

Commentary

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“There is no plan to get peace. The enemy has a plan, though. It is that when they come we have to flee and escape. If we do not escape, we must die. That is the only plan. Because we are staying inside the country and we can’t flee to another country, we can’t do anything. We feel that we were born here, so if we live, we work and eat, and we die, it is finished. We can’t do it any other way.” - 70-year old internally displaced Karen farmer in the forests of Papun District after his village was destroyed (*“Flight, Hunger and Survival”*, Interview #78)

Playing Games with Political Prisoners

As the much-discussed ‘talks’ in Rangoon between the SPDC military junta and the National League for Democracy (NLD) drag into their second year without a single piece of news about their agenda, a single statement, or a single sign of progress, the international community is trying to find more creative ways of pretending that something positive is happening in Burma. The most popular method at the moment is to point to the SPDC’s releases of a few NLD political prisoners. Little notice is taken of the fact that many of them have only been released on completion of their sentences, or were never charged or sentenced at all. But more importantly, is it logical to commend someone for releasing a political prisoner? Essentially, releasing a political prisoner is like sending an innocent person to hospital after shooting them (which is actually a regular activity of SPDC troops). Kidnappers are not commended and given aid for releasing their hostages, but that is how the SPDC is being treated. Rewarding a junta for releasing political prisoners is essentially rewarding them for arresting political prisoners in the first place, and only serves as an encouragement for them to arrest more in the future. Why shouldn’t they, once they have seen that the release of a few NLD members can make the world forget about nationwide forced labour, the ongoing destruction of hundreds of villages, systematic executions and other abuses?

The idea that the SPDC would arrest political prisoners for no reason other than to get credit for releasing them may sound ridiculous, but they have done it many times before. They played this game the most extensively in 1993-94, arresting hundreds at a time, even sweeping random people off the streets, only to release them a week or two later. While the arrests got 3 lines on page 64 of the international media (arrests by a junta are not news), the releases received front-page headlines (releases by a junta *are* news). At one point during that time Daw Aung San Suu Kyi complained that if the SLORC (predecessor to the SPDC) wanted to arrest 5 NLD members, they would arrest 105, then release 100 and be congratulated for it. By commending the present releases, the international community is only setting the stage for hundreds or thousands of arrests to happen again.

This also leads to the question “Who is a political prisoner?” The NLD makes little or no mention of any political prisoners except its own members. International human rights groups speak of 1,500 political prisoners, but these groups only include people from cities or towns with a secondary or post-secondary education, and almost exclusively Burmans, on their lists. Foreign governments go by one of the above definitions or an even narrower one of their own. The truth is that there are not 1,500 political prisoners in Burma, there are not 1,800 political prisoners, there are well over 10,000 political prisoners. All over the country farmers, day labourers and others are imprisoned under Articles 17/1 (contact with illegal organisations) and Article 17/2 (rising against the State), but none of these fit the definitions above so no one thinks of them as political prisoners, no one writes letters for their release, no one even acknowledges their existence. Yet they are treated far worse than the high profile political prisoners, in fact many of them are summarily executed without anyone ever having written a letter on their behalf. Is the Chin rice farmer hauled off to an SPDC Army camp on a baseless suspicion of giving some rice to the Chin National Front, tied up, beaten, slashed with knives, held down while a gallon of water is poured in his nose, then locked into mediaeval leg stocks or a pit in the ground for weeks, not a political prisoner? Is a Karen woman whose husband flees to the forest to escape forced portering, who is then arrested, raped and detained at the Army camp until her ‘rebel’ husband comes in and gives himself up for execution, not a political prisoner? According to the SPDC they are not. The NLD and the international human rights organisations do not include them in their lists, and by repeatedly making their definitive statements that “there are 1,500 political prisoners in Burma” they systematically exclude these people. Do you agree with them? Of course it will never be possible to obtain the names and details of every one of these people, but their existence should at least be acknowledged. If letters and campaigns cannot be begun for each and every one of their cases, then at least letters and campaigns should demand their freedom *en masse*.

