Village Agency

Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State

KHRG
Karen Human Rights Group
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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Front cover photo: Displaced residents of S--- village in Papun District return to their hiding site in April 2008 after retrieving food supplies from their abandoned village. Earlier, the villagers had fled following the SPDC's establishment of a new camp close to their village. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Back cover photo: Trekking through the hills of Than Daung township, northern Toungoo District, these villagers fled their homes when troops from SPDC MOC #5 set up three new army camps at Pwee Kee, Shoh Koh and Kaw Haw. Due to the close proximity of these camps to their home village, these villagers fled on June 7th 2007. *[Photo: KHRG]*

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The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) was founded in 1992 and documents the situation of villagers and townspeople in rural Burma through their direct testimonies, supported by photographic and other evidence. KHRG operates independently and is not affiliated with any political or other organisation. Examples of our work can be seen on the World Wide Web at **www.khrg.org**. Printed copies may be obtained subject to approval and availability by sending a request to **khrg@khrg.org**.

Preface

With a disproportionate emphasis on isolated incidents of particularly emotive violent abuses in rural areas and a concurrent neglect of the many ways villagers have sought to resist such abuse, international journalism and advocacy around Burma has often contributed to portrayals of rural villagers as helpless victims passively terrorised by the Burma Army. By marginalising the agency of rural villagers in this way, such portrayals have perpetuated the exclusion of these individuals from the ongoing political processes which affect them. Citing the personal testimonies of over 110 villagers living in Karen State, this report seeks to challenge such portrayals and provide a forum for these individuals to speak for themselves about the context of abuse in which they live and their own efforts to resist this abuse. By highlighting the resistance strategies and political agency of villagers in rural Karen State, this report argues that the voices of these individuals can, and indeed should, be heard and incorporated into the many ongoing political processes that affect them.

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Introduction

Discussions and debates regarding international approaches to Burma's political and humanitarian challenges have been caught in a false dichotomy since the early 1990s. This has hindered efforts to effectively address the concerns of the country's overwhelmingly rural and agrarian population. On the one hand, a number of UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), some foreign governments, as well as Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) have called for a clear separation of politics from humanitarian and developmental concerns and yet have simultaneously required that all such concerns be addressed solely through SPDC-sanctioned measures. On the other hand, democracy activists within Burma and abroad have often narrowly focused on a formal transfer of State power away from the military, arguing this to be a necessary precondition for any substantial long-term progress in the country's humanitarian situation or overall economic development. Both of these approaches, however, remain overly focused on elite politics and perpetuate a top-down model of intervention which marginalises local voices. These approaches also assume (and perpetuate) misconceived and ill-informed notions of repression and resistance in contemporary Burma.

In regards to repression, the misunderstanding is one of scale rather than substance. There has been a disproportionate emphasis in the international media on isolated incidents of particularly emotive violent abuses, in the case of rural non-ethnic Burman-dominated areas like Karen State, and abuses of civil and political rights – such as freedom of expression and association – perpetrated against those engaged in overtly political acts in the country's urban settings. The former supports a conventional understanding of non-Burman villagers being passively terrorised into submission by the Burma Army. The latter focus fits comfortably within Western – most vocally US – fixations on the pre-eminence of electoral politics. While both types of abuses obviously do occur and their redress is important, they are not representative of the forms of repression most commonly confronted by the majority of the country's population; a

population which remains overwhelmingly rural and agrarian. Rather, as examined below, communities in Karen State (and presumably elsewhere in rural Burma) predominantly confront, and express concerns about, the far more prevalent problems of structural violence, caused by the oppressive social, economic and political systems commensurate with militarisation, and the harmful combined effects of a variety of abuses which, over time, undermine livelihoods, exacerbate poverty and worsen the region's humanitarian crisis.

In regards to resistance, the misunderstanding is one which narrowly depicts urban-based pro-democracy parties and armed ethnic insurgent groups as the primary, if not sole, forms of opposition in contemporary Burma. Although the popular protests of September 2007 succeeded in demonstrating a much broader civilian involvement in the country's resistance to military rule, international reporting, while sympathetic, has nevertheless tended to perpetuate four misconceptions regarding popular resistance. These are: 1) popular civilian resistance in Burma is primarily, or even solely, an urban phenomenon; 2) civilian resistance was largely dormant from 1988 until 2007; 3) civilian resistance was effectively quelled through the violent crackdown that followed the September protests; and 4) popular resistance in Burma has primarily been conducted in order to overthrow the military leadership and transfer control of formal State authority to an alternate political organisation. These misconceptions have supported a broad misunderstanding of a rural agrarian population largely outside of, and not critically engaged with, the political realm. On this basis, their voices have been marginalised, indeed excluded, from the ongoing political processes which affect them.

Village agency

In contrast to the misleading portrayals of repression and resistance described above, rural villagers in Karen State, in the course of thousands of interviews with the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) over the past 16 years, have provided dissenting narratives. While individual testimonies vary, personal accounts of repression

and resistance have largely been shaped by the extent of military control over a given community.

In areas of Karen State controlled by the SPDC, villagers' accounts have overwhelmingly focused on the local-level implementation of exploitative State policies employed to finance and otherwise support local military units, the wider structures of militarisation and individual military officers. Villagers' testimonies have cited various forms of forced labour, arbitrary taxation, looting and other ad hoc demands; restrictions on movement, trade and agriculture which have been used to facilitate such demands; threats and violence employed to enforce compliance with such demands and restrictions; and the deleterious consequences of these demands and restrictions on poverty, malnutrition, ill health, and access to education, healthcare and other social services. This distinctly rural perspective suggests that, while the country's predominantly rural and agrarian population does have strong political concerns, their views tend to be more focused on the local-level implementation of State policy than, as others have likewise noted, on the "*high profile issues singled out by the international press*" (Maung Thawnghmung 2003: 8).

In areas not under consolidated SPDC control, individual villagers' testimonies differ. In these areas, villagers have generally reported to KHRG concern over the military's forced relocation efforts and interrelated search-and-destroy missions conducted against civilians unwilling to relocate into SPDC-controlled areas. As part of these search-and-destroy missions, Burma Army patrols have applied a shoot-on-sight policy, killing anyone spotted in the area; burning food stores, agricultural fields, plantations, homes, schools, churches and other village structures; and blocking all travel and trade (including of food and medical supplies) into, out of, and within non-SPDC-controlled areas. These efforts have largely aimed to further a dual strategy of: 1) expanding State control over previously non-State-controlled areas and 2) making life unbearable in non-State-controlled areas in order to force civilians to move into military-controlled villages and relocation sites.

Confronting this widespread and systematic repression, villagers in both SPDC-controlled and non-SPDC-controlled areas have

actively and persistently sought to resist abuse and claim their rights to physical security, an adequate level of subsistence, a productive means of livelihood and a life of dignity for themselves and their families. Villagers' resistance strategies have been diverse and contextually conceived. In SPDC-controlled areas, these strategies have largely functioned to reduce or wholly evade compliance with exploitative demands and the restrictions which facilitate them. To these ends, villagers have employed techniques including negotiation, bribery, lying, outright refusal, confrontation, various forms of discreet false compliance, jokes and counter-narratives, and temporary evasion. However, given the constant threat of violent retribution by the military, villagers have had to be deft in determining how much space exists to resist exploitative demands and restrictions.

When the burden of demands becomes too great, villagers in SPDC-controlled areas often choose displacement to urban centres inside Burma, hiding sites in non-SPDC-controlled areas, refugee camps in Thailand or migrant worker communities abroad. As villagers in Karen State traditionally have a strong connection to their land, many of these people initially seek to remain close to their homes following displacement. In such situations, displacement into hiding comprises a form of resistance to military rule aimed at retaining control over land, livelihoods and personal dignity. As such, it is important to understand that subsistence measures and other efforts which displaced communities at hiding sites employ to support themselves are more than just coping strategies. These measures are overtly political *resistance* strategies which reflect underlying values about power relations, social organisation and the legitimacy of contending political authorities. Examples of such resistance strategies include:

- Establishing hiding sites in preparation for expected displacement
- Hiding food stores in the forest
- Monitoring troop movements and employing advanced warning systems to alert villagers to approaching army patrols

- Retrieving food and other supplies left behind at villages during flight
- Cultivating covert agricultural fields
- Establishing temporary 'jungle markets' to covertly trade with villagers from SPDC-controlled areas
- Sharing food with friends and family
- Utilising locally-available foods and medicine
- Accessing indigenous organisations providing aid cross border from Thailand
- Providing community education and social services
- Assisting family and community members in the daily challenges of life in hiding

KHRG calls these village-level initiatives and villagers' capacity to resist abuse *village agency*. This terminology has been employed to counter prevailing notions of villagers in Karen State and other parts of rural Burma as helpless victims lacking the capacity and analytical ability to assess and concretely respond to their situation and resist the abuses committed against them.

Village agency also challenges narrow conceptions of politics that prioritise the power struggles of the elite. Such conceptions marginalise the concerns of, and daily acts of resistance by, the country's predominantly rural population. These misconceptions have been perpetuated through a disproportionate fixation on formal authority and electoral politics. They have also led to an assumption that political issues are not, cannot, and in some cases should not, be addressed prior to, or outside of, a free and fair national election (or at least 'tripartite dialogue' or some other form of elite political negotiation).

By contrast, a broader understanding of politics is needed – one which includes the everyday struggles and concerns of the rural population and recognises that political processes are not limited to conflicts over the control of institutional authority by formally-organised political parties, ethnic insurgent leaders or members of

the current military junta.[1] Rather, political processes in contemporary Burma are pervasive and ongoing, and participation in them is all-inclusive.

Given the daily political engagement of villagers in Karen State and other rural areas, a rights-based approach to contemporary Burma must recognise that local communities can, and indeed should, lead all forms of intervention which affect them. External actors can thus begin by listening to the voices of the villagers and supporting the strategies that these individuals are already employing to resist abuse and claim their rights, rather than imposing foreign, and quite likely inappropriate, strategies upon them.

It is important to stress here that the concept of village agency is not simply a theoretical exercise. There are immediate and concrete applications of village agency which can provide tangible benefit to rural communities across Burma. These include:

- Conducting **human rights impact assessments** as an integral part of all humanitarian and socio-economic development programmes implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies operating in Burma

- Supporting, through funding and capacity building, **independent civil society** groups in rural areas under the control of the SPDC and ethnic ceasefire groups

- Increasing assistance by international governments, funding bodies and NGOs to indigenous organisations delivering **'cross-border' aid** to local communities in Burma

[1] Similarly, Benedict Kerkvliet (2002: 11) argues for an understanding of 'everyday politics' that goes beyond a narrow conception of formal alliances and factions expressly challenging or supporting *de jure* State authority and legislative powers. Rather, it should include the "*debates, conflicts, decisions, and cooperation among individuals, groups, and organizations regarding the control, allocation, and use of resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities*" which are "*a part of daily life*."

- Incorporating **locally-driven civilian protection** measures into ongoing humanitarian relief and development programmes currently being implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies via Rangoon

- Introducing the **concerns and suggestions of rural villagers**, via explicit testimonies, into foreign policy discussions, round tables and think tanks conducted by international academic and policy making communities

- Incorporating the voices of rural villagers into ongoing international **journalism and advocacy** efforts

As the situation in Burma evolves, future applications of a village agency perspective include allowing refugees a seat at the table for any potential repatriation negotiations and including internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and other affected communities in peace negotiations between armed groups and the SPDC. While the above opportunities for engagement will be examined in more detail in chapter eleven below, the overall argument of this report is that the far-too-often-excluded voices of rural villagers must be included in the political processes that affect them and their concerns must shape any related intervention. By recognising that politically-engaged forms of intervention, supportive of villagers' ongoing resistance strategies, need not focus on regime change (nor wait until one has occurred), discussions and debates regarding international approaches to Burma's current political and humanitarian challenges can hopefully progress beyond the false dichotomy in which they have been caught.

Format of this report

This report is not primarily an incident-based collection of human rights abuses in Karen State. Rather, it attempts, through the extensive use of direct testimonies by villagers themselves, to provide a forum where villagers can speak for themselves regarding the situation of abuse in which they live and their own efforts to

resist this abuse and claim their rights.[2] While this report focuses on Karen State, the situation described here has many similarities to other, especially rural, areas across the country.

The report begins with three chapters outlining the historical, political and economic context of the Karen. Chapter one provides a historical background to the current conflict in Karen State. Chapter two looks at the ways in which Karen villagers have been represented in international media and elsewhere. Chapter three then examines the place of land and rural – primarily agrarian – livelihoods in Karen State.

The following section addresses the situation of civilians living in areas under SPDC control; areas which can be understood as 'State spaces'. Chapter four addresses the role of exploitation and the forms in which this abuse is committed. Chapter five looks at the harmful consequences of exploitation. Chapter six then examines how the military has used violence in order to enforce compliance with exploitative demands. Chapter seven concludes this section by presenting some of the diverse ways in which villagers have resisted regular exploitative abuse.

The subsequent section addresses the situation of villagers living at displaced hiding sites or other non-SPDC-controlled villages in the forests of (primarily) northern Karen State; areas which can be understood as 'non-State spaces'. Chapter eight examines how the Burma Army has targeted civilians in military attacks in order to forcibly relocate the entire population to areas under SPDC control. This chapter also looks at the deleterious consequences of these attacks and of the related restrictions on movement and trade. Chapter nine then looks at the ways villagers have sought to maintain their lives in hiding as a means of resisting military efforts to bring them under State control.

The final section concludes this report by first, in chapter ten, examining the implications of an agency-centred perspective on conventional understandings of unity and dissent within the Burma

[2] Extensive documentation of particular incidents of human rights abuse in Karen State is available in the many Karen Human Rights Group reports at www.khrg.org.

Army. Chapter eleven then sketches some practical applications of a village agency perspective for external approaches to contemporary Burma. Lastly, this report concludes in chapter twelve with some brief remarks regarding agency, village-level resistance and forms of engagement that are mindful of on-the-ground political implications.

Notes on the text

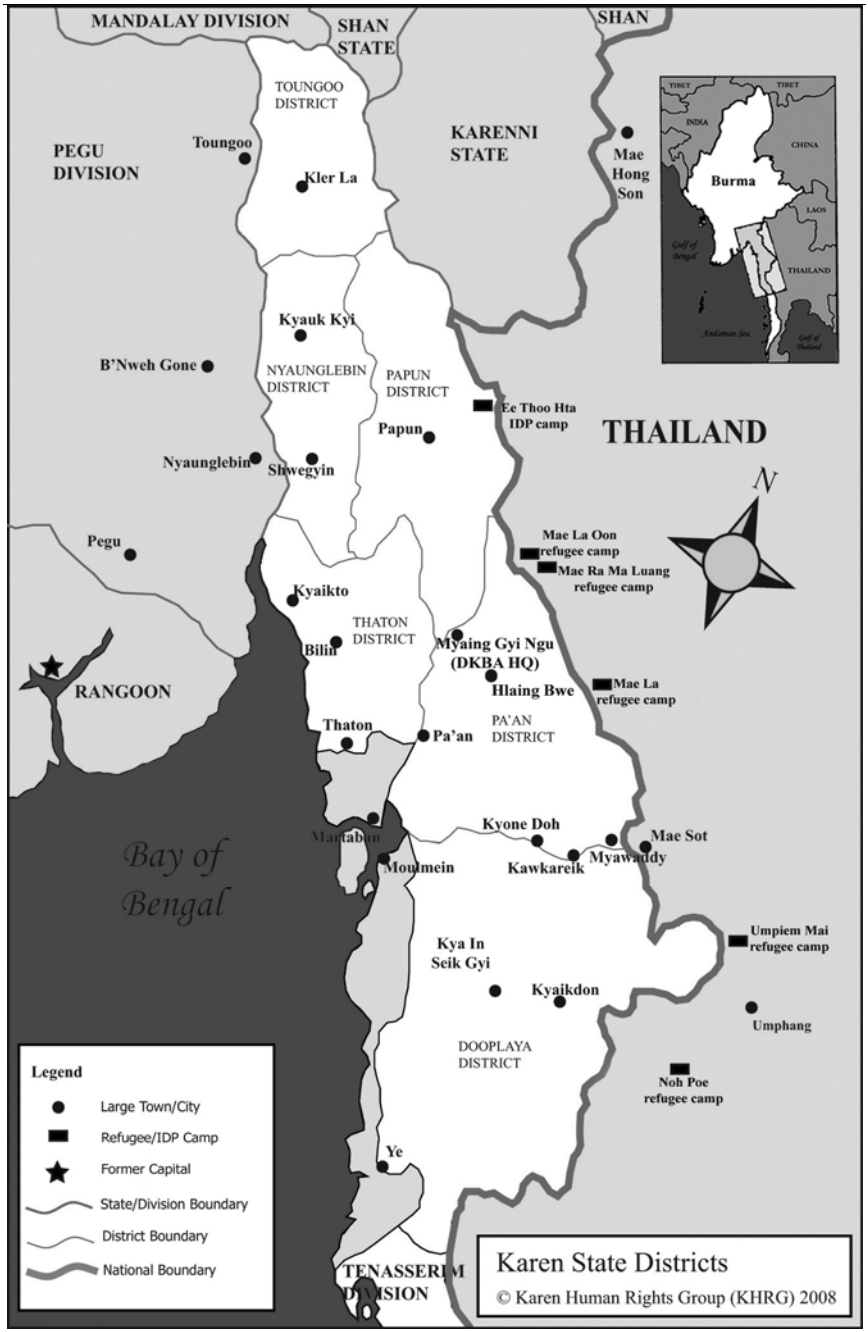
This report is based primarily on the testimonies of villagers living in all seven districts of locally-defined Karen State drawn from over 110 interviews conducted in S'Gkaw Karen, Pwo Karen and Burmese languages between January 2006 and July 2008 by KHRG field researchers operating in the area. In certain instances, the report also draws on additional earlier interviews conducted by KHRG where the context was consistent with the current situation. Much of the analysis and background to this report is informed by thousands of interviews conducted by KHRG field researchers since the organisation's founding in 1992. The methodological approach is one of qualitative over quantitative research in order to allow local villagers to speak for themselves about abuses, their effects and the implications on their lives and to describe the manner in which they have responded to events. Further supportive information has been drawn, where appropriate, from academic and media articles as well as reports from government, intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies.

Many of the place names mentioned in the report are indicated on the accompanying maps. Most districts, townships, villages and rivers have both a Karen and Burmese name. We have tried to be consistent throughout this report and favour the names preferred by local people. While districts are identified with Burmese names, their boundaries follow Karen designations (shown in the Karen State Districts map below) as used by local people and the Karen National Union (KNU) but not the SPDC. Under SPDC designations (as shown in the Burma map below), sections of western Toungoo and Nyaunglebin Districts fall within eastern Pegu (Bago) Division, western Thaton and Dooplaya Districts form part of Mon State, and Tenasserim comprises a division wholly separate from Karen State. Karen and Burmese names transliterated into English follow KHRG standards and may deviate from those used by other organisations as no convention has been universally adopted. This report uses UK English spelling throughout, except where directly quoting texts written in US English. However, dates are formatted following the American convention.

Terms and abbreviations

BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army; allied with the SPDC
ECDF	Ethnic Community Development Forum
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FBR	Free Burma Rangers
IB	Infantry Battalion of the SPDC Army
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KED	Karen Education Department
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KORD	Karen Office for Relief and Development
KPF	Karen Peace Force; Karen armed group allied with the SPDC
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group
KTWG	Karen Teachers' Working Group
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion of the SPDC Army
LID	Light Infantry Division of the SPDC Army
MMCWA	Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association
MOC	Military Operations Command of the SPDC Army
MWAF	Myanmar Women's Affair's Federation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TPDC	Township Peace and Development Council
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
VPDC	Village Peace and Development Council
baht	Thai currency; US $1 equals (at time of writing) approx. 34 baht at current market rate
basket	Unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One basket of paddy equals 20.9 kg. / 45.08 lb. in weight. One basket of husked rice equals 32 kg. / 70.4 lb. in weight.
big tin	Unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One big tin of paddy equals 10.45 kg. / 23.04 lb. in weight. One big tin of husked rice equals 16 kg. / 35.2 lb. in weight.

kyat	Burmese currency; US $1 equals (at time of writing) 5.8 kyat at official rate, approx. 1230 kyat at current market rate
loh ah pay	A Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour; although traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects
set tha	A Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger at army camps but also involves other tasks when no messages are in need of delivery
Tatmadaw	Burmese language name for the armed forces
viss	Unit of weight measure; one viss equals 1.6 kg. / 3.6 lb.


MANDALAY DIVISION
SHAN STATE
SHAN
TOUNGOO DISTRICT
PEGU DIVISION
Toungoo
Kler La
KARENNI STATE
Mae Hong Son
TIBET
TIBET
INDIA
CHINA
Burma
LAOS
Gulf of Bengal
THAILAND
Andaman Sea
Gulf of Thailand
Kyauk Kyi
B'Nweh Gone
NYAUNGLEBIN DISTRICT
PAPUN DISTRICT
Ee Thoo Hta IDP camp
Papun
THAILAND
Nyaunglebin
Shwegyin
N
Pegu
Mae La Oon refugee camp
Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp
Kyaikto
THATON DISTRICT
Bilin
Myaing Gyi Ngu (DKBA HQ)
Hlaing Bwe
Mae La refugee camp
RANGOON
Thaton
Pa'an
PA'AN DISTRICT
Kyone Doh
Mae Sot
Mawlamyine
Moulmein
Kawkareik
Myawaddy
Bay of Bengal
Umpiem Mai refugee camp
Kya In Seik Gyi
Kyaikdon
Umphang
DOOPLAYA DISTRICT
Noh Poe refugee camp
Ye
TENASSERIM DIVISION
Legend
Large Town/City
Refugee/IDP Camp
Former Capital
State/Division Boundary
District Boundary
National Boundary
Karen State Districts
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TIBET
TIBET
INDIA
BANGLADESH
CHINA
LAOS
THAILAND
KACHIN STATE
Myitkyina
SAGAING DIVISION
Haka
Lashio
Sagaing
Mandalay
CHIN STATE
SHAN STATE
Kengtung
MANDALAY DIVISION
MAGWE DIVISION
Sittwe
Magwe
Taunggyi
ARAKAN STATE
Loikaw
KARENNI STATE
Toungoo
PEGU DIVISION
KAREN STATE
Bay of Bengal
Pegu
RANGOON DIVISION
Thaton
IRRAWADDY DIVISION
Rangoon
Pa'an
Moulmein
Bassein
MON STATE
N
Andaman Sea
Tavoy
TENASSERIM DIVISION
Mergui
Gulf of Thailand
Kawthaung
Legend
Former Capital
State/Division Capital
Other Town (not all shown)
State/Division Boundary
National Boundary
Burma
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Context

- One -

Background

Population estimates of the various ethnic nationalities in Burma are highly contested. State authorities and ethnic nationalist leaders alike have sought to draw political leverage from repressed or inflated figures respectively. The last reliable and available census for the country was conducted in 1931. The SPDC has reported the current Karen population at 3.5 million (SPDC 2006) to 4 million (*Myanmar.com* 2006) while the KNU has given a figure of 7 million (Smith 1999: 30). The population of Burma as a whole has been estimated anywhere from 47 million (*CIA Factbook* 2008) to 55.4 million (WHO 2006). The Karen are primarily spread across Irrawaddy Division, Tenasserim Division, Pegu Division, Mon State, Karenni State and Karen State in south and south-eastern Burma as well as in the forested mountains of north-western Thailand. The Thai-Karen population comprises over 400,000 people excluding those from Burma now residing in Thailand-based refugee camps (Delang 2003: x). Only a minority of the Karen actually reside within the borders of modern-day SPDC-defined Karen State (as established under the U Nu government in 1952). A 1998 demographic study by the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG 1998: 15) estimates that the Karen population living within the seven districts of Karen National Union (KNU)-defined Karen State ('*Kawthoolei*'; covering SPDC-defined Karen State, Tenasserim Division, eastern Mon State and eastern Pegu Division) was 2 to 2.5 million people. Field research for the present report was primarily drawn from this area.

