



Report from the Field

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Toungoo District: The civilian response to human rights violations

Attacks on villages in Toungoo and other northern Karen districts by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) since late 2005 have led to extensive displacement and some international attention, but little of this has focused on the continuing lives of the villagers involved. In this report KHRG's Karen researchers in the field describe how these attacks have been affecting local people, and how these people have responded. The SPDC's forced relocation, village destruction, shoot-on-sight orders and blockades on the movement of food and medicines have killed many and created pervasive suffering, but the villagers' continued refusal to submit to SPDC authority has caused the military to fail in its objective of bringing the entire civilian population under direct control. This is a struggle which SPDC forces cannot win, but they may never stop trying.

"The main thing I want is for the SPDC army to go back to town from our village. The way the SPDC rules is unacceptable and doesn't benefit us at all. They only come and disturb our way of living. If they have to fight they make us go in front, and if the villagers get injured they don't even care. If I have to tell the truth, I don't want to see their faces."

- Naw M--- (female, 23), K--- village, Tantabin Township

Since late 2005, the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC) junta ruling Burma has been sending more troops in to Toungoo District and building army camps closer to the villages; there are now more than 2,000 soldiers based in Toungoo District. The SPDC's current plan is to force the villagers living in the hill areas to move into the SPDC controlled areas, representing the first step in their strategy to eliminate any possibility of non-violent or armed resistance against complete SPDC control of people's lives, land and livelihoods. In 2006 the SPDC have subjected villagers to forced labour, movement restrictions, and road blockades to prevent villagers from buying food in the towns. The SPDC soldiers have become more active in the hill areas in many different places, threatening the villagers to leave the hill areas and move into areas controlled by the SPDC. Despite threats, violent abuse and killings from SPDC soldiers, the civilians have not complied with their demands. Villagers in both the plain and hill areas have resisted, contrary to the expectations of the SPDC. Villagers under SPDC control have found ways to evade movement restrictions and other demands, some civilians have left their villages and some have fled into the jungle to escape SPDC control. Others have fled to other Karen districts or across the border to refugee camps in Thailand.

SPDC militarisation

The SPDC soldiers based in Toungoo district now total more than 20 battalions, including Infantry Battalions #16, 20, 26, 29, 30, 32, 60, 73, 80, 92, 124, 253, and 603, and Light Infantry Battalions #14, 108, 124, 439, 522, and 590. Rapid army expansion has led to most SPDC battalions being grossly undermanned with only 120-150 men per battalion, but

it is nonetheless estimated that there are currently more than 2,000 SPDC soldiers located in Toungoo District. In July/August 2005 the SPDC began closing the roads in the district to non-military traffic¹, preventing the villagers from buying food. They have also blockaded the roads and landmined the footpaths to cut off the villagers living in the plains from those living in the hill areas.

Following up on these restrictions, SPDC soldiers from the Light Infantry and Infantry Battalions increased their military activities in the hill areas in order to control the villagers. In the plains, SPDC soldiers have forced the villagers to work for them doing labour such as *set tha [rotating shifts as messengers and camp servants]*, portering, building new army camps, cooking for the soldiers, and transporting water from the river to the army camp. In the hill areas the SPDC have increased their activities, controlling more areas and patrolling areas where villagers are displaced. On May 1st 2006 the SPDC intensified its blockade on all travel routes used by the villagers. The strategy appears to be to target the villagers first to clear them out or bring them all under control, then destroy the Karen National Union (KNU) in the district, then consolidate full control throughout the region so the entire civilian population can be systematically exploited for the benefit of the military. Their campaign involves sending more troops into Toungoo district, with the aim of depopulating the hills by December 2006. At this stage the principal goal of the SPDC is to force all civilians into controlled areas and restrict their movement and activities.

"The SPDC army Division #66 officers said that they would send more troops into Toungoo District, and target the villagers first. They said that this was because they knew the civilians were the arms of the KNU. So they would clear the civilians first so that they could start to get rid of KNU later on."

- Saw N--- (male), H--- village, Thandaung township

Impact of SPDC human rights abuses on civilians

Most of the civilians living in the plain areas are in villages under SPDC control. In these areas the increased SPDC militarisation and activity has led to increases in forced labour, land confiscation, forced relocation, and restrictions on movement and livelihoods, all of which have led to problems with food security. In the hills, villagers have suffered from forced displacement, systematic destruction of their crops and food supplies, arbitrary shootings and killings, and landmines, among other abuses. The SPDC blockade on communication between the plain and hill areas is also increasing the difficulties for civilians in the hill areas in relation to food, health, education, and living conditions.