While the Talks go on, so do the Killings

“This group [the SPDC] is not easy. This group only destroys. They torture and kill civilians. They go and burn the civilians’ villages, paddy and hill and flat fields. They burn everything they see. They take some of the paddy, but they stomp on the paddy that they can’t take from the rice barns. For example when they came to our place, they destroyed some of the paddy and some they threw on the ground so we couldn’t eat it anymore. Some of the paddy they didn’t throw, they burned. We couldn’t do anything. How can we eat? We dare not be close to them. We just go back and look at our village for a while. We have to flee. We also have to be afraid of their landmines. We have to be afraid of them about everything and we dare not go anywhere.” - 40-year-old internally displaced Karen man in Nyaunglebin District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #99)

While journalists and diplomats compete to issue the most random guesses as to what is being discussed in the SPDC-NLD talks, there is a very simple way to assess the progress of the talks which is being ignored by almost everyone: simply look at the SPDC’s behaviour on the ground nationwide. Not the release of a few NLD members - as explained above, that is simply a game being played by the junta - but the real situation. Obviously if the talks are making serious progress toward democratic transition the SPDC would be taking steps, decreasing military activity, cutting back on forced labour, slapping a moratorium on forced relocations, all signs which would be visible in the countryside. None of these signs are present. Instead, military activity is steady if not increasing. In August and September the entire military and civilian authorities nationwide were mobilised to cover up forced labour, threatening village heads and telling them to lie if the visiting International Labour Organisation (ILO) delegation should come

to their villages. A regime which is sincerely negotiating a transition of power would not do this, it would admit the problem and take steps to deal with it. It would begin arresting those who use forced labour, not villagers who dare to tell about it.

“They try to shoot us. They say we are the enemy and they really shoot at us. I don’t know what to think. They shouldn’t do that. If they are really searching for their enemy, they only have to shoot their enemy. Now they are shooting the villagers. The villagers are not their enemy. When the Burmese shoot like this we can’t shoot back because we don’t have anything to shoot with.” - 30-year-old internally displaced Karen man in Nyaunglebin District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #87)

The situation in northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Division is a glaring example that the SPDC is not scaling down its repression of the civilian population. Since the SPDC-NLD talks began, troops from over 50 SPDC Battalions have been sent to Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts to burn more villages and systematically destroy the food supplies of tens of thousands of villagers who have fled into the forests after their villages were burned by SPDC troops. These battalions are right now sending patrols into the hills to trample the crops before the upcoming harvest, landmine the fields, and shoot on sight any villagers they see harvesting. The situation for the internally displaced villagers in the hills of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts is increasingly desperate. With little or no food left, constantly on the move to avoid regular SPDC patrols, the villagers are running out of options for survival. The SPDC wants them to come out of the hills to the garrisoned relocation sites so that they can be used as forced labour to support the Army. But the villagers know that this would mean starvation, with no food provided and no way to obtain any.

“When he was wounded we were almost on top of the guns. We threw down our machetes and baskets. We looked at them and knew that we couldn’t flee anymore. We fled into the bushes and the bullets were flying in front of us, ‘fee-fee-fee’. Hay aye, hay aye! The brush was being cut down [by the bullets] ‘preh-preh-preh’. It sounded like an elephant eating, it was so noisy. ‘Hay-hay-hay’. There was light in front of our noses, red-red-red, red-red-red [tracer bullets]. Hey, hey! We couldn’t flee anymore. I was carrying my grandchild and she was crying too much. Below us there was the sound of groaning. There was the sound of someone calling in the river, Hey! It was too noisy above and below us. There were a lot of people. I thought they had already fled away but they had come back. Then we stayed together. Then I asked who was making the groaning sound there. Someone said it was his child. He said there were two people [wounded]. Then he said that if we take that other person’s child it would be hopeless. So we were going to leave the child there. We didn’t know whether we would live or die. If the Burmese had come and seen us at the higher place they would have killed us.” - Karen woman over 50 describing what happened when a group of internally displaced villagers stumbled into an SPDC ambush in Nyaunglebin District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #62)

“They have laid landmines in those areas, and whenever we heard the explosion of landmines, we had to run. If we tried to burn off our hill fields and the smoke went up, then their bullets started flying. If they weren’t firing too many bullets or shells, we stayed and hid in a valley [otherwise they had to keep running]. We were working under horrible conditions and having to flee all the time. If we could work there, we’d have enough food to eat each year. But now we can’t work there.” - 45-year-old internally displaced Karen man in Papun District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #67)