For the most part, Karen and other rural communities living in mountainous south-eastern Burma have historically lain outside the direct control of the assorted Burman, Mon and Tai kingdoms of pre-colonial Southeast Asia (South 2008a: 13). National borders in the modern sense were non-existent. While various monarchic claims of sovereignty in the past extended over Karen areas, the central 'State' was never able to fully enforce its authority at the local level (Leach

1960: 61). In this way, sovereignty – as understood locally – has traditionally resided at the village level with kings and urban bureaucracies distant and distinct centres of authority. Although the colonial period saw the British draw up ahistorical international borders which retained the majority of the Karen homeland within the Burmese state, the colonial authorities nevertheless administered the region separately as part of the country's 'Frontier Areas', as opposed to the central ethnic Burman-dominated plains.

On the eve of the country's independence from British rule, the more politically conscious of the Karen elite felt that ethnic-Karen aspirations would be threatened by the rule of a centralised and ethnic-Burman-dominated government. Indifferent to such concerns, the post-independence government under U Nu's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) began a process of nation-building aimed at consolidating State power and authority over all areas of the country and fostering a sense of nationalism derived largely from the ethnic-Burman Buddhist historical experience of the independence struggle. This particular form of nation-building was received with hostility by segments of the Karen population, especially the Christian-dominated political elite.

Despite the structures of parliamentary democracy, U Nu and the AFPFL lacked widespread legitimacy outside of the ethnic-Burman majority. The government's nation-building project was thus contentious from the start and diverse ethnic groups – including the Karen – took up arms against the post-independence administration. The armed Karen resistance began in 1949 and gradually consolidated into the present-day KNU and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Initially pursuing the political objectives of secession and national independence, the KNU revised its aims in the early 1990s to that of autonomy within a democratic federal state. Despite the historically important role of the KNU, contemporary Karen political views and allegiances are, like the population itself, diverse. In 1994, concerns amongst the KNLA's majority-Buddhist infantry over a lack of responsiveness from the minority-Christian-dominated leadership, exacerbated by State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) efforts to divide the Karen resistance, led to a split within the KNLA. A large number of former

KNLA soldiers, adopting the name Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), formed with SLORC/SPDC[3] support and has since served as a proxy in the junta's campaign to extend military control over all areas of Karen State.

On top of multiple ethnic insurgencies, Burma's post-independence government was also beset by a large-scale communist insurrection and at its weakest point was effectively limited to the capital where it was simply dubbed the 'Rangoon government'. Citing as justification a potential disintegration of the country under the ongoing insurgencies, the Burma Army (*Tatmadaw Gyi* in Burmese), under the leadership of Ne Win, first took State power for a two-year period beginning in 1958 and then more permanently in a 1962 coup. Continuing the nation-building programme even more aggressively than the previous parliamentary government, the post-coup Revolutionary Council under Ne Win established a system of military authoritarianism which it called the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. Under a one-party system, the military-controlled Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) took over all aspects of the government's executive, legislative and judiciary responsibilities as well as the day-to-day administrative work of the civilian bureaucracy.

With a stated goal of self-sufficiency through political and economic isolation, the BSPP went about creating an exploitative system in which civilians were forced to serve and maintain the hierarchical structures of military authority. By nationalising all agriculture and industry and establishing a monopoly on trade, the military effectively appropriated the country's entire natural wealth. Unrelenting exploitation of the civilian population alongside draconian restrictions on trade, travel and communication led to the almost complete collapse of the national economy. The Burmese Way to Socialism proved a dismal failure both politically and economically. The 1988 popular uprising in Burma was thus largely

[3] The post-1988 military junta ruling Burma changed its name from State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. This change was nominal only and did not reflect any substantive change in policy or leadership.

underpinned by frustration at the military over its mismanagement of the country's economy and the resulting economic stagnation.

With the subsequent establishment of the SLORC in 1988, the military sought to fend off a potential loss of power to a civilian administration. Staking its legitimacy on the dual claims of economic development and national security, the post-1988 military regime under both its SLORC and (since 1997) SPDC monikers has worked to present, both internally and abroad, an image of absolute unity within the country and total domestic support for centralised military rule. This approach has required the complete suppression, or at least de-legitimisation, of dissenting narratives. Pursuing the assimilationist objective of 'national consolidation', SPDC Senior General Than Shwe has ordered State authorities to "*focus on 'union spirit' and avoid manifestations of regional or ethnic diversity*" (Bowman 2007: 7). Seeing any expression of power which does not clearly benefit the military regime as a threat to its existence, the BSPP, post-1988 SLORC and subsequent SPDC have all sought to counter aspirations for ethnic autonomy with military force. This has led to the heavy use of violence in the central authority's campaign of domination and assimilation.

Since the late 1960s the Burma Army has pursued a counter-insurgency policy termed the 'four cuts' which aims to sever channels of food, finances, intelligence and recruits to insurgent forces (Smith 1999: 259). Applying this strategy, military operations have largely functioned to extend State control over traditionally non-State-controlled areas and people. Over the decades of conflict, the area under State-control has steadily grown as armed opposition groups across the country have lost ground. The KNU/KNLA no longer holds large sections of fixed territory and recent estimates put the group's troop strength at about 5,000-7,000 soldiers, excluding non-military political cadres who number just over 1,000 (South 2007b: 61).

Irrespective of the changes in State and insurgent leadership, the decades-long armed conflict in Burma continues, as do the underlying tensions between centralised and local control at multiple levels. Despite a linguistic abandonment of the Ne Win-era Socialist terminology, the post-1988 military regime has sought to maintain a

centrally-controlled economic system as well as its own political pre-eminence. Limited policies of liberalisation have served primarily to create economic opportunities for the military elite and a small number of business cronies or, in some cases, to avoid popular unrest over the country's deteriorating economic conditions.

- Two -

External depictions of the Karen

> "*[T]he Karen remain framed in Orientalist terms as a simple and backward people who are so desperate as to mistake their children for gods with supernatural abilities and send them to war*" (Brooten 2008: 226).

International responses to the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Burma rely heavily on foreign accounts of the situation constructed externally to the context in question. Despite a few notable exceptions, foreign journalists covering Burma often lack lengthy exposure to the communities about which they are reporting and usually do not speak any of country's indigenous languages. Media outlets are, furthermore, typically impelled to search for sensational stories to hook reader/viewer interest. A global phenomenon that has been applied to the Burma case is that "*in order to be reported, news from distant nations must be unusual or attention-grabbing, simplified, and must fit reader preconceptions*" (Brooten 2008: 217). Sources interviewed to substantiate news articles are often limited to indigenous political elites, staff of international aid agencies and Western 'experts'. These accounts may be further bolstered by citing human rights reports on Burma which, though well intentioned, are often narrowly incident-based in their documentation, typically biased towards civil and political rights (as opposed to social, economic, and cultural rights) and perpetuate stereotypes of victimhood that mask the complexities of the local context (Brooten 2004: 186). The resulting media accounts, in turn, provide the framework through which much of the international community makes sense of the situation and develops strategies of response.

The 'simplified' reporting that seeks to 'fit reader preconceptions' regarding the Karen people has tended to perpetuate four notable fallacies. These are: 1) that the Karen share a single homogeneous identity; 2) that civilians are unintended victims in the Burma Army's war against insurgents; 3) that villagers are passive

and helpless victims of abuse; and 4) that displacement in Karen State is principally the inevitable consequence of armed conflict between the Burma Army and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). In combination, these misconceptions can promote inappropriate external responses to the situation in Karen areas.

In order to address the first fallacy – the homogeneity of Karen culture, language, religion and politics – it is important to recognise that the Karen are comprised of an extremely diverse population. Nevertheless, suppression of diversity amongst the Karen has been used by actors across the ideological spectrum, including elites within particular Karen nationalist communities, to support often contradictory agendas (South 2007: 72). The SPDC has likewise, in its efforts to suppress and conceal individual, and often dissenting, agency, employed a monolithic representation of the Karen population "*striving for the emergence of a peaceful, developed and modern State under the guidance of the State Peace and Development Council in Kayin [Karen] State*" (SPDC 2006).

One example of this misrepresentation of local diversity in the international media has been the narrow depiction of the population as a "*predominantly Christian Karen tribe*" (*The Telegraph* 2007). While Christians comprise an important segment of the Karen, they nonetheless make up a minority of the population. A 1998 demographic study of the Karen estimated that approximately 25 to 30 per cent are Christian, 5 to 10 per cent animist, with the remaining 60 to 70 per cent being Buddhist (BERG 1998 cited in South 2007: 56). A more recent study estimated that about 15 to 20 per cent of Karen are Christian, 5 to 10 per cent animist and the remaining 70 to 80 per cent Buddhist (Maung Thawghmung 2008: 3). Both of these studies, however, neglect to mention the small but important numbers of ethnic-Karen Muslims, often self-referentially called 'black Karen', within the overall Karen population (KHRG May 2002: 10). This one example of glossed-over religious diversity is illustrative of the tendency towards simplified narratives and the use of a homogeneous identity to serve particular political and other agendas.

The second fallacy common to reports on the Karen is the notion that civilian casualties in Karen State have been primarily the

unintended victims in the Burma Army's war against the KNLA. This notion follows from a traditional understanding of conflict where two or more armed groups compete for military dominance amidst a civilian population which does not factor as a military advantage to any of the armed groups involved. The following news excerpt provides one example of such a depiction:

> "*Caught in the murderous conflict between the Burmese army and Karen rebels, the people of a makeshift jungle village witness a new arrival. While the Karen National Union, Burma's oldest and perhaps most important ethnic rebel group, continues its fight against the Burmese junta, Karen villagers are forced to flee their homes to avoid the fighting*" (*The Nation* 2007).

Some news reports have indeed acknowledged the Burma Army's targeting of civilians; typically framed as part of 'counter-insurgency' operations and the 'four cuts' campaign. However, without deeper analysis these reports have generally perpetuated the fallacy that attacks on, and control over, civilians are primarily means to undermine insurgents. Interviews with local villagers themselves, however, (as examined below) suggest that attacks against civilians have primarily sought to extend State control over civilian populations so as to be able to establish a system of administration whereby resources can be efficiently extracted from local communities. Few reports in the media or elsewhere have clearly identified this underlying objective of ensuring an exploitable resource base on which continued military expansion and operations depend.

The third oft-perpetuated fallacy regarding Karen civilians, particularly in reference to the violence and abuse they face, is that they are overwhelmingly helpless victims, passively terrorised by the brutal repression of the Burma Army and other armed groups. The following journalist's account of civilians in conflict-affected areas of eastern Burma is illustrative,

> "*[E]xhausted, terrified Burmese and ethnic peoples face an age old conflict which roars and screams unabated… As an NGO worker stationed in Phnom Penh told me, 'The people just walk around dehumanised. I have never been so shaken by a visit. They are so terrified they have forgotten who they are. To be safe, they chant mantras about the Burmese army being great: the same bastards who are killing their relatives*'" (Kemp 2007).

This quote highlights how news reports have tended to neglect civilian agency in responding to and resisting violence and abuse. Such depictions have also been adopted within academia:

> "*Discrimination against the Karen populace has been so complete that the Karen people have in those years [from independence to the present] developed two distinctive characteristics, namely, a culture of silence and a culture of apathy*" (Saw U 2007: 221).

Such depictions are reinforced by incident-based human rights reports which fail to present the context in which particular abuses occur and perpetuate stereotypes of passive villagers. An activist's account of the situation of IDPs in eastern Burma demonstrates such stereotyping:

> "*In the jungles and mountains traumatised, weak, psychologically numb people were attempting to survive in conditions where their homes, food, implements and animals had been destroyed. They lived in constant fear of attack*." (Horton 2005: 14)

External depictions of a passively suffering Karen population inevitably lead to the belief that civilians depend on outside intervention or some other political shift from 'above' in order to achieve any positive change. As one journalist described this state of affairs, "*Its [the Burma Army's] victims, who are languishing in camps all along the mountainous border with*

Thailand, can only hope and pray for a change of heart among the generals in Rangoon" (BBC News Online 2000).[4]

The fourth fallacy regarding the situation in Karen State is that displacement is primarily a function of civilians fleeing involuntarily from instances of overt armed conflicts between the Burma Army, the DKBA, the KNLA and other armed groups. While it is true that villagers in Karen State have fled, and continue to flee, in order to avoid instances of violent conflict between armed groups, such 'armed conflict-induced' displacement represents a minority of the cases.

In contrast, villagers living in areas not firmly controlled by the Burma Army more often flee direct military attacks on their communities (often part of wider forced relocation efforts), rather than attacks against insurgents. In other cases, particularly in areas where the Burma Army has an established presence and some measure of control over the civilian population, displacement is often a means employed to avoid explicit forced relocation orders or evade the military's exploitative policies and practices. (This type of displacement will be examined in more detail below.) The inaccurate view that displaced civilians from eastern Burma are solely, or even primarily, fleeing from instances of armed conflict between State and non-State actors has, furthermore, gone beyond media accounts of the situation. The Royal Thai Government, for example, does not officially recognise displaced people from Burma who currently reside in camps within Thailand as refugees, but rather

[4] Although portrayals of passive suffering among Karen civilians are the norm, it would be incorrect to suggest that there are no exceptions. As one informed journalist reported, in criticism of the fourth Rambo film in which the title character travels with a group of mercenaries into Karen State, "*What the film does not and should portray are the hundreds of Karen soldiers and civilians who risk their lives every day to provide medical and other aid to their embattled people. While most of the material aid comes from Western countries or is purchased in neighboring Thailand, it is taken into Myanmar and distributed almost exclusively by teams of local Karen. Very few foreigners venture into the conflict-ridden mountains of eastern Myanmar, as mercenaries, missionaries or even as aid workers*" (McCarten 2008a). Such portrayals, however, are not frequent.

as individuals who are "*temporarily fleeing fighting*" (HRW 2002: 167).

What these four fallacies share in common is their marginalisation of the political role of rural villagers and neglect of individual agency. Instead, the tendency is to lump the mass of Karen and other villagers together into a single homogeneous mob of frightened civilians whose actions ebb and flow in response to the tide of armed conflict and elite politics; glossing over local-level analysis and initiative by individual villagers seeking to assert control over their lives and claim their rights. This view facilitates villagers' continued exclusion from political processes such as humanitarian relief programmes, socioeconomic development projects and refugee repatriation negotiations intended to help them.

In contrast to such narrow depictions of civilians in Karen State (and other areas of rural Burma) there is far greater international publicity of the urban-based pro-democracy movement and other popular expressions of dissent and resistance in Rangoon and other major cities, with the most notable recent example being the mass protests of September 2007. While the 2007 protests were not limited to Rangoon and other large urban centres (see, for example, KHRG September 2007), the barriers to international media coverage of areas outside of Rangoon gave the impression that this was indeed the case.[5]

Beyond media coverage, there has also been increasing academic research into, and analysis of, the subtle and creative ways in which civilians (most often those based in Burma's urban areas) have responded to and resisted oppressive military rule. Some of the more innovative examples of these are the use of rumours and counter-narratives (Tosa 2005: 154-173), 'new style' literature (Leehy 2005: 175-205), networks of book exchanges (Fink 2001: 183-186) and mass lay meditation (Jordt 2007: 143-157). However, the typically foreign academics, engaged in the research needed to bring such forms of resistance to the awareness of the international community,

[5] According to one source, "*at least 227 distinct protests were staged during this time in no fewer than 66 towns and cities throughout the country in each of Burma's seven states and seven divisions*" (Human Rights Documentation Unit 2008: 9).

have openly acknowledged that restrictions on access enforced by the ruling military regime have limited their investigations to the "*urban and peri-urban areas of central Burma*" (Skidmore 2005: 2-3).

The four fallacies mentioned above, in combination with the urban bias in reporting on civil disobedience in Burma, lead to a situation in which the political agency of the rural poor is marginalised in favour of more powerful and formally-organised political actors; whether urban-based opposition politicians, the heads of various armed insurgencies, international aid agency representatives, foreign governments, UN diplomats or the SPDC junta itself. Villagers in Karen State, and other areas of rural Burma, on the other hand, are portrayed as lacking the knowledge, means and political initiative to effect change in their immediate circumstances. Rather than supporting the understanding that political change comes from local concerns and initiatives, such portrayals lead to the conclusion that it is instead external actors and indigenous political elites who are the most legitimate authorities on, and agents of, political change. As the analyst whose quote opened this chapter has stated, "*Images of the Karen as simplistic and backward... function to keep us from seeing them as part of a multi-ethnic Burmese opposition working to craft alternative visions for Burma's future, and reinforce the perceived need for outside intervention*" (Brooten 2008: 229). Indeed, the popular depictions examined here only serve to further marginalise the political agency of rural villagers and justify external and authoritarian forms of engagement; forms of engagement which can very well be at odds with the self-perceived needs and concerns of the local population.

- Three -

Land and rural livelihoods

"*In developing countries such as Burma, politics is mainly about control over land and natural resources*" (Tun Myint 2007: 191).

"*I want to say that in the future I desire to return to my village and live there peacefully, if it's possible*."
– Saw M--- (male, 45), Ht--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Oct 2007)

Agriculture, or more specifically paddy[6] cultivation, has been of central importance in the area of what is now Burma since ancient times. In the pre-colonial era, not only was the population at large dependent on rice consumption, but a large proportion of the monarchy's income was derived from the collection of paddy quotas enforced on agrarian communities (Shway Yoe 1882: 525). It was largely this in-kind revenue that served to sustain the monarchy as an institution. As the scale of paddy cultivation grew even further during the colonial period, the crop's production grew exponentially and Burma became the top rice-exporting economy in the world (Brown 2005: 9).

Following the country's independence, all governments of Burma – whether parliamentary democracy or military authoritarian – have sought to harness the country's rice production and trade to serve a self-perceived national interest (Okamoto 2007: 135). Following the 1962 military coup this 'national interest' became conflated with regime security and, applying a purportedly socialist framework, the State implemented what later scholars have termed "*a policy of agricultural exploitation*" which functioned on the basis of "*the procurement system, the planned cropping system and the state ownership of farmland*" (Fujita and Okamoto 2006: 4).

[6] 'Paddy' refers to un-milled rice which retains its husk. 'Rice' is here used to refer to milled paddy, or to both milled and un-milled rice when no distinction is necessary.

While State control of agricultural production and trade were an explicit policy in the socialist period, such control has nevertheless continued, with only limited liberalisation, under the SLORC/SPDC regime (despite its rejection of the language of the earlier socialist political model). The State's most recent liberalisation of agricultural policy occurred on April 24th 2003, when SPDC Lieutenant-General Soe Win announced that the country would abolish the system of direct paddy procurement which had been in place since the Ne Win government introduced it on October 10th 1973 (Min Htet Myat 2003). Instead, rice was to be purchased from independent traders by Myanmar Agricultural Produce Trading (MAPT), a State agency, which would then apportion it to the armed forces at cost. However, as examined below, villagers in Karen State and elsewhere in rural Burma report that systematic paddy procurement by SPDC personnel continues unabated, as do the State's land confiscation and crop controls.

Analysts suggest that the continuation of State control over agricultural production and trade are motivated by a desire to ensure a stable rice price as a means of avoiding social instability, given widespread poverty and the population's dependence on rice consumption (Okamoto 2007: 143). Furthermore, the regime depends on the continued support of armed forces personnel who, along with their family members, are estimated at up to 2,000,000 individuals (McCarten 2008b). Without State provisions for this segment of the population, rising rice prices amidst increasing poverty risks undermining the junta's most crucial support base. One recent study described Burma's contemporary agricultural policy thus:

> "*The genuine policy objective of the [SPDC] government seems to consist of the following two elements: avoidance of social unrest and sustenance of the regime. These two main objectives have required agricultural policy to accord with the following two subordinate aims. One aim is to stabilize prices at a low level for the commodities that are indispensable for the people's diet. The other is to sustain state enterprise in the agro-processing sector which depends*

> *for its raw materials on domestically produced agricultural commodities*" (Fujita and Okamoto 2006: 21).

The implications of State control over agriculture are even starker when seen against the backdrop of the country's demographic makeup. An estimated 70 per cent of Burma's population lives in rural areas (Bowman 2007: 9). According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, over 70 per cent of the country's labour force is engaged in agriculture; a sector which accounts for 57 per cent of Burma's Gross Domestic Product (FAO 2004 cited in Turnell 2007: 129). Furthermore, studies of Burma's contemporary agrarian demographics report that "*98 per cent of peasant family landholdings are less than 20 acres in size*" (Maung Thaunghmung 2003: 5). Together, these figures indicate that the country's population is overwhelmingly comprised of small-scale farmers.

In Karen State, the population is likewise overwhelmingly rural and dependent on agriculture – typically small-scale farming – as a means of livelihood. The Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG) estimates that approximately 70 per cent of the population in KNU-defined Karen State lives in rural areas and of this population 40 per cent reside in the plains while 60 per cent reside in the hills. The proportion of rural communities within the smaller SPDC-defined Karen State, however, is reported as 90 per cent. Villages average 20-30 households each; although in northern Karen State there are smaller villages which may have as little as 5 households while elsewhere in Karen State larger villages may have over 200 households. Over 60 per cent of farmers in Karen State cultivate agricultural land of under 5 hectares (12.35 acres) (BERG 1998: 12, 14-15, 37-38).