(A). Transportation blockages: Impact on food supply and livelihood

Since more SPDC troops have been sent into the area and built more army camps, the soldiers have not allowed civilians to travel outside their village or make contact with other villages. As a result of the SPDC's activities, the villagers face more problems with regards to food security and taking care of their families.

"The SPDC soldiers would like to make it difficult for us to get food so that we will be hungry. Because of this, more villagers are fleeing from the villages and some are going to the refugee camps in Thailand."

- Saw R--- (male, 66), T--- village, Thandaung township

Villages in Kler Lah area (see **map**) such as Kler Lah, Kaw Soe Ko, Wa Tho Klah, Maw Pa Der, Ler Ko, Ku Pwa Der, Klay Soe Kee, Der Doh, Maw Ko Der and Gha Mu Der are currently under SPDC control and subjected to travel restrictions that prevent them from

¹ See [KHRG Photo Gallery 2005: Movement Restrictions](#).

travelling to other villages to buy food. Some villagers don't have food, so they have to borrow from close friends and some are resorting to eating boiled rice porridge. Although some still have a rice supply, it is only enough for one or two months. According to the reports from a KHRG researcher who is operating in the area, the villagers in Kler Lah area can't buy food and the most serious problem they face is food shortage. In addition, the situation for villagers in the Day Loh and Klay Loh river areas north of Kler Lah is now the same as it is for villagers in Kler Lah area.

"If the SPDC soldiers see villagers on the roads or pathways they capture them, fine them and force them to be porters. We don't have the freedom to trade; we don't dare to sell our rice to other villagers because if they captured us they would make problems for us. If the situation remains like this, we will have to suffer more in our future lives. We don't know other places to flee to. We have to stay in the village and work for them [SPDC soldiers] by being forced labour and we can't go to work for ourselves."

- Saw T--- (male), M--- village, Thandaung township

Due to the SPDC's road blockages, the villagers are unable to sell the vegetables that they have grown and as a result cannot earn an income. Now a 'bowl' (1.6 kg / 3.5 lb) of rice costs 15,000 Kyat, over 30 times the price in plains regions. Some of the villagers say that they don't know when this suffering will end. The villagers based in Kaw Thay Der area are not allowed to visit other villages. If they want to visit other villages they must ask permission from the SPDC authorities, and if the authorities allow it they are only permitted to leave the village for 4 or 5 days to travel to other villages. They have to pay 100 Kyat for the pass.

"The current biggest problem is food, because the SPDC soldiers have closed the road and we are not allowed to buy food from the town or to go outside the village. If the situation remains the same we will have problems with food in the coming year."

- Naw S--- (female, 43), K--- village, Thandaung Township

(B). Forced labour

Every day the SPDC soldiers order villagers to work on building, maintaining and servicing their new army camps. As a result the villagers living under SPDC control don't have time to work for their families. The villagers are forced to do jobs such as carrying water, messenger duty, building and maintaining camp buildings and fences, portering and cooking and preparing food for the soldiers.

"Burmese soldiers are setting up their camps on the hilltops and ordering the villagers to work in the camp every day. We have to prepare their food and carry water by rotation every day. In addition, when the SPDC soldiers are preparing to go to the front line [into the hills to burn villages], they usually order the villagers to carry things such as weapons and food. Sometimes, when 15 villagers are forced to go as porters, only 8 of them come back. I always have to do this as well."

- Naw W--- (female, 67), S--- village, Tantabin township

Moreover, the SPDC soldiers are ordering the villagers to clear away bush from both sides of the vehicle roads, which involves clearing landmines and digging security bunkers for the soldiers. The villagers must also cut logs in order to build fences for the army camps. On March 1st 2006, SPDC Infantry Battalion #92 moved into Htee Hta Pu village in Thandaung township and forced the villagers to act as messengers and servants and to build an army camp using 1,000 logs. In addition, the SPDC soldiers established camps in the Pah Der Kah (Par Der Ka) area east of Than Daung Gyi in Thandaung township, and ordered the villagers from Ler Ghee Ko, Pah Der Kah, Htee Hta Pu, K'Thwee Dee and Ker Der Kah villages to carry food for them and cut bamboo and logs for camp construction.

