



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Report from the Field**

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## **Increased roads, army camps and attacks on rural communities in Papun District**

*Having initially begun construction a decade ago, the SPDC has this year completed the Papun section of a roadway which extends northwards from the east-west Kyauk Kyi to Saw Hta vehicle road towards the SPDC army camp at Buh Hsa Kee in southern Toungoo District. While still incomplete on the Toungoo side of the border the Papun section effectively cuts the northern half of Lu Thaw township into two east-west sections and forms a dangerous and difficult to cross barrier for those civilians fleeing from ongoing military attacks against their communities. Nevertheless villagers in Lu Thaw and other areas of Papun continue to evade SPDC forces and the district currently has the highest number of internally displaced people in hiding out of any area of eastern Burma. Notwithstanding the creative and courageous strategies which these villagers have adopted in order to avoid the army columns which continue to hunt them down, they remain in a precarious situation; one which has only heightened in its severity with the completion of the Papun section of the north-south vehicle road and the upgrading of other roadways further south.*

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As one of the three northernmost districts in Karen State, Papun (Mutraw in Karen) covers an area heavily affected by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)'s ongoing military offensive against rural communities. The district is divided into Lu Thaw township in the north, Bu Tho township in the southeast and Dweh Loh township in the southwest. While both Bu Tho and Lu Thaw townships are covered in densely forested mountains, much of Dweh Loh is comprised of plains, and large sections of these are covered in open agricultural land. SPDC control is to a large extent shaped by this geography as the military is able to maintain a stronger hold on the civilian population living in the plains of Dweh Loh township than it can over those living in the forested mountains of



Displaced villagers who earlier in the year fled from their homes at a temporary hiding site in Lu Thaw township when SPDC forces camps at Htaw Muh Bpleh Meh shelled their community with high powered mortars and opened fire with belt-loaded machine guns on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2007.  
[Photo: KHRG]

Lu Thaw and Bu Tho. Despite this regional variation the SPDC has aggressively pushed to extend and consolidate its rule over all areas of the district using a combination of road and camp construction to support its military presence. In armed attacks the Army has targeted those civilians attempting to hold on to their freedom, keep control of their land and pursue

their livelihoods outside of military control. These attacks have included incendiary destruction of crops, hidden food stores, agricultural fields, homes and community buildings; the regular shelling of villages, fields and forested hiding sites with 120 mm mortar fire from hilltop army camps; and the shooting on sight of any civilians spotted in non-SPDC controlled areas.

## **SPDC military deployment and road construction**

Since March 2007 SPDC troops stationed in Bu Tho township have been pushing through with the construction upgrade of a vehicle road that aims to connect SPDC camps leading from Papun town on to Gk'Hee Kyo and Kaw Bpoo (Kaw Boke in Burmese) and then to Dah Kway (near Kyauk Nyat). As part of the road construction operations SPDC troops led by Aung Kyaw Htun under Light Infantry Division (LID) #44 were active in those villages lying alongside the roadway. While in previous years SPDC soldiers patrolling the rural areas of Bu Tho have returned to their base at Papun town following the completion or reparation of vehicle roads, this year the troops remained in the area despite road-building equipment including bulldozers being sent back. Local villagers have reported that the SPDC has been upgrading this road in order to send rations and other supplies to the construction sites of the proposed dams at Weh Gyi. The soldiers have therefore remained along the roadway in order to flush out displaced communities in hiding and forcibly relocate them to military controlled villages and relocation sites.

In order to strengthen their efforts to eradicate any civilian presence in non-SPDC controlled rural areas, local military authorities have applied sweeping movement restrictions backed up by a shoot-on-sight policy. Local residents have also reported that these soldiers have been looting the property of villagers living near the roadway. Villagers have witnessed SPDC soldiers stealing livestock such as chickens and goats as well as plantation crops and taking goods from village shops without paying anything in return. While some villagers have reported this issue to the local SPDC authorities, the looting has nevertheless continued unabated.