Villagers in Karen State predominantly engage in paddy cultivation as a means of livelihood. The manner of cultivation, whether rotational hillside farming or irrigated flat field farming, depends on the type of arable land available. The Karen practice of hillside rice farming is a form of rotational cultivation agriculture. Following this method, a single household in a stable village may own 8 to 10 farm fields and cultivate a given field for 2 to 3 years

until the soil is drained of its nutrients and then move on, allowing the unused fields to remain fallow for a few years in order to rebuild their nutrient base while burning off the overgrowth and cultivating a 'new' field that was previously left fallow. Where flat land is available, either in the plains or along the banks of rivers and streams, irrigated flat field farming is possible. In flat field agriculture, fields are divided into rectangular segments; the dry overgrowth is burned off in April or May; and fields are not usually rotated. Following the initial rains, villagers plough the fields, establish one or two fields as a nursery which are flooded and fertilised with manure and then flood the remaining fields and transplant the paddy plants by hand from the nursery to the larger fields. Paddy crops are ideally harvested after they ripen around November when the rainy season has ended.

It is important here to recognise that land, particularly where used as the basis of subsistence, is a central facet of rural social relations rather than simply a capital input in a production chain. Land ownership provides economic security at the household and community level, shapes relations of power and serves as an important element of identity and dignity. As traditional Karen sovereignty resides at the village level, villagers generally see land rights as something to be determined and resolved locally rather than distributed or verified by some distant and foreign (including centralised State) power (Heppner 2006: 8). As such, land claims follow local customary law and title deeds are typically not written down. Villagers frequently go to great lengths to retain possession and control of their land despite a lack of such formal written title deeds.

A young boy in Dooplaya District leads buffalos around a field in preparation for planting. He begins work at 6:00 am every day in order to be able to attend school at 9:00 am. Like many children in Dooplaya, extortion by SPDC forces and other demands on his family for labour and supplies mean he must engage in extra agricultural work in order to contribute to their subsistence. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Within this overwhelmingly agrarian context (in which the stability of State control depends on the population's affordable consumption of domestic agricultural produce), the SLORC/SPDC regime has pursued a seemingly straightforward agricultural policy of increasing production across the country (Tun Myint 2007: 191). As an illustration, the Chinese news agency *Xinhua* reported the following in March 2008:

> "*Myanmar top leader Senior-General Than Shwe on Sunday called on the country's peasants to make efforts to boost the agricultural sector, which is the mainstay of the country's economy, and improve the socio-economic life of the people… He also said the government is taking measures for scaling up sown area [sic] such as reclaiming fallow lands, vacant lands and low-lying areas through various means,*

> *reclaiming highlands and rendering assistance for multiple and mixed cropping patterns… With over 70 percent of Myanmar's population being engaged in agricultural undertakings, the sector contributed 50.1 percent to the national economy and achieved an average annual growth rate of 9.8 percent during the past five years, statistics reveal.*"

Behind this statistically dubious, yet glowing, report of agricultural development in Burma, the State maintains the three main agricultural policies listed above; namely, the procurement system, the planned cropping system and the state ownership of farmland. These policies aim to shore up regime security, yet they negatively affect small-scale farmers. In regards to paddy procurement, farmers are obliged to sell a quota of their paddy harvest to local SPDC officials at a price set well below the market value. As part of crop control measures, SPDC officials dictate to local farmers "*what, how and how much to produce*" (Turnell 2007: 130) via their respective village heads at regularly scheduled township peace and development council (TPDC) meetings.

In regards to land confiscation, under Burmese law, all land officially belongs to the State and local farmers maintain only cultivation rights which may be revoked at any time by local SPDC officials (Hudson-Rodd and Myo Nyunt 2001: 3). This State ownership also includes all natural resources, such as minerals, precious stones and natural gas lying below ground (Smith 2007: 224). As a consequence, agricultural analysts note that, while State ownership of land was a programme initiated during the socialist period, it has actually increased following the country's ostensible shift towards a market economy (Fujita and Okamoto 2006: 4). While the traditional agricultural practice followed across much of rural Burma entails leaving farm fields fallow for extended periods, the SPDC "*classifies this as waste land and thus state property*" (Duffield 2008: 30). Lacking formal land title deeds or the "*knowledge or resources to formally register their land, many communities have been dispossessed*" (Duffield 2008: 30). In Karen State, land expropriated by SPDC and DKBA soldiers is either

retained for military plantations or agricultural fields, developed into military bases or new roads or sold off to private business interests. In return for developing a new plantation or cropland of at least 5,000 acres, the SPDC subsidises private agricultural entrepreneurs with

> "*30-year leases, permission to export 50% of the crop and to sell the rest within Burma, exemption from taxes and duties for machinery, insecticides, fertilisers imported for the purpose of cultivation, provision of no-cost infrastructure (roads, bridges, telecommunication, wells), [and] guarantee of loans*" (Hudson-Rodd and Myo Nyunt 2001: 4).

The result has been a prioritisation of private large-scale agro-business at the expense of small-scale farmers. Large firms proving financially beneficial to the junta are allowed to operate freely either with state 'licences' or in joint military-business ventures, while small-scale industry and subsistence agriculture are severely restricted.

Ironically, the SPDC's policies of paddy procurement, crop control and prioritising large scale agro-business, is at odds with its goal of increasing the country's overall agricultural production. Recent comparative studies suggest that in fact small-scale agriculture – where farmers have access to appropriate and sufficient inputs and the freedom to decide their own agricultural agenda – is more efficient than large-scale agro-business, as small-scale farmers are able to "*use land more intensively than large commercial farms due to their ability to draw on family labor and to make use of ecological niches*" (FAO 2004: 5). In a report on Burma's poor economic growth and rising inflation, which reached 35 per cent at the end of 2007, the International Monetary Fund recommended "*liberalizing agriculture to give farmers more freedom to grow and sell their crops*" (*Financial Times* 2007). Nonetheless, the regime appears intent on pursuing its authoritarian agricultural policies of large-scale land confiscation, paddy procurement and crop controls.

The implications of these policies for small-scale farmers – the vast majority of Karen State – are disastrous. The Food and

Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations reports that, "*the available data appears [sic] to indicate stagnant (agricultural) productivity growth and rising rural poverty since the mid 1990s*" (quoted in Turnell 2007: 130; author's parentheses). In response to the economic and political pressures of this increasing rural poverty, migrants have been fleeing the country in increasingly larger numbers. Current estimates of the migrant worker population from Burma living in Thailand, including those with and without registration with the Royal Thai Government is over two million (Lubeigt 2007: 170). The fact that migrant workers in Thailand are willing to work for 40 to 60 baht (US $1.18 to 1.77) a day or less is indicative of the current state of impoverishment in Burma and the implications of the country's contemporary agricultural governance (Lubeigt 2007: 176).

State spaces

- Four -

Exploitation

Redistributing wealth from the rural poor to the military elite

> "*The entire country has become a massive resource base on which the Tatmadaw can draw as it chooses, not only to sustain itself and conduct military operations, but also to perpetuate military rule*" (Selth 2002: 148).

Following Burma's 1962 military coup, the newly-formed Revolutionary Council (RC), under the leadership General Ne Win, nationalised all of Burma's agriculture, industry and trade. As the coup had installed the military as the *de facto* government, this nationalisation essentially placed all of Burma's wealth under the control of the armed forces. Initially developing under the purportedly socialist framework of the RC-controlled BSPP but continuing under the post-1988 SLORC and subsequent SPDC regimes, the armed forces' expansion and consolidation of its economic base has resulted in it becoming, through its military-controlled institutions and business ventures, the single largest component of the national economy (Selth 2002: 130). Following the BSPP's introduction of strict control mechanisms over rice production and trade, examined in chapter three above, the "*exportation of rice became a state monopoly and served as the regime's main source of foreign exchange*" (Okamoto 2007: 135).

After more the 45 years of military rule, the ongoing operations of Burma's armed forces have become directly dependent on the country's agriculture, industry and trade. This dependence has grown over the past twenty years as Burma's armed forces have significantly increased in size. During this period, the regime has maintained rice rationing for the growing number of armed forces personnel despite the limited liberalisation of agricultural policy in other areas.

From 1988 to the mid 1990s the military rapidly expanded its size from 180,000 to about 400,000 individuals (Callahan 2007a: 36). As part of the overall campaign to entrench military rule in Burma, the then SLORC regime stated in 1995 that it aimed to reach a total of 500,000 personnel in the country's armed forces within five years (Selth 2002: 79). More recent reports on Burma's armed forces, however, suggest that this figure has definitely not been reached, and was likely never a realistic objective in the first place. According to one analyst of Burma's armed forces, "*even with a limited form of conscription, the regime has been unable to attract and retain enough suitable recruits to fill all the* Tatmadaw*'s new positions*" (Selth 2002: 80). A leaked internal Burma Army document cited by *Jane's Defence Weekly* (and quoted on BBC Radio in March of 2007) reported that "*Burma army battalions are poorly managed, lacking resources and are plagued by desertion*". Human Rights Watch, in its October 2007 report on child soldiers in Burma, identified "*Declining morale in the army, high desertion rates, and a shortage of willing volunteers*" to be major factors leading to the Burma Army's increased reliance on child recruits (HRW 2007b: 5). Despite such limitations, current estimates of Burma's armed forces personnel remain between 300,000 to 400,000.[7] The logistical requirements of supporting such a large institution have increased accordingly.

Moreover, given the large-scale popular resistance to military rule, the junta has become increasingly aware that it needs to shore up its most crucial support base: armed forces personnel and their families. This was especially the case after the 1988 uprising, when civilian bureaucrats had joined the protests, and after the 1990 election, when the results showed large-scale pro-National League for Democracy (NLD) voting in military-dominant areas (*The Irrawaddy* 2008). However, given the hierarchical structure of the armed forces, the importance of internal support for centralised military rule is greater further up the chain of command. As a

[7] For varying estimates on the current troop strength of the SPDC Army see, Smith (2007: 22); Callahan (2007: 7); and HRW (2007b: 29-31). According to Andrew Selth (2002: 80), an SPDC spokesperson speaking in 1998 stated that Burma's entire armed forces "*stood at 'not over 350,000' and was unlikely to climb any further*".

consequence, while the junta has sought to ensure basic subsistence rations for low-level armed forces personnel and their families, it has created "*an almost parallel state service sector that provides relatively high-quality opportunities for health care, education and other social services for the officer corps and their families*" (Callahan 2007b: 47). Furthermore, the leading corporations in Burma are predominantly owned and operated by active or retired military officers or individuals with strong connections to the ruling administration (Turnell 2007: 109-110). The result has been the creation of a roughly three-tiered class system, with upper-level military officers and a limited number of well-connected business cronies enjoying a position of elite privilege and economic opportunity; a much larger number of middle-to-low ranking officers and soldiers required to serve, and channel resources towards, the military leadership, yet also able to appropriate resources for themselves from civilians; and, finally, the vast civilian population which must support both low-level army units operating in their area and the more distant military leadership. Veteran Burma observer Bertil Lintner (2007) described this class disparity as follows:

> "*The new generals' town [Maymyo / Pyin U Lwin] and their heavily fortified new capital [Naypyidaw] are only the most extreme examples of how isolated Burma's military men are from the population. The officers live in secluded, subsidized housing, and their families have access to special schools, hospitals and shops larded with goods unavailable in ordinary stores. An army pass assures the holder of a seat on a train or an airplane, and no policeman would ever dare report him or her for violating traffic rules*."

In combination, the concentration of wealth and resources at the highest levels of military control and the simultaneous expansion of the size and operations of local military units across the country has led to a contradictory manner of distributing resources. While the regime has recently begun earning massive revenue of roughly US $100 million per month through the export of natural gas, it appears that most of this wealth is being hoarded in undisclosed locations;

whether in accounts at offshore banks, the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank or the country's Central Bank (Turnell 2008). As a result, in order to support both the increasingly privileged life of upper-level military officers as well as the large-scale expansion and operations of on-the-ground military units, local-level armed forces have become dependent on the regular direct exploitation of the civilian population in Karen State and other, especially rural, parts of Burma. The junta, for its part, has largely sought to deny, or at least legitimise, such exploitation through censorship and other forms of State-control over the 'public' sphere of domestic media.

Whereas control over agriculture, industry and trade support the larger system of military rule, local army units in Karen State are themselves dependent on the routine exploitation of the local civilian population. This dependence on the local population became explicit in a 1997 order by the War Office to the country's 12 Regional Commanders "*to meet their basic logistical needs locally, rather than rely on the central supply system*" (Selth 2002: 136; Callahan 2007b: 46). This policy, typically termed "*living off the land*" (Amnesty International 2005) has placed the burden of financing militarisation and the military elite on the largely rural population of Burma through an extensive array of exploitative demands enforced on village communities. In general, there are three primary categories of exploitation through which military forces extract resources from the civilian population in areas of Karen State under consolidated or partial military control. These are: 1) forced labour, 2) arbitrary 'taxation' and 3) looting and *ad hoc* demands.

Forced labour

During the colonial-era, British authorities exploited the forced labour of the civilian population to support the structures of Imperial authority and the exploitative industrial practices on which it relied (South 2003: 89-90). The legal framework through which colonial authorities sought to validate the use of forced labour remained in place well past independence and the relevant laws were only officially repealed in the late 1990s following extensive lobbying and pressure by the International Labour Organisation. In contemporary

Burma, forced labour takes a variety of forms including, but not limited to, portering military supplies, road construction and the clearing of overgrowth from the sides of vehicle roads, 'guiding' army patrols, sentry duty, *set tha* (messenger duty), fabrication and delivery of building materials, participation in 'meetings', participation in ceremonies and rallies, construction of fences, clinics, schools and libraries, and participation in parastatal organisations. These forms of forced labour are surveyed below. In almost all cases of forced labour, no compensation of any kind is provided. Local SPDC personnel often refer to uncompensated forced labour as *loh ah pay*; a Burmese term traditionally referring to voluntary work on community projects like temple construction, but not to military or State projects. As a consequence of the more recent linguistic manipulation, local people in Karen State now use the term *loh ah pay* in reference to most forms of forced labour.

In seeking to address the utilisation of forced labour in contemporary Burma, and understanding the junta's intransigence in prosecuting offenders or otherwise effectively curbing its perpetration, it is important to recognise the widespread and systematic character of this abuse.[8] As analysts have recognised, the regime has become dependent on forced labour "*to carry out routine administrative and infrastructure works*" (Wilson 2007: 97). Were military officers at all dissuaded from making use of forced labour, the inability of 'frontline' army units to support themselves would require a scaling down of the military presence in rural areas, especially in the heavily militarised, non-Burman dominated uplands in Karen State and elsewhere. Some common forms of forced labour are examined below.

Portering

> "*Last month, we had to carry rations almost every day. There was a vehicle road but they didn't carry their rations by vehicle. They wanted the villagers to porter for them.*

[8] For a detailed analysis of SPDC relations with the International Labour Organisation regarding the regime's perpetration of forced labour, see KHRG's August 2007 report, *Shouldering the Burden of Militarisation*.

Women and the elderly were amongst those who had to go and carry their [the soldiers'] things. There were old people nearly 60 years of age and young people about 12 years of age who had to carry the rations."

- Saw N--- (male, 25), Y--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

Military-enforced labour portering supplies is utilised most intensively between October and December following the end of the rainy season. At this time, roads and forest paths in Karen State have dried out sufficiently enough to allow for new troop deployment and rotation. However, troop deployment and rotation continues throughout the dry season and, thus, so does forced portering. Burma Army units operating in Karen State generally do not have a sufficient number of vehicles to meet their transportation needs and are furthermore faced with an increasingly high price of petrol. In some cases it appears that transportation of supplies by vehicle is a possibility, but local army commanders choose to utilise forced labour instead, apparently so that fuel rations can be sold off for personal profit. The uncompensated use of civilian porters has thus become pervasive.

"*They [SPDC soldiers] continue to come to our village. They usually come once a month or twice a month; sometimes once every week. They don't harm the villagers when they enter the village, but sometimes they harm the villagers when they order the village [community] to go and work. We have to carry heavy loads which weigh more than we can carry. Now [nowadays] we have to carry rice for them to Kler Day camp. [It takes] two or three days each time [which includes multiple trips]. If we walk very fast, it takes three hours, but if we walk normally it takes four hours. Four or five villagers have to go at one time. We have to carry over one big tin*[9] *of rice [per person]*."

- Saw Dt--- (male, 50), Ht--- village, Pa'an District (July 2008)

[9] *Big tin;* unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One big tin of paddy equals 10.45 kg. / 23.04 lb. in weight. One big tin of husked rice equals 16 kg. / 35.2 lb. in weight.

In order to acquire sufficient numbers of porters, local Burma Army officials issue orders to villages located along the route to the destination military camp or base. The supplies which villagers must porter typically comprise rations of rice and tinned food for the soldiers, as well as munitions of bullets and mortar shells.

> "*Two men have to carry one sack of rice and it contains three big tins. The old men over 60 years of age are also obliged to take part and even 12-year-old children are included because the SPDC [officials] demand two or three people in one family to go and deliver rations for them*."
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

In recent years, the Burma Army has also increasingly relied on convicts taken from prisons across the country to serve as porters alongside soldiers in Karen State. These individuals have been brutally abused and frequently killed when they are no longer able to carry their load.[10] This increased use of convict porters, however, has not lead to any significant decrease in the use of local villagers for this work.

Road construction

> "*We've also had to do* loh ah pay *for the SPDC, such as constructing the vehicle road. Individual households must each provide one person. This was [most recently] in 2007. At that time there were 12 people in our village who had to participate in it. Women and children were amongst those who had to do it. The youngest age amongst the children was eight years old. The soldiers were guarding us when we constructed the road. We had to bring along our own materials. They didn't provide us with any food and or give us any payment. We [also] had to cut [forest growth along*

[10] For more information on the SPDC's use and abuse of convict porters, see KHRG, *Less than Human: Convict porters in the SPDC's 2005-2006 northern Karen State Offensive* (August 2006).

the roadside] for three days. The road was not so far from the village. We had to walk just 15 minutes."

- Ko M--- (male, 30), Kh--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Road construction, like portering, is an annual task which SPDC officials most commonly demand following the end of the rainy season around October. As many roads in Karen State are unpaved routes built of stone and clay, they typically wash out during the rainy season. SPDC officials, therefore, demand that villages provide a quota of labourers to reconstruct segments of roadway located close to their village.

"*Villages in the area of Gkaw Thay Der, Kler La, Ghah Muh Der and Kler Thay Kee have to do forced labour for the SPDC Army. They usually do labour such as fixing camp fences, constructing roads and carrying army rations and such. The Burmese [SPDC] Army never gives any wages to the villagers*."

- Saw M--- (male, 42), T--- village, Toungoo District (Nov 2006)

For road construction, villagers must typically bring their own tools and food for the duration of the work. The construction involves collecting stones from the surrounding area, carrying these by basket or palanquin to the road itself, forming the road foundation with the stones, then collecting clay or earth in baskets from nearby fields and packing this firmly atop the road surface. This collection of materials can also lead to the destruction of local farm fields or paddy dikes, from which such materials are often taken. Furthermore, where the construction involves the laying of a new vehicle road, villagers may have their farm fields, gardens, or even homes simply cleared away in order to open up the land for the proposed route.

"*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 gardens [due to the clearance of land alongside the road]. In our garden, 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. Also, the SPDC soldiers' columns have sold, in the city, the bamboo poles which we cut for them."

- U T--- (male, 44), --- village, Thaton District (June 2007)

Shown here on November 15th 2007, residents of Gkroo See village carry out uncompensated forced labour as ordered by local SPDC officials. The villagers are repairing a vehicle road by filling in potholes along the roadway using large stones. They then had to cover the stones with earth and flatten out the road's surface. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Roadside brush clearance

> "*This year we've had to clear [the sides of] the vehicle road in [the area of] Baw Naw Wah. The road has already been constructed from Gkeh Kaw to Lay Kay [and] Kyo Weh. We had to bring along our own food and tools for clearing [the sides of] the road. The length of [the area to be cleared alongside] the road was three arm spans [5.5 m. / 18 ft.] wide.*"
>
> - Daw M--- (female, 53), --- village, Thaton District (July 2007)

Following the seasonal pattern, similar to the portering of military rations and construction of vehicle roads, SPDC officials demand that villagers do forced labour clearing brush and other forest growth from alongside lengthy stretches of road located near their home villages following the end of the rainy season. The heavy rains during the preceding season mean that bushes and shrubs alongside vehicle roads can have grown several meters high since the last time they were cut back. The Burma Army requires that villagers clear large swaths of forest growth along both sides of all vehicle roads in Karen State as a means to more easily spot civilians and opposition soldiers trying to evade military forces. In some cases these roadside clearings may have to be as wide as 50 feet / 15.2 metres. The labour required for this work is thus time consuming.

> "*Sometimes we have to clear the vehicle road... T--- village has faced* loh ah pay *frequently because it's located near to the military camp. [SPDC] LIB #44 is based in Kyaikto. The village usually has to clear the vehicle road which has already been constructed from W--- to L---.*"
>
> - Ko M--- (49, male), T--- village, Thaton District (June 2007)

Villagers – including women and children doing forced labour – cutting back forest growth alongside a vehicle road in the Gkoo Hsay area of Papun District on November 12th 2007 as ordered by Aung Htun Lin, commander of SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #434. November 12th was a Monday and the children doing forced labour here were unable to attend classes while they participated in the forced labour. *[Photo: KHRG]*

SPDC personnel, furthermore, often plant landmines alongside roadways in Karen State to obstruct the covert travel of civilians and opposition soldiers in the area. There is a risk, therefore, that those villagers forced to clear brush from these locations may trigger one of these mines and suffer consequent injury or death.

'Guide' duty

> "*The SPDC usually asks the village head to go ahead of them so that if the KNLA has planted landmines, our village head will step on them first. Whenever they [SPDC forces] are active, they always call the village head. The village head's name is Saw P--- [and he is] 55 years old, he was from K---*

village and he has five children. This happened [most recently] on January 14th 2008. The SPDC [official] was LIB #258 battalion commander Aung Soe Hlaing."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Forced service as a 'guide' most frequently occurs in contested areas of Karen State where SPDC soldiers are not familiar with the local terrain or where SPDC or DKBA soldiers are seeking out, or concerned about encountering, KNLA soldiers or landmines. In this context, such work may in fact be intended to guide soldiers to a particular location. Alternatively, the frequent requirement that villagers must walk in front of the patrol indicates that this work also serves as a means of 'human minesweeping'; a practice also known as 'atrocity de-mining'. This use of 'guides' as human minesweepers or shields for bullet fire is even more evident where villagers are ordered to walk in front of bulldozers doing road construction. In some cases, individual villagers taken away to 'guide' army patrols to KNLA camps have been beaten and released, killed or simply disappeared when they are unable to locate KNLA troops.

"*They [SPDC soldiers] called him [the speaker's father] to lead the way to the location of the KNU [KNLA] in the jungle. To be honest, my father really was a fool [mentally impaired]. I was surprised that they killed him without any reason. If they were dissatisfied with his son [the speaker's brother; allegedly affiliated with the KNU] they should have gone and found him [the son]. They were so cruel to him [the father]. Before, they killed my father they called him to find the KNU location in the area around the village. They beat him with bamboo sticks. They pulled out his hair. A monk in the village told us that he saw the bamboo poles [that were used to beat him] sticky with hair and blood. We dared not follow after him*."