“We flee and stay in the jungle. We look and listen for any news. We look at the heads of the enemy [the direction in which their columns are moving/looking]. When their head is directed toward us, we turn to the other side. When their head is directed toward another place, we turn to this side. When they come from the east, we flee to the west. When they come from the west, we turn to the east. We avoid them up and down, and we have escaped each time. We go between the rocks and the valleys, and to the sources of the streams.” - 31-year-old internally displaced villager in the Papun hills (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #71)

Even the villagers from the SPDC-controlled ‘Peace’ villages are fleeing into the hills to take their chances among the internally displaced. Though they have not been forced out, they say that they can no longer survive under the SPDC’s increasing demands for forced labour, extortion money, building materials and food. The forced labour prevents them from being able to tend their crops, so they try to buy their way out of it. Then the money runs out but the demands keep coming. The villagers can’t pay so they go for forced labour, but then their crop fails and they have no food. When they fail to show up for labour or pay, their village heads are arrested and tortured and the village is stormed to catch porters for forced labour. Eventually they give up and flee into the hills, even though they know that being caught there means being shot on sight. The last straw for villagers in at least 3 village tracts (Ka Dtaing Dtee, Tee Tha Blu Hta and Ku Thu Hta) of southern Papun District is a recent SPDC order stating that they will not be allowed to leave their villages for the 3 months from September to November 2001, not even to go to their fields. At least 30 SPDC-controlled villages are affected, with a population of over 5,000, and the numbers may grow as more reports come in. They have been told that the purpose is to mount an all-out operation against the KNLA, but these are the last 3 months of the growing season and include the harvest time, meaning that the crop will be left untended and the entire harvest will be wiped out. Some of these thousands of villagers now locked inside their villages have managed to escape, and say that everyone there is expecting to starve within the next year as a result. This type of systematic starvation of the Karen villagers in the region is nothing short of genocide.

“If the Burmese had already arrived at your hill field, you had to leave that hill field and you couldn’t dare work in it anymore. If you worked there again, maybe you would step on a landmine. If you clear your hill field by burning it, maybe bombs will explode beside you.” - 45-year-old male refugee from Papun District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #67)

“They are forcing us to carry loads for them, do ‘loh ah pay’ and send information. When they force us it becomes a problem for us. In the end, our lives become thirsty. We have to work for them, so we have little time to do our own work. When we have no free time, we become thinner and thinner. That is why we have less and less. None of the families have enough food because they are forcing us to do so much. ... About 10 families have run. Aye! Because of the weakness, because the SPDC are forcing us so much and they cannot suffer it. But many are fleeing to places up above here [higher in the hills]. Aye! They are always fleeing. Just a few are still living here. The villagers have a plan. If they cannot continue to suffer they will go up [into the hills], but right now they can’t go and are still suffering very slowly.” - 56-year-old man in an SPDC-controlled village in southern Papun District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #188)

KHRG has interviewed over 300 villagers in this region since 1999, as well as former SPDC soldiers and Karen relief workers in the area. Based on their testimonies and supported by SPDC order documents and photographic evidence, our newly released report ***“Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts”***

(KHRG #2001-03, October 2001) documents in detail the plight of villagers in Papun and Nyaunglebin districts.

“I have faced and borne these troubles for a whole year. We don’t have our hut anymore. We sleep in the jungle and have to worry that ants, termites or snakes will bite us. We are afraid but we can’t do anything. Even if the ants bite us, we can’t do anything. We sleep in the damp. It was raining the whole year. We couldn’t burn off our hill field and we just stayed like that the whole year. We couldn’t do anything because of the Burmese. If it were not for them, we could live our lives. Before, we never stayed like this. But now we have to stay like this always. We can’t do anything. ... It was calm for just one or two days. Most days we have to flee. Now we have to run away again. If it calms down longer than this and we can stay longer, it will be better. I hope the Burmese will go quickly and then we can go back and stay at our place. Now we have to stay on the ground because we can’t go to our huts. If they see any huts they burn them. There are no good huts left. We have to live on the ground in the summer. We can’t build a good hut because they will burn it. They even burn little huts. If we roof it with tarpaulin, it doesn’t stay dry and the water comes in. It is very unpleasant. If we make a more pleasant house, when they see it, they will burn it.” - 36-year-old internally displaced woman in southern Papun District (*“Flight, Hunger and Survival”*, Interview #142)

