



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field

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State agencies, armed groups and the proliferation of oppression in Thaton District

Throughout SPDC-controlled areas of Karen State the regime has been developing civilian agencies as extensions of military authority. On top of this, the junta has continued to strengthen the more traditional forms of militarisation and, at least in Thaton District, has firmly backed the expansion of DKBA military operations to control the civilian population and eradicate KNLA forces which continue to actively patrol the area. The people of Thaton District thus face a myriad of State agencies and armed groups which have overburdened them with demands for labour, money and supplies. While engaging with these groups, addressing the demands placed on them and attending to their own livelihoods, local villagers have sought to manage a delicate balance of seemingly impossible weights.

In contrast to the primarily mountainous areas further north, Thaton District (Doo Tha Htoo in Karen) in western Karen State is comprised mostly of low-lying flood plains where the civilian population engages predominantly in flat-field paddy cultivation. Cutting across this land are a few north-south ridges of craggy hills on which local villagers practice hill-side paddy cultivation. On this mostly open terrain local communities as well as the armed opposition have had fewer avenues to evade military units of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and its local proxy, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which have largely consolidated their hold over the local civilian population. The numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) living in hiding in Thaton are thus amongst the lowest in eastern Burma.¹ The SPDC has increasingly relied on the DKBA to control the local civilian population and eradicate the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) from the area. The DKBA for its part has placed demands upon the local population in order to support its own military structures, eliminate the KNU/KNLA presence and implement the SPDC's narrowly conceived and self-interested form of regional 'development'.

Despite the increasing reliance on DKBA forces, the SPDC Army, called *Tatmadaw Gyi* in Burmese, remains active in Thaton District and continues to expand and consolidate its presence. In doing so *Tatmadaw* units have ordered local villagers to provide the necessary funds, food and supplies needed to support its operations. Notwithstanding such overt militarisation, the SPDC has been working to establish forms of local control, ostensibly civilian in character. Under the rubric of regional 'development', the regime has thus promoted the expansion of various State and parastatal agencies. Some of the primary, explicitly State, agencies which the junta has established at the village level in Thaton

¹ In its 2006 survey *Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma*, the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium registered no IDPs in hiding in Thaton or Bilin townships of Mon State, which correspond to Thaton and Bilin townships, of Thaton District in Karen State as identified on KHRG maps. No figures are available for displaced populations in Kyaikto or Pa'an townships. See *Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma 2006 Survey*, Appendix 3, TBBC, November 2006. Accessed at <http://www.tbtc.org/idps/2006-idp-english.pdf> on September 22nd, 2007.

District include the *Pyi Thu Sit* ('People's Militia'), Myanmar Police Force, and the many Village Peace and Development Councils (VPDCs). Military-backed parastatal agencies active in Thaton include the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), Myanmar Child and Maternal Welfare Association (MMCWA) and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF).

The increasing reliance on State and parastatal agencies which remain fundamentally bound to the authority of the military regime is consistent with the SPDC's shift towards presenting a cloak of civilian administration draped over the bulky framework of militarisation. To that end, the regime is in the process of constructing a system wherein both the 'civilian' State agencies and armed military forces seek to control and exploit the civilian population. On top of this the SPDC and DKBA have phrased much of their aggression against villagers in Thaton District in terms of an 'anti-insurgency' campaign against KNLA forces which continue to patrol in some areas. Villagers, for their part, are often expected to provide food to soldiers from all three armed groups. While many local civilians see KNLA troops in a much more benign, if not positive light; such provisions nevertheless create a further outlay for villagers already overburdened by the excessive demands of State agencies, the *Tatmadaw* and DKBA forces.

State Agencies

In order to support its stated goals of developing the country and introducing its own brand of 'disciplined democracy', while still retaining absolute military authority, the regime has worked in much of SPDC-controlled southern and western Karen State, including Thaton District, to establish, expand and entrench forms of local control that present a more civilian veneer. Among such extensions of military authority, the VPDCs, *Pyi Thu Sit* and the Myanmar Police Force are explicitly State agencies while the USDA, MMCWA and MWAF function as military-controlled parastatal organisations. The term parastatal, however, should not be understood to mean that these agencies operate outside the control of the State or with any sort of autonomy. The USDA, for example, is led by military officers who hold positions within the current SPDC bureaucracy. USDA Secretary-General U Htay Oo holds the rank of Major General in the SPDC and serves as the military regime's Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation.