Lu Thaw township in northern Papun is also host to a major north-south road building project in support of expanded SPDC militarisation. This township is divided between 12 village tracts as follows:

#	Village tract
1	Kay Bpoo
2	Naw Yoh Hta
3	Ler Muh Bplaw
4	Saw Muh Bplaw
5	Gkaw Loo Der
6	Tay Muh Der
7	Pla Koh
8	Yeh Muh Bplaw
9	Kheh Bpa
10	Gklaw Hta
11	Baw Thay Hta
12	Bpay Gkay

In Lu Thaw township the SPDC has just recently completed the initial construction of a vehicle road west of the Yunzalin river linking the army camp at Pwa Ghaw – which is also the planned location of a new large-scale relocation site – to smaller army camps scattered across the mountains further north. While the SPDC has completed the initial road construction up to the northern district border of Toungoo, the army has yet to finish linking it

to Buh Hsa Kee, an SPDC camp in southern Toungoo which appears to be the intended end point of the road. If the completed vehicle road does in fact connect to Buh Hsa Kee, it will effectively cordon off a large section of mountainous land spread across southern Toungoo, western Lu Thaw township and northeast Nyaunglebin District. This road network, in turn, will create a formidable barrier to displaced people attempting to flee from SPDC forces. As the SPDC has a policy of clearing large swaths of land on either side of roadways, in order to spot those attempting to cross, and then deploying landmines alongside these roads, villagers who attempt such crossings face severe risks of being killed or injured by exploding landmines or shot by SPDC soldiers.

Locally-based KHRG field researchers report that the SPDC has at least five main objectives in constructing this and other roads in Papun District. These are:

1	Increasing direct military control of the area
2	Improving communications between field camps and larger bases
3	Facilitating more efficient transportation of army rations
4	Facilitating the forced transfer of civilians to relocation sites
5	Providing infrastructure for future gold mining operations

The forced relocation of all civilians in the area to a relocation site near Pwa Ghaw, which the SPDC is reportedly calling 'New Army Town' (*Tat Myo Thit* in Burmese), is in line with the junta's standard operations in Karen State. Once civilians have been effectively confined within such relocation sites the Army can more easily exploit them for labour, money, food and other supplies. The road linking the SPDC's Lu Thaw forces to those in Toungoo has long been on the military agenda, but so far the Army has been unable to complete its construction. Around the end of 1997 the SPDC began the initial construction and, in May 1998, completed a section of roadway up to Htaw Muh Bpleh Meh in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract. Following this initial stage, road construction efforts ground to a halt due to fighting with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), only to be recommenced in May of 2006. This more recent attempt was also hampered by KNLA attacks. However, earlier this year in April 2007, SPDC forces were able to push through with road construction all the way north to the army camp at Kay Bpoo and on May 3<sup>rd</sup> reached Kay Bpoo village. While SPDC construction in Lu Thaw township worked north, SPDC forces based in Toungoo District began construction south, near the army camp at Buh Hsa Kee, aiming to reach Tar Meh Der village. While the initial Lu Thaw section of this road is complete, the linking segment in Toungoo District south of Buh Hsa Kee remains unfinished. Nevertheless, civilians living in Lu Thaw township in the area west of the Yunzalin river have confronted heightened SPDC military attacks in which they are targeted. The situation in Kay Bpoo, one of the twelve village tracts in Lu Thaw township serves to illustrate the regional situation.

## Military attacks in Kay Bpoo village tract

Kay Bpoo village tract is situated along the western bank of the Yunzalin river in northern Lu Thaw township, immediately north of Ler Muh Plaw village tract<sup>1</sup> near the SPDC camp at Baw Ka Bplaw. Kay Bpoo is the largest village tract in Lu Thaw with over 20 villages and over 4,000 villagers. With the SPDC now maintaining a permanent military presence in Kay Bpoo the entire civilian population has fled into the surrounding mountains. Kay Bpoo has in the past been a relatively wealthy area with the local population traditionally prospering off of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the human rights situation in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract see "SPDC Army atrocities in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract in the words of a local resident," KHRG, October 2007. Available online at [www.khrg.org/khrg2007/khrg07f9.html](http://www.khrg.org/khrg2007/khrg07f9.html).

natural plants, precious stones, paddy crops and cardamom, sugar cane, orange and pomelo plantations. However, with the current SPDC military occupation of this area villagers have been unable to freely practice their traditional livelihoods. Plantations and larger agricultural fields have been left untended while those in hiding try to maintain smaller covert fields, although even this practice is risky as SPDC patrols regularly seek out and destroy hiding sites and covert fields; shooting-on-sight those civilians spotted in the process.