The deterioration in the human rights situation is not limited to these two districts alone. Interviews conducted by KHRG throughout Karen regions in recent months show that the situation is not improving anywhere. KHRG also continues to obtain SPDC order documents, hundreds of which are being issued every month and sent to villages demanding forced labour, building materials, food and money, placing restrictions on villagers and threatening village elders. In May 2001 KHRG published translations of over 500 such orders as *“SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A”* (KHRG #2001-02, 18/5/2001). Approximately 300 of these were direct orders for forced labour, despite the SPDC’s claims to be putting a stop to the practice. In the few months since the publication of that report in May, KHRG has already obtained close to 1,500 more SPDC order documents sent to villages. While we have not yet been able to translate all of these, approximately 300 of them are demands for forced labour dated after the SPDC’s alleged order banning the practice in November 2000. The continued issuance of thousands of such documents is hardly a sign of progress in the SPDC’s treatment of its people.

“[T]oday the xxxx Chairperson must arrive with 2 sacks of rice and bring along 2 permanent [rotating] servants. If you fail, we will send a bomb [mortar or artillery shell], informing you again.” - written order sent by SPDC #xxx Light Infantry Battalion to a village in Thaton District in mid-November 2000 [*“SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A”*, May 2001, Order #178]

“No one came in accordance with the call for servants when the Strategic Command went back [rotated out of the area], so the Head yourself must come to clear [the matter]. If [you] don’t come, [we] will call you with the Mobile Column. ... Every time [we] call for servants from the Village Head, [you] give many excuses and avoid it. In future, if battles or landmines occur concerned with your village, the village will be destroyed. ... The troops from above the Head’s village have suffered from landmines, so [we] are not happy at all. If the camp/activities such as a battle occurs, we will shoot [the village] with big weapons. Letting you know in advance, you are informed.” - written order from an SPDC Camp Commander to a village in Papun District, late November 2000 [*“SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A”*, May 2001, Order #187]

“Why didn’t you come when called by the camp? [We] Have already been waiting 3 days for your village. Send 8 villagers at once. Will wait until 2 o’clock. If [they] don’t come, know that your village will suffer.” - SPDC written order received by a village head in Papun District [***“SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A”***, May 2001, Order #203]

In September 2001 KHRG also released ***Photo Set 2001-A***, consisting of over 400 photos taken by KHRG researchers over the past year which add more evidence to the record that the human rights situation is not improving. The set is now available on our web site (www.khrg.org). It documents hundreds of abuses committed by the SPDC Army and authorities throughout Karen regions, and also shows that there has been no end to forced labour as claimed by the regime. The set contains sections on Forced Labour; Forced Relocations & Restrictions; Attacks on Villages & Village Destruction; Detention & Torture; Shootings & Killings; Flight & Displacement; Landmines; Soldiers; and a special section on Children.

Forced Labour and the ILO

During the entire duration of the ‘talks’ there has only been one other issue in Burma which has managed to attract any attention at all: the issue of forced labour. Forced labour is without doubt the single most important human rights issue in Burma today, definitely in the minds of most of Burma’s people. But this has been the case for years, and it has only attracted attention now because the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has been pressing the SPDC to put an end to it.

“The loh ah pay [forced labour people] from the Elder’s village flee very often, so as soon as this letter is received the Elder yourself must come to send 2 loh ah pay people to the sawmill near K---, to arrive on 20-1-2001. If [you] fail, the Elder will be tied up with rope.” - SPDC order issued to a village in Papun District, January 2001 [upcoming KHRG report]

“The messengers from the Elder’s village must arrive at the camp at 7 o’clock in the morning. Bring along morning rice packs and come to do duty at the camp.” - written order sent from SPDC Infantry Battalion #xxx to a village in Dooplaya District in mid-August 2001 [upcoming KHRG report]