Aside from the Myanmar Police Force, SPDC units have been forcibly registering or otherwise conscripting local villagers into all of these groups. Depending on the nature of the particular organisation and the size of the village in which it is active, villagers must provide set numbers of recruits or members and make regular payments towards the support of local units or the larger organisation as a whole. A breakdown of some of these agencies which operate in Thaton District and the burden they place on local civilian communities is as follows:

<i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> ('People's Militia')
SPDC military forces in Thaton District have been forming village-level <i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> units and ordering the local communities to provide a set number of recruits to serve as militiamen. Depending on the size of the village the soldiers have been ordering village heads to arrange between 5 and 10 individuals to serve in the <i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> for a period of five years. These <i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> militiamen are active in their home villages providing security against 'bandits' and other subversive elements. Moreover, they must patrol along with SPDC columns that arrive at their village and serve as guides so long as the soldiers remain active in the surrounding area. As the SPDC provides no remuneration for those serving as <i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> , the burden falls on the local community. Each household must provide five baskets of rice to the local <i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> and the village as a whole must collect 10,000 kyat as payment to the regional <i>Pyi Thu Sit</i> authorities.

Myanmar Police Force

In Thaton District, branches of the Myanmar Police Force have previously been limited to the towns and larger villages. However, the Police Force has more recently been expanding in the area. For the construction of new police stations as well as the reparation of older buildings, local police officers have ordered villagers to provide thatch shingles, wooden posts and bamboo poles for use as building materials. Furthermore, in numerous villages in Thaton District the police have also ordered villagers to make cash payments, which some local villagers have said is being used to fund the purchase of alcohol for the officers. The amount of extortion money which local villagers have had to pay to the police has varied from 30,000 to 50,000 kyat. Some villagers reported that they paid the money because they feared police retaliation in the case of non-compliance.

Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)

SPDC soldiers have forced each village in Thaton District to assign one to three villagers as USDA members who will serve in that capacity within their home villages. The SPDC has then used these USDA members as an extension of the State's draconian administration. Villagers must request and purchase permission documents from these USDA members in order to travel and trade outside of their home village. These documents cost between 500 and 1,000 kyat. This new role for the USDA members is indicative of the SPDC's increasing reliance on this group as a civilian front for military control as the role of issuing such permission slips has long rested instead with local military officers. The villagers have for the most part complied with these requirements, as the USDA members, even though they may be fellow villagers, are required to report to the regional SPDC authorities each month. The military in turn maintains its armed forces in the region and thus retains the threat of violence to reinforce the USDA's position of authority and enforce compliance with USDA directives.

Village Peace Development Council (VPDC)

With the increasing military encroachment and consolidation of control over civilian life in Karen State, the regime has sought to develop local level government bodies as township- and village-based extensions of military authority. These structures have been formed as Township Peace and Development Councils (TPDCs) at the township level and as Village Peace and Development Councils (VPDCs) at the village level. Regional SPDC authorities designate local VPDC chairpersons from the local community who are then required to receive and implement regular decrees coming down the chain of command from the central military authority. Often these orders are disseminated at monthly TPDC meetings which VPDC chairpersons must attend. While VPDC officials typically come from the same community as the village in which they serve, they nevertheless come to represent extensions of the regime as they are required to press fellow villagers into complying with military decrees. Such decrees typically relate to various security and development programmes – such as fencing in village confines and forcibly cultivating specified crops – which support local, regional and national military structures. In Thaton District, villagers have complained that VPDC authorities also force them to make cash payments twice a month for the purpose of staging festivals and providing meals to governmental employees during their regular visits.

Armed Groups

While the regime expands its networks of 'civilian' State and parastatal agencies into Thaton District at the village level, the region simultaneously remains in a situation of overt militarisation. With an expanding presence of SPDC and DKBA forces and continued patrols by KNLA columns villagers have been striving to address their own livelihood under the weight of regular demands by armed groups as well as the 'civilian' State agencies. A breakdown of these armed groups, detailing their presence, their activities and their impact on villagers' livelihoods is presented below:

Tatmadaw Gyi (SPDC Army)

Most SPDC units presently operating in Thaton District serve under the command of Light Infantry Division (LID) #102, which replaced LID #44 and #104 in May 2007. The battalions at some camps in Thaton District are being replaced every three to four months. While the SPDC appears to be increasingly relying on the DKBA to maintain control of the local civilian population, the Tatmadaw nevertheless maintains a large presence at bases and camps in Thaton and regularly patrols the area. These forces regularly demand forced labour, building materials, meat and other food from local villagers. SPDC soldiers have furthermore been ordering villagers to report the arrival of any KNLA soldiers and have been threatening to burn down any village that is found to be supporting the KNU in any manner.

Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)

The regime has been increasingly relying on the DKBA to control the population of Thaton District and eradicate the regional KNU/KNLA presence. This reliance has been backed by political, financial and military support. In working to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the local civilian population, the DKBA has been ordering villagers to fabricate and deliver building materials and fire wood, provide recruits to serve as DKBA soldiers, labour on rubber plantations owned by various DKBA officers and meet other forced labour demands. Villagers have told KHRG that in many cases they comply with these demands out of fear of DKBA retaliatory punishment.

Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)

The KNU administers Thaton District as KNLA-defined 1st Brigade and KNLA forces continue to patrol the region. As they operate among local communities, these patrols have requested that villagers provide two big tins of rice (32 kg. / 70.4 lb.) and 500 kyat per household per year. Some villagers have complained about these provisions because they already have so many demands placed on them by SPDC and DKBA forces, State agencies and their own livelihood requirements. In some cases villagers have confronted the KNLA soldiers, explained their situation and not provide the stated provisions.

Forced labour

“Every time the SPDC army columns have arrived in the village, the villagers have had to serve as porters for them. Moreover, the commander has demanded that the villagers send thatch shingles and bamboo poles to Dta Paw army camp.”

- Naw M--- (female, 53), G--- village (June 2006)

Lacking sufficient outside provisions to support their aggressive military expansion, both the SPDC and DKBA forces active in Thaton District depend on the uncompensated labour of the local civilian population. On top of this, individual officers exploit their positions in the military hierarchy to demand forced labour for personal aggrandisement. Demands for forced labour, whether to support the broader military structures or profit individual officers have been either direct – as, for example, demands to tend military-owned plantations and agricultural fields, construct and repair army camps and vehicle roads and serve as porters, sentries or *set tha*² – or indirect – as when army officers demand building supplies such as bamboo poles and thatch shingles which require labour intensive production and delivery methods.

² *Set tha* is a Burmese term for forced labour as a messenger at army camps, but also involving other tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

"Sometimes we have to clear the vehicle road. They always order us to send two set tha every day to their camp. The set tha must rebuild the camp fence and cut down bamboo poles. T--- village has faced loh ah pay³ frequently because it's near the military camp. [SPDC] LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #44 is based in Kyaikto. The village usually has to clear the vehicle road which has already been constructed from W--- to L---. In May 2007 [SPDC] IB [Infantry Battalion] #2 commander Kyaw Oo ordered three bullock carts to send him to P--- and TOC [Tactical Operations Command] commander Mya Soe ordered a bullock cart to send him to L---."

- Ko M--- (49, male), T--- village (June 2007)

As the hours involved in individual incidents of forced labour accumulate they severely cut into much needed time for villagers to address their own livelihoods. This then leads to poor or wholly failed harvests for those villagers dependant on agriculture; a demographic which comprises the vast majority of those living in Thaton District. From this reduced crop yield villagers must then provide payments, typically in kind, to the various State agencies and armed groups active in their area. The sheer scale of forced labour in Thaton District, and indeed throughout SPDC-controlled Karen State, places it amongst the leading poverty-inducing factors of militarisation.

"My village is called B---. There are 200 households in the village. There are about 4,000 people in the village. We have to do loh ah pay for the SPDC regularly and also they always order thatch shingles and bamboo poles. Every time they arrive in the village they order the villagers to serve as their porters."

- U T--- (male, 44), village head, B--- village (June 2007)

In April 2007, troops from SPDC LIB #2 under the command of Zaw Min Htun arrived at Htee Hsee Baw village and set themselves up at the local Buddhist monastery for three nights. While staying there the soldiers stole chickens belonging to resident villagers for their meals. Furthermore, Zaw Min Htun ordered one villager to accompany his patrol as a guide. The conscription of local guides by SPDC forces is common across Karen State. These individuals are often made to walk ahead of troop patrols as human shields in the case of attack by armed opposition groups and as human minesweepers to detonate any landmines and thus prevent the injury of any soldiers.

On April 5th 2007, a patrol of soldiers from Company #4, SPDC IB #3, under company commander Lan Htun arrived at Dta Gkaw Poh village ward. According to a KHRG field researcher operating in Thaton District, Lan Htun ordered the residents of 16 different villages in the ward to construct a vehicle road from Dta Gkaw Poh village to Meh Bpoo village. For this work the villagers were required to provide their own tools as well as food for the two days they were expected to labour. This roadway was furthermore laid directly through plantations, farm fields and residential areas, thereby destroying coconut, dog fruit and toddy palm plantations and paddy fields. Villagers living along the route had to dismantle and relocate their homes to make way for the new road. One villager involved in the incident, who lists 13 villages which had to labour on the road, related the situation in an interview conducted in June 2007 as follows:

"We had to clear the vehicle road from Meh Bpoo to Dta Gkaw Poh. Not only my village had to do this but another 12 villages had to do this as well. The villages which had to clear the road were Weh Bpya Hta, Thee La Baw, Gkoh Dta Gkee, Ler Pa Dta, Gkyee T'Kaw, Htee Meh Baw, Noh Gkyaw, Ka Lah Gkoh, Htee Poh Neh, Per Ler Kee, Hseh Gkyaw and Baw T'Bproo. Many people have lost their farms and

³ *Loh Ah Pay* is a Burmese term originally meaning voluntary service in the construction of temples and other community buildings. The SPDC uses the term when demanding uncompensated labour. For villagers the term has come to mean most forms of forced labour.

gardens. In our garden the plants such as coconut trees, mango trees and betel nut bushes were destroyed. The width of the road is 25 feet [7.62 metres]. Some houses were dismantled. Moreover, the SPDC soldiers' columns have sold the bamboo poles which we cut for them in the city."



The villagers shown here prepare and deliver thatch shingles on May 17th 2007 by foot to the camp of SPDC LIB #102 battalion commander Min Zaw Oo. Min Zaw Oo ordered villages in the area of his camp to fabricate and deliver 300 thatch shingles each. The majority of those who fabricated and delivered the thatch were women and some were children. [Photos: KHRG]

As State agencies and army units proliferate, village heads find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to implement unwelcome demands for labour, money and supplies upon their fellow villagers. Military officers typically dispatch orders to village heads in the form of written demands which either state the requirements in full or request that the village head travel to the given army camp to receive more specific instructions. Demands are backed by a threat, often implicit, of violent retaliation including the wholesale destruction of villages in the case of non-compliance.

"They usually order our village to give them 700 thatch shingles for the year. They never collect the thatch themselves and we always have to send the thatch to their camp at Aung Taw. We're afraid of them so we dare not refuse their order. They usually send a letter to the village head when they order us to send thatch shingles."

- Saw L--- (male, 51), L--- village (May 2007)

On May 15th 2007, the SPDC rotated out LIB #104 troops stationed at Dta Paw camp, Pa'an township and replaced them with LIB #102 under the command of Min Zaw Oo and camp commander Hain Zaw Oo. The newly arrived battalion initially dispatched an order for 400 thatch shingles and 300 bamboo poles from T--- village. Some of these were used to rebuild the camp and the rest sold off for profit. Camp commander Hain Zaw Oo further demanded that the village provide two rotating *set tha* as well as a sentry to guard the camp and ordered the villagers to cut down a stand of the trees in a nearby wood which they then sold off in town. The community had been intending to use these trees to rebuild the local school and monastery.

On June 4th 2007, battalion commander Min Naing Oo, of LIB #9, LID #44 operating along the east side of the Baw Naw river with a camp at Yoh Gklah monastery ordered Htee Pa Doh Hta village to provide five people to cut down trees from the monastery grounds. The monks had been intending to use these trees for the construction of a new building for the monastery and requested that the trees not be cut down. Min Naing Oo nevertheless continued with the work and had the newly felled logs sent off to Thaton town. Min Naing Oo also demanded 300 bamboo poles and 200 thatch shingles from each of the following villages:

#	Village name
1	Eastern Htee Pa Doh Hta
2	Western Yoh Gklah
3	Eastern Yoh Gklah
4	Kaw Poh Koh
5	Lay Kaw Htee
6	Htee Pa Doh Kee
7	Htaw Gklaw Hta
8	Noh Ber Baw
9	Wa Kheh Hta
10	Htaw Gklaw Kee
11	Nya Poh Kee
12	Dta Uh Kee
13	Dta Uh Nee

Min Naing Oo paid nothing for the supplies to any of these villages in return. Some of the bamboo and thatch was used to repair his military camp and some was sold off for profit.

Despite the ever-present risks of overt resistance, village heads have become deft at perceiving how far they can go in avoiding or at least minimising military demands. They may negotiate or bribe for a reduction in demands or alternatively, if they perceive that the situation allows, they may simply ignore initial order documents or refuse a demand outright.

“When they ordered the villagers to do loh ah pay I didn’t let them [the villagers] go and they [the soldiers] came and shouted at me. Being a village head I have faced many terrible things from the SPDC soldiers.”

- Daw T--- (female, 55), village head, K--- village (June 2007)



This rubber plantation at D--- village, Pa’an township, eastern Thaton District belongs to Bee Koh of DKBA Battalion #2, Brigade #333. Bee Koh has ordered villagers to clear the plantation’s undergrowth annually. [Photo: KHRG]

back brush and other growth around the trees. The DKBA has been especially explicit with its threats and in some cases villagers report being threatened with execution should they fail to comply with a given demand for forced labour.