- Saw K--- (male, 26), K--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2007)

Sentry duty

> "*Now the time to do* loh ah pay *for the SPDC, such as sentry duty, has approached us again. They [the Burma Army] are nearing the time to send out their rations. They usually send out their rations in December. When they send out their rations we serve as security for them, such as by helping them check the road. Both night and day the villagers must serve as sentries*."
>
> - Saw P--- (male, 48), --- village, Papun District (Nov 2007)

SPDC soldiers operating in Karen State have demanded that villagers serve as sentries at army camps, villages and alongside army patrols. As this labour is constantly required, military officers often demand that villages provide sentries on a rotational basis so that fresh civilians come to relieve those who finish their obligatory service period. Sentry duty typically involves one or two individuals at a time serving for one or two days before being replaced. Those unwilling to comply are fined. By utilising civilians as sentries, army personnel also hold local villagers accountable for any attack by opposition forces.

> "*If they need something from other villages, they usually ask the villager serving as a sentry to go and get [it]. They usually let the villagers [serving as sentries] leave at 4:00 or 5:00 pm. Villagers are able to arrive back at the village at 6:00 pm or past 6:00 pm. We have to wait until they let us go. We can't run away and escape. If a villager is sick on their shift, another villager must go instead. But if villagers can go but don't go, they're fined*."
>
> - Saw Bp--- (male, 30), Gk--- village, Pa'an District (July 2008)

'Set tha'

> "*They order villagers to cut wood, bamboo poles and thatch shingles and two villagers have to go for duty as* set tha *everyday*."
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Set tha, literally 'messenger' in Burmese, typically involves the delivery of order documents from local military officials to the heads of nearby villages. However, *set tha* duty also includes a variety of other menial tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, at army camps and bases at times when no order documents are in need of delivery. Villages are typically required to send workers on a rotational basis (often from one day to a week per session) so that there will always be one or two *set tha* from the village stationed at the camp or base at any given time.

> "*Two villagers have to serve as* set tha *per day. Sometimes they must go to the [SPDC] army camp [and] clean the camp or carry water for the soldiers. If they [the soldiers] have an emergency trip, they order the* set tha *to guide them to the place where they must go. Sometimes, the* set tha *doesn't need to do anything. They just go and show themselves at the army camp and come back home, but they have to be ready. [Because] if suddenly they're needed, they have to run to the army camp*."
>
> - Saw A--- (male, 57), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

Fabricating and delivering building materials

> "*During this year [2007] they [the Burma Army] have ordered the villagers to send bamboo poles and thatch shingles. The villagers have had to send it [the materials] to the police station once and to the military camp twice. On February 23rd 2007, the villagers had to send [wooden] planks to the military camp along with 600 thatch shingles and 500 bamboo poles. They [the Burma Army] said that they would [use the supplies to] repair their camp*."
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 44), L--- village, Dooplaya District (March 2007)

The obligatory fabrication and delivery of various types of building supplies is a regular task enforced on villages across those areas of Karen State controlled by the SPDC and its allies. The most common materials which military forces demand are thatch shingles,

bamboo and wooden poles and wooden planks. Often these materials are for use in repairing or constructing structures at army camps and bases. However, in many cases the amount of a given demand is so high that it appears local military commanders are selling off much of what they get for personal profit.

This labour is also particularly time-consuming. It involves the initial search for sufficient raw materials, the required felling of trees or bamboo or collection of leaves, the fabrication of the materials (cutting wood and bamboo poles to specified lengths, planing wood into planks, or fastening leaves to a bamboo rod to make shingles) and then delivery of the materials by foot, bullock cart, boat or raft to the designated army camp or base. In this form of forced labour, as with most others, children, women and the elderly are frequently required to take part and villagers must also take along any food that they will need if the delivery trip to the army camp or base is lengthy.

> "*The SPDC demanded 150 bamboo poles from both G--- and P--- villages. They demanded that each bamboo pole should be at its widest as big around as an arm and 10 cubits [15 feet] long. Each household had to [collect and] cut [to size] five bamboo poles. The Gklay Htah army camp that we had to take the bamboo to was about one hour from our village. We had to carry the bamboo by ourselves [without carts], so two people from each household had to go because one person couldn't manage to carry all five bamboo poles. When we got there they didn't give us any food to eat and we had to come back to eat in our own houses. They also didn't give us any money. Don't expect that they'll give you money. Instead of giving you money, they ask for more and more forced labour*."
>
> - K--- (male, 30), G--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

> "*100 thatch shingles cost 6,000 kyat [US $4.88] and 1,500 cost 90,000 kyat [US $73.17]. We have to send all the thatch shingles to their [DKBA] camp. That's a lot of thatch shingles and it costs the whole village to go [to prepare and*

deliver the shingles]. All villagers who can carry thatch have to go and their ages have been over 50 and the youngest have been 10 years old. We have to go and carry our food to eat on the way and they never give food to us."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 51), D--- village, Papun District (Feb 2008)

A resident of Gkwee T'Ma village in the Meh Cho village tract of the Papun District constructs a bamboo raft on December 16th 2007 as a means of sending the bamboo poles down the Buh Loh Gklo River to the Burma Army base at Waw Muh. This labour was ordered by Kyaw Zwa Aung, an officer of SPDC LIB #216, Light Infantry Division (LID) #11. He told the villagers that the bamboo poles were for repairing buildings at Wah Muh army base. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Attendance at meetings

"*We have to attend a meeting at the TPDC [office] twice a week. If the chairperson is not in the village, then I [a Village Peace and Development Council member] have to attend the meeting for him. We had to spend our own money for the transportation [to the TPDC office]. At the meeting we must*

> *report to them what work we have done during the previous month*."
>
> - U W--- (male, 48), P--- village, Dooplaya District (2007)

As SPDC authorities have worked to systematise their rule in Karen State, orders to villages are now routinely disseminated at regularly scheduled 'meetings'. In those areas where the SPDC has established Village Peace and Development Councils (VPDCs) – most extensively in Dooplaya, Thaton and Pa'an Districts – the relevant VPDC village chairperson (usually the village head) or a representative is obliged to attend monthly meetings at the local TPDC headquarters. At these events, TPDC officials, along with local SPDC military officers, disseminate orders which village heads must then enforce on the residents of their respective villages. Village heads must then report back to officials at subsequent meetings regarding their compliance with previously issued demands. These demands typically fall under the rubric of 'development' and include issues such as the various forms of forced labour and other exploitation examined in this chapter. Aside from the forced labour involved in the implementation of those demands issued at the meetings, travel to the meetings and participation in them likewise constitute forms of forced labour. Those villagers attending these meetings must, furthermore, cover travel costs and usually any food for personal consumption, as meals are rarely provided.

Participation in ceremonies and rallies

> "*If one of the [SPDC] leaders visits the place and has a ceremony, like the opening ceremony of some building, the students must go to welcome the leaders. They have to line up and applaud. They [SPDC] see that the way to get a lot of people quickly is to use the students.*"
>
> - Saw A--- (male, 28), P--- village, Papun District (Aug 2007)

Ceremonies marking the visit of some military official; the commemoration of State anniversaries; the holding of educational,

sports or cultural competitions; and the opening of a particular building are common in SPDC-controlled areas of Karen State. A related, but somewhat less common, type of event is obligatory pro-government rallies. These events are generally used as publicity opportunities to illustrate the SPDC's development credentials, to show particular SPDC officials giving cash donations and to enact a scene of civilian support for the military government. One notable example of the latter was the SPDC-organised pro-regime rally held in Pa'an town on October 8th 2007, following the large-scale protests that took place the preceding September. Villagers in Dooplaya District reported that local SPDC authorities had ordered households to provide one individual to attend the rally or otherwise provide an explanation and pay a 5,000 kyat [US $4.06] fine (in some areas this was reportedly as high as 10,000 kyat [US $8.12]) for non-attendance. This demand was backed up with the threat that those who were unwilling or unable to either attend or pay the fine would be imprisoned. In some cases SPDC authorities further warned that children of such households would not be allowed to sit for their school exams. Some families, unable to cover the entire fine in a single payment, were allowed to pay an initial instalment on condition that the remainder would be handed over at a later date. Those who attended the one-day rally had to cover their own travel costs to and from Pa'an town (in the next district) as well as food for the day.[11]

In most cases of State-organised ceremonies or rallies, villagers are not only forced to attend and participate in the event but also to contribute funds to cover the costs of the event and host any officials visiting to attend the affair. Often a new school or health clinic for which an event is being held has been financed and built by the local community. The official ceremony, nevertheless, typically identifies the new structures as SPDC organised and funded.

[11] For more details of this event, see KHRG, *Forced labour, extortion and the state of education in Dooplaya District* (October 2007).

Construction of army camps, fences, schools, libraries and clinics

> "*Sometimes the SPDC, DKBA and KPF [Karen Peace Force] write letters to our village head and demand villagers for work. The SPDC has forced the villagers to cut bamboo and wood and to fence in their army camp. We had to bring our own machetes and bamboo to tie and make the fence. We carried the bamboo on carts. Sometimes they've demanded two carts of bamboo and sometimes three carts… They didn't give us food and we had to bring our own rice to eat. We had to work on the fence construction for one day.*"
>
> - Saw H--- (male, 64), B--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

Forced labour in the construction of army camps and bases directly supports the militarisation of Karen State. Forced labour in the construction of schools, libraries and clinics on the other hand, is utilised as a means of supporting the SPDC's explicit 'development' agenda through which it seeks to garner some measure of domestic and international legitimacy. While villagers might otherwise appreciate the construction of schools, libraries or clinics in their communities, often community members themselves must shoulder most, if not all, of the labour and financial costs in the initial construction as well as ongoing maintenance and operational costs such as teachers' or medics' salaries and requisite supplies. Where SPDC authorities appropriate the efforts of villagers in this way, no local legitimacy is earned by State authorities and villagers are thus generally sceptical about any of the regime's purported development initiatives.[12]

> *"They forced the villagers to build a library but they didn't give us the wood, bamboo or other things that we needed to construct the building. They gave us some books to keep in the library, and so far they haven't told us what those are to cost. If we have to pay them money for the books that they*

[12] For more information on the SPDC's abusive implementation of its 'development' agenda, see KHRG, *Development by Decree: The politics of poverty and control in Karen State* (April 2007).

gave us we'll just have to pay it, because we are afraid of them."

- U B--- (male, 61), T--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

"*On February 10th 2008, we had to repair his [SPDC commander Myo Kyaw's] military camp. We had to spend a day of our time there and there were 30 villagers who were participating in repairing the military camp*."

- Saw L--- (male, 55), Y--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

Forced agriculture

"*We had to plant dry season rice crops and castor crops [for the SPDC] in 2007.*"

- U S--- (male, 50), M--- village, Dooplaya District (2008)

"*Last month, they [officials at the monthly TPDC meeting] ordered us to plant castor plants. We couldn't stay [wouldn't be allowed to remain in the village] without planting them. We had to buy the seeds by ourselves. 4,600 kyat [US $3.74] had to be paid for one tin of castor seeds. They said that if we ran out of oil, we could use it [the subsequently harvested castor seeds]. We had to buy and plant two tins of it. We had to buy it from TPDC chairperson U Nyut Naing. They also [forcibly] sold castor seedlings to individual villages. Each village had to buy five castor seedlings for planting. They also asked us to plant [the castor seeds] around our garden like a fence*."

- U W--- (male, 48), P--- village, Dooplaya District (2007)

Forced agriculture in Karen State involves labour on both civilian-owned farm fields as well as fields owned by army units and individual military personnel (but often previously expropriated from local villagers). Forced labour for army units usually involves the planting, upkeep and harvest of paddy crops for use in feeding locally-based soldiers. Forced agricultural labour for individual military personnel serves to enrich local commanders. Common in DKBA areas, for example, is forced labour on rubber plantations

owned by individual commanders. This work involves similar types of seasonal labour for the profit of local DKBA commanders and is typically uncompensated.

Two residents of Dtaw Dt'Lay Koh village in Thaton District water trees at the DKBA's nearby rubber plantation on November 19th 2007. The plantation is located in an area between Dtaw Dt'Lay Koh and Noh Peh Moh villages in Pa'an township. *[Photo: KHRG]*

> "*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've ordered us to cut [the weeds and brush at] the plantation.*"
>
> - Saw L--- (male, 51), L--- village, Thaton District (May 2007)

Forced agricultural labour on farm fields owned by civilians has, in recent years, primarily involved castor bean (*Jatropha curcas*) planting and dry season paddy planting (also known as 'double cropping'). Castor planting is an initiative that was introduced by SPDC Senior General Than Shwe in December 2005 with the reported objective of having 8 million acres throughout Burma under

cultivation with this plant within three years (ECDF 2008: 1). Dry season planting in Karen State has involved special species of paddy seed, most commonly a variety known by its Burmese name *Shin Thweh Lah*, which require extensive irrigation and fertilisation in order to succeed. Villagers have complained to KHRG that they have been forced to purchase both paddy and castor seeds in order to implement these agricultural initiatives. Villagers have also been forced to purchase fertiliser for dry season paddy cultivation. Furthermore, many of the dry season crops have failed due to inadequate irrigation systems. Debts incurred to cover the costs of the initial purchases cannot be repaid in such cases and the resultant interest payments hobble ongoing livelihoods efforts.

> "*The SPDC also told us to plant* Sin Thweh La *paddy for them once this year. They sold each sack of this paddy for 6,600 kyat [US $5.37] and they sent me three sacks [to purchase]. My villagers tried to cultivate it, but the land was low and flooded with water, so all the paddy plants died. It was Nyein Chan Yay [the KPF] who delivered this paddy and when they reached K---village, the K--- village head summoned me to meet with him. Then he divided the paddy between Bp---, K---, Y--- and L--- [villages]. He divided it for us and requested that we help buy it. If only one village [bought the paddy seeds], we wouldn't have enough money to buy it all. Buying the paddy had no benefit for us because it was already late when they gave us the paddy. We had already planted our paddy and we didn't have any land to plant the paddy they gave us. As for the people who did plant it, [they] planted it on low land. So, when the water flooded [the area], the paddy plants were all covered. In our village, a basket*[13] *of paddy sells at only 1,500 kyat [US $1.22], but they sold us three big tins [equivalent to one and a half baskets] of paddy for 6,600 kyat [US $5.37]*."
>
> - U Ny--- (male, 40), K--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

[13] *Basket*; unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One basket of paddy equals 20.9 kg. / 45.08 lb. in weight. One basket of husked rice equals 32 kg. / 70.4 lb. in weight.

Participation in parastatal organisations

> "*...the USDA [Union Solidarity Development Association] also forced us to join them. They directed how many people from a village must join them. They told us that we could go to court [would gain the right to bring legal charges against others as a reward for joining the USDA] if we have problems or if others did anything wrong to us. We were forced to join every organisation. For the USDA, we haven't organised our village to join yet. They've ordered us to do this since May, but we haven't organised our villagers yet.*"
>
> - Saw T--- (male, 43), P--- village, Dooplaya District (June 2006)

According to a 2007 order document which SPDC authorities issued in Dooplaya District, "*In 2007-2008, more than 90% of the public must be involved in an NGO*."[14] In the context of the SPDC's aggressive drive to enforce participation in various parastatal organisations, the 'NGO' referred to is inevitably one of the many government-organised 'non-governmental' organisations. These parastatal organisations include the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF), the Myanmar Red Cross and the Auxiliary Fire Brigades. Civilians across Burma are pressured or forced outright to participate in one or more of these organisations. Members of the Auxiliary Fire Brigades and the Myanmar Red Cross are given basic military training and are "*now considered an integral part of Burma's broader 'Defence Services'*" (Selth 2002: 81). The USDA has been regularly involved in orchestrating State violence; most recently against participants in the country's September 2007 protests (HRW 2007a: 116-119). Aside from the obligatory payment of 'registration fees', those who are forced to join up must then take part in meetings and other events with their respective group.

[14] For a complete translation of this document see Order #39 in KHRG, *Shouldering the burden of militarisation* (August 2007).

"*Women that join their groups have to pay admission fees. They ordered the village head to select women to join [the] Myanmar Women's Affairs [Federation]. We already collected money from the villagers and sent it to them. Every person who joined had to pay 310 kyat [US $0.25]. No villagers were interested in joining, so we had to force them to join. They gave 50 application forms to my village. Even though the villagers don't want to do these things, they are forced or ordered to do so. They have to do it because we are under SPDC control. The SPDC doesn't sympathise with the difficulties of the villagers. For Maternity and Child Welfare [MMCWA], they gave 100 forms to our village, but we haven't done anything [about joining] yet. I know that the villagers don't understand anything about these organisations, but when the SPDC demands money from them they are used to paying without knowing or understanding why.*"

- Naw L--- (female, 34), T--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

Arbitrary taxation

"*When I lived in our village, there were a lot of demands and taxes placed upon us. I have two young children and I have to look out for my family's livelihood. I didn't have the money to pay taxes or pay soldiers and if I went somewhere to find work, we had to pay money along the way [to clear the checkpoints]. I couldn't handle this kind of oppression and so came to live in L--- village [an IDP hiding site in Karen State]*."

- Saw --- (male, 32), L--- village, Pa'an District (July 2008)

Arbitrary 'taxation' is a means by which military authorities have tried to both systematise and legitimise extortion. In Karen State such 'taxation' has included obligatory payments in-kind, such as paddy procurement, and in cash. Although such forms of 'taxation' are widespread and systematic, they are arbitrary insofar as their particular amounts and frequency vary between areas and remain at

the discretion of local officials. Furthermore, unlike forms of taxation employed under functioning democracies, rarely, if ever, do the funds collected get spent for projects with clear benefits to local communities. In cases where some of the money does appear to go towards local development initiatives – such as in construction of schools, libraries or clinics – local communities have still complained that funds have been siphoned off by State officials. Construction also continues to be carried out with forced labour and infrastructure is left with insufficient State support for ongoing operations. Some examples of arbitrary 'taxation' are examined below.

Paddy procurement

Under the socialist administration of the BSPP, the government collected 30 to 40 baskets of monsoon paddy (paddy cultivated during the monsoon period) per acre of farm land; a quota which was officially reduced to 10 to 20 baskets after 1988 (Okamoto 2007: 137). Between 1989 and 2003 Myanmar Agricultural Produce Trading (MAPT), the government department responsible for paddy procurement, paid farmers at a rate set between 40 to 60 per cent of the contemporary free-market rate in exchange for their obligatory paddy provisions (Okamoto 2007: 140). The paddy quota was (and is) fixed on a per acre basis. Farmers are thus obliged to provide the specified amount irrespective of the actual harvest yield, which can be decimated by flood, drought or even extensive time loss due to forced labour.

> "*[SPDC] IB [Infantry Battalion] #48 headquarters is based at Ohtwin in Bago Division. Every year they send a representative to come and collect the field taxes. For one acre we must give them eight baskets of un-husked rice*."
>
> - Saw L--- (male, 37), P--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

In April 2003, the SPDC officially abolished the system of procuring paddy directly from farmers, following lengthy criticism by the World Bank. Despite the official abolishment of the direct paddy

procurement policy, however, villagers in Karen State nonetheless continue to report that the practice persists systematically. Paddy harvest yields can vary greatly depending on weather, soil conditions, impediments such as rocks within paddy fields, the availability of water and the application of chemical fertiliser. Scott's average paddy harvest yield figure of 100 baskets per acre appears excessive. Even Burma's present day State-controlled media, in which reports of agricultural and economic production and growth are inevitably glowing, only claims an average of 66 to 70 baskets of paddy per acre in the Irrawaddy delta, the most fertile agricultural area of Burma (*Myanmar Times* 2004). In plain areas of SPDC-controlled Karen State, villagers have reported that paddy harvests usually range from 40 to 45 baskets per acre and procurement officers generally demand that 10 to 15 baskets per acre be sold to the State at around 50 per cent of the market value. Those who cannot meet this quota (often due to poor harvests) must typically purchase paddy on the market (often with funds raised by selling off land, livestock or other possessions or taking out loans), which they can then sell at the fixed rate to the procurement officer. Where farmers are still unable to meet their paddy quota, military officials can confiscate the relevant land and then sell it off. To make matters worse, local procurement officials reportedly round up the land area figure, thus increasing the quota demanded on villagers. The surplus can then be kept for officials' own household consumption or sold off for personal profit. Given the continuation of paddy procurement in Karen State, its abolishment may have been limited to certain parts of central Burma or simply have been intended as a measure to satisfy outside observers, such as the World Bank, without ever having been intended to be implemented on the ground, particularly in rural areas less accessible to international observers.

Other forms of official extortion

> "*They [DKBA] ordered me to collect the tax for Hala [brand] rice mills from the owners. We only have one rice mill in our village. They've ordered that a village can only have one rice*

mill and the rice mill owner must pay 10,000 kyat [US $8.13] for the rice mill tax. They [DKBA] issued a receipt to the rice mill owner. Other villages also had to pay the rice mill tax."

- Naw M--- (female, 39), W--- village, Thaton District (Feb 2008)

On top of in-kind paddy payments, villagers in Karen State and elsewhere in Burma are required to pay a wide range of 'fees', some of which do not even have the pretence of funding infrastructure or services. In cases where reasons are given, villagers have reacted with scepticism.

"*They said that they would give [the money] to those people who went for portering duty, but to my knowledge they've spent the money that they've gotten from the villagers [on themselves]*."

- Saw M--- (male, 47), Gk--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

All armed groups operating in Karen State, including the SPDC, the DKBA, the KPF and the KNLA collect taxes from local communities. By far the largest portion of these is collected by SPDC personnel. The scale of the SPDC's many forms of arbitrary 'taxation' has reportedly increased across Burma in recent years (Turnell 2007: 113).

The DKBA demanded the same amount as the SPDC...

"When I stayed in the village they [SPDC authorities] taxed the villagers who traded artificial meat. For one stove for [preparing] artificial meat [the villagers] had to pay 20,000 kyat [US $16.26]. For one viss [1.63 kg. / 3.6 lb.] of artificial meat [the villagers] had to pay 2,500 kyat [US $2.03]. They had to pay the taxes to both sides; the SPDC and the DKBA. The DKBA demanded the same amount as the SPDC. As for saw mill owners, for individual saw mills [the owners] have to pay 100,000 kyat [US $81.30] each month to the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers and for the DKBA they have to pay 10,000

kyat [US $8.13] per month and for the KPF as well they [the owners] have to pay them 10,000 kyat [US $8.13] per month.

Also, we have to pay a sugar cane tax. For one acre of [sugar cane] field we have to pay 6,000 kyat [US $4.88] to the DKBA and the KPF each year. As for rice mills, [the owners] have to pay 50,000 kyat [US $40.65] per year to the DKBA and the KPF. To some groups of Burmese [SPDC] soldiers we've had to pay the fees, but to some [others] we haven't needed to pay."

