decisions are not taken lightly, as they mean abandoning land that may be the site of significant family or cultural connection, as well as extensive investment of labour and resources. Villagers in Pi---, and elsewhere, nonetheless appear to carefully evaluate and compare security and livelihoods risks at home and in other areas. These local concerns and priorities, and the strategies employed to address them, should be acknowledged, respected and supported. Local actors are best able to assess the obstacles and threats they face, including protection concerns, and formulate appropriate responses. External actors wishing to promote human rights in eastern Burma should thus seek detailed understandings of these activities and the concerns and priorities that inform them. Such nuanced understandings are necessary for developing practical support that broadens villagers' range of feasible options for responding to abuse and the effects of abuse.

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

- *Central Papun District: Abuse and the maintenance of Military Control (August 2010)*
- *Southwestern Papun District: Transitions to DKBA control along the Bilin River (August 2010)*
- *SPDC mortar attack on school in Papun District (February 2010)*
- *Starving them out: Food shortages and exploitative abuse in Papun District (October 2009)*
- *Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance (July 2009)*
- *DKBA attack on villagers and the forced dismantling of a mosque in Papun District (July 2009)*
- *IDPs, land confiscation and forced recruitment in Papun District (July 2009)*
- *SPDC and DKBA road construction, forced labour and looting in Papun District (March 2009)*
- *Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Papun District (February 2009)*
- *Mortar attacks, landmines and the destruction of schools in Papun District (August 2008)*

Photos documenting the human rights situation in Papun District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010* (updated June 2010), *KHRG Photo Gallery 2009* (updated June 2009) and other previous KHRG photo galleries and photo sets. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

Karen Districts



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