For many villagers DKBA demands for forced labour outweigh those coming from SPDC personnel. Demands for work tending rubber plantations have been especially common. In Thaton District, villagers have reported that every DBKA commander owns their own rubber plantation with an area of at least 50 acres. Rubber harvested from these plantations can be sold off for profit. The photo on the left, for example, shows one such plantation belonging to officer Bee Koh of DKBA Battalion #2, Brigade #333. Forced labour on rubber plantations includes the initial cutting and clearing of the plantation grounds; planting the rows of rubber saplings; constructing bamboo fences around the perimeter of the plantation; and cutting

"They [DKBA] regularly order us to go and cut the grass in the rubber plantation at H-- near N--- village. The name of the DKBA commander who has ordered us was Moh Der. Once or twice a year they have ordered us to cut [the brush at] the plantation."

- Saw L--- (male, 51), L--- village (May 2007)

On February 1st 2007, battalion commander Bo Lweh of DKBA Battalion #3, Brigade #333 ordered 20 people for each of Ler Gka Gkya, Noh Naw Wah and Dtaw T'Lay Koh villages to cut back the undergrowth of his rubber plantation. These plantations have been grown on land confiscated from local villagers in previous years. In response to earlier attempts by villagers to complain about the seizure of their land, DKBA soldiers beat them. Locals generally don't raise the issue of land confiscation directly with DKBA personnel anymore.

Along with rubber, demands for thatch shingles have also become so large as to suggest that DKBA units are selling many of them off for profit rather than using them for construction and repair work. In March 2007 Brigadier Maung Gyi, commander of DKBA Brigade #333, ordered individual villages in his area of operation to send 700 thatch shingles to L--- camp. Those who were unable to provide the thatch were told that they could submit 30,000 kyat in cash instead.

"Once a year the DKBA orders 2,000 thatch shingles from the village. The commander is named Maung Gyi [of Brigade] #333. He's a brigade commander. We have to send the thatch by bullock cart to L--- and the other villages sent it to another place. Commander Maung Gyi stays at Oh Daw camp."

- U T--- (male, 44), village head, B--- village (June 2006)

Further types of forced labour which the DKBA imposes on villagers in Thaton include collecting firewood and repairing the homes of individual officers. The DKBA has also been conscripting soldiers throughout Thaton to bolster its size. On March 4th 2007, for example, Maung Gyi of DKBA Brigade #333 ordered the village head of H--- village to provide 20 individuals to serve as soldiers. These villagers were to be sent along with 2,000 thatch shingles to Oh Taw camp. The head of H--- village replied that she would not be able to provide 20 people willing to serve in this capacity and if the DKBA wanted soldiers it would have to catch the conscripts itself. The DKBA officer delivering the order therefore said that he would indeed find the 20 people himself, but that the village head nevertheless still had to deliver the shingles.

Local KNLA units have also been searching for new recruits from amongst the local population of Thaton District. However, as these aren't demands backed by the threat of force villagers have less worry openly refusing. Some therefore decide to join while others do not.

"The KNU [meaning KNLA] requested the men to volunteer as soldiers for three years, but the KNU [KNLA] couldn't order them to do anything because they had only requested. So it depended on their [the villagers'] decision."

- Ko M--- (male, 49), T--- village (June 2007)

Extortion and looting

Military forces have extracted money, food and other supplies from villagers in Thaton in a variety of ways. Sometimes, soldiers stationed at or near a given village simply steal livestock, either under the cover of darkness or in some cases in open daylight. Officers have gained additional income selling off the rations of soldiers in their unit and then requiring that villagers provide all necessary food in compensation. While villagers are

typically not reimbursed for such provisions, in some cases in Thaton District soldiers have paid at most half the market value of the food in return.

"Sometimes the soldiers have stolen the villagers' chickens and vegetables. Last month the new column demanded that the villagers send pork for them. They [the soldiers] bought a pig that cost 30,000 kyat. They only paid 10,000 kyat themselves and left the other 20,000 kyat for the villagers [to pay]. I had to collect money from the villagers and pay back the pig owner."

- Naw M--- (female, 53), G--- village (June 2007)

Starting from end of March 2007, LIB #9 battalion commander Min Naing Oo required that local villagers send 10 viss (16 kg. / 35 lb.) of pork for his soldiers every week. As payment he has given half the market value of the pork. As the villagers did not have enough pigs to meet these demands the village heads requested that the villagers purchase the needed pork elsewhere.

SPDC officers in Thaton District have also applied arbitrary taxation on trade, travel, agriculture and the possession of vehicles or machinery. In some cases, soldiers have simply detained random villagers, often under the pretext that they have some connection to the KNU/KNLA and then demanded a ransom payment for their release.