“When they order the villagers to work in their army camp, if the villagers don’t go they [SPDC soldiers] send the order again. Sometimes the soldiers themselves come to the village. If the villagers don’t obey, they [SPDC soldiers] threaten to move them into the relocation site or burn down their village.”

- Saw H---, T--- village, Thandaung township

(C). Land confiscation and forced relocation of villagers

In Thandaung Township, the SPDC soldiers are forcibly relocating civilians in many different places. SPDC Army officers have told villagers that they have orders from higher authorities to confiscate land from the villagers in Thandaung Township. Most of the territory east and west of the Day Loh river in Thandaung township (see **map**) has now fallen under the SPDC’s control. Since early 2006, the following villages have become SPDC controlled: Pah Der Kah, Ler Ghee Ko, Ker Der Kah, Htee Hta Pu, Htee Hta Saw, Kler Mu Kha, Kler Pa Htee, Sa Ba Law Kee, and K’Thwee Dee. Moreover, villages slightly further south along the Day Loh river, including Pa Leh Wah, Ta Hser Ka Tha, Klay Wah, and some villages (Peh Kaw Der, Maw Ko Der, Der Doh, Wa Soe and Sho Ser villages) which are situated close to and east of Kler Lah, have also become SPDC controlled areas.

Since early 2006 many villages located in newly SPDC-controlled areas have been forcibly relocated. If the villagers do not obey the SPDC soldiers they face numerous problems. On February 2nd 2006, SPDC soldiers ordered villagers from Pah Der Kah, Kaw Mi Der, and Thay Ya Yu to move to the western side of the Day Loh river. Some of the villagers did not go and instead moved to other villages or fled into the hill areas. Several of these villagers died as a result of stepping on landmines, which have been laid by the SPDC soldiers in various locations. Some of the villagers were also arrested by the SPDC soldiers and killed.

Those villagers living east of the Day Loh river were ordered by the SPDC soldiers to move to Thandaung. Village leaders who refused to move were sent a chillie, a piece of charcoal and a bullet by the SPDC. This message means we will capture and torture you, burn your village and shoot your villagers. Currently, the villagers in Thandaung township are not allowed to travel outside their villages and they are not permitted to buy food in Thandaung town.

(D). Landmines

At present both the SPDC and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) are using landmines. Throughout 2006, SPDC soldiers have been planting landmines in front of villagers’ houses, in abandoned villages, in ricefields, along riverbanks and pathways from villages to the fields, with the specific intent of harming villagers. Many areas in Thandaung township are now heavily mined, and as a result more than 15 villagers have been injured and killed in this township. KNLA forces warn the villagers regarding which areas and pathways are mined, but SPDC soldiers do not inform the villagers at all regarding where their landmines have been planted. SPDC soldiers are known to have laid landmines in Pah Der Kah, Kaw Mi Ko, Leh Ko, K’Thwee Dee, Ker Der Kah, Htee Hta Saw, Kler Mu Kee, Sa Ba Law Kee, and Kler Mu Kha villages in Thandaung township, and consequently people from these villages don’t dare go to work their fields because they are frightened of stepping on one of the landmines.

The soldiers have also planted landmines around each army camp. On April 1st 2006, village leaders from the abovementioned villages met with the SPDC commanders to discuss the problem of landmines, but with no positive outcome. The meeting occurred because in Kaw Thay Der area, villagers had been forced to cut back the bushes alongside the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee and Kler Lah – Mawchi roads and clear landmines. As a result, 5 villagers stepped on landmines. Those villagers injured by the landmines were not allowed to go to Toungoo hospital, and were instead sent to Kler Lah clinic. This clinic is not equipped to perform

amputations or other surgery, but can only stabilise landmine victims for transport to Toungoo. Even so, it was one week before these landmine victims were allowed to be transported to Toungoo hospital.

“The SPDC soldiers’ landmines were not far from the village but the villagers didn’t know where they had planted them, so many of the villagers were affected.”

- Saw P--- (male, 18), Thandaung Township

Below is a partial list of civilians in Thandaung township who stepped on SPDC landmines between January and April 2006. This list is not complete.