- Saw B--- (male, 44), P--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2007)

In Karen State, the wide variety of 'fees' demanded of villagers include road tolls; fees for porters, construction workers or other labourers; fees for the construction of schools, clinics, libraries or other buildings; fees for travel permission documents; fines for travelling without permission documents; the forced purchase of tractors, calendars, compact discs, fertiliser and paddy seed; 'taxes' on rice mills, saw mills, hand tractors and chain saws; cash payments in lieu of compliance with forced labour; fees to avoid forced recruitment into the military; food provisions for military personnel operating in or near a given village; fees for festivals; obligatory donations to monks, monasteries or pagodas; payment of soldiers' debts at village shops; and other incidental expenses.

"*We have to buy a hand tractor*[15] *every year. Individual villages have to buy one tractor. Those hand tractors are 'Farm Number 16' [the model or company name]. For one tractor we have to pay over 2 million kyat [US $1,626]. Each time we've attended the [TPDC] meeting, we've reported about the hand tractors, such as how they're not useful for us as they must be repaired before we can use them. They [the TPDC authorities] have responded that it [the forced*

[15] These are long-handled self-propelled (petrol-fuelled) ploughing machines used mainly to plough irrigated rice fields and sometimes called pedestrian tractors; the operator walks behind the machine.

purchase of the tractors] was an order from the district [authorities] and the district authorities have explained that the order was from the headquarters."

- Saw M--- (male, 44), L--- village, Dooplaya District (March 2007)

On June 14th 2007, villagers in Lay Kaw Htee village tract of Papun District divide the rice from one large rice sack [51 kg. / 112.5 lb.] into smaller bags so as to make carrying it more manageable. A local SPDC police officer ordered the villagers to deliver the rice to the police headquarters. *[Photo: KHRG]*

"*We also have to pay taxes. We have to pay for their [SPDC] office [civil administration] and for their [army] battalion. We have to pay for many things. I [as the village head] have many fees to pay [to the SPDC personnel]. I [now] have 30,000 kyat [US $24.39] to pay. I can't collect [the money] from the villagers. I have to pay [the fees] by myself. They often come and collect the money and we have to pay it. For example, if they [SPDC] do something [some work] in L--- town, we have to pay the costs for the office [administration] and the labour. They ask for many things. I can't remember [everything]... We can't manage all of their oppressive and frequent demands for taxes and frequent demands to go and*

work for them. We can't handle that kind of oppression. It's not the [proper] way that they ask [the villagers] to do the work or demand money. It's not the villagers' responsibility."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 44), Hs--- village, Tenasserim Division (June 2007)

Looting and ad hoc demands

"*On the same day [SPDC] commander Pah Beh also ordered us to send him a chicken so we had to buy a chicken and send it to the military camp in Yoh Gklah. He also ordered us to provide them with vegetables and betel leaves. At that time I was very busy so I asked the villagers to just send a chicken and 50 viss [81.5 kg. / 180 lb.] of betel leaves. I had to pay 2,500 kyat [US $2.03] for the chicken*."

- Naw M--- (female, 39), W--- village, Thaton District (Feb 2008)

On top of demands issued under the pretext of 'taxation' or other official fees, army personnel often steal or loot the property of villagers in areas where they operate. Villagers have reported that soldiers have come to their village, often at night time, and stolen livestock such as chickens and pigs or have broken into their homes and taken what limited valuables villagers possess. This is a persistent risk for villagers temporarily leaving their homes in order to avoid forced labour or other demands. SPDC deserters interviewed by KHRG claimed that they were forced into stealing livestock and other food from village communities because they were given insufficient rations; often because senior officers sold off whatever food was allocated for low ranking soldiers (KHRG April 2008: 148-149). Alternatively, soldiers disregard any need for discretion and simply demand outright chicken, pork, curry or other foods, often pre-prepared, from a given community.

"*They [SPDC soldiers] lived behind our village for one month and after they had eaten all of our chickens and pigs and the fruit and vegetables in our farm fields, they went back to stay at Gklaw Maw. They ate all our chickens that we*

couldn't take with us [when they fled]. They took away village machinery and sold it all for their profit. They took all of the villagers' property that they wanted. Some villagers had collected posts for house construction, but the SPDC took them all and made charcoal."

- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

"*They [SPDC and DKBA] usually order me to find chicken, rice and porters for them. Whenever they come they demand these things and sometimes I can't find time to have a meal. Even day and night. The SPDC came to our village recently on the 8th of this month [January]. Sometimes when they come they ask me to collect up to four or five baskets of rice. Even though the villagers have nothing to eat, they have to look for rice to give [the] SPDC.*"

- Naw M--- (female, 49), N--- village, Thaton District (Jan 2008)

Also includable as a form of looting is unaccountable natural resource extraction, including logging and mining which occur throughout Karen State on land traditionally belonging to local communities. Such appropriation has had little to no benefit for local people in Karen State and instead primarily profited large companies from central Burma as well as individuals amongst the SPDC, DKBA and KNU leadership.

The big trees have been cut down...

"We didn't have big businesses here. [But] we have one now. People are buying and selling logs but the poor people aren't able to do this [are not able to fell or trade timber]. The logs are from near to our village. All of the logs are going to the town. It benefits only those people who can [afford to] do [this kind of work], but those people who can't, have to [just] watch those people [who are logging]. The logs are being carried by truck and now the road [that was built for the logging trucks] has reached our village. The road hasn't benefited the villagers. I think that after the logs have been

traded the SPDC will come and do something [using the road built for the logging trucks]. Now the big trees have been cut down and only the small trees are left behind. Now, because the big trees have been cut down, the area is getting hot and we can't get enough water for our rice fields."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 51), D--- village, Papun District (Feb 2008)

Systemising exploitation

Local-level exploitative abuses are not primarily the random acts of low-level and disorderly soldiers. They are a systematic part of the military's efforts to support the expansion and consolidation of military rule. Even individual acts of looting are inseparable from the wider military policy of 'living off the land'. Furthermore, as SPDC Minister for Information Brigadier-General Kyaw Hsan acknowledged at a press conference in 2006, "*In fact, the Tatmadaw is well-organized, well-trained and having [sic] an excellent chain of command and control system*" (SPDC 2006). More broadly, military analysts have noted that "*The last 12 years have seen considerable advances in the Tatmadaw's command and control system, and its communications networks are now much more sophisticated and reliable*" (Selth 2002: 79). This connection between local-level exploitation and high-level military policy is also evident in the military's more recent efforts to systemise the manner in which it carries out such exploitation. These efforts include: establishing Village Peace and Development Councils (VPDCs); requiring that village heads attend regular and intermittent meetings at Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) offices or at the camps and bases of local military figures; conducting household registration of village populations; and enforcing generalised restrictions on movement. With such systems in place, local SPDC authorities have regularised particularly common types of demands that now require compliance on a daily, weekly, monthly or seasonal basis.

"*We have to do* loh ah pay *once a month because our village is a big village and the big villages were ordered to do it once a month. However, with regards to going to the SPDC Army camp and doing work for them, we were ordered to do it everyday [on rotating* set tha *duty]. All men, women, children, youth and old people have gone to do* loh ah pay. *The oldest people [that have had to work] are around 50 to 60 years old and the youngest people are 15 years old*."

- Naw W--- (female, 48), S--- village, Toungoo District (March 2007)

Demands by SPDC personnel are typically disseminated via the local VPDC chairperson or village head. These orders are often issued through written order documents sent to the chairperson or village head of a particular village with a *set tha*. Other armed groups – including the DKBA and the KNLA – similarly place demands and 'requests' on local communities via the relevant village head. Village heads are, therefore, put in the uncomfortable position of having to enforce demands on their fellow community members who are often already suffering under the strain of excessive military appropriation.

"*On February 12th 2007, they [SPDC] sent an order letter which said that we had to give them bamboo poles and thatch shingles. The village head collected 10 thatch shingles from each household. At that time we had to give them 400 thatch shingles*."

- Saw M--- (male, 35), K--- village, Dooplaya District (March 2007)

"*On February 13th 2008, they [SPDC LID #101] demanded 2,000 thatch shingles from our village. They sent me [the village head] a letter and I had to duplicate that letter and share it with the other villagers. As of now, we've already had to send the thatch shingles that they demanded*."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

With regards to the more routine demands, SPDC personnel generally issue instructions to groups of village heads at regular

TPDC meetings. Often these types of demands are framed as part of the SPDC's national economic and agricultural development agenda.

They usually demand these things in the meeting…

"The biggest problems that we suffer are carried out by the SPDC and the DKBA. They often demand things like thatch shingles and money from our village once a month or twice a month. The period at which their demands are highest is the present time [after the rainy season]. During the rainy season, mostly they demand thatch shingles and bamboo poles... They also demand porters during this month [December]. From Gk'Neh Khaw Hta up to Wa Mee Day village, two villagers have had to go for duty as porters and if the villagers don't go, we have to give money. We have to pay 3,000 kyat [US $2.44] per day [to hire other people to go as porters if the villagers are unwilling to go]. Two people have to go for one month [at a time]. Now we have to give them money [in lieu of sending] two villagers and every household must give 800 kyat [US $0.65]. Our village had to give [in total] 10,000 kyat [US $8.13; the seemingly low total of 10,000 kyat may be due to the village head having negotiated for a reduction or because the porters did not need to work every day during the month]. If we don't pay anything, they detain the villagers who go to buy food in Papun [town]. Every year during the dry season, we have to go to serve as porters.

I have been a village head for three years and every year we've had to do this. We can't stay [in the village] if we don't give them money. Even if we can't give them the full amount, we still have to pay them something. For example, if we have to pay 30,000 kyat [US $24.39], but we can't give them the full amount, we still have to give them at least 28,000 kyat [US $22.76]. We are living in an [SPDC] controlled area and if they want to demand something, they send a letter [to call people] for a meeting and we villagers must go. They usually demand these things in the meeting. The DKBA and SPDC demand the same things because they cooperate together."

- Saw M--- (male, 28), M--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

As much of the demands for paddy, forced labour and monetary payments are set with quotas proportionate to the village population, amount of agricultural land or quantity of particular capital equipment, SPDC authorities have been conducting widespread household registration in areas under its consolidated control. By registering the village population and household size, land ownership and capital equipment, local SPDC authorities have sought to ensure that no potential source of 'tax' revenue goes unexploited.

> "*Last year, 2004, and this year, 2005, the SPDC demanded from us a household population register including all fields and plantations. They said that if we didn't give [them] this register then when they come and take our fields, our land and our livestock we can't object.*"
>
> - Ko A--- (male, 36), T--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2005)

As a KHRG field researcher operating in Dooplaya District described this registration process in December 2006:

> "*The SPDC demands that village heads conduct a family registration every year. The purpose of this process is to force villagers to do things, because after the SPDC knows the numbers of villagers, they order and force villagers to do many things, such as to organise village tracts, to crop castor to their quotas, to crop* Sin Thweh La *paddy [in the dry season], to buy a type-16 hand tractor, to organise [villagers to join] the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation [MWAF] and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association [MMCWA], to recruit villagers for the militia, etc*."

A further component of the SPDC's systematisation of exploitative local governance in Karen State has been the imposition of draconian movement restrictions. These typically require that villagers fence in their villages and obtain travel permission documents in order to venture outside their communities. Villagers must pay fees for these documents, but the required travel permission is not always granted. By restricting travel in this way, local SPDC personnel can more

effectively enforce demands on village communities as residents are severely obstructed from temporarily leaving their communities in order to evade particular demands.

A double-row perimeter fence made of sticks interwoven with split bamboo – built by villagers as ordered by local SPDC forces – encloses Taw Lu Koh village in Nyaunglebin District. *[Photos: KHRG]*

> "*No, the SPDC doesn't allow us to sleep in the forest. We can go to our plantation areas but we can't spend the night in the plantation area. We have to go and get a travel permission document. We have to pay 50 kyat for one document. That document lasts only one day. They stopped villagers from taking cooked rice and uncooked rice to the plantation areas for one month and later on we could take rice to our workplaces. They stopped [allowing] cooked or uncooked rice to be taken out in July 2007... [E]very village has had to make a fence around their village. If a Tactical Operations commander or battalion commander of theirs [SPDC's] enters Kler La town, we can't go out of the village. We can't even go to nearby villages such as Buh Hsa Kee and*

Gkaw Thay Der. They don't let the villagers leave. We can sometimes go [outside the village] once a week and sometimes once every two weeks."

- Saw H--- (male, 50), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

"*They told [the villagers] to make a fence around our village. Now we have to make a fence around our village. They ordered every village around here to make a fence. It's not easy to go from village to village. We want to go to Sha See Boh but we can't go over there. If they see [the villagers], they just shoot [them] on sight*."

- Saw M--- (male, 47), L--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

This chapter has provided extensive testimonies by villagers in Karen State about their first-hand experience with exploitative local expressions of military rule under Burma's current military regime. These statements illustrate how local-level military personnel are dependent on the appropriation of labour, money, food and supplies from civilian communities in Karen State and how the SPDC has sought to systematise this appropriation at the local level. The widespread and systematic character of this control and extraction of resources indicates that these abuses are not the random and unpredictable acts of low-level and disorderly soldiers but a systematic part of a larger administrative policy set by the senior military leadership; a policy that financially profits this elite class, supports locally-deployed low-level military personnel and, as will be examined in the following chapter, creates poverty and erodes the livelihoods of the region's predominantly rural civilian population.

- Five -

Creating poverty

The economic, social and humanitarian costs of exploitative governance

"*They [SPDC soldiers] have demanded money every month. Our villagers have a lot of difficulties and problems. We don't have a way to earn an income. Not only have our villagers had to pay these kinds of demands all the time but also villagers from other villages. Most villages in [SPDC] controlled areas have to pay these demands*."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 51), D--- village, Papun District (Feb 2008)

"*[I]f there were no demands for forced labour, they [the villagers] could earn their livelihoods smoothly*."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 37), Dt--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

Whereas the previous chapter examined the systematic character of exploitative governance in Karen State, the present chapter aims to show the harmful consequences of this form of governance for the local population; consequences acutely felt by the region's predominantly agrarian communities. The implications of exploitative governance have, furthermore, been amplified through an absence of social services and other State welfare provisions (Duffield 2008: 9).

While official SPDC statements glorify the State's development activities in rural and so-called 'border' areas, local statements about the limited or wholly absent provision of social programmes belie such claims.[16] Schools funded and built by villagers have been appropriated and advertised as solely government-backed projects while insufficient financial and logistical support is provided to maintain them. Village health clinics likewise remain under-funded

[16] For an extensive examination of the SPDC development agenda, see KHRG, *Development by Decree: The politics of poverty and control in Karen State* (April 2007).

and poorly serviced via State channels with insufficient medical supplies.

It is the combination of marginal social provisions and systematic civilian exploitation that has served to so severely undermine the economic, social and humanitarian situation of rural communities in Karen State. Regular forced labour cuts into time needed for agriculture or other work. The coerced provision of food and supplies undermines villagers' own nutrition and household needs. Demands for money deplete villagers' limited savings. Moreover, on top of the regular appropriation of civilian resources, restrictions on movement, employed to more efficiently control the population, limit opportunities for trade and work outside of village confines.

With limited local employment options in a cash economy, villagers are frequently pushed towards selling off personal possessions and/or incurring debt in order to meet the combined financial requirements of military demands and household subsistence. The consequent increase in rural poverty (in terms of diminished fiscal liquidity; loss of personal possessions and food supplies; and loss of access to a means of production, as agricultural land is sold off to pay, or avoid taking on, debts) means that villagers' options for addressing nutritional, health, education and other social needs are highly constrained. Poverty, malnutrition, poor health, limited educational opportunities and constraints on social and cultural practices are thus a consequence of widespread and systematic military predation in rural Karen State.

Poverty

> "*I would like to also say that the villagers [in the relocation site] have had to struggle to earn [their] livelihoods and they've also had to labour for the SPDC such as by always doing* loh ah pay. *It's a big problem for the villagers*."
>
> - Saw G--- (male, 66), S--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2008)

Poverty, in the fiscal sense, arises through interlinked pressures and constraints under exploitative local governance. Most directly,

payments of monetary sums to meet arbitrary 'taxation' and other extortionate demands cut into household financial savings. In-kind payments of paddy quotas and other agricultural produce involve a loss of potential revenue from selling these goods elsewhere. Payments of time through forced labour involve an opportunity cost, as time expenditures for this work inevitably take away from agriculture or other livelihoods work. Restrictions on movement, which confine villagers to their home villages and prevent them from accessing agricultural fields or other work opportunities, likewise undermine livelihoods opportunities. Finally, the selling off of property or incurring debt to meet arbitrary military demands heightens economic insecurity at the household level. The International Crisis Group (2008: 15) has likewise noted that, in Burma, "*government repression and mismanagement are the root causes of poverty*."

> "*They [the villagers] can't work very smoothly. The SPDC doesn't let us go and stay at our work places [farm fields] during the night time. If we need to go, we have to let them know and then they don't let us light any fires in the farm houses and they don't allow us to catch the wild pigs and buffalos which come and eat our paddy crops. So, we can't get enough rice [as the harvest is poor] and we have to buy [rice] from outside [of the household or village] and it costs us 7,000 kyat [US $5.69] for one big tin.*"
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Malnourishment

> "*This year we've had to worry about our food as no one has enough food because our villagers were portering [doing forced labour carrying military supplies] all the time during the rainy season. The villagers didn't have enough time to clear out the weeds in their hill fields. So the villagers' paddy fields weren't good enough and didn't provide enough food.*"
>
> - Nan Dt--- (female, 55), T--- village, Thaton (January 2007)

As large numbers of villagers in Karen State remain dependent, at least in part, on subsistence agriculture, poor or wholly failed crops constitute one of the most direct causes of malnutrition. Time lost to regular forced labour requirements have severely impacted villagers' abilities to plant, tend and harvest their crops. Likewise, restrictions on travel to farm fields located outside of immediate village confines reduce time available for cultivation and also hamper efforts to protect crops from wild animals. These factors can lead to smaller harvests and thus insufficient food supplies whether for household consumption or trade to diversify diet. Limited cash due to the causes of poverty mentioned above also restrict options for villagers to purchase food supplies elsewhere.

> "*Most of the villagers do farming and gardening. Even those who are farming don't have enough food because they haven't had time to take care of their plants as they've always had to do* loh ah pay."
>
> - U T--- (male, 44), B--- village, Thaton District (June 2006)

> "*Only two villagers out of ten have enough rice. They're borrowing from each other just to stay alive. During the dry season, they go to other villages to look for work and try to save food for the rainy season. Most of the villagers are doing like this. [But] from the time we finish with the [seasonal] farm work, we're ordered to repair four furlongs [approx. 800 meters] of the Lay Gkay car road… Some villagers have become weaker because they've had to do a lot of forced labour.*"
>
> - Saw P--- (male, 68), S--- village, Thaton District (May 2008)

Ill health

> "*They [SPDC] have never provided any health services to the villagers. As long as I've lived here I've never see that [the provision of health services] happen for our villagers. Even when our villagers went and asked them [SPDC] for help, they didn't listen.*"
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Villagers in Karen State have regularly cited malaria as the most common health problem which they face. Other common threats include tuberculosis, diarrhoea, fevers and malnutrition.[17] The current poor state of health conditions in rural Karen State arises in a context shaped by the interlinked conditions of poverty and malnutrition; the exploitative causes of which were examined above. Malnutrition undermines villagers' resistance to infectious diseases and poverty reduces the means through which villagers are able to finance trips to hospitals, medical supplies and treatment. Furthermore, restrictions on movement mean that even villagers with the financial means to do so may be obstructed from travelling to address health concerns. These challenges must be seen against the backdrop of a scarcity of government provisions for health care. Burma's per capita expenditure on health, according to the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO 2007), "*is the lowest in the world*". Even this marginal spending does not all appear to be going to the population in need as an increasing proportion of it is reportedly being used to finance health services exclusively for members of the armed forces and their families (Selth 2002: 135). Furthermore, the limited State funding that is made available for public healthcare is disproportionately spent on urban medical facilities which are particularly difficult for those in rural Karen State to access due to both movement restrictions and the high travel costs, including frequent toll gate fees, involved.

Limited educational opportunities

> "*If they [SPDC authorities] continue demanding things like this every year, I will pull my children out of school because I won't be able to support them to attend school.*"
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 47), Gk--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Given the insufficient or, in many cases, complete lack of State funding for education, families are often required to cover all costs

[17] For more detail on the State of health in SPDC-controlled areas of Karen State see chapter five in KHRG, *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State* (April 2008).

for school enrolment, or at least the intermittent fees that arise throughout the year. These costs can include teachers' salaries, costs of individual students' school supplies and various intermittent school expenses such as fees for opening and closing ceremonies and other special events. Where persistent demands for money, labour, food and other supplies have eroded household incomes, undermined livelihoods and increased poverty, the burden of school costs can often be too much for individual families who must, therefore, take their children out of school and in some cases have them enter the workforce to contribute to the family's livelihood. Alternatively, demands for forced labour may mean that children are required to meet their household's labour quota and are, therefore, quite directly obstructed from attending school.

> "*Sometimes those who have to go for* loh ah pay, *but are sick and can't go, ask their children to cancel their school and go instead of them. They have to bring whatever the SPDC or DKBA asks [them] to bring*."
>
> - Naw Kh--- (female, 13), Ht--- village, Papun District (March 2007)

Villagers living across SPDC and SPDC-ally-controlled areas of Karen State have frequently cited the forms of poverty, malnutrition, poor health and limited educational opportunities surveyed here as a consequence of persistent military demands on their communities. As villagers recognise the underlying exploitative factors shaping their present financial, livelihood, health, educational and social situation, the military has had to employ coercive measures, as examined in the following chapter, in order to enforce compliance with its ongoing exploitative policies.

- Six -

Repression under military control

The role of violence and the arbitrary exercise of power

Exploitative practices in SPDC or SPDC ally-controlled areas inevitably lead to tension with local communities unwilling to comply. Violence is thus primarily used as a tool to enforce compliance with exploitative demands. In Karen State, physical violence is employed on a gradient from the direct, to the demonstrative, to the implied. On one level, violence is directly employed to enforce compliance with particular demands. Such direct violence is also used as a demonstrative mechanism employed to show the State's capacity to arbitrarily utilise violence and in this way cultivate a culture of compliance rooted in fear (Duffield 2008: 20-21). Lastly, violence is implicitly employed where communities, having seen the demonstrative expressions of direct violence, understand that the underlying threat of violence remains even in cases where no reference to violent enforcement of demands is explicitly made. Generally, the extent to which violence is openly employed is heightened relative to the level of civilian compliance perceived by State personnel implementing demands. As exploitation has become systematised, violence remains a necessary structural component of military governance in areas under control of the SPDC and its local allies.