A woman from Thaton District prepares two bottles of alcohol for delivery to local SPDC authorities. SPDC LIB #102 under the command of Min Zaw Oo ordered this alcohol to accompany a delivery of 300 thatch shingles to his camp. [Photo: KHRG]

"The SPDC army is staying at Dta Gkaw Poh and the camp commander is named U Hla Tun, the LIB commander is named Soe Aung, and the battalion deputy commander is named Mae Mae. They have based their army camp at Dta Gkaw Poh. They always come to the village and tax the villagers who have hand tractors and rice mills. The rice mill and hand tractor owners have to pay 16,000 kyat once a year as tax."

- U T--- (male, 44), village head, B--- Village (June 2007)

"In May 2007 there was a KNU nurse who was arrested by the SPDC military. They kept the nurse with them for 3 days and [then] they told his parents to exchange their son [the nurse] for a gun. So his father bought a gun from the DKBA at Kaw Htaw for 600,000 kyat [and gave it to the SPDC], but they didn't release him at the same time. They had promised that they would release [the nurse] on the 8th of this month [June]."

- Daw M--- (female, 60), H--- village (June 20th 2007)

Following the May 2007 reshuffle of troops stationed at Dta Paw camp as mentioned in the forced labour section above, LIB #102 camp commander Hain Zaw Oo ordered all of the nearby villages to provide a combined weekly payment of 100 viss of pork (163.3 kg. / 350 lb.), a massive quantity, all of which was unremunerated. On top of this demand, column commander Mai Zaw Oo also demanded pork from the same villagers. Min Zaw Oo, however, was willing to provide some compensation, although this was limited to at most half the market value of the pork. As the DKBA also operates in the area of the SPDC's Dta Paw camp, local villagers are faced with demands for curry and thatch shingles by this group as

well. These DKBA units have generally allowed villagers to provide cash payments if they are unable to produce the specified goods. T--- village, for example, has therefore paid an average of 40,000 kyat in lieu of annual deliveries of thatch.

The KNLA soldiers who patrol Thaton also request food provisions from the local communities in the areas where they operate. In Thaton District this amounted to two big tins of rice (32 kg. / 70.4 lb.) and 500 kyat per household per year. Villagers have sometimes complained to the KNLA about these provisions as they are already overburdened by the excessive demands for labour, money and provisions by the other armed groups and State agencies. As most local villagers see the KNU as fellow Karen they have in some cases been able to express their frustrations and tell them openly when they are unable to provide anything.

Education

While there is a growing number of villages in Thaton District that do have primary schools providing education up to the grade four many still lack even these basic facilities. Children from villages lacking schools, who nevertheless want to pursue their education, have had to travel often long distances by foot to neighbouring villages or towns in order to access even primary-level education.

Although the SPDC has provided some support for the construction of a limited number of schools in Thaton District, most have instead been built with village funds and village labour. In at least one case, at Noh Naw Wah village in Pa'an township, villagers reported that they constructed their school with partial support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). While the villagers were aware of the UNDP backing for the school, local SPDC authorities announced following its completion that it had actually been funded by the regime.



Noh Naw Wah primary school which villagers report they built with support from the UNDP. However, following the construction the SPDC claimed that it was instead the military regime which had financed the school. [Photo: KHRG]

"We have a school in our village that goes up to grade four. The school was built by the villagers. The teachers are from the township government [TPDC] which sent them to teach. The villagers must pay their salary. There are five teachers; four are female and one is male. The students must pay their own school fees. When the children graduate from grade four their parents send them to the town to continue studying. They don't get any free materials. Their parents must pay for them."

- U T--- (male, 44), B--- Village (June 2007)

As is standard SPDC policy, the regime forbids Karen language instruction at schools in Thaton including the Noh Naw Wah school. This has been severely detrimental to the long-term strength of the language as many young people growing up in SPDC-controlled areas are unable to read and write their mother tongue, although many can still speak fluently due to regular use outside the classroom. This situation is made more difficult in situations where the SPDC sends native Burmese teachers from urban areas who can not even speak

Karen let alone teach it outside class time. However, in some cases where school teachers come from the local Karen community they have been able to quietly provide some Karen language instruction without reprisals from SPDC authorities.

"We have a school in the village up to grade four. The teachers are from the village and are also supported by the villagers. There are 69 students attending the school, they are lucky as they have an opportunity to study the Karen language."

- Daw T--- (female, 55), K--- village (June 2006)

The teaching situation in Thaton is such that each school differs in terms of whether it has wholly local teachers, wholly SPDC-designated teachers from outside, or a mix of the two. These teachers are often supported entirely by the local community, although in some cases ethnic Karen community-based organisations provide additional outside assistance. SPDC-designated teachers typically receive remuneration from the State but the amount is often insufficient and villagers must provide supplementary rice supplies.