The ILO has been criticised by some people internationally for not being ‘patient’ enough with the SPDC and not giving the regime enough time to put an end to forced labour. This is wrong, because the ILO has in fact been pressing the SPDC and its predecessors to stop using forced labour since 1964. Thirty-seven years is a lot of patience. During that time the ILO has stepped up the pressure bit by bit but the Burmese regimes consistently denied the problem and refused to take any action. Finally in the 1990’s the pressure reached new heights, culminating in a 1997-98 ILO Commission of Inquiry which studied over 10,000 pages of evidence and took testimony from over 300 direct witnesses before concluding that forced labour in Burma is rampant, widespread throughout the country and directly implemented by the regime. Since then the ILO has given several deadlines for serious action to be taken, and each time the SPDC has waited until the deadline and then claimed to issue a new ‘order’ banning forced labour. The latest of these ‘orders’ was supposedly issued on November 1st 2000 and signed by SPDC Secretary-1 Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, stating that forced labour is now illegal and that those demanding it will be punished. The SPDC claimed that it had distributed that order to every village head everywhere in the country and that it has been enforcing its conditions. In September 2001, the ILO finally had a chance to send a team into Burma to investigate these SPDC claims.

Their report will not be released until November, but our own observations indicate that there has been no decrease in forced labour, and that the only circulation of the SPDC orders occurred just 2 to 4 weeks before the ILO team was scheduled to arrive. In some areas village heads were called to meetings to be told about the order and receive copies of it, but at the same meetings they were told that if the ILO team comes and speaks to any of their villagers they must say that there is no forced labour any longer. They were then forced to pay 1,000 Kyat to buy placards with the order stapled to them in English (which no one in their villages can speak) and Burmese, and told to post these placards in their village if any foreigners come. When the Army demanded forced labour again after these meetings, some village heads in Pa'an District took their copies of Khin Nyunt's November 1st order to the Army commanders to show them that forced labour is not allowed any more. In every case they were told "That order doesn't apply here". Village heads in most other areas say that they were simply never informed of the order and that forced labour has continued as before. Recent deserters from the SPDC Army have told KHRG that they heard of the order but that their commanders laughed at it, knowing it was not serious. As for the clause in the order decreeing criminal punishment for those using forced labour, even the SPDC admits there has not been a single criminal case brought to the courts yet.

"As soon as this letter is received now, the Chairpersons yourselves must come and send 2 'loh ah pay' people from each village (with rice) to the camp, you are informed." - written order sent from SPDC Infantry Battalion #xxx to a village in Dooplaya District in mid-September 2001 [upcoming KHRG report]

"Q: They said they don't order people to go for 'loh ah pay' or portering anymore. Is that true?"

A: Maybe they will comb their hair in front of the people and the other leaders like that, but here we have suffered it and there are many villagers who have had to carry loads in the mountains and many people have died along the way." - 40-year-old village headman from an SPDC-controlled village north of Nyaunglebin (*"Flight, Hunger and Survival"*, Interview #17)

Instead, the SPDC is trying to fool the international community with smokescreens like the increased use of convict forced labour. Prisoners have always been used for some forced labour in Burma, but they are now being used more than ever before [see *"Convict Porters: The Brutal Abuse of Prisoners on Burma's Frontlines"* (KHRG #2000-06, 20/12/01)]. This does not mean that the forced labour burden on civilians has decreased, simply that the Army is always adding more and more forced labourers. What has also changed in the past year is the nature of the 'convicts' being used. Many of them have been arrested on spurious charges such as 'hiding in the dark' or possession of an illegal lottery ticket, rapidly convicted without evidence, then held in prison for only a few days before being sent for use as forced labourers by Army units. This raises the very serious question of whether the SPDC is trying to fill more of its forced labour needs by artificially turning civilians into convicts, knowing that the international community is far less critical of convict labour. In recent months several villagers have even told KHRG that they were captured from their fields by Army units, forced to change into convict clothes and taken away for forced labour.

"When they arrested me, they asked me, 'Where are you from?' I told them I was from xxxx. They asked me what time it was. I told them it was still very early, but they didn't agree. They punched me and asked me, 'Why are you still out now?' I explained to them I was leaving the teashop, but they didn't believe me. They punched me there on the road and took me to xxxx jail." - Burman labourer aged 28 from Pegu town who was imprisoned without grounds, then sent to the frontline as a convict porter [*"Convict Porters"*, December 2000, Interview #3]

“The servants who are being used in our Columns/Companies are convicts who are being punished. If you see any servants who have fled and escaped from the Column, come quickly to report the information to the nearest Columns.” - written order sent from SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #xxx to a village in Papun District in 1999 [***“SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A”***, May 2001, Order #7]