> "*We didn't know what they [DKBA] would do to us if we didn't arrange the money for them… Would they have said that we were disobedient? Would they have said that we didn't care about them? Would they have misunderstood us? …We couldn't determine it [the punishment for non-compliance], so we just organised the money*."
>
> - Pu P--- (male, 70), Dt--- village, Thaton District (Dec 2006)

The forms of violence and the exercise of arbitrary power which SPDC and other military personnel employ in Karen State include arbitrary arrest and detention, threats, torture, killing, rape and sexual

violence, and the deployment of landmines. The first four types of these, sufficient to illustrate how violence is used to enforce demands, are examined in more detail.

Arbitrary arrest and detention

> "*During the last rainy season on June 9th when farmers were ploughing the fields, they [SPDC] arrested two people and imprisoned them. They were 25-year-old Maw Ywa Doh and 16-year-old Bpaw Lee Gka. They [SPDC] accused these two guys of sending rations to members of the KNU. They put them in Toungoo prison. They've been sentenced to one year in prison. The army unit which arrested these two guys was [SPDC] IB #73*."
>
> - Saw L--- (male, 45), T--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

In Burma, the inconsistent and ambiguous application of the law, in combination with draconian restrictions on trade, travel, communications and livelihood, means that civilians can never be sure if or when the State will detain them (Duffield 2008: 8). While those detained are rarely informed of the legal grounds on which they are detained, in Karen State arbitrary detention is most typically employed on the pretext of association with the KNU or KNLA. Although not generally made explicit at the time of detention, Burma's 1908 Unlawful Associations Act serves as a legislated basis for the arbitrary detention, relocation and control of civilians across Burma. As the regime includes the KNU amongst other "*anti-government groups*" (SPDC 2006), the Army can freely detain any civilian in Karen State with full domestic legal backing on the grounds that she or he "*in any way assists the operations of any such association*" (Article 17.1 reprinted in BLC 2003). Nevertheless, such alleged association appears at times to be simply a pretext for extorting funds from detainees.

> "*When they [SPDC authorities] demand things, they call a meeting and the village heads must attend the meeting and they [SPDC authorities] directly assign for each village how much the village must give. If we don't give [what is*

demanded], there will be torture and oppression. In the past, I discussed with my friend [saying] that we shouldn't give [what was demanded] and see what happens. When the villagers went down to buy food in Papun town, they [SPDC authorities] detained the villagers and ordered [the village head, saying:] 'come [from the village to Papun town] and deliver the money, otherwise we will not let your people return [to the village].' "

- Saw P--- (male, 44), W--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

Saw K--- from Dooplaya District, shown here on December 19th 2007, was shot in the leg by SPDC soldiers from LID #22 whilst escaping arbitrary detention. On December 9th 2007, soldiers of the SPDC LID #22 detained him, ordered him to meet with their column commander and then tied him up and violently interrogated him over alleged contact with the KNU.[18] *[Photo: KHRG]*

[18] For more details on this incident see KHRG, *SPDC soldiers arrest and kill villagers on allegations of contacting KNU/KNLA* (January 2008).

Threats

> "*When they [SPDC] write an [order] letter, if the village head doesn't go, they scold and stare angrily at the village head. Their frequent demands make our lives very difficult. Even though we can't comply, we must comply*."
>
> - Naw H--- (female, 55), D--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

> "*They [SPDC soldiers] didn't hurt anyone but they ordered them to work a lot because there was no village head in the village. So they [SPDC soldiers] came and organised the villagers by themselves and threatened the villagers if the villagers wouldn't go*."
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Threats employed to enforce compliance with demands not only include the insinuation of potential direct violence but also of arbitrary detention, financial and food confiscation and increased restrictions on movement. All such threats depend for their effectiveness on villagers' beliefs that military personnel are both willing and able to carry them out. This belief, in turn, depends on the previous demonstrative use of violence and other measures.

> "*They already warned us that they will demand villagers to serve as porters. If we don't go, we'll have to give money. If we don't go, we're worried that they will restrict our travel when we go to Papun to buy food. They live in the town and if they don't let us go and buy things, it will difficult for us*."
>
> - Saw P--- (male, 44), W--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

> "*We had to carry bricks, sand, cement, water and lime from the bottom of the mountain up to the top... He [the DKBA officer] wrote a letter to us and said that if we didn't go, 'action' would be taken against us. So, the villagers thought it would be better if we went, because if they came and took our rice, we wouldn't dare say anything and we would be in trouble*."
>
> - Naw B--- (female, 46), K--- village, Thaton District (Jan 2007)

SPDC and DKBA military personnel may, as with arbitrary detention, employ threats against those villagers with alleged connections to the KNU/KNLA. Threats for such apparent 'counter-insurgency' purposes cannot be isolated from their function in the wider context of exploitative military rule, as they likewise depend on, and foster, a culture of compliance rooted in fear that facilitates other exploitative demands.

> "*Unfortunately, SPDC [personnel] threatened my family and said to my wife, 'Go and look for your husband and I'll give you two days time and if you can't, I'll burn down your house.' My wife told them that she didn't know how to find [her husband] because the KNU had called him. Up until now I haven't yet been able to enter my village. I've heard that the SPDC hasn't done anything to my family yet. They've just threatened my family*."
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Torture

> "*The DKBA and SPDC soldiers demand forced labour and supplies, but if we don't follow them, we're worried that they will trouble and torture us. So, despite the difficulties, we're afraid of them. Therefore, as we are villagers we have to obey them*."
>
> - Saw K--- (male, 45), Bp--- village Thaton District (Dec 2006)

> "*The group of SPDC soldiers who entered my village this month stole chickens from the villagers and stayed in my village for three nights. But they weren't satisfied with the chickens, so they asked the village chairperson to find a pig for them. They were armed and, furthermore, they could torture us if we didn't find one for them, so we had to find one for them*."
>
> - K--- (male, 30), G--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

As discussed above, torture has a direct function in enforcing compliance with a given demand and also a demonstrative function in establishing a culture of compliance by reminding villagers that such violent treatment always remains a possibility. Relevant demands for which military personnel have employed torture include, amongst others, the provision of money, food supplies and information, as well as restrictions on movement.

> "*Every time when we go to our cardamom fields we must get a written permission letter from the village head. If they detain us in the jungle without any permission letter, they beat us and bring us in front of the village head and ask whether the [detained] person is really from K--- village.*"
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 30), K--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2008)

In relation to the provision of information, torture is most commonly employed by SPDC and DKBA personnel to extract information out of villagers regarding KNU/KNLA activity in the area of their village.

> "*They [DKBA soldiers] came and arrested me at my home at night time. It was about 10:00. At that time I was at home and they ordered other soldiers to come and call me to meet him [a DKBA officer] in another house. He punched my chest and jaw. They covered my head with a plastic sheet for a while. He told me to tell him the truth and I responded to him, 'I'm a Karen person and I never tell lies. A few days ago the KNU soldiers entered the village but now they've already left and no, they aren't inside the village compound.' …After that I couldn't sleep well. I was afraid that they would come and ask me about the KNU [KNLA] soldiers again*."
>
> - Ko M--- (male, 39), Gk--- village, Thaton District (Nov 2007)

> "*Recently, when the SPDC commander Lah Thay Thaw arrived in the village, he struck and strangled the villagers. He didn't do this himself. Rather, he ordered his soldiers to*

do it... He arrived in the village on August 13th 2008. At that time there were four villagers whom he had strangled. One of the villagers named T--- who was 20 years old; they punched him and struck him with a flashlight. M---, who is over 30, was punched. Ma--- was punched on his jaw and he was also strangled. There was also K--- who is over 40 years old. At that time the SPDC Army soldiers hadn't given any orders restricting work in the evening and those four villagers encountered them [the soldiers] on the way when they [the villagers] were going to a fair. The soldiers asked them about Kawthoolei [KNU/KNLA] but they couldn't answer the questions so they [the soldiers] tortured them. When they [SPDC soldiers] enter the village, they take the villagers' food such as coconuts and vegetables. They never pay for those things."

- Naw Y--- (female, 43), P--- village, Thaton District (Oct 2007)

"*I was detained by [SPDC soldiers from] LID #22... At first they arrived at my home and told me that I had to meet with the column commander. So I left my home and followed them. On the way they tied my hands with rope and asked me, 'Do you work with the KNU?' and I answered, 'No I'm just a simple villager and work on a farm. Even now I haven't yet finished harvesting my paddy at my farm.' They punched me and kicked my back with their boots and also hit the back of my neck with a gun. They didn't believe me. They accused me of working together with the KNU*."

- Saw K--- (male, 35), P--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2007)

When military personnel employ torture to enforce demands, such as forced labour, on a whole community, they've typically singled out village heads for this abuse. Village heads are the ones who must implement given demands, such as household forced labour quotas, and they are, therefore, caught between the threat and use of torture on the one hand and the desire to protect their communities from the harmful impact of persistent exploitation on the other.

"*They always order us to work for them for free instead of paying us anything. They order us to work for them and they've even beaten us. If a villager can't go, they usually take action on the village head*."

- Saw M--- (male, 47), L--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

"*If the village has 70 households, 70 villagers have to go [for forced labour] and if the village has 100 households, 100 villagers have to go. It's always one villager from each household that must go... They demand these villagers through the village head. If the village head can't organise the total number of villagers demanded, they scold [the village head] and become mean so that the village head must organise the total number of villagers that they want*."

- Saw H--- (male, 50), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

Killing

In areas under SPDC control, outright murder of civilians mostly occurs during violations of movement restrictions (i.e. being caught outside village confines in violation of such restrictions) or upon accusations of involvement with the KNU/KNLA. The SPDC's enforcement of its shoot-on-sight policy is most widespread in those areas of northern Karen State which remain outside of consolidated military control. While many villages and relocation sites in this area are under quite heavy SPDC control, much of the forested mountains around these communities are not. As such, movement restrictions imposed on SPDC-controlled communities function to prevent local residents from fleeing into non-SPDC-controlled areas or at least meeting and trading with displaced communities who remain in hiding in non-SPDC-controlled areas.

"*[I]f a villager goes out of the [army] camp area, and if they [soldiers] see [the villager], they shoot [the villager] dead without any reason. While I was coming [to the IDP camp], they shot dead one of our village heads. It was four months ago. The village head's name was Tar Gkay Nay. He was*

over 30 [years old]. When this man returned from travelling into the mountains, the SPDC shot him dead. They shot him dead near Gk'Ser Doh, at a place called Bpaw Gka Loh. The SPDC shot him on sight."

- Saw M--- (male, 47), L--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

The killing of civilians in SPDC-controlled areas has also been employed against those who allegedly had contact with members of the KNU/KNLA. Alternatively, in some cases villagers who have refused to comply with given demands have been killed outright. Such summary executions serve a powerful demonstrative role in promoting future compliance from members of the community from which the executed villagers hailed.

"*We know that if people have given excuses in the past, they [SPDC soldiers] have beaten and killed them. So now the village head dares not say anything. Village heads who haven't been beaten by the SPDC are in the minority. We're still afraid from our experiences in the past. No villagers dare oppose them [SPDC soldiers], because they [the soldiers] always perceive themselves as being right and they have no compassion for civilian*s."

- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Sep 2007)

Individual incidents of the types of violence surveyed here, ranging from threats and detention to torture and killing, all function as components of the wider system of exploitative military rule. The place of violence within the system of exploitative local governance even includes those incidents seemingly a part of the 'counter-insurgency' campaign against the KNU/KNLA. The reason is that all expressions of direct violence, where made apparent to local communities, serve a demonstrative role in fostering a culture of compliance where the possibility of violent enforcement of demands always remains, if only implicitly.

- Seven -

Resistance strategies

Practical measures for claiming rights under military control

So far, this report's examination of exploitation, deleterious consequences of persistent demands and violent enforcement of these demands paints a bleak picture. However, lest it be mistaken that power relations in rural Karen State are a one-sided affair, the present chapter seeks to shed light on villagers' persistent, and often successful, efforts to challenge the authority of military personnel. The catalyst for such opposition, as one would expect, is the inherent tension between civilian efforts to maintain their livelihoods and ensure an adequate level of subsistence and the systematic and harmful character of exploitative military demands. This tension not only necessitates, as examined in chapter seven above, violent enforcement of demands on the part of the State but also leads to persistent resistance on the part of civilians.

Villagers in Karen State, especially those serving as village heads, have responded to extortionate demands by adopting a wide range of resistance strategies aimed at minimising or wholly avoiding compliance. Nonetheless, the ever-present risk of arbitrary expressions of power in situations under control of the Burma Army or its proxies means that resistance to military demands risks inciting violent responses at the hands of army personnel. This risk increases where civilian resistance is more overt.

Despite such risks, however, villagers in Karen State have persistently tested these limits with a variety of strategies that range from simple requests for reductions in 'taxation' quotas to aggressive challenges for military personnel to withdraw their demands. In fact, with extensive firsthand knowledge and experience of military repression, local villagers are quite deft at discerning how much or how little space exists to oppose particular orders. Resistance strategies which villagers employ in areas under the consolidated control of the Burma Army or its proxies include, amongst other techniques, negotiating, bribing, lying, shaming, confronting,

refusing, various forms of discreet false-compliance, jokes and counter-narratives and outright evasion. While this list is definitely not exhaustive, the range of measures listed here, and examined in more detail below, do give some idea of the extent to which villagers have resisted abuse and sought to claim their rights despite the ever-present risk of violent retaliation. Almost all of the following quotes presented in this chapter come from those serving as village heads for their respective communities and thus as intermediaries between SPDC and DKBA officials issuing demands on the one hand and the village community which is expected to comply on the other.

Negotiating

> "*The SPDC asked ten households to go and build their houses in Thee Muh Hta. These ten households would have to actually move [to Thee Muh Hta]. I told them [the SPDC officials] that we are hill tribe people living on the mountain side and it would not be easy for us to move our place immediately, so we could only build three or four houses at first. They agreed and said 'We won't force you to move now. Do it slowly and little by little there will be more and more houses.'... We are under their control so we can't do anything, we can only say 'Amen, Amen' to whatever they say. [However] we tried to say as much as we could and they let us build [just] three to four houses.*"
>
> - Saw Le--- (male, 40), Gk--- village, Papun District (Jan 2008)

As SPDC and DKBA personnel typically issue orders to villages via their respective village heads, these individuals are in the difficult situation of having to enforce burdensome demands on their own communities. Village heads, therefore, often appeal to local military authorities for a reduction in particular demands or a softening of movement restrictions on the grounds that their absolute enforcement is simply not feasible. A village head's request may be for as little as a meal for those taking part in forced labour. Alternatively, it may involve a reduction in the number of thatch shingles or forced labour conscripts demanded or in the amount of arbitrary 'taxes' that

villagers have been ordered to pay. In such cases the village head may highlight the extent of poverty in his or her village, the small quantity of paddy supplies after a poor harvest or the already heavy burden on the community due to previous military demands. Negotiation depends for its effectiveness on at least a semblance of shared values between village heads and local SPDC personnel. Many low-ranking SPDC soldiers deployed in Karen State come from villages themselves, albeit elsewhere in rural Burma. Shared rural values can thus be an effective tool to garner a reduction in demands.

As an illustration of the use of shared values to negotiate reduced demands, villages in Karen State have been increasingly relying on women to take on the role of village head. Women, especially those middle-aged and older, are traditionally accorded high respect in rural communities across Burma. It is, therefore, generally more difficult for young soldiers confronting older female village heads to justify (to themselves and to the village head) the enforcement of abusive demands which will have a clearly harmful effect on the woman and her community.[19] Consider the following two statements, both by women serving as the heads of villages in Karen State.

> "*All the village heads are women. The men don't dare to be village heads because the Burmese [SPDC authorities] speak to the men angrily and they [the men] cannot speak Burmese fluently so they don't want to talk to the Burmese [SPDC]. It's a little bit better for women, because we dare to talk to the Burmese.*"
>
> - Naw K--- (female, 53), N--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

> "*When [SPDC officer] Myo Maung was there, they used to demand two bullock carts from us once a month to carry all their rations from K'Lay Kee camp to Kyaikdon. The*

[19] For more information on the situation of women in Karen State and the increasing number of female village heads, see KHRG, *Dignity in the Shadow of Oppression: The abuse and agency of women in Karen State* (November 2006).

distance is so far that I cannot tell you how many hours it took. The bullocks that went looked bad and could barely walk by the time they arrived back at the village. We complained that it was difficult to find bullock carts to go, so he reduced it to one bullock cart. We complained about the distance and they reduced the distance and said we'd only have to carry [the rations] as far as Plaw Pa Taw."

- Naw K--- (female, 53), N--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

Such successful negotiation efforts notwithstanding, attempts at negotiating a reduction in demands are not always effective and the initial order may stand unchanged.

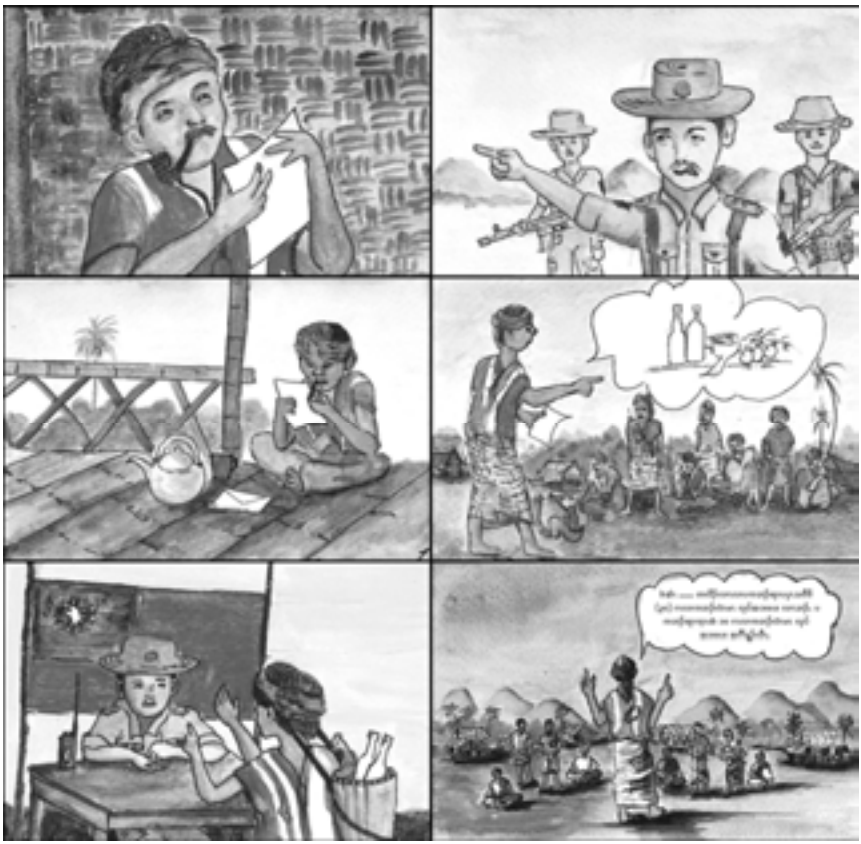
"*At the moment, the [SPDC] Operations Commander Aung Kyaw Nyein is forcing us to do castor planting. We have to do it 'without fail'. They called us to a meeting... [and] forced us to buy castor seeds. They sold us one basket full for 70,000 kyat [US $56.91]... When the seeds arrived at my village, I had to explain to my villagers that the price of the seeds would have to be shared among the villagers. The villagers also have to work on their fields so they don't have time to plant this castor. I told the soldiers about the villagers' problem, but it didn't work. I am in the middle of the soldiers and the villagers. I couldn't persuade either so now I am in trouble. The villagers don't want to plant it and don't know how to plant it, so they don't want to pay me the money... I don't want to be the village head anymore because I feel really worried and afraid.*"

- Daw K--- (female, 40), B--- village, Dooplaya District (June 2006)

Bribing

Bribing officials in Karen State is often intertwined with forms of negotiation as examined above. These two strategies can function together to reduce the total requirements placed on a given village.

The drawings below (view from left to right, top to bottom) have been taken from a KHRG poster used in Village Agency workshops with villagers in rural Karen State. These pictures illustrate an incident which a village head related to KHRG about how, after receiving an order document from local SPDC authorities demanding 30 villagers for forced labour (box 1), he first ignored it. The soldiers returned (box 2) and issued a second order document (box 3). The village head and his fellow villagers met together (box 4) and decided to try to bribe (box 5) the local SPDC commander rather than immediately comply with the stated order. The final illustration (box 6) shows the village head explaining to his fellow villagers that the attempt was successful in reducing the forced labour requirement from 30 to 10 villagers.[20] *[Images: KHRG]*



[20] For more information on KHRG's Village Agency workshops see Phan and Hull (2008: 19).

So long as the cost of the bribe is less than the cost of compliance, this strategy bears tangible savings for the local community. Nevertheless, bribery occasionally has its limits:

> "*For the villagers, they have to do both their own work and forced labour and they are also having food problems. The villagers are in trouble now. They came frequently to discuss it with me [the village head]. They came and asked, 'If we have to do the broadcasting [tossing seeds out in a wide arc into a fertilised nursery field] and transplanting [moving paddy seedlings from the nursery to a larger agricultural field], can we hire people to go instead of us? Or can we pay them money instead?' But the Operation Commander won't take money. He said he needs only people to do the work*."
>
> - Daw K--- (female, 40), B--- village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

Lying

> "*There are 51 households and there are 280 people in the village. We didn't give them [SPDC and DKBA] the correct [number of] family units. We reported to them that we had only 30 households in the village*."
>
> - Daw S--- (female, 50), Gk--- village, Papun District (Nov 2007)

The use of lying as a resistance strategy most typically involves the underreporting of village populations and household numbers to local authorities. As military personnel issue demands for such things as arbitrary 'taxation', the production and delivery of building materials or other forms of forced labour at a level proportionate to either the village population or number of households, underreporting allows villages as a whole to reduce the total amount requested. Communal savings can then be divided amongst the community. To illustrate, with regards to certain forms of arbitrary 'taxation' SPDC personnel have enforced a three-tiered system of demands according to what are deemed to be small, medium or large villages. Designation as a small or medium village means a lower payment for the entire village population which is then divided on a

per capita basis. Alternatively, as forced labour demands are often made at a rate of one or two per household, underreporting the total number of households means that at least some members of the community can get out of forced labour duty. Some village heads have adopted this strategy specifically to remove the burden of forced labour from the most vulnerable households; often those headed by widows or orphans.