"We have a school in the village that goes up to grade four. The school was built by the villagers and there are four teachers. Three teachers were sent by the government and another one was chosen by the villagers. Three of the teachers are supported by the government and the other one is supported by the villagers. The students don't have an opportunity to study the Karen language, so even though they can speak they can't read."

- Naw M--- (female, 53), G--- village (June 2007)

As most villages lack educational facilities beyond the primary level, parents wishing their children to access post-primary education must typically send their children to study at schools in the towns and larger villages where they may need to remain as boarders. Tuition at such facilities can cost anywhere from 200,000 to 300,000 kyat per year. However, due in large part to persistent extortion and demands for forced labour these amounts are far beyond the means of most Karen villagers. As their parents are unable to support their education, many children have made the difficult trek east across the Thailand – Burma border in order to attend refugee-camp based schools instead.

Agriculture

"Most of the villagers do farming and gardening. Even those who are farming don't have enough food because they don't have time to take care of their plants as they always have to do loh ah pay."

- U T--- (male, 44), village head, B--- village (June 2006)

Along with flat field and hillside paddy cultivation villagers in Thaton District raise groundnut, sugar cane and sesame crops and maintain coconut, dog fruit and toddy palm plantations. Heavy flooding in Thaton District at the start of the rainy season in May-June 2007 prevented many local farmers from carrying out the initial stages of the crop cultivation cycle involving broadcasting the paddy seeds and then transplanting the young seedlings. As the crop cycle is closely tied to seasonal changes, the initial delay will have devastating consequences on this year's harvest. This flooding, furthermore, follows largely-failed attempts at cultivating heavily-fertilised dry-season paddy crops which the regime has been aggressively pushing via its TPDC authorities. Adding to this is the initial financial outlay for the fertiliser which villagers have been required to purchase. Villagers ended up feeding the dead dry-season paddy plants to their livestock as the grains were too stunted for human consumption.

"This year none of the households in my village have enough food. The reason is that some villagers don't have cattle to do farm work and others don't have a farm. They have to find daily work in order to survive. For the people who have a farm they have had to deal with flooding, so half of their rice has been lost to the water."

- Saw L--- (male, 51), L--- village (May 2007)

Despite these successive agricultural disasters the regime has maintained its rice quota system in Thaton whereby farmers must provide 20 big tins [320 kg. / 704 lb.] of paddy to local SPDC authorities per acre of farmland. Paddy harvests can vary greatly on the basis of seed quality, soil conditions and weather. Notwithstanding wholly failed crops, the yield of a single acre can thus range from 30-70 tins (480 kg. / 1,056 lb. – 1,120 kg. / 2,464 lb.). This means that local villagers in Thaton typically pay an annual rice quota of between 29 and 67 percent of their total harvest. To make matters worse, as the quota is set by acreage rather than actual yield, those with failed harvests due to flooding or the regime's inept authoritarian agricultural policies can find themselves in a situation of having to borrow money to buy rice to pay for the 'tax' of a harvest that does not exist.

Confronting food insufficiency farmers may purchase rice elsewhere or borrow from fellow villagers to meet their family's needs. Recent prices for one bowl (1.56 kg. / 3.45 lb.) of rice in Thaton District have varied from 500-600 kyat during the dry season and 700-800 kyat during the rainy season, when rice is less plentiful. However, rampant inflation due largely to the regime's economic mismanagement means that these prices are far from stable. In 2006 the average price of rice across Burma rose by an average of 30% percent.⁴ The recent doubling of petrol prices and 500% increase in compressed natural gas prices⁵ will likely inflame this inflation even further and make it still more difficult for rural villagers to purchase rice supplies on the open market.