Villagers in Karen areas are also complaining of a more obscure play on words which SPDC officers are using to disguise the use of forced labour. For several years the SPDC has claimed that this labour is not forced at all but that it is ‘*loh ah pay*’, a Pali term referring to voluntary community work to earn Buddhist merit. Of course, labour for an Army under threat of punishment does not qualify as *loh ah pay* at all, but SPDC officers still use the term in their order documents demanding all forms of short-term forced labour. As a result, to the villagers *loh ah pay* no longer means merit-making voluntary labour, it means forced labour for the SPDC. Until now, both the officers and the villagers have been using the term to refer to shifts of one to a few days of forced labour at Army camps or doing odd jobs; it has never been used to refer to portering, road and infrastructure labour, or other difficult, dangerous or long-term forced labour. Villagers will usually go for *loh ah pay*, but they will either pay or flee to escape frontline portering or heavy infrastructure work, both of which are greatly feared because many people are killed doing this labour. Now, however, the villagers are complaining that officers in several regions have said that portering and hard labour are to be called ‘*loh ah pay*’ as well. This angers the villagers greatly, especially when orders call for ‘*loh ah pay*’ and they show up only to find themselves being taken for long-term portering. Some have said that now that they can no longer tell what they are to be used for, they may flee their villages when *loh ah pay* is demanded. The only apparent reason for the SPDC to make this change in terminology is so that they can claim that all forced labour in Burma, even portering, is voluntary.

“Q: They demand porters but call it ‘loh ah pay’, is it different from portering?”

A: It is the same. If they demand porters and say it is portering, the villagers dare not go. That is why they trick us. They think, ‘If we arrest porters for a long time, and call them porters, the civilians know about it and are afraid to come. They dare not come.’ So they call it ‘loh ah pay’. They called it ‘four day loh ah pay’. But we had to go more than four days and it became long term portering. They trick us in this way.” - 36-year-old man from an SPDC-controlled village in Papun District (***“Flight, Hunger and Survival”***, Interview #206)

Another smokescreen is that the Army now issues many of its orders for forced labour to the Township or Village Tract Peace and Development Councils instead of directly to the villages. These local SPDC authorities then divide the demands among the villages under them, and either issue the demands for the labourers or hire people to go and then bill the villages for the amount. The result is that to the villagers and the outside world, it appears that the orders are coming from the low-level civilian authorities instead of the Army. The orders usually make it clear enough that the work is for the Army, however, and if the villages fail to send the people or the money they soon find that it is the Army which comes to round them up for forced labour.

“To harvest the paddy for #xxx [Battalion], come to send the whole village, one person per house from the Elder’s village, to xxxx tomorrow on 19-12-2000 at 7 o’clock in the morning, you are informed.” - written order from a village tract head to a village head in Papun District, December 2000 [upcoming KHRG report]

“[Your village] failed to come yesterday and today to contribute ‘loh ah pay’ for [LIB] xxx. Why? I know the Elder’s village has been [busy] growing rice. Therefore, the Elder yourself should come to discuss and explain to the xxx Quartermaster Captain. The Quartermaster Captain has just arrived at my house. Come and meet the Quartermaster Captain as soon as you receive this letter.” - written order from a village tract head to a village head in Papun District, August 2000 [*“SPDC & DKBA Orders to Villages: Set 2001-A”*, May 2001, Order #318]

“To clear an aircraft ground [helipad], one person per house from the Elder’s village must come for ‘loh ah pay’, each with their own machete, and gather at xxxx tomorrow at 7 o’clock in the morning, you are informed.” - written order from a village tract head to a village head in Papun District, February 2001 [upcoming KHRG report]

Overall, the SPDC has shown that it is much more sensitive to criticism of its use of forced labour than to criticism on other points, such as its treatment of the NLD. This is because forced labour is so widespread that they cannot simply pretend it doesn’t exist, and because it is fundamental to their system of military rule. The SPDC could rapidly cut back on forced labour if it wanted to enforce its own orders, but the regime is afraid to do so. This is because most SPDC officers have little or no political ideology, and their loyalty to the SPDC springs from their impunity to obtain wealth and power by using the civilian population for their own ends. If they are banned from doing so, and if they lose their impunity to do so and can be punished, many officers would lose all loyalty to the regime. This could lead to a split in the Army, which the SPDC leaders fear more than all else. So forced labour is a far more serious issue, both to the population and the SPDC, than most people give it credit for.

