



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the Field
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SPDC Army atrocities in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract in the words of a local resident

While the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) continues its diplomatic manoeuvring claiming a 'return to normalcy' and courting favour with United Nations special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, attacks on villages and military atrocities in northern Karen State have continued unabated. Nevertheless, local villagers continue to resist such abuse and speak out, where possible, against its daily perpetration. The report below comprises a translated account of the situation in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract, Lu Thaw township, Papun District written not by a KHRG researcher or any other of the organisation's staff, but rather by a local village head from Ler Muh Bplaw village tract who testifies in his own words to the atrocities that continue to undermine rural lives and livelihoods. The report discusses SPDC operations including attacks on villages and the killing of civilians as well as the state of health and education for the communities of Ler Muh Bplaw village tract. The text of the report is supported with photographs taken by KHRG field researchers.

The situation of SPDC troop deployment

Ever since the SPDC completed the construction of the road through Ler Muh Bplaw village tract, the villages have been divided along its two sides. SPDC troops regularly conduct security operations along this road and have more actively occupied it in 2007. Their army camps are located at Paw Kheh Koh, Gkwee Dta Bee, Kyo Kaw Htee, Htaw Muh Bleh Meh and Htee Hsee Hta Bplaw. Every month these troops receive orders from their leaders to carry out operations among the villages and to destroy paddy fields. In Ler Muh Bplaw village tract the SPDC soldiers are thus regularly active.

On May 16th 2007, troops from Htaw Muh Bleh Meh came and slept at Kee Thee mountain. In the morning of the following day on May 17th 2007, the soldiers divided into two groups. One group went ahead to the villagers' paddy fields and the other group remained behind to fire off mortars. At 6:35 am they shot and killed 18-year-old Naw Gkoo Roo in her paddy field while she was cooking for her family and friends. The other people ran away safely. Naw Gkoo Roo was a villager from Ler Muh Bplaw village tract. The SPDC troops burnt down



The SPDC camp at Htaw Muh Bleh Meh in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract shown here on May 15th 2007. At the base of this hill the Army has constructed a car road linking this camp to other SPDC camps in the area. The troops based here have destroyed villagers' hill fields, hunted down and shot at those living nearby and fired mortar shells at fields and communities into the surrounding forests. [Photo: KHRG]

four paddy fields and 20 tins of rice in the Htuh Ba area of Bler Ghaw village and also fired off their mortars from 7:00 am to 12:00 pm. They shot and killed a buffalo belonging to one of the villagers. The villagers were very afraid of them and fled to a safe location. In July the troops received an order to increase security around their army camps. As a consequence the troops did not often come to make trouble for the villagers and the paddy fields.

The situation of villagers and their livelihoods

Out of the five village tracts in northern Lu Thaw Township, Ler Muh Bplaw is the smallest and in it there are seven villages. As of 2007, the population is approximately 1,293 villagers. All of these seven villages have been displaced from May 1999 until now. The villagers are all S'Gkaw Karen. Most of them are Christian or follow traditional beliefs and some of them are Buddhist. These villagers ordinarily cultivate hill fields due to the fact that there are mountains in the village tract. So the villagers have to maintain their hill fields on and around the mountains. However, there are some small flat areas and a few flat field farms but the villagers do not dare to do flat field farming because the SPDC soldiers are regularly active and they stay close to the fields. The villagers do not therefore have an opportunity to do flat field farming in this area. In addition, in 2006 and 2007 the military forcibly occupied the villagers' land and paddy fields. Some paddy fields were destroyed by the military. The military came and destroyed the rice in the fields and they shelled whoever came to the fields with their mortars. After that the villagers were not able to cultivate the flat paddy fields anymore.



Khee Ghoh Loh Der villagers conduct the early stages of the rice cycle by dibbling holes for planting their fields on May 15th 2007. These fields are located near to the SPDC camp at Htaw Muh Bleh Meh. As the soldiers intermittently fire off mortar shells from their camp into the surrounding forests and fields these villagers have to take care of their security by monitoring the activities of local SPDC troops so as to know when it is safe to cultivate their fields and then work in groups to quickly tend to the crops before heading back to the forest cover. [Photo: KHRG]



These villagers, shown here on May 17th 2007, fled from Gker Ghaw Koh and Bler Ghaw Koh villages in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract when local SPDC troops shelled their homes with high-powered mortars. Children carry young siblings while their parents are over loaded with personal belongings which they quickly collected upon fleeing their homes. [Photo: KHRG]