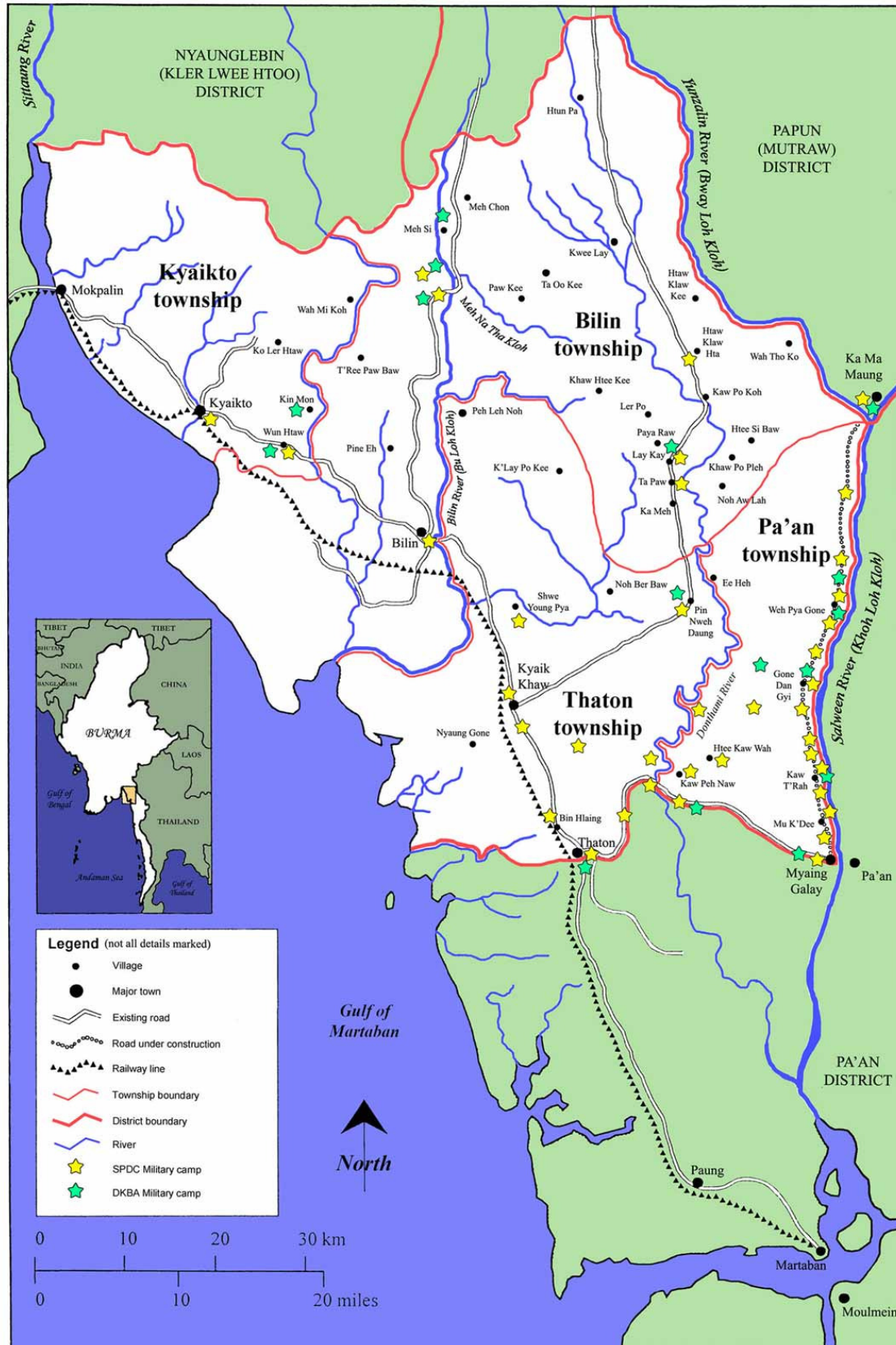
Conclusion

Amidst rampant inflation, crop confiscation, the extortion and demands for forced labour of the many State agencies and armed groups, and repressive policies on travel and trade, many civilians in Thaton District have looked elsewhere for economic security. Some villagers have left their homes in search of work abroad; mostly in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. These are typically young women and men frustrated at the lack of opportunities in their homeland. The SPDC has forced potential economic emigrants in Thaton to purchase exit visas in order to 'legally' leave Burma and work abroad. This cost is on top of any other fees for visas and work permits in the country of arrival. Furthermore, the regime has sought to tax the wages of those working abroad; a tactic only possible with those who have taken the 'legal' route of purchasing SPDC exit visas. Despite the financial gain of selling exit visas to potential economic emigrants, the regime has been reluctant to issue them in large numbers. Largely in response to the regime's economic and political restrictions on working abroad, many locals have sought alternate channels, either through engaging the services of a human trafficking agent or simply walking out of the country in search of work. The increasing burden on the civilian population in Thaton District resulting from the regime's aggressive development of oppressive 'civilian' agencies on top of the exploitation and abuse meted out by the Army through its own forces and those of the DKBA have only heightened frustration with and resistance to the grinding system of militarisation.

⁴ "Roundup: Myanmar takes measures to bring down commodity prices," *People's DailyOnline*, August 30th 2006. Accessed at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200608/30/eng20060830_298141.html on September 22nd, 2007.

⁵ "Depositors in panic run to banks for withdrawals," *Mizzima News*, September 16th 2007. Accessed at <http://www.mizzima.com/MizzimaNews/News/2007/Sep/63-Sep-2007.html> on September 22nd, 2007.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



Karen Districts