#	Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Village	Date	Reason
1.	Maung Lu Kyaw	M	75	Villager	Kler Mu Kha	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
2.	Saw Yo Ha	M	25	Villager	Tha Nay Kya	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
3.	Saw Aung La	M	25	Villager	Na Kyi Sway	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
4.	Saw Ta Lay	M	35	villager	Kler Mu Kha	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
5.	Saw Poe Loe	M	40	villager	Ka Thaw Pweh	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
6.	Saw Swan Keh	M	38	Villager	Ka Thaw Pweh	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
7.	Saw Pee Lee Moe	M	22	Villager	Ka Thaw Pweh	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
8.	Naw Na Tha Kyo	F	23	Villager	Ka Thaw Pweh	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
9.	Saw Ba Neh Htaw	M	18	Villager	Ka Thaw Pweh	Jan 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
10.	Naw Kler Doh Paw	F	21	Villager	Haw Lu Der	April 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.
11.	Saw Eh Doh Wah	M	27	Villager	Htee Kaw Per	April 2006	Not informed of location of landmine planted by the SPDC.

To support the increased troop presence in the district, the SPDC army has been sending more large Army trucks up from central Burma. Once the trucks arrive at Kler Lah, however, they are parked there and the officers sell the petrol for their own profit. Instead of using the vehicles to transport supplies, they use local people, either on foot or by commandeering private vehicles without payment. People are also used to carry supplies in order to detect and clear KNLA landmines along the roads and pathways. Some villagers have fled their villages to avoid this forced labour, but others comply out of fear of the military. On March 8th 2006 in Kaw Thay Der area of Tantabin township, a Light Infantry Division #66 Column led by Aung Myo Htut ordered local villagers to clear the road, and one villager named Saw Kaw was injured by a landmine. The army didn’t look after the injured villager and the other

villagers had to look after him. Similarly on March 22nd 2006, they again asked the villagers to go and clear the landmines around Pa Ka Ku Lah in Tantabin township, and this time a villager named Saw Hu was injured by a landmine. The villagers had to look after him and sent him to the hospital, but the SPDC Army provided no assistance because they said it was not a direct result of the labour that Saw Hu had been ordered to perform.

“Although they had trucks parked in Kler Lah, they didn’t use them and the SPDC soldiers were selling the petrol. For us, the villagers, they ordered us to clear the landmines and ordered us to walk in front of them. We were also afraid of the landmines, that we might be injured. But as they might give us a problem if we didn’t go, we had to go.”

- Naw M--- (female, 23), K--- village, Tantabin township

(E). Disappearances and the killing of civilians

Since late 2005 there has been a significant increase in the forced labour demanded of civilians by the SPDC Army, and of the suffering brought on by that labour. A relatively new development, however, is that in Thandaung township some of the villagers who have been taken for forced labour by the SPDC are still missing and nobody has been able to obtain any news of their whereabouts. As a result, many families have lost contact with their loved ones. West of the Day Loh river in Ku Thay Der area, some villagers and village heads have been arrested and killed. On April 18th 2006, SPDC troops under battalion commander Nay Myo Aung of Light Infantry Battalion #108 shot a villager named Saw Mya Lin outside the village. Although he was able to escape, he was badly injured on his right hand.

On May 3rd 2006, soldiers from SPDC Light Infantry Division #66, Light Infantry Battalion #14, went into Saw Der village where they shot and killed 22 year old Saw Thu Ler Taw. In response to this shooting, the other villagers fled the village leaving their belongings behind. The soldiers then robbed 200,000 Kyat from Saw Thu Ler Taw and looted the possessions of the other villagers. On May 8th 2006, Light Infantry Battalion #108 commander Nay Myo Aung and his soldiers were burning down houses in Hsaw Wah Der village southeast of Kler Lah when they shot and killed 80 year old Saw Than Aung, and took his savings amounting to 400,000 Kyat.

