

# **Karen Human Rights Group**

## **News Bulletin**

*News Bulletin is regularly produced by KHRG in order to provide up to date information on recent developments taking place within Karen and other areas of Burma, particularly when urgent action may be required. To receive News Bulletin by email, subscribe to the mailing list by following the links on the KHRG Homepage. Topics covered in News Bulletin will generally be documented in more detail in future KHRG reports.*

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### **Convict Porters: Falsely charged, brutally abused, and unable to go home**

An Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group  
June 22, 2006 / KHRG #2006-B8

*As the SPDC offensive in northern Karen regions continues, dozens of forced labour porters are escaping from SPDC columns every week. Most of them are convicts taken from prisons far away in northern Burma. They tell of imprisonment on bogus charges, constant extortion by authorities, extreme brutality at the hands of the Army and the murder of their fellow porters. The lucky few who escape end up in the care of the Karen National Union, who must feed them and care for their wounds with no outside aid. Worse yet, they are trapped far from home: the road home for them is blocked by the Burmese and Thai armies, and almost no one in the outside world is willing to give help or advocate for 'convicts' regardless of how unjustly they were imprisoned or how brutally they have been treated.*

### **Convicts as porters**

In recent years Burma's State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) regime has rapidly increased its use of prison convicts as forced labour porters for the Army. Throughout the country, particularly where there are no roads or only seasonal roads, forced labour porters are used to carry most or all of the Army's ammunition, rations and supplies. Rural villagers are summoned for this labour on a regular basis to support Army camps in remote areas. For large scale military operations, until the late 1990s Army units would sweep towns and cities to round up thousands of civilians and truck them to frontline areas for use as porters. As the Army expanded more porters were needed on a regular basis, but rounding up civilians was attracting growing criticism led by the International Labour Organization. To deflect this criticism and to secure a more stable supply of porters, particularly for offensive operations in areas like Papun District where villagers are difficult to catch, the SPDC in the late 1990s began rapidly increasing and systematising its use of convicts as porters. A system of *Won Saung* holding camps was established close to the Army's main operating areas; convicts serving short sentences or with no more than a few years left on their sentences (and therefore considered less likely to attempt escape) were transferred to these camps where they could be readily available to

operational battalions. Once taken by a battalion they are kept as long as required, often beyond the end of their sentences, and are treated extremely brutally. They are considered expendable, and are often used as human shields and human minesweepers.

Though the use of convicts may deflect some international criticism, it still constitutes forced labour as defined by the International Labour Organization, and the use of civilian convicts for such purposes is a serious violation of the Geneva Conventions. The use of convicts has not significantly reduced the use of ordinary civilians as porters except in the case of large-scale military offensives; for most portering labour, such as carrying rations every month to remote camps or hauling ammunition along with routine patrols, it is still local villagers who are rounded up.

In the present offensive in northern Karen State, the seven infantry battalions of SPDC Military Operations Command (MOC) #15 now attacking and destroying Karen villages along the upper Bilin River<sup>1</sup> (see **map**) are accompanied by an estimated 400 porters, most of whom are convicts. In addition, MOC #10 operating in northern Papun district, and MOC #16 and MOC #21 in neighbouring Nyaunglebin District, are each estimated to have about 400 porters with them. When added to the porters with Light Infantry Division (LID) #66 in Toungoo district, it is likely that there are at least 2,000 convict porters taking part in the ongoing SPDC offensive against northern Karen villages. This is in addition to hundreds of civilians who have been rounded up, particularly by LID #66 in Toungoo district.<sup>2</sup>

### **False charges and extortion**

Right now approximately 60 convict porters are in the care of Karen National Union (KNU) officials after escaping in Papun district, and equivalent or slightly lower numbers are with KNU authorities in neighbouring Toungoo and Nyaunglebin districts. Many of them are Shan, Kachin, Akha and Wa brought from distant prisons in Burma's far north and northeast, probably as a deliberate strategy to make them too afraid to escape in Karen territory so far from home.