Furthermore, on July 9th 2007, at 9:00 am, soldiers entered Htee Saw Kee village and fired off their guns. The soldiers came and slept near to the Lu Thaw mountains and in the early morning they entered into the village when the school had already begun and also fired off their mortars. Htee Baw Kee village is in Saw Muh Bplaw village tract but I am reporting about it because some families from among our villages went to find shelter there. At the time of the shooting the families from Ler Muh Bplaw were unlucky and three of the children

from our village tract were injured. Twelve-year-old Saw Eh Kree Htoo was injured on his right calf. The second child was Saw Ee Bra Hay, who is over a year old and was injured with a piece of shrapnel in his shoulder. The third child was four-year-old Naw Say Ler Paw who was hurt with a piece of shrapnel in her left arm. There were no other people injured but the soldiers subsequently burned down three houses and looted some property estimated at [a value of] 16,020 Thai baht [about 620,000 kyat] and other property estimated at 70,000 Burmese kyat [about 1,809 baht]. During the night of August 9th 2007, they came and slept near the hill fields of Gkaw Maw Koh village. However, on this day the owner of the field did not come to sleep at his hill field due to the heavy rains in the morning and went back to the village. On August 22nd 2007, they came again to Loo Gka Ber Hta near to where the villagers were doing cultivation. Our village tract has therefore had to deal with the deployment of the enemy which continues unabated. Our civilian population is afraid of two things. These are the SPDC soldiers, who themselves conduct the offensive, and the landmines which they have planted.



The photo above shows the remains of paddy stores in Ler Muh Bplaw village tract on May 17th 2007. Shortly before this photo was taken SPDC soldiers patrolling from their camp at Htaw Muh Bleh Meh burnt down the structure and its contents. This rice store was one of seven burnt down, along with seven paddy fields, by Htaw Muh Bleh Meh-based SPDC. [Photo: KHRG]



The burnt remains of Naw Bpoh Roh, a woman from Saw Muh Bplaw village tract who had come to Ler Muh Bplaw village tract to find work cutting trees. Naw Bpoh Roh was caught in her temporary home at Hser Hta village in Ler Muh Bplaw when SPDC soldiers attacked in mid-May 2007. When a KHRG researcher arrived on the scene and took this photo on May 17th 2007, Naw Bpoh Roh's body was still smoldering. [Photo: KHRG]

Education

In all of the villages in this village tract most of the youths are eager to get an education and so our village tract has six schools. The total number of students is 312 and the total number of teachers is 34. There are five primary-level schools. The only high school is at Htee Moo Kee. In 2007 we started our schools about a month late because of the SPDC soldiers' operations. So we started in May and continued until August and the students have been able to study smoothly. We cannot yet know how it will be in the near future. As other friends and leaders provide support we don't have so many problems regarding textbooks, notebooks, pens or other school materials. Regarding the teachers' salaries, the students support the teachers with foods and the leaders¹ have organised other support for the

¹ Local villagers often use the term 'leaders' in reference a variety of Karen groups providing support. In this case the village head is likely referring to the Karen Teachers Working Group or the Karen Education Department of the Karen National Union which provide some financial support for teachers' salaries as well as other school supplies.

teachers and because of this our school can operate. In the coming years, due to the increasing insufficiency of food needed to run the school, we'll need to get advice from the leaders.