On April 3rd 2006, SPDC Tactical Operations Command #661 (part of Light Infantry Division #66) led by Commander Soe Htwe arrested and tortured a village elder of Ker Der Kah village, northeast of Than Daung Gyi in Thandaung township. Later that day they took him to the Day Loh riverside, where they tortured him further and killed him. The body was left alongside the Day Loh river but no one dared go to retrieve it. They were afraid of being captured and tortured, or that the body or the surrounding ground might be booby-trapped with a landmine. Only after more than a week did people go, but by then the body was already seriously decayed. In the same village on March 11th 2006, SPDC Light Infantry Division #66 led by Commander Aung Soe killed two Ker Der Kah villagers named Saw Ah Poe and Saw Dah. They were captured and detained on the road, tortured and killed. Their families are still in Ker Der Kah village, but the two men were killed because the SPDC army does not allow anyone in Pah Der Ka (Par Der Ka), K’Thwee Dee, and Htee Hta Saw villages to go outside their village. Anyone seen outside these villages is shot on sight.

The soldiers don’t allow the villagers to go to town, and any villagers caught there are detained by the Army and accused of contacting the Karen National Union (KNU). They are then beaten by the soldiers. On April 13th 2006, SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Division #66 captured Saw Bu Htoo, who was walking along the road in Tantabin township. The soldiers tied his hands behind his back with rope and punched him more than 20 times. As Saw Bu Htoo ran to escape the soldiers shot at him, but he was still able to get away. In circumstances like these, between January and July 2006 the SPDC army killed six villagers in the Per Htee area in Tantabin township. Furthermore, in the Maw Nay Pwa area in

Tantabin township, SPDC Light Infantry Division #66 has been patrolling the villages and surrounding area, and whenever they see a villager they capture, torture and kill them. Six of the villagers from this area have also been killed in the first half of 2006.

This has made life extremely dangerous for people living in villages located on the roads, despite being labelled as 'peace villages' by the SPDC. People in Kaw Thay Der village, which is located on the Kler Lah – Bu Sah Kee road, for example, say that under the restrictions and shoot-on-sight orders their situation is now very difficult. Some civilians remain in the village, others have left their homes and are living in the jungle under the trees and bamboo, and some have dispersed into Toungoo town. The villagers are now scattered in different places. Many of the civilians who have fled into the jungle have died due to the lack of food and medicines.

Education

Civilians displaced in the hills or confined to their own villages have lost almost all opportunity at education, particularly post-primary education. Most children cannot access post-primary education in their own village, but the movement restrictions and the danger of landmines or capture and abuse by SPDC troops make it impossible for them to travel to schools in other villages or towns. Meanwhile, civilians living in the plains under SPDC control are facing continuous increases in school costs. Families have told KHRG they must now pay an extra tuition fee of 6,000 Kyat for each child every month, causing many children to be taken out of school because their families cannot pay. This does not appear to be a state-instituted fee, but results from the lack of any funding for schools by the SPDC in rural areas combined with local-level SPDC corruption. In the mountain areas, students cannot even attend school due to the increase in the SPDC's military activities. There are many children who have passed 5th standard but cannot continue their studies because they are constantly fleeing from their homes and no higher education is available locally any more. Due to SPDC military operations, some schools suddenly had to close down just before the end of the school year in February and as a result students were not able to sit their exams and complete their year. Some students have fled to the jungle, while others have moved to other districts or refugee camps in order to continue their schooling.

Health

As a result of the increased military activity by the SPDC, the number of displaced persons has also increased. Due to the large number of displaced people, the health of children is a major concern during the rainy season. Most of the villagers injured by the SPDC's landmines have been taken care of by other civilians. KNLA medics and mobile medical teams also treat landmine victims but they are usually short of resources and are not always nearby. It is very difficult for villagers who have fled from the SPDC to access medical care at a hospital in town, because people from the hills are at risk of being captured and accused of contact with the KNU. Villagers living in SPDC controlled areas can buy medicines and seek treatment at local hospitals, but only if they have the large sums of money required to pay the bills as no assistance is provided.

The civilians' struggle to secure their rights

As a result of the SPDC army blocking the villagers' trading routes and subjecting them to forced labour, the villagers don't have time to work for their own families. These villagers try to take care of each other, and whenever there are food shortages and living conditions are difficult they support each other with whatever they have. In SPDC controlled villages, it is dangerous to disobey orders but villagers still resist by not going to forced labour on time,

not sending the full numbers of people demanded, or negotiating reductions in demands for food, money and forced labour by playing different local Army units off against each other. Since the increase of human rights abuses perpetrated against Karen civilians, many have decided to resist these abuses and evade SPDC control by leaving their villages and fleeing into the mountains. Others have moved to other Karen districts or crossed the border into refugee camps in Thailand.