KHRG has already interviewed many of these escaped porters. Due to the SPDC's preference for convicts on short sentences, many of them say they were imprisoned for trivial offences like selling illegal lottery tickets or fighting. Some have told KHRG they were rounded up with a group of people for purposes of extortion – those who could pay bribes were set free while those who could not were charged with possession of heroin. This is a common charge in northern Burma where they were arrested. Some of the convicts say they were detained by police along with people caught red-handed in possession of heroin, but the guilty were set free on payment of a bribe, while others had no heroin but were imprisoned because they could not pay.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts* (KHRG #2006-B7, 7/6/2006).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Once in prison the corruption and extortion continued. Some prisoners with long sentences (on the order of 20 years) paid bribes to be sent for porter duty in hope that they could escape, while those on short sentences faced the opposite situation, having to pay bribes if they wanted to avoid being sent as porters. This is consistent with previous testimony of convicts gathered by KHRG, which indicates that everything from food distribution to daily chores in Burmese prisons runs on corruption and extortion.<sup>3</sup>

### **With the Army: brutality, torture and murder**

Once with the Military Operations Command troops, the convicts describe a life of callous and constant brutality. They are forced to carry loads of 30-35 kilograms (66-77 lb.) in bamboo baskets that chafe and eventually cut through the skin on their shoulders and at the base of their backs, wearing nothing but rubber flipflops on their feet or going barefoot when their flipflops fall apart. Stumbling under the loads on steep rocky hillsides is common, gashing their shins and leading to beatings by soldiers from behind. When the columns enter villages the porters are kept under guard just outside the village, probably to prevent their escape during the ensuing chaos of burning, looting and shooting at villagers. When the porters fell ill, SPDC officers told them “There are no medicines for you.” One porter recounted being told by an officer, “Once you leave jail you are a dead man. If you try to run we will shoot and kill you. If we miss, you will die from a landmine, or if the KNLA catches you they will kill you.” All of them had been beaten, on occasion amounting to torture, and fed starvation rations of little more than a handful of food per day. One group saw SPDC soldiers receive treatment after stepping on landmines, but when a porter stepped on a landmine the soldiers killed him rather than treat him. Several also witnessed porters who could carry no further being beaten or tortured and then left behind to die.

Despite the SPDC threats that they would die if they attempted escape and their lack of knowledge of the local territory, many of the porters came to the conclusion that death was certain if they remained with the troops much longer. One porter says he decided, “If we are killed that is our fate, but we have no choice but to escape this torture.”

### **Escape with no way home**

Some do die while escaping, either shot by SPDC troops or maimed by landmines and left to bleed to death, but more and more are escaping and ending up in the hands of the KNU, who are now taking care of about sixty escapees in Papun district alone and more in other districts. The KNU does not have enough food for its own troops and all the displaced villagers it is attempting to protect, yet it is left to treat the escaped porters' wounds and feed them because no outside aid is provided for them. Worse yet, home is far away for these men and there appears to be no way to get there.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Convict Porters: The brutal abuse of prisoners on Burma's frontlines* (KHRG #2000-06, December 2000).

Travelling northward overland to Shan State is currently impossible because it would require passing through the areas where SPDC columns are now burning villages and shooting civilians on sight. Heading southwest to Thaton and then northward past Rangoon would almost certainly end in recapture because the porters lack identification and passes to get through the SPDC checkpoints, and some of these men do not even speak Burmese, only the languages of their home regions. Covertly crossing the border into Thailand and travelling north to recross the border into Shan State would give the best chance of making it home, but Thai authorities and military are currently blocking all movement of people from Burma along these roads. Some escapees have already tried to cross into Thailand to seek paying work, but were arrested by Thai authorities and forcibly deported back into Papun district. They are caught in a trap, with no apparent way home.

Relief aid is urgently needed to help these men survive until they find a way out, along with advocacy pressing Thai authorities to allow them to transit via Thailand to Shan State on humanitarian grounds. Unfortunately, however, few outside organisations are willing to help these men because they are ‘convicts’ – though they have been convicted by a system widely acknowledged to be corrupt and on the basis of dubious military decrees posing as laws. Most of these men would not be convicts if they lived in any other country. They therefore need and deserve support not as ‘convict porters’, but as civilians who have been grossly abused in direct violation of international human rights and humanitarian law.