Beginning in late April 2007 SPDC forces in Kay Bpoo advanced from T'Ler Gk'Na Koh to Tha May Kee village and then further north. As the troops advanced they shelled upcoming villages with 120 mm mortars prior to entering. Local villagers in the area responded by fleeing into the forest. As most people could not carry large amounts of rice, they confronted a situation of pressing food insecurity. Villagers have adopted a variety of measures in response to such challenges including sharing rice supplies, preparing hidden rice stores in the forest prior to flight, sneaking back to their villages to recover abandoned food supplies, tending small covert hill fields in the forest and accessing related cross border aid.



The base and remaining fins of a 120mm mortar shell which SPDC troops based at the Kaw Poo army camp fired at Bp'Yoh Wah village on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2007. [Photo: KHRG]



Displaced villagers from Kay Bpoo village tract as seen in May 2007 after having fled their homes following the SPDC's establishment of a new army camp nearby. [Photo: KHRG]

between their village and hiding site as the SPDC soldiers come and go.

In previous years SPDC forces that have reached Kay Bpoo have returned during the rainy season to the larger bases along the Kyauk Kyi – Saw Hta vehicle road. However over the past two years the Army has sustained its offensive, albeit more slowly, through the rainy season and with the 2007 completion of the new route north they have been able to support a continuous military presence throughout the year. As a consequence, 18 of the displaced village communities have been completely unable to return to their abandoned homes and fields even for the short span of the rainy season, while another two village communities have managed to move back and forth

In one incident on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2007 at about 9:00 am, a patrol of SPDC soldiers operating in Kay Bpoo village tract arrived at Kheh Yuh Der village and within just over an hour had burnt down 14 houses. The villagers who fled this attack reported that along with their houses the soldiers also burnt all of their belongings such as cooking pots, clothing and other household materials and rice supplies. Four days later on the morning of August 13<sup>th</sup> another patrol of SPDC soldiers operating in Kay Bpoo entered a hiding site of displaced villagers at Leh Bpeh Kyo where they burnt down every single hut that they saw. These attacks are continuing as the SPDC applies a standard strategy of seeking out the settlements of



displaced villagers, shelling these hiding sites from a distance prior to arrival and then sending a group of 10 to 20 soldiers to check the shelled area. Upon arrival within the villages proper, this group of 10 to 20 soldiers is charged with burning down huts and paddy fields and executing any civilians they come across.

Included below is a list of those communities which have been unable to remain living at their home villages in Kay Bpoo village tract due to ongoing SPDC attacks:

#	Village name	Number of households	Population		Total displaced population
			Male	Female	
1	Sho Bper Koh	55	133	237	370
2	Taw Koo Muh Der	14	141	128	269
3	Boh Na Der	17	52	62	117
4	Thay Thoo Kee	55	156	200	356
5	T'Yuh Kee	26	89	96	185
6	Kay Bpoo	61	208	262	470
7	T'May Kee	17	55	56	111
8	Gkaw Hter Der	17	52	48	100
9	Ploh Kee	26	117	94	211
10	Ta Keh Der	15	55	45	100
11	Baw Lay Der	47	159	154	313
12	Kheh Yuh Der	15	48	35	78
13	Beh Thaw Loh	26	106	108	214
14	Kuh Hla Der	33	107	99	206
15	Htee Bway Kee	17	53	51	104
16	Htee Hsee Kee	18	61	75	136
17	See Day	22	78	81	159
18	Leh Kee	45	154	155	309
	<b>Total</b>	<b>526</b>	<b>1,824</b>	<b>1,986</b>	<b>3,808</b>