“The army is increasing their numbers and adding military camps, and they order the villagers to cut thatch and bamboo in order to build their military camps. For this they demand 20 to 30 villagers, and another two villagers to be ‘set tha’ [messengers and servants] every day at their military base. If there is nothing else to do there, we have to draw water for them and carry the water from the river to their camp, about 15 minutes walking distance. The villagers ordered to be ‘set tha’ are supposed to bring along their own food. Moreover, another five villagers have to go every day to be sentries at their military base, and if anything needs to be carried they have to be porters, which sometimes lasts for 10 to 15 days. Whenever they go anywhere we have to follow them to carry their things, carrying loads of 15 viss [24 kg / 52 lb], and we are afraid and sad whenever we climb up the mountains because of the possibility that there will be fighting or that we might lose our legs to landmines. If we die, we know that they won’t take care of us. Moreover, they don’t like us to visit from one village to another. If they see a villager out on the car road, they arrest, torture, and fine us, so we can’t work for ourselves peacefully. We also can’t transport and sell our paddy because if they caught us, that might be a problem for us. Because of this, we didn’t know how to work for our living. The longer we stayed the more we suffered, but we didn’t know where else to go. As we were suffering from the SPDC’s forced labour and being their porters, we decided to flee. We gathered the four people of our household, and step by step we came to the refugee camp. My other friends will also follow us if the oppression keeps increasing.”

- Saw D--- (male), L--- village, Tantabin township

Displaced villagers in the hills have developed ways to covertly harvest their rice and retrieve hidden food supplies, sometimes by night, while many have switched to cash crops like cardamom which can be grown in small forest clearings. The villagers staying under SPDC control in the plains and civilians staying in the mountain areas who have fled from SPDC control have also been supporting each other through a secret food trading system. Displaced villagers in the hills bring forest products and cash crops to temporary ‘jungle markets’ at secret locations, which they barter for goods like salt, processed foods and medicines brought up into the hills covertly by villagers in SPDC-controlled areas. However, since the SPDC army started to increase their activities they have restricted villagers in the plains, making it difficult for them to travel outside their villages, while blockading or landmining the paths from the plains up into the hills and through the hills in order to stop the movement of people and goods in the hills and the trade between hill villagers and plains villagers. Since this trade system has largely been blocked, many villagers living in the mountain areas say they no longer have any way to buy food. Their houses and rice storage barns are burned down by SPDC troops whenever they are found. Living in dangerous conditions and unable to secure their food supply, some villagers have fled to other districts or across the border to refugee camps in Thailand rather than surrender their rights and submit to SPDC control. Most say they will return home not when there is ‘peace’ if that means SPDC control, but only when a situation prevails wherein they can regain their rights.

“The SPDC army based in Kler Lah army camp and Dta Kwih Soe [Ta Kwee Soe] army camp were active around Dta Kwih Soe in January 2006. They were patrolling around to find people’s hiding places, and they wouldn’t allow the Peh Su Yeh villagers who are under their control to go outside their village. They blocked the path to foods such as rice and salt, and materials which are basic household items, and during the time when we were harvesting they came up and we couldn’t harvest

anymore. However, we brought what we had harvested to the forest, and while the situation was still better than it is now we tried to buy various foods at the places [SPDC-controlled villages or jungle markets] where it was easy to go. KNLA soldiers also tried to protect us for our security and made contact to support us with food. We used to buy food at Play Hsa Loh but in January 2006, as the SPDC army knew about this, they came and based their camp there and didn't let the villagers under their control to go outside, and they blocked all the pathways. If they saw the villagers outside, they fined, arrested and punished them. As we couldn't run anymore, we came and reached the refugee camp on the 19th of January 2006".

- Saw T--- (male), displaced villager

On July 19th 2006 the Free Burma Rangers reported that there were over 18,000 villagers presently displaced in Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Papun districts by the ongoing SPDC campaign against hill villages. The displaced villagers are striving to look after each other, supporting each other with food, medical care and setting up education for their children on the ground in the forest.