Health activities

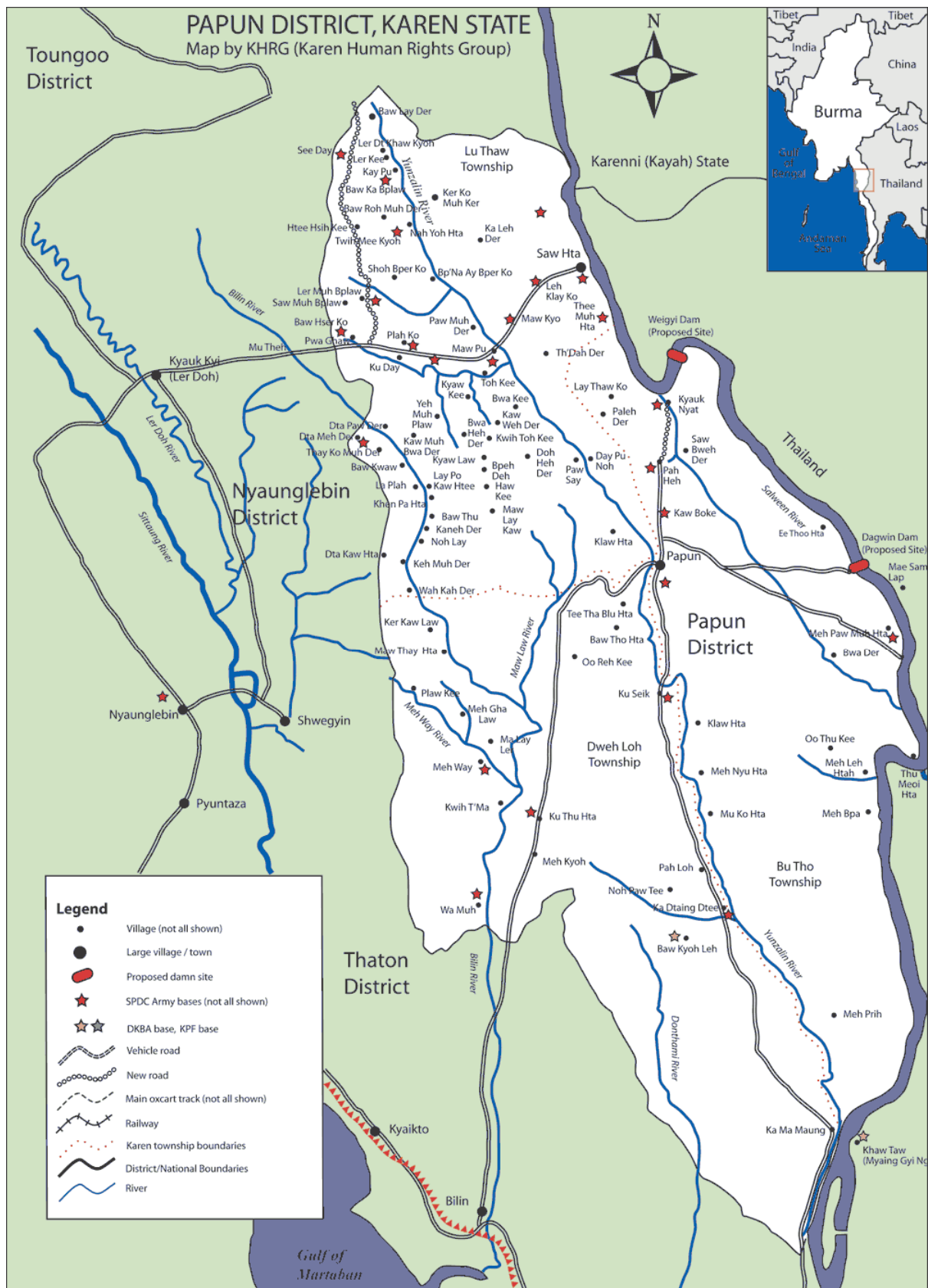
We don't have any villagers who do health work so we have not yet been able to set up a hospital or clinic anywhere. We rely on the KNU township hospital staff. They try to help us as best they can. This year other groups like Backpack² have not yet arrived at our village tract. The groups of midwives in our village tract have tried to work as best they can and it has been very beneficial. In our village tract, especially in 2007, none of the villages have been able to escape displacement. We must hide and sleep out in the rain and among the mosquitoes and insects. Whether in the schools or in villages we have seen that there are many diseases such as colds, fevers, headaches and diarrhoea and so we really need the leaders' advice from above.

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

- *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (October 2006)
- *Road construction, attacks on displaced communities and the impact on education in northern Papun District* (March 2007)
- *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)
- *Villagers displaced as SPDC offensive expands into Papun District* (May 2006)
- *Abuses in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun District* (April 2006)
- *Attempted rapes and other abuses in northern Karen Districts* (March 2006)
- *SPDC road construction plans creating problems for civilians* (January 2006)
- *Flight, Hunger and Survival: Repression and Displacement in the Villages of Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts* (October 2001).

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.

² 'Backpack' refers to the Backpack Health Worker Teams; cross-border mobile medics who provide humanitarian assistance to displaced populations in eastern Burma.



A map of Southeast Asia with Burma highlighted in white. Surrounding countries include Tibet, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. The Gulf of Bengal and Andaman Sea are labeled.