## Displacement

*"The SPDC often attacks the village so that we must run back and forth from the village to the hiding site many times in one year. We have no hut to shelter us from rain. So we have to stay out in the rain. When the situation became a little bit calm I built a hut and when I was finished, we had to flee again. I have built many huts like that. We have to run at least five times a year. The whole village faces a food shortage problem because we had to leave our place of work and our belongings when we fled to the hiding site. We were only concerned with escaping from the SPDC troops. We couldn't bring much along with us. Some couldn't find rice for their family so their families have had to drink porridge<sup>2</sup>. Another reason is that because of SPDC movements we have had to relocate the site where we stay from place to place and no longer have a place to earn our livelihood. We don't have good soil to grow rice, so the land produces less rice and we don't have enough rice."*

- Saw K--- (male, 42), Dt--- village, Yeh Muh Bplaw village tract, Lu Thaw township  
(June 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Displaced villagers short on food often depend on a form of watered down rice porridge in order to stretch out their meagre supplies.

As the above quote exemplifies, villagers in Papun who remain in hiding from SPDC forces live a precarious existence having to frequently relocate their communities in response to ongoing attacks and the changing deployment of SPDC military units. Rather than a single instance of displacement away from their home village, these communities follow a more cyclic movement wherein they may regularly return to their home villages or other displacement sites in order to retrieve abandoned belongings or hidden food stores or even seek to reclaim their land and homes following the departure of SPDC patrols. While evading army units, tending agricultural fields, securing trading partners and seeking out cross-border relief groups many displaced communities are unable to remain for extended periods in single locations. Nevertheless, the population of displaced villagers hiding in Papun remains high. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium reported that 30,800 civilians remained in hiding in Papun District as of 2007, which is the highest number of civilians in hiding out of any area of eastern Burma.<sup>3</sup>



Displaced civilians from Kheh Yuh Der village use plastic sheets and wild banana leaves to build a temporary shelter from the rain in May 2007. [Photo: KHRG]

*"I have five children. We couldn't live in our village and so we have to live here [at a displacement site]. I don't why they came and attacked our village. I don't know what bad thing I've done to them to make them come and oppress us and burn down our village in return. We face many problems and are always in a difficult situation. This place is called Gk---. I have come to live here for about three weeks already. First I lived in B--- and because the SPDC attacked I moved to Htee Baw Kee and when the SPDC just recently attacked Htee Baw Kee I had to move again to this place."*

- Naw L--- (female, 50), B--- village, Saw Muh Bplaw village tract, Lu Thaw township (August 2007)

On July 9<sup>th</sup> 2007 SPDC troops from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #505 of Military Operations Command #1 based in Wa Gklay Dtoo army camp in Saw Muh Bplaw village tract approached and shelled Htee Baw Kee village. After the initial shelling the soldiers entered the village from where the villagers had already fled. During the shelling however, the exploding shrapnel from the mortars injured 12-year-old Saw Eh Kree Htoo and 4-year-old Naw Say Ler Paw, the children of Saw Wah Beh and Naw Mya Pweh.

On July 28<sup>th</sup> 2007 SPDC forces based at Pwa Ghaw Loh army camp set out on a patrol through Wa Doh Hta, Pway Kee, Saw Muh Bplaw areas where large numbers of displaced villagers were in hiding. As the troops travelled through the forest, displaced communities which had set up temporary homes at hiding sites had to once again flee as soldiers attacked their houses and fields. As this was in the midst of the rainy season, displaced villagers faced a heightened risk of illness, especially from mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. At the abandoned hiding sites, SPDC soldiers looted property left behind and destroyed whatever they didn't take.