SPDC human rights violations are forcing many Karen villagers in Toungoo district to become displaced in their own and neighbouring districts. As it is not easy to cross into Thailand as a refugee, a camp for displaced villagers had to be set up at Ee Thu Hta, in Papun district on the Karen side of the Salween River where it borders Thailand. This camp was set up in April 2006 and in less than a month the number of people taking refuge there grew to more than 800, ninety percent of whom were from Toungoo district. They set up their own systems for managing the camp, including health and education, and obtained material support from the KNU and Karen relief groups. The population is now well over 1,000 and growing, with more people still arriving from Toungoo district. This camp itself, however, is far from secure, being located close to several SPDC Army camps.

Conclusion

The displacement of villagers is due to the SPDC's violation of their human rights, which have become so severe and systematic that they have had to leave their way of life and the places inherited by their ancestors in order to secure their human rights and life for the future. Most of them are supporting each other, coming up with resourceful ways to survive and stay close to their land, sometimes with the help of small amounts of outside aid. This is becoming increasingly difficult against the military machine determined to drive them off their land and seize control of their lives. It is difficult enough to document the situation of these villagers, but it is far more difficult to help them meet their own needs, particularly in terms of physical and food security. The forced labour, extortion, restrictions on movements, blockades on the pathways and roads, and the proliferation of landmines throughout their district are all making it difficult for villagers here to work for their own and their family's survival. If the villagers were not subjugated, attacked or hunted down by SPDC forces and if they were allowed to live according to their own culture and traditions, they would not be forced to flee from their homes and seek refuge in other countries in such large numbers.

"If we were living as our ancestors according to their traditions, we wouldn't have to worry about our daily survival. However, because the SPDC army came and based themselves here and they are creating so many problems, the villagers are facing many difficulties."

- Saw T--- (male, 44), K--- village, Tantabin township

In the SPDC's view of society, civilians should be servants to the military. By disobeying orders the villagers are actively resisting this model of society and trying to retain control over their own lives, land and livelihoods. To the SPDC, this has made the Karen villagers of Toungoo district their enemy, particularly those living in remote villages. The SPDC view the villagers as disobedient renegades undermining the country, and as the backbone of the Karen armed resistance. To the civilians, the SPDC is primarily seen as a merciless and

tyrannical regime practicing senseless violence against them when they only want the freedom to control their own lives. Most of them view the KNU not as an alternative government, but as a force to protect their security, drive the SPDC occupation force from their land and secure a peaceful life for them. While the SPDC wants to control the villagers, the villagers only want to live peacefully with their families, achieve self determination, and have control over the welfare of their village and their daily lives.

“The main thing I want is for the SPDC army to go back to town from our village. The way the SPDC rules is unacceptable and doesn’t benefit us at all. They only come and disturb our way of living. If they have to fight they make us go in front, and if the villagers get injured they don’t even care. If I have to tell the truth, I don’t want to see their faces.”

- Naw M--- (female, 23), K--- village, Tantabin Township

Further background

Further background on the current situation in Toungoo district can be found in the following Karen Human Rights Group reports:

- *Without Respite: Renewed Attacks on Villages and Internal Displacement in Toungoo District.* June 13th 2006, KHRG #2006-02.
- *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo districts.* June 7th 2006, KHRG #2006-B7.
- *Toungoo District: Update on the dam on the Day Loh river.* May 30th 2006, KHRG #2006-B5.
- *Recent Attacks on Villages in Southeastern Toungoo District Send Thousands Fleeing into the Forests and to Thailand.* March 16th 2006, KHRG #2006-B3.
- *Toungoo District: Civilians displaced by dams, roads, and military control.* August 19th 2005, KHRG #2005-F7.
- *'Peace', or Control? The SPDC's use of the Karen ceasefire to expand its control and repression of villagers in Toungoo District, Northern Karen State.* March 22nd 2005, KHRG #2005-F3.
- *Enduring Hunger and Repression: Food Scarcity, Internal Displacement, and the Continued Use of Forced Labour in Toungoo District.* September 27th 2004, KHRG #2004-01.

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2005* (KHRG #2006-P1, 6/4/06) and *KHRG Photo Set 2005-A* (KHRG #2005-P1, 27/5/05). These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrq.org>.

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A map of Southeast Asia with Burma (Myanmar) highlighted in white. Surrounding countries are labeled: 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 southwest, Andaman Sea to the south, and Gulf of Thailand to the southeast. The word 'Burma' is written in large black letters across the white area.