“In January 2001, at the time when every battalion commander went for the four-monthly meeting, the Division Commander said, ‘We aren’t allowed to use forced labour any more, and I have already sent the radio message about it.’ Our battalion commander was not at the meeting. I stay near the battalion commander. I heard the battalion commander and the operations commander talking to each other. They were talking as friends. ‘Younger brother [the operations commander is senior in rank and is addressing the battalion commander], the Division Commander said we can’t call for ‘wontan’ [servants] or porters anymore. He only threatened us. They just talk to each other. Why doesn’t he try it himself. He stays in the town. We are the people who really have to work. So if we have to carry [the loads themselves], can he come and carry also?’ They were talking to each other. I was sitting down beside them in case they needed boiled water [for tea]. ... I lived in the office so I know everything they said. He [the operations commander] said, ‘About this, I will still use forced labour in my area.’ For carrying loads, for example, I can only carry one load. We can’t carry two loads, so there is one load left. Where can you get the people to carry it? So we just take villagers. Okay, there is no other way. [The Battalion Commander said:] ‘Come on. If anything happens, let it happen. If they arrest me, then they can arrest me.’” - an SPDC Lance Corporal who fled the Army in March 2001, describing his commanders’ reactions to the supposed SPDC order banning the use of forced labour (*“Flight, Hunger and Survival”*, Interview #236)

“We stay under the control of the military and the villagers have to face not having enough food, because of the military oppression. Since we were children, we saw our parents and grandparents always go to be sentries, porters and do ‘loh ah pay’. ... The people are becoming exhausted. In addition, the SPDC are forcing us to come and work for them more and more. To work as a sentry or a porter is not right. It has been like this since we were children, under the Ma Sa La [Ne Win’s pre-1988 regime], Na Wa Ta [SLORC, 1988-1997], and Na Ah Pa [SPDC] times. ‘Loh ah pay’ and portering are becoming our jobs by tradition. It is becoming worse. The villagers are poor and have to work day to day to feed themselves.”
- 40-year-old refugee man from western Nyaunglebin District (*“Flight, Hunger and Survival”*, Interview #9)

Look at the People, not the Politicians

Those who are desperately trying to assess whether or not there is ‘progress’ in Burma should pay much less attention to the SPDC’s games and statements in Rangoon, and look at issues like forced labour, destruction of villages, internal displacement, refugee flows, corruption and extortion. Any regime sincere about reform would rein in its troops and reduce these types of abuses in parallel with the talks. In Burma no such thing is happening. As for the NLD, if they sincerely wish to improve the lot of people in Burma they should long ago have insisted on noticeable reductions in human rights abuses as a show of good faith if the talks are to continue. Clearly the NLD has insisted on no such thing. The only benefits of the talks have been to the party’s own members, the politicians, those who are supposed to put the interests of the population before their own. The outside world can see clearly that the human rights situation continues to deteriorate, yet almost all we hear are expressions of optimism and ‘progress’. Where is this ‘progress’? These talks cannot make ‘progress’ until they become open, until the ethnic nationalities and other parties are allowed to take part, and until the people of Burma have a right to hear what deals are being made about their future.

“[I]f the needs of the villagers can be met and if there are rights for the villagers then everything will go well and they will not be poor like this. Some of the villagers said that if there are rights for them and their needs are being met, then even if they still have to give taxes it will not be a problem for them. If they can go freely to their hill fields and into the jungle and work there is not much of a problem, but because they can’t travel they can’t work easily and they cannot easily pay the taxes. ... I don’t have anything else to tell, but in the future I would like to have peace and development in our country. We should have peace and then work well to get enough food. There are many ways of oppression and we would like to be safe from these. It would be enough for us if we were safe from the many kinds of oppression.” - Karen village headman, age 40, from western Nyaunglebin District (*“Flight, Hunger and Survival”*, Interview #17)

“I can’t tell you about anything else. I can tell about the time when I was angry. When I was angry I couldn’t laugh or cry. I came back and saw that my rice was already burned. I had no rice to eat. I didn’t want to laugh. I couldn’t cry. I was angry but I couldn’t do anything. I wanted to cry but I couldn’t cry. I wanted to laugh but I couldn’t laugh.” - Karen woman villager, age 36, in southern Papun District (*“Flight, Hunger and Survival”*, Interview #142)