<sup>3</sup> *Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma: 2007 Survey*, Appendix 2, Thailand Burma Border Consortium, October 2007. Accessed online at <http://www.tbtc.org/idps/report-2007-idp-english.pdf> on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

*"One of my children died because he got a fever and we couldn't look after him very well during the time when we were going back and forth from the village to the hidden site. We have no medic to look after us full time. They just come sometimes. When our children get sick, we can't find medics immediately. We just try to buy medicine from our friends who know about medicine. The hospital is far away from our village. To send people to the hospital is very difficult and to ask other people [to go to the hospital for them] is also very difficult because everyone has their own work to do for their family... We just endure like that and if it's not a person's time to die, then they'll recover."*

- Saw K--- (male, 42), Dt--- Village, Yeh Muh Bplaw village tract, Lu Thaw township  
(June 2007)



On July 9<sup>th</sup> 2007, SPDC forces from Wa Gklay Dtoo camp attacked and burnt down houses in Htee Baw Kee village and then looted or destroyed whatever possessions remained. [photo: KHRG]

In Saw Muh Bplaw village tract there are four displacement areas with a total of 119 families and 855 displaced villagers. All these villagers are currently facing food shortages and a host of other health problems. Having fled during the rainy season months they had to manage the wet conditions and heightened rate of illness until the cessation of the rains at the start of October. Being November it is now the traditional time to harvest paddy crops. Although those living in Saw Muh Bplaw remain at risk of being caught out in the open and shot on sight, they are nonetheless attempting to follow through with the harvest. SPDC forces continue to occupy villages in the area, and army units from neighbouring Ler

Muh Plaw village tract are patrolling in the Yuh Ghaw Loh and Day Buh Loh areas in search of displaced villagers. Other SPDC forces from Pwa Ghaw have advanced towards T--- and G--- displacement areas in a search and destroy mission targeting civilians in hiding. On August 10<sup>th</sup> 2007 the SPDC established camps at Maw Bpoo and Maw Kyo from where they shelled the nearby hiding sites of T'Kaw Toh Baw and Tha Dah Der. The villagers initially attempted to remain nearby, but because the soldiers remained active in the area the villagers were unable to remain and fled further into the forest on August 11<sup>th</sup>.

## Conclusion

*"If the SPDC wasn't active in our villages, we would have enough food because we could work full time on our farms and fields. But now we often have to flee into the forest. We can't go and work on our farms. We live dependent on the rice that we have saved in the past. When these rice stores are gone we'll have to go looking for rice and we'll also have to go and work on our farms whenever it's possible. We don't have time to get any extra income."*

- Saw Gk---- (male, 40), L---villager, Kheh Bpa village tract, Lu Thaw township  
(June 2007)

The ongoing construction of army roads and camps and the uninterrupted attacks on civilian communities in an effort to drive them into military controlled relocation sites contradicts the claims of a 'return to normalcy' which the regime has been reiterating to the international