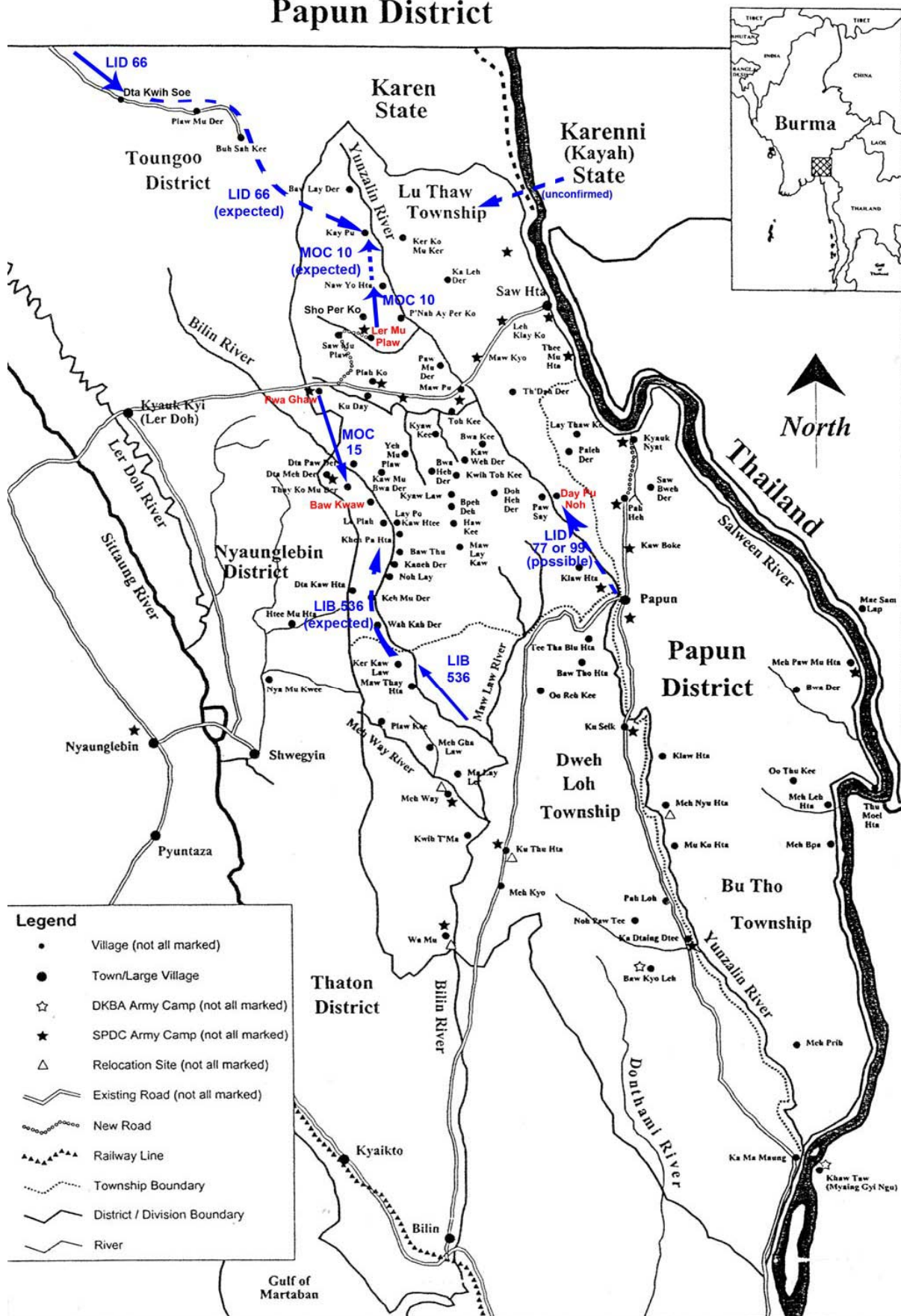
### Further background

See the following reports for further background related to this situation and the issue of convict porters in general.

- ***Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts*** (KHRG #2006-B7, 7/6/2006)
- ***Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun district*** (KHRG #2006-F3, April 2006)
- ***Convict Labour*** section in ***Surviving in Shadow*** (KHRG #2006-01, January 2006)
- ***Papun District: Forced labour, looting and road construction in SPDC-controlled areas*** (KHRG #2005-F5, May 2005)
- ***KHRG Commentary #2005-C1*** (June 2005)
- ***Convict Porters: The brutal abuse of prisoners on Burma’s frontlines*** (KHRG #2000-06, December 2000).

Photos related to convict porters can be seen in **Section 3.1** of ***KHRG Photo Gallery: 2005*** (April 2006), **Section 6.2** of ***KHRG Photo Set 2005A*** (May 2005), and other previous **KHRG Photo Sets**. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

# Papun District



Scale: 1 cm to 7.5 km

Map by KHRG, Karen Human Rights Group



## A map of Burma and its surrounding regions. Burma is shown in white, with a yellow rectangular area in the south. Neighboring countries are labeled: TIBET to the north, INDIA to the west, CHINA to the north and east, LAOS to the east, and THAILAND to the south. Bodies of water are labeled: Gulf of Bengal to the west, Andaman Sea to the south, and Gulf of Thailand to the southeast.



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