> "*The villagers elected me. My duty as village head is to provide them [SPDC officials] with things when they demand them. And if they order us to find things for them, then we must find them. If they fine us, we must pay them. Even if we don't have the money, we can't refuse them. The most difficult thing for me as village head has been when they've demanded bullock carts. If the Burmese [SPDC] demand bullock carts at night, then I have to go looking for some and it bothers the villagers because they have to do it too. Our village has 45 households, but I've reported that there are 30 households [to lessen SPDC demands]*."
>
> - Naw K--- (female, 53), N--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

> "*The SPDC soldiers demanded taxes for the plantations, hill fields and flat fields. They also asked us for the number of households in our village. We told them we had only over 80 households, not over 100 households. We took out the widows' and orphans' households because we thought that if they demanded taxes from us, the widows and orphans shouldn't need to pay them*."
>
> - Pu Ht--- (male, 48), Dt--- village, Dooplaya District (Nov 2006)

Another, although less common, use of lying as a resistance strategy has been through exaggerating the extent of poverty and livelihood vulnerability at relocation sites in order to garner a relaxation of movement restrictions and possibly permission to return to former villages in order to tend crops left behind when the community was relocated. As relocation sites are, in fact, quite often unsustainable due to limited land allocations for agriculture and few other income-

generation opportunities, claims of increased poverty and livelihood vulnerability are typically completely truthful. However, even where it may be possible to eek out of meagre living, villagers may stress their inability to do so at all in order to be able to return to their former lands where livelihood opportunities are typically greater and to which communities often have ancestral ties.

Refusing

> "*A few months ago, the DKBA demanded one person from our village to become a new soldier, but nobody dared to go. So they gave us another order to pay them 700,000 kyat [US $569.11]. We didn't obey their order. Later they couldn't do anything*."
>
> - Saw D--- (male, 55), Th--- village, Thaton District (Dec 2007)

> "*Now they [SPDC] are demanding villagers for duty as porters. They've demanded two villagers from our village to go for duty as porters. But we replied to them that we couldn't go*."
>
> - Saw P--- (male, 44), W--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

> "*They [SPDC authorities] ordered the villagers to plant cashew [trees] but the villagers didn't do anything. They [SPDC] said that this was an order from the Division and the township officials for the villagers to plant cashew [trees] but the villagers didn't listen*."
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 71), M--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

Outright refusal to comply with stated demands is a step up in the scale of confrontation between villagers and local authorities. As such, the decision to employ this tactic requires that the cost of compliance outweighs the risk of violent or other retaliation by military personnel. Villagers familiar with particular local SPDC or DKBA officials are, therefore, in a better position to predict the possible responses which their actions may incur. Villagers in Karen State have refused outright to comply with a range of orders issued

by military personnel including, amongst other things, arbitrary taxation, forced labour and *ad hoc* demands for food. Village heads may also try to strengthen their position by making a case that the cost of compliance is simply too great.

> "*Last time, the SPDC came into our village and called four village heads [from the area] to follow them. We told them that we dared not go because the KNLA soldiers were active. Previously, KNLA soldiers had been lying in wait for them [an SPDC patrol] and detonated a landmine and one of our village heads died on the spot. The SPDC usually asks the village head to go ahead of them, so if the KNLA have planted a landmine, our village head will be the first to step on it.*"
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

> "*[The soldiers at] the DKBA camp on top of Meh Gyi hill demanded bamboo from us, but we haven't cut it for them yet. I told them 'we also have to work at Meh Gyi pagoda and you've also ordered us [to do work] here, so we can't do that [preparing and delivering the bamboo poles].*"
>
> - Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Bilin Township (May 2008)

Such refusal may, however, not be an outright rejection of entire demands, but rather a unilateral reduction in amount or simply a delay in compliance. Even so, reduced or delayed compliance provides tangible benefits to civilian communities while simultaneously reducing the immediate resources available to military personnel.

> "*I always face problems with the DKBA. They always order me to send bamboo poles and thatch shingles. A few days ago, they ordered me to send bamboo poles and thatch shingles to Meh Mweh. The commander's name is Pa Yoo Khay. His position is company commander. They have a military camp in Meh Mweh. They ordered me to collect bamboo poles and thatch shingles and send these to them by*

next month. I had to collect 200 bamboo poles and 300 thatch shingles. But as of now we haven't yet started cutting the bamboo poles because it's time to harvest. So I've reported to them 'the villagers are busy now. We'll do it for you next month."

- Saw My--- (male, 42), M--- village, Papun District (Nov 2007)

"*The SPDC soldiers have also demanded things from the villagers. They demanded money once, leaves three times, bamboo once and wood once. They demanded 20,000 kyat [US $16.26] from G--- village and 20,000 kyat [US $16.26] from P--- village. They didn't tell us what this money was for, but previously I heard them say that they didn't have enough oil so they would buy oil. We had to take this money to their army camp. When we reached their army camp, they told us to find food for them. We said to them, 'We've already brought money to you and now we still have to find food for you, we won't go.' Then he [the SPDC official] asked, 'What will you do if you don't go?' We replied, 'We have our own work and travel, as well as children and grandchildren at home. We have to go back to look after them.'* "

- K--- (male, 30), G--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

As outright refusal is a much more overt form of resistance and thus an explicit denial of formal authority, violent or other retaliation is more likely. As such, these acts of refusal are all the more courageous.

"*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), K--- village, Thaton District (June 2007)

In the following example, a villager's courage is particularly noteworthy as he refused to comply with a demand to hand over

livestock *after* being violently beaten; and thus with an imminent possibility of suffering such treatment again.

We didn't give these items to them...

"Seven days ago DKBA soldiers arrived in the village. At that time, I was taking duty as a *set tha* in the village. I was hit by them. They hit me with a gun seven times on my head. Before they tied me, they hit my head three times and after they tied me they continued to hit my head three times [as this makes six times, not seven, the villager may have misstated one of the numbers]. At the time when they hit me, I was in the house. It was about 7:00 in the evening. They ordered me to come out from the house and when I had descended [from the steps of the house] to the ground they tied my hands with rope.

They asked me about the location of the KNU and I answered them that I hadn't seen their [KNU] place. I was afraid of them so when they hit me, I soiled myself. The name of the person who hit me was deputy battalion commander Pah Klay. After that I felt dizzy with pain for four days. They didn't give me any medicine. They released me when they arrived in Meh Theh. When we were released from them they ordered me and Saw B--- to give them a duck and a chicken, but we didn't give [these items] to them."

- Saw P--- (male, 35), M--- village, Thaton District (Oct 2007)

In a somewhat different form of refusal, the villager who provided the following testimony described how local monks have refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of donations offered to them that have been extorted from others.

"*Sometimes, they [SPDC soldiers] have demanded food from the people who run businesses, such as oil, rice and sweet powder [MSG] and offered it to the monastery. But the monks have said to them, 'These things are not from you,*

these are from other people.' So the monks have given that food to the government civil servants, such as teachers."

- Ko K--- (male), T--- village, Papun District (Oct 2007)

Confronting

"*They [the villagers] had to carry things for the SPDC and also had to cut bamboo poles for them. I didn't want to see it [the forced labour], so I warned them [SPDC authorities] that 'If you continue to order the villagers to do these things, the news [of the forced labour demands] will spread out from BBC and VOA*[21]*.' After that they reduced the forced labour. At first the villagers had to cut bamboo poles twice a month or once a month. After I confronted them the villagers didn't need to do this [particular type of] work anymore*."

- Ko K--- (male), T--- village, Papun District (Oct 2007)

Direct confrontation is clearly the most overt of resistance strategies (short of outright violence). In many respects confrontation overlaps with the various forms of refusal examined above. However, confrontation also entails an explicit rejection of the legitimacy of particular demands or even existing power relations. The effectiveness of confrontation over the implementation of abusive demands depends, like the various forms of negotiation and refusal examined above, on the particular relations and balance of power between the local military official and (typically) the village head; both parties' perceptions of the legitimacy of a particular demand; and the possibility of violent or other retaliation. Village heads or other civilians employing such confrontation must thus weigh the cost of compliance against the risk of retaliation.

"*In 2006, I was still carrying my duty as village head. I faced their [Burma Army's] false allegations about me being the cause of the trouble that they had [with the KNLA] while they were drinking alcohol. They [the Burma Army soldiers]*

[21] BBC and VOA; Foreign Burmese-language news radio stations which broadcast into Burma.

came to me and quarrelled with me. I said to them, 'I wasn't elected as a village head by the KNU or by you. Rather, I was elected to my position by the villagers. The KNU didn't tell me anything about them firing on you. If they [KNLA] fire on you, then you can fire back at them. It's not my responsibility.'"

- Daw S--- (female, 50), Gk--- village, Papun District (Nov 2007)

As an example from over a decade ago, the following boxed statement has been included as it is a particularly lively account of confrontation and shows that the use of confrontation as a resistance strategy is not confined to recent years. In this case a 61-year-old female village head recounts her experiences dealing with local Burma Army authorities.

This is not my duty...

"They send us written orders for things and they even write what they'll do to the village head if the village fails to comply. Such-and-such amount at so-and-so time, they write it all. Sometimes they are so irritating that we use them for toilet paper… They demanded our village give them 20 viss [32 kg. / 72 lb.] of betelnut and 11 baskets of rice during the last month. As for my village, when they demand 5 baskets I give them only 6 pyi [1 basket = 16 pyi]. They demanded 2,000 betelnuts. What do they want with betelnuts at this time of peace negotiations? I rebuked them telling them they should not lower the dignity of the *Tatmadaw* like this. We have to be tactful and diplomatic like that when we cannot meet their demands. When I said that, we were exempted from giving it. If the young man who was killed had been from my village, the tragedy wouldn't have happened. But the village heads of those other villages were too afraid. They had been beaten so very often. Sure, the other village headwomen are beaten. They have to go whenever they're summoned, even at midnight, and they can only come home at 4:00 am. Who knows what the soldiers would do to those headwomen at such hours of the night? People from my village don't have to suffer like that. If they call us, we won't go.

I'm only a village head, I'm not a guide. I know how to deal with both the government [SPDC] and the rebels [KNLA] when necessary. If they ask me to serve as their guide at night, I refuse them. This is not my duty. The younger village headwomen ask me to go along with them, they say they need my presence. How do their husbands feel seeing them going off with Burmese soldiers in the middle of the night? I told the Burmese Major frankly, 'Suppose your wife or daughter were called by a Karen rebel under similar circumstances, even for only one night, even if that Karen rebel actually did nothing to the women, how would you feel then?' And I was exempted. But the other women village heads have to go. Those women have to fan them while they're eating, they even have to wipe their mouths after their meals - these things have been witnessed by people [seen by other villagers as well]. As for me, the soldiers won't even allow me to get close to them - maybe because I stink like anything, and those other women are pretty... I tell them, 'If you don't like it, I will report it to higher authorities.' I think they are a bit afraid of such confrontations. The soldiers are a bit afraid of our village because of this. As for the village on the other bank of the river, they are given hell and never have time to rest...

I'm overcome with disgust. I want to resign as village head. It would be alright if they listen to us, but they never listen to what we say. It's such an insult when SLORC says they'll slap my face, even though I'm the age of their mothers. They've never dared actually do it. They only threatened to shoot me one time, and that time it only ended up with them beating me. It's because when they said they'd shoot me I told them sarcastically, 'Do it then, since the SLORC issues you ammunition to shoot us.' They drew their knives to intimidate me, they said 'You old hag!' and one of them hit me with both hands on my shoulders. He shouted, 'If you were not the age of my mother, your cheeks would surely have burst!' They scolded me so much that it hurt my teeth *[a common figure of speech]*."

- Pee B--- (female, 61), T--- village, Dooplaya District (1996)[22]

[22] When this interview was conducted, Pee B--- had been village head for many years. Six months later, however, the local Army Major ordered that she be

In some cases, confrontation may be primarily an assertion of dignity rather than a refusal of a particular order. In the following account, for example, the village head asserted his lack of fear to the DKBA soldiers who had just finished torturing him as punishment for being caught outside his village at night-time.

> "*When I was coming along the way I encountered DKBA [troops] and they detained me and strangled me with the string from the sheath of my knife for about two minutes and I almost died. They kicked my side and struck me twice on my head with the butt of a gun and once on my side... The officer's name is Taing Soe and his rank is company commander. They know me very well and said to me 'don't be afraid' and I told him, 'I'm not afraid of you. If I was afraid of you I would not have taken responsibility as village head.' We have to deal with every armed group because, as we know, we can't sit on one side of the boat. If we sit on only one side, the boat will tip over into the water and we'll die*."
>
> - Saw Gk--- (male, 38), Ht--- village, Thaton District (May 2008)

It is important to note that direct confrontation is not always successful. Confrontation can result in villagers simply being ignored by military personnel or worse, in the case of violent or other retaliation. In the quote below, for example, the village head's complaint to a local SPDC official was simply dismissed with a denial that any action could be effectively taken to address the issue being raised. However, even when confrontation fails to obtain material benefits, such acts of resistance can still serve to uphold villagers' dignity.

> "*Some villagers came to report to me that the soldiers had stolen their chickens. So I went to report it to their battalion commander. Then he said to me, 'did you yourself see the*

replaced by a man as village head because he refused to deal with her any more. Excerpted from KHRG, *SLORC in Kya-In and Kawkareik Townships* (February 1996), Interview #4.

soldiers steal the villagers' chickens?' I told him, 'I didn't see it myself, but my villagers reported it to me and asked me to report it to you.' Then he replied, 'When the soldiers enter the village, I don't have time to look after them all the time. What they do or eat is up to them. I don't have time to look after or talk to them. Even my bodyguard has stolen people's things.' "

- K--- (male, 30), G--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

False compliance

"*On March 11th 2007, our villagers had to go and carry things to Gkay Gkaw. They [SPDC] demanded 100 people to go but we couldn't [all] go and only 38 people were able to go. Then we had to carry [the military supplies] for two days. They [SPDC] didn't say anything even though the number of villagers didn't fully meet what they had demanded.*"

- Saw M--- (male, 34), M--- village, Papun District (March 2007)

False compliance entails forms of resistance whereby the appearance of compliance is maintained without villagers actually meeting demands in full. This type of resistance has included, amongst other things, delaying compliance, foot-dragging on forced labour assignments, shoddy workmanship on construction projects, ignoring order documents, partial compliance (i.e. incomplete provisions of money, labour, food or supplies) or the provision of poor quality paddy or other supplies to meet demands. For instance, one agricultural analyst studying agricultural governance in contemporary Burma has noted in relation to the regime's paddy procurement policy that,

"*In response to the government's low procurement price, farmers tended to deliver to the depots their lower-quality paddy (such as that which was not fully dried or had been intentionally mixed with foreign matter) and sold their better paddy to the free market*" (Okamoto 2007: 140).

Meeting demands only in part appears to be one of the most common forms of false compliance which villagers in Karen State have employed. It is a statement on the relative power of villagers that they are often able get away with providing an amount of money, labourers, food or other supplies below what soldiers initially demanded.

> "*The DKBA demanded 400 thatch shingles. When we give them thatch shingles, we have to send all of the thatch shingles to Oh Taw [DKBA camp]. I told them, we can't deliver [the thatch shingles] to your place but we'll collect money [instead] and give it to you. We wouldn't be able to stay without meeting their demands. They've said 'If you don't give [what is demanded], how many rows [of soldiers] can the KNLA make around your village for security [i.e. will the KNLA be able to protect the villagers from retaliatory punishment for non-compliance?]. For the four hundred thatch shingles, I gave them only the value [in cash] for three hundred thatch shingles... The SPDC has also demanded chicken and sesame paste but they haven't paid any of the cost. The last time, they demanded one viss [1.63 kg. / 3.6 lb.] of chicken from me but I couldn't find [enough] chicken, so I only gave them about a half a viss [0.82 kg. / 1.8 lb.] of chicken*."
>
> - Naw M--- (female, 49), N--- village, Thaton District (Jan 2008)

> "*We finished [preparing bamboo poles] for them [SPDC] and delivered [the bamboo poles] to them this morning. We had to carry [the bamboo poles] by ourselves. One piece of bamboo was more than one arm span long and two inches wide. We delivered only 1,100 pieces [of the initial 2,000 demanded]. We left out 900 pieces. If they order us to send the remainder, we'll have to send it later*."
>
> - Saw N--- (male, 44), --- village, Thaton District (Aug 2007)

Counter-narratives

> "*The SPDC never comes to our village to improve or develop the village. They never give us suggestions on how to improve the village. They never think to rebuild the school, the monastery or the village road. They come to the village only to eat the villagers' things*."
>
> - K--- (male, 30), G--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

Counter-narratives are by definition those accounts which dissent from, and challenge, the prevailing discourse propagated by those in positions of power and formal authority within a given society. In contemporary Burma, the SPDC has propagated an official State narrative in which all civilians are united behind the competent and benevolent leadership of the military as it promotes peace, happiness and economic development for all. Counter-narratives in this context are the jokes, sarcastic comments, rumours, gossip and other tales and discussions that are critical of the leadership role of the SPDC and its local allies. These narratives reject the attempt by the State to justify – or at least make invisible – the exploited and otherwise subservient role into which the villagers have been thrust. Such counter-narratives serve the functions of fostering and consolidating local perceptions of the illegitimacy of particular officials or the wider system of military rule; developing solidarity within oppressed communities; and asserting villagers' dignity in the face repression. By way of example, a villager from Dooplaya District related the following account to a KHRG field researcher to emphasise his point about the failings of military governance.

The right has become wrong and the wrong has become right…

"I want to tell you a story. One day a rich man held a party and he invited all the high-ranking people. He put out a tray with a bar soap for washing hands. One of the high-ranking people went along with his servants. He saw the tray and the bar of soap. He picked up the bar of soap, put it in his mouth and gulped it down. Then one of his

servants told him that soap is not for eating but for washing hands. The rich man then said to his servant, 'You're useless. You'd wash your hands, but I wash my stomach.' The moral of the story is that it's futile to criticise those in positions of authority.

At the present time everyone knows about the situation in Burma, but nobody can criticise it. The way the SPDC's operating, the right has become wrong and the wrong has become right. The Burmese [military] has been mismanaging for so many decades that it's become too hard [for the military regime] to change to what is proper. Both the SLORC and the SPDC have implemented development [projects] in the country such as road construction, school-building, planning etc. Everyone knows that they do it improperly, but nobody can make them change their incorrect ways."

- Saw M--- (male, 44), N--- village, Dooplaya District (June 2006)

Evading

> "*The SPDC did not ask us for forced labour because whenever they came we ran away, so they couldn't ask for forced labour.*"
>
> - Saw D--- (male, 16), L--- village, Papun District (Feb 2007)

Temporary evasion by villagers of military personnel remains a frequently pursued tactic wherever possible. When effective, this strategy allows villagers to avoid compliance with demands for labour, money, food and other supplies (by avoiding the demand in the first place), without permanently abandoning their homes. Villagers able to get advanced warning of the impending arrival of army patrols or other military personnel likely to issue demands may simply 'happen' to be outside of the village when military personnel arrive. Sometimes a village head may receive news of the impending arrival of these military personnel and inform his or her constituents so as to allow them an opportunity to get away.

"*Sometimes I tell the village men to run away if they can manage to run, but some people can't flee anymore… So, if they [SPDC soldiers] need them, we call them out. But if they [villagers] hear them [soldiers] coming from a far distance, all of them [villagers] will flee.*"

- Naw M--- (female, 37), W--- village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

"*In the past, they ordered me to follow them to Gklaw Gklay Day. When I arrived there I escaped and came back to my village. A few weeks ago that army unit was rotated out, so they couldn't come to find me in my village anymore*."

- Saw Bp--- (male, 23), Bp--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

The persistent use of temporary evasion as a tactic to avoid compliance with military demands is a primary factor behind the local enforcement of village containment, whereby the SPDC has forced villagers to fence in their communities and enforced movement restrictions that inhibit easy departure from villages without written consent forms. Nevertheless, even with such measures in place, villagers continue to attempt such evasion. In some cases it appears that men have been more willing or able to employ this tactic than women; possibly due to the fact that men have, at times, been more systematically targeted for forced labour duty than women. As a harmful corollary of this, however, some SPDC military personnel have become more willing to increase the forced labour burdens on women – as no men are around to do this work – or have at least threatened that they would do so if men continued to be absent. There is also a risk that sexual violence by soldiers may increase in situations where male residents of the village are no longer present.

"*They [the villagers] just try to do what the SPDC demands. Also, the SPDC has threatened them into doing the work, such as [by saying] that they will burn down the houses. Some men have hid in the forest and when the transportation [forced portering of military supplies] has finished, they've gone back to the village. At those times, most of the people*

doing the work for the SPDC were women and children and old men who were left behind in the village. The SPDC has said that if they go somewhere [to some village], and if the men are in hiding, they will call the women to follow them. They've already told us like this."

- Saw Gk--- (male, 40), W--- village, Papun District (March 2008)

Evasion has also been a means by which villagers have avoided compliance with various military-imposed restrictions. This typically includes general restrictions on travel and trade outside of the village confines. Forcibly-relocated villagers have covertly left their SPDC-controlled relocation sites to travel back to tend or harvest agricultural fields at their abandoned villages or to collect supplies left behind during the hurried process of military-enforced relocation.

We've just gone and come back secretly...

"We now face a lot of difficulties because the SPDC relocated us far away from our workplace [farm fields]. Now we can't work very well to earn our livelihood and we've lost our workplace. We have to go back to our workplace secretly and work secretly. We can't work freely. The SPDC relocated us to P--- village. It's three miles away from our village... All of us and all our children, we had no time to take a rest. We had to carry things in the rain for the whole day. They asked us to move all of our property within one day and next day they wouldn't let us return to our village.

So on the second day, we had no house to stay in and we had to stay under another villagers' house on the ground among the shit of the pigs and chickens. Then our children became sick. To be able to [build and] stay in a house of our own, we went back secretly to our [abandoned] village. When there were no soldiers patrolling in the village, we went back into the village and we tried to break up our [abandoned] house and take the roofing material. I called all of my children to accompany me. If they could carry three thatch shingles, then I gave them three shingles to carry and if they could carry five,

then I gave them five. It took us three or four days and we were able to build a small hut and until now I've stayed in the hut...

They [SPDC] didn't provide any food, rice or otherwise [at the relocation site]. Nor did they even give us permission to return to work at our workplace [abandoned farm fields]. We had to return secretly without them knowing... Now no one lives in our old village. They haven't given us any work [travel] permits. We've just gone and come back secretly by ourselves. If we can work for an hour, then we work for an hour, but we also worry about our security. If the situation isn't good or if the SPDC soldiers approach, we return to the [relocation] site. The SPDC has shot dead eight people [for violating movement restrictions], but I've already reported that to the [KNLA] Brigadier. The dead people [who were shot] are Saw Tar Gkoo, Ma Oh Hla, Naw Kwee Paw – and I can't remember all of their names. Some were still young."

- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Sep 2007)

Villagers in SPDC-controlled areas have also covertly travelled into non-SPDC-controlled areas (particularly in the forested mountains of northern Karen State) in order to trade with displaced villagers in hiding at temporary 'jungle markets' set up for this purpose. These markets are set up in secret locations and not only allow for an important means of livelihood for many villagers but also provide a place for displaced villagers in hiding to access and purchase crucial supplies.