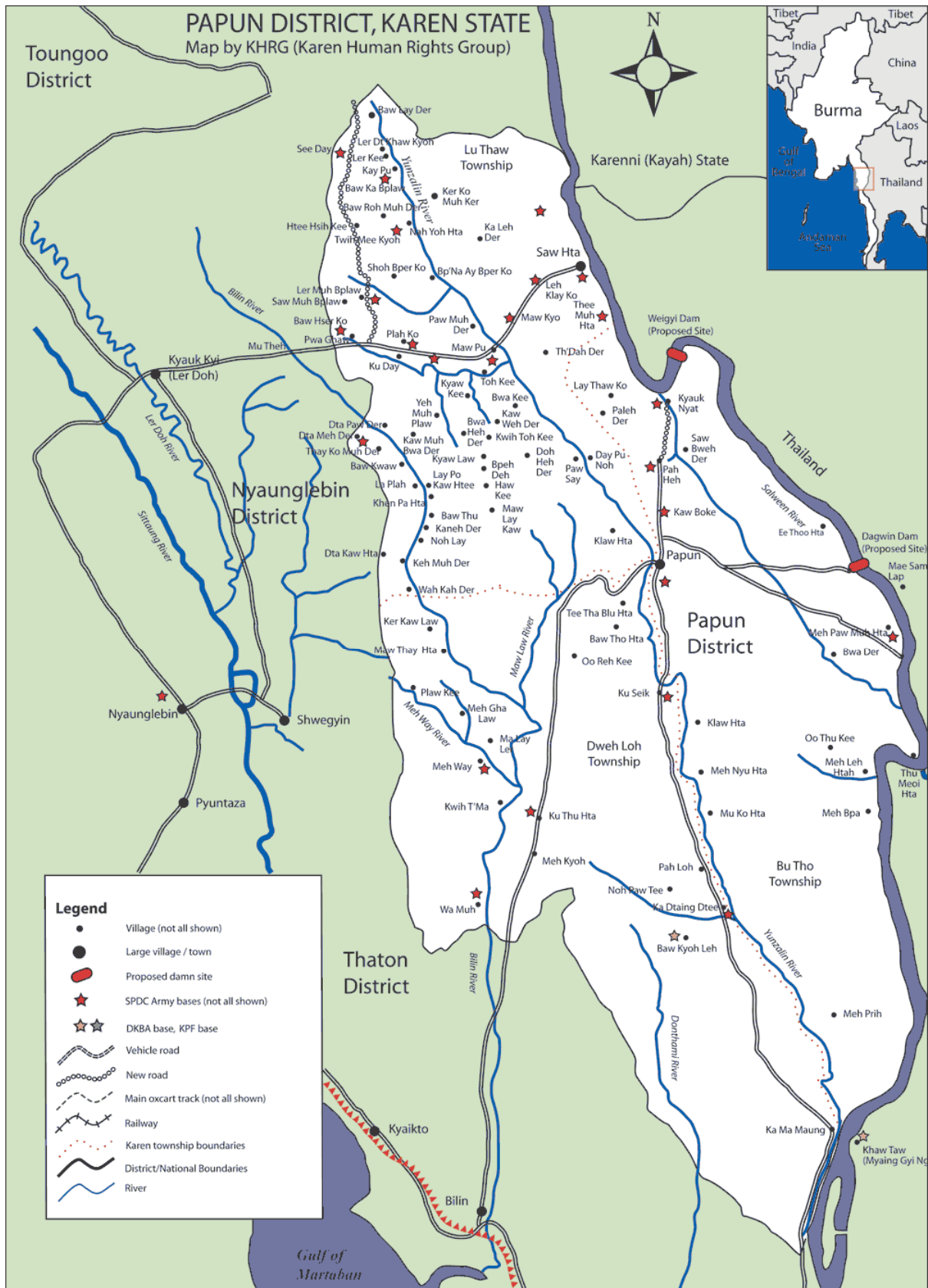
community *ad nauseum*. By working to force villagers into an exploitative military-civilian relationship through village and food destruction, forced relocation and arbitrary executions the junta has shown that, at least in Karen State, it is business as usual and the lives, livelihoods and dignity of the local civilian population remain as inconsequential as ever. All rights are sacrificed for the sake of an aggressive policy of expanding and entrenching a system of absolute military rule over a subjugated civilian population. The dependence the regime has on this exploitative system ensures that civilian frustration over systematic impoverishment and the consequent humanitarian fallout remain salient factors prompting the continuation of everyday resistance and dissent.

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

- *SPDC Army atrocities in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract in the words of a local resident* (October 2007)
- *Road construction, attacks on displaced communities and the impact on education in northern Papun District* (March 2007)
- *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (October 2006)
- *SPDC Attacks on Villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the Civilian Response* (September 2006)
- *Less than Human: Convict Porters in the 2005 – 2006 Northern Karen State Offensive* (August 2006)
- *SPDC military begins pincer movement, adds new camps in Papun District* (August 2006)
- *Forced labour, extortion and abuses in Papun District* (July 2006)
- *New SPDC military moves force more villagers to flee* (July 2006)
- *Offensive columns shell and burn villages, round up villagers in northern Papun and Toungoo Districts* (June 2006)
- *SPDC troops commence full offensive in Papun District* (June 2006)

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Papun District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* (September 2007) and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006* (March 2007). These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).





A map of Southeast Asia with Burma (Myanmar) highlighted in white. Surrounding countries are shown in green: India to the west, China to the north and east, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the south. The Gulf of Bengal is to the southwest, and the Andaman Sea is to the south. The word 'Burma' is written in large black letters across the white area.