Other forms of evasion have included long-term emigration to urban areas inside Burma or into migrant worker communities abroad. For those in Karen State, this has most commonly been to Thailand, but also Malaysia. The SPDC has sought to restrict this option, register all those who depart and tax their wages abroad. Most villagers, however, are able to slip away without completing such registration and can thus prevent military personnel from appropriating portions of the remittances they send home to their families.

> "*Last rainy season, three villagers went and worked in Malaysia. Most villagers have gone to work in Bangkok. Because when they stayed and worked in the village they never got enough food, so they went to find jobs in other countries. As for me, I'm now very disappointed. Even though my children have gone to work in Bangkok, I [still] can't repay my debt.*"
>
> - Naw M--- (female, 50), Gk--- village, Thaton District (Nov 2007)

The many examples of village-level resistance examined above not only belie the claim that Burma's rural communities are supportive of military rule, or even politically neutral, but also demonstrate that villagers can and do mitigate abuse and thereby reduce the economic, social and humanitarian costs of military rule. Furthermore, the statements included here represent only a fraction of the population of Karen State, let alone Burma. Employed by millions across Karen State, or tens of millions across rural Burma, such everyday resistance delivers not only significant material gains for the civilian population as a whole (if only relative to the situation in which they would otherwise be), but also comprises a tangible and considerable loss of resources for the wider system of militarisation.

Non-State spaces

- Eight -

'Peace villages' and 'hiding villages'

Targeting displaced communities in hiding

"*Their [SPDC soldiers'] first targets are the civilians and their second are their enemies [KNLA soldiers].*"
- Saw S--- (male, 55), Gk--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

"*The SPDC doesn't see us as villagers. They identify us as their enemy. So, when they see us, they shoot to kill us all*."
- Saw Bp--- (male, 57), Gk--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Nov 2007)

The SPDC has pursued a campaign of forced relocation in order to ensure that all civilian communities in Karen State are placed and remain in areas firmly under State military control. In Karen State, communities in areas not under consolidated SPDC control are typically evicted from their homes and moved into newly created relocation sites alongside roadways, next to army bases or connected to pre-existing (but military-controlled) villages. In this way, forced relocation serves to establish consolidated pools of exploitable civilians for food, money, labour and other supplies. Those confined to such areas remain subject to the systematic forms of military predation described in the preceding chapters.

"*The SPDC forcibly relocated us and now we have to live in another village. We can't live in our own village... They [SPDC] forced us and pressured our Karen people and they forcibly relocated our Karen villagers and, if we didn't move, they would have come and killed us. They gave us only two days to finish moving. Within those two days we couldn't bring all of our possessions. The belongings which were left behind in the house were burnt down [by SPDC soldiers] together with the house*."
- Saw L--- (male, 23), M--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

In early 2007, SPDC authorities in Nyaunglebin District embarked on a large-scale relocation programme forcibly removing residents of at least five villages in Kyauk Kyi township. Following these mass relocations local SPDC authorities forbade all relocated villagers from returning to their former homes and fields. Shown above is the entrance gate at Bplaw Law Bler, one of the destination relocation sites. The signboard reads: "*Warm welcome to Htaik Htoo area*" (the Burmese name for Bplaw Law Bler). The photo below shows some huts of relocated villagers on narrow plots of barren land inside Bplaw Law Bler relocation site, where few services are available. *[Photos: KHRG]*

Aware of the pervasive exploitation and restrictions in SPDC-controlled areas and the serious financial, social and humanitarian consequences of such policies, many villagers have earnestly sought to avoid relocation to these sites. Instead, these villagers have responded by fleeing into situations of hiding in the forest in order to evade military relocation efforts. Such flight illustrates a case of 'voting with one's feet' whereby "*the state from which flight occurs is deemed illegitimate, at least by those fleeing*" (Steinberg 2006: 244). Such evasion also reduces the exploitable populace controlled by local military forces and thus undermines the logistical capacities of local military units and the wider structures of militarisation. The most recently available demographic survey identified 49,500 displaced civilians in hiding in Karen State alone (TBBC 2008: 54).

In response to this flight and displacement into non-State-controlled spaces, the Burma Army labels those areas not under its control as either 'black' (where controlled by insurgent forces) or 'brown' (where contested), as opposed to the 'white' zones where the Burma Army has a consolidated hold on the civilian population. Over the past two decades the Burma Army has penetrated deeper into Karen State and established greater control over networks of vehicle roads, army camps, bases and relocation sites (all of which are often newly built with forced labour). Some of the more remote rural areas, however, especially large parts of the forested mountains in northern Karen State, are yet to have a permanent military presence. While the Burma Army may dispatch patrols out from vehicle roads and army camps into the surrounding hills, local communities continue to evade these forces and maintain a life, albeit with great insecurity, on the run. Amidst the ever-present threat of military attack, these communities are, nevertheless, able to claim their right to live free of military oppression and in this way maintain their dignity.

In the areas where the civilian population continues to resist relocation into military-controlled hamlets, the Burma Army applies a second set of terms. These are 'peace villages' (*nyein chan yay ywa* in Burmese) and 'hiding villages' (*ywa bone* in Burmese). At 'peace villages', village leaders have informal agreements with the local military authorities according to which their communities will

cooperate with SPDC demands without going into hiding. In return, they will not be forcibly relocated nor have their homes burned down. In contrast, the Burma Army has labelled those communities which refuse to submit to such conditions and choose instead to reside in situations of displacement outside military control as 'hiding villages'.

We can never accept to go and stay in the relocation site...

"Previously, they called [the villagers] to go back and stay in the area of the combined villages [the relocation site where separate village communities had been forcibly grouped], but we didn't accept their order. We just [want to] live under the control of the KNU, our mother organisation. Also, we've heard that in the controlled area it is very difficult to live like we live in the forest. We can say that [the situation in which] we live in the forest is better than living in an area under SPDC control.

The villagers under SPDC control are in the hands of Burma Army. So the army asks them to work for the army as animals. They have to dig up roads, build camps for the SPDC, carry water for them, cut fire wood for them and cook rice and curry for them. They have to do many kinds of work. They give no wages for that labour. Instead of giving wages, if people can't work they've [in some cases] killed them. When they can't handle the torture of the SPDC, some villagers have come back to the forest and [now] live in the forest. When they came back, [they] explained the situation to us. It's very dangerous for us to go there. We can never accept to go and stay in the relocation site."

- Saw S--- (male, 62), Kh--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

Such 'hiding villages' represent an overt challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the State and a loss of logistical support to local army units in the form of civilian payments of labour, money, food and supplies. As a consequence, Burma Army units deem 'hiding

villages' to be legitimate military targets and hunt them down accordingly in search-and-destroy missions. This pattern has been most recently intensified since the start of the current northern Karen State offensive which began between the end of 2005/start of 2006. In a June 2008 report, Amnesty International identified many of the abuses involved in the Burma Army's attacks on civilians in northern Karen State as crimes against humanity:

> "*For two and a half years, a military offensive by the Myanmar army, known as the* tatmadaw*, has been waged against ethnic Karen civilians in Kayin (Karen) State and Bago (Pegu) Division, involving a widespread and systematic violation of international human rights and humanitarian law. These violations constitute crimes against humanity*." (Amnesty International 2008: 1)

The strategy of militarily targeting civilians has served the dual function of 1) pressuring 'hiding' villagers to submit to State control by relocating them into SPDC-controlled areas and 2) gradually eliminating all non-State-controlled communities and spaces. Given the use of military means to target and achieve control over the civilian population and the relatively limited amount of large-scale conventional warfare between armed groups, the current situation has been called a 'low-intensity conflict' (MacKinnon 2007).

Attacks on civilians

> "*I feel sad. We are children, we should study in school peacefully and smoothly but now we have to run and stay in the forest and study in the forest instead... They came and attacked the village, arrested villagers and killed the villagers and burnt down the village. They shelled Hta La Koh [village] with six mortar [shells] and five of the mortar [shells] exploded. Villagers and animals were injured and killed. Six villagers were injured, including two students and myself [also a student]. At that time, I was walking and the mortar [shell] hit my waist, my upper bladder and my thigh*."
>
> - Naw S--- (female, 14), Ht--- village, Papun District (May 2008)

With the above understanding of the conflict in mind, the character of attacks in northern Karen State has been as follows. Upon approach to a given hiding site or non-SPDC-controlled village, army patrols shell these communities from a distance with 80 and 120 mm mortars before approaching on foot and torching homes, schools, churches, farm fields, food supplies and food storage containers. Following a shoot-on-sight policy, soldiers fire at anyone spotted during the attack. Those civilians killed in these cases are typically those unable to get away in time; often the sick and the elderly or those caught unaware, such as farmers out tending their crops.

> "*In the past, we had 35-36 households in the village, but when [SPDC] LID #66 and #77 set up camp, there were only 24 people from 6 households remaining. We all farm hill fields, but we can't work them as we have in the past and we can't cultivate anything. The SPDC troops who are near our village are based out of areas near W--- and B---. They came down and searched for food in the villagers' plantations. They burnt the forest and the fire destroyed the villagers' workplaces [fields and plantations]. They shelled villagers' residences with mortar fire. We can still hear their gunfire. We didn't have enough rice. When the villagers returned to look for food, they found that nothing had been left behind [by the departing soldiers]. We have to be porters, [carrying] other people's things in order to get wages. We have a difficult life*."
>
> - Saw G--- (male, 54), G--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)

In the photo above a displaced hiding site in the Th'Ay Kee area burns on December 4th 2007 following an attack by soldiers of SPDC MOC #4. In addition to buildings, the soldiers destroyed paddy crops, rice, salt, cardamom, betel nut and other supplies belonging to the displaced villagers, as seen below two days later, on December 6th, when villagers returned to collect food and other supplies left behind when they fled. *[Photos: KHRG]*

"*The SPDC Army [units] stationed here are LIB #703, LIB #707 and LIB #710 of MOC [Military Operations Command] #4. They entered Th'Ay Kee village and burnt down Th'Ay Kee village and they also burnt down Day Kee village and destroyed the villagers' rice barns and they took some [of the rice supplies] for themselves. The date when they burnt down [Day Kee] village was December 1st 2007 and on December 5th 2007 they burnt down Th'Ay Kee village. They also burnt down Buh Hsa Kee and Buh Kee. Now the villagers are living in the forest*."

- Saw H--- (male, 50), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

"*When we were harvesting and collecting our rice in the hill fields, at that time the Burmese [SPDC] soldiers came to attack us. They shot at us and we ran away. My father and a 16-year-old boy name P'Ree Sein died in the hill field at that time. My father [her father's corpse] was left in the hill field but we couldn't do anything*."

- Naw S--- (female, 22), S--- village, Toungoo District (Nov 2006)

Despite this use of military force against civilians, villagers are often able to get away from their villages prior to the actual attack, using advanced warning systems and departing before the arrival of a given Burma Army patrol. An estimated 30,000 villagers fled from such attacks from January 2006 to the start of 2008 (Eubank 2008: 11).

"*We arrived here [at an IDP hiding site in Nyaunglebin District] on December 1st [2007]. The SPDC soldiers attacked our village, so we had to come here. One villager died when the army attacked our village. The child [who died] was just 17 years old*."

- Naw P-- (female, 45), Ny-- village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2008)

Notwithstanding the capacities of local communities to successfully flee such attacks, the Free Burma Rangers reported in early 2008 that, since the start of 2006, the Burma Army had killed over 370 villagers and built over 60 new army camps and three new

roads in the three northern Karen State districts of Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Papun (Eubank 2008: 11). To prevent residents from returning to their homes following their flight into hiding, Burma Army soldiers have destroyed buildings, burnt food stores and cropland and planted landmines in and around abandoned villages. Soldiers typically loot villagers' personal property and destroy whatever they cannot take with them. Livestock is often found later by returning villagers, having been killed and left to rot by departing soldiers.

> "*We must always flee from the soldiers of the SPDC Army. When they arrive in our village, we always lose our time [that is needed] to do our farming. As of now we haven't yet finished doing our farming. We need to collect our paddy from the farm and transport it to the rice storage containers. Before the SPDC Army soldiers arrived in my village, they entered into Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin township] and then through Ler Doh [Kyauk Kyi township] and entered into our agricultural fields. When they saw the villagers' rice storage containers, huts and paddy at the farm, they burnt it all*."
>
> - Hs--- (male, 57), K--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Nov 2007)

> "*At that time, they [SPDC soldiers] shot six mortar shells into the village. They caught the villagers' chickens. Many items of mine were burnt. Some plates, pots and sacks of cardamom were destroyed by them [SPDC soldiers]. I couldn't bring anything with me when I escaped from them. After they [SPDC soldiers] caught the chickens and burnt the houses, they deployed their landmines in the village and they returned to their place [army camp]*."
>
> - Naw Hs--- (female, 63), H--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

16-year-old Naw D--- from Htee Baw Kee village, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, recovers after medics amputated the mutilated lower part of her right leg which was injured by an SPDC-deployed landmine on March 15th 2008 when she returned to her abandoned village to collect her family's hidden stores of rice. *[Photo: KHRG]*

"*When the SPDC comes, we have to stop working and flee and hide in the jungle. Sometimes we can't even work for one week [straight]. Then they enter into our workplaces [farm fields] and eat our crops and some [of the soldiers] destroy our possessions. If it's during the hot season, they patrol and burn the forest and the fire destroys our crops and plantation areas*."

- Saw D--- (male, 60), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)

"*The SPDC Army soldiers have already arrived in our village eight times. Each time they've taken our pigs, chickens and ducks. And they've also cut down our mango trees; not just taken the fruit*."

- Naw Gk- (female, 53), Gk- village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2008)

Beyond direct military attacks against non-SPDC-controlled villages and displaced hiding sites, and the destruction of covert rice storage barns and hillside farm fields, the Burma Army has also applied indirect measures aimed at starving 'hiding' villagers out of the hills. These include restrictions on the movement of hiding villagers (enforced through the SPDC's shoot-on-sight policy), as well as restrictions on the movement of the residents of 'peace' villages who could otherwise flee into hiding or at least trade with, and thereby support, those communities who are hiding in the forest. A further manner of restrictions has also been placed on the trade and the transport of food and other supplies along vehicle roads in areas, especially of northern Karen State, where large numbers of displaced communities remain in hiding. As an example, SPDC forces operating under MOC #5 began in March 2007 to restrict a list of goods at the P'Leh Wa checkpoint, situated about halfway between Kler La and Toungoo town. The restricted items which the soldiers began confiscating included rice, fish paste, salt, tea leaves, onions, garlic, sandals, motor oil, edible oil, chilli, MSG and medicine. The restrictions imposed at this checkpoint created an initial shortage of rice at Kler La town.[23] These restrictions, furthermore, built on previously imposed trade restrictions in the area.

> "*Since 2006, the SPDC Army operations have become more intense and I have not been able to cultivate my hill field. Also, the SPDC Army has been blocking rice, salt and fish paste – our main foods – and doesn't allow us to sell cardamom or betel nut to the shops. Nor do we dare to go to the shop at Gkaw Thay Der [village].*"
>
> - Saw Ht--- (male, 43), K---village, Toungoo District (Jan 2007)

> "*The village has to face difficulties brought about by the SPDC. The SPDC has restricted the transport of food. We haven't been able to carry rice along the way between Kler La and Toungoo [town]. They [SPDC soldiers] have set up*

[23] For further details on the SPDC's restrictions along the Toungoo to Kler La road, see KHRG, *Provoking Displacement in Toungoo District: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks* (May 2007).

many gates along the road. Even [if the villagers have only] one or two milk tins of rice, they [the soldiers] have kept all [of it]."

- Saw H--- (male, 50), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

The apparent reason for the imposition of trade restrictions in northern Karen State has been to prevent the possible distribution of crucial food and other supplies to hiding villagers and thereby support their efforts at evasion.

Humanitarian situation for displaced communities in hiding

The draconian restrictions on movement and trade which remain integral to the SPDC's protracted low-intensity conflict against the civilian population in northern Karen State have had compounding effects which go beyond (but remain intimately tied to) individual incidents of mortar attacks on villages, shoot-on-sight killings and death and injury from landmines. The harmful consequence of the SPDC's policies of travel and trade restrictions, in combination with direct military attacks on civilian communities, have increased poverty and livelihood vulnerability, heightened food insecurity, worsened health conditions and obstructed access to education and other social services.

As Burma Army patrols have systematically destroyed any covert hill fields they've encountered, displaced villagers in hiding have regularly lost their paddy crops at various stages during the crop cycle. Furthermore, given the SPDC's ongoing shoot-on-sight policy, many displaced villagers whose crops may not yet have been destroyed are unable to tend to their agricultural fields if the Burma Army presence is particularly heavy in their area. Being unable to regularly tend their covert agricultural fields or plantations, crops may become overgrown with weeds or eaten by wild animals, leading to poor or wholly failed harvests. A continued Burma Army presence may, furthermore, prevent hiding villagers from accessing their fields at all, thus eliminating any possibility of obtaining even a limited harvest. Restrictions on movement also prevents these

people from seeking out wage labour in SPDC-controlled towns to supplement their agricultural losses.

> "*Previously, I stayed in Shoh Bper Koh village, but because the SPDC soldiers were conducting operations I fled to stay at B--- village. So at present I've had to abandon my place of occupation because the soldiers are active in that area. So, I can't go to cultivate my hill fields*."
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 41), B--- village, Papun District (Nov 2006)

> "*The villagers weren't able to go and tend their fields, so their hill fields and flat fields became overgrown with weeds and the paddy plants couldn't grow freely. They didn't have enough food. They had to buy it from the other villages such as Kler La and Gkaw Thay Der but now we can't go to buy food anymore. The SPDC Army camps are situated along the way, so we can't do anything about it*."
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 57), O--- village, Toungoo District (Aug 2007)

> "*If the SPDC wasn't active in our villages, we'd 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 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---village, Papun District (June 2007)

Not only is agricultural work obstructed, but so too are efforts to address subsistence needs through trade with communities living under SPDC control. Such obstructions involve road blocks where soldiers restrict types and/or amounts of products being transported. They also involve efforts to detain and punish villagers who venture into SPDC-controlled areas in order to sell or purchase supplies.

"*Now we also can't buy rice in Kler La and Toungoo [town], because they've blocked our way there. If we run out of food, we don't yet know ourselves what we'll have to do... Now we have to eat [watered down] rice porridge. We need our siblings to help us as much as they can*."

- Saw N--- (male, 27), K--- village, Toungoo District (Sept 2007)

"*The SPDC Army has been active in my area since 2006. We live along a route that the SPDC patrols, so we must do our work in fear of SPDC Army attacks and landmines. This has created a difficult situation for us. Because of the operations of the SPDC Army, I haven't been able to tend to my hill field and I have no income. The SPDC has been blocking the trading routes and it's not easy to travel. As we have no security, this is causing a situation of fear and worry*."

- Saw K--- (male, 48), P--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2007)

An inevitable consequence of these restrictions and attacks has been the increase of food insecurity, malnutrition, illness and disease. This humanitarian component of displacement is exacerbated as restrictions on movement and increased poverty hinder efforts to access medicine, medical treatment or even preventative measures (such as insecticide-treated mosquito nets) which could help reduce such illness in the first place.

"*They [the displaced villagers] don't have good shelters and also don't get enough food to eat. They are facing different kinds of diseases such as fever, headaches and diarrhoea. They have had to look after each other. Some of the villagers haven't had enough food or good quality medicine, so they've died in the forest. Some pregnant women have had to deliver their babies in the forest. They were only able to use a fire [to keep warm after delivery], as they didn't have any medicine when they gave birth to their babies. They usually treat themselves with traditional medicines, but some have died when they've delivered their babies*."

- Saw P--- (male, 42), T--- village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2008)

The child on the left in the photo above, shown here on December 15th 2007, comes from Y--- village, Toungoo District and is suffering from malnutrition because his parents ran low on food supplies while living displaced in the forest. Due to the ongoing SPDC offensive in northern Karen State, displaced children living in the area face severe challenges to food, health and education. *[Photo: KHRG]*

On top of the humanitarian concerns of malnutrition, illness and disease, persistent attacks and (often repeated) civilian flight into displacement means that schools are often forced to close down. For many communities in non-SPDC-controlled areas of northern Karen State, schools are often unable to remain open straight through a school year.

> "*Because of oppression, fear and the destruction of the village by the SPDC, we dare not stay at our village anymore and the school hasn't been able to reopen since it was destroyed. Now, if we look at the situation in the village, some of the villagers are always in fear and they can't do their work smoothly anymore.*"
>
> - Saw B--- (male, 43), H--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2007)

"*We have 50 school-aged children. At first, they all went to school but when the SPDC restricted [the transport of] food, we didn't have food to eat and then the school also stopped and some students went down to the town to live there. Now in Gklay Soh Kee we don't have a school.... The school [had always] functioned with difficulties, but in August 2007 the SPDC restricted [the transport of] food and the school stopped functioning [completely]*."

- Saw H--- (male, 50), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

As the above quotes illustrate, the harmful consequences of the SPDC's policy of targeting displaced civilian communities in hiding go beyond the immediate impacts of shootings, attacks on, and destruction of, villages and landmine explosions. They also include detrimental, longer-term impacts on health, nutrition and access to education or other social services. It is largely because of the Burma Army's imposition of movement and trade restrictions that these later consequences are so severely exacerbated.

- Nine -

Displacement as resistance

"*We fled because we were oppressed by the SPDC. We didn't get any permission to travel. They wouldn't give us any travel documents. They were making us do construction work [forced labour]. So, we couldn't do our own work. If we had stayed, we would have only fallen into debt and so we came here [to an IDP hiding site inside Karen State]*."
- Naw W--- (female, 48), S--- village, Toungoo District (March 2007)

When villagers perceive that the restrictions and exploitative local governance of SPDC rule are a fundamental threat to their livelihoods, subsistence, freedom and dignity, they often choose displacement into hiding as a means of resisting the State's efforts to control and extract resources from them. In such cases, voluntary displacement into hiding comprises a means of resistance to State control and abuse.

"*The SPDC Army orders us to carry loads. If we don't do this, they say that we're rebels. So, we have to constantly labour for the SPDC Army and we have no time to do our own work. So, our families are faced with food problems as we have no food to eat. However, if people don't carry out the tasks which the SPDC demands, the SPDC Army will take action against those people. I had to carry loads for the SPDC Army, but the last time I didn't comply and I fled*."
- Naw S--- (female, 36), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Jan 2007)

"*When I was staying at K---, it was at a time when the SPDC was setting up their army camp. I had to do* loh ah pay *at that time. I had to dig a well for them and we heard news that villagers in K--- had fled to another place because they wanted to leave. So I thought [and decided] that, since I couldn't manage my livelihood, I asked the village leaders for*

permission and then fled into the hills. I fled step-by-step [further and further] and have now arrived at this [IDP] camp."

- Saw G--- (male, 31), P--- village, Toungoo District (March 2007)

Villagers from Th'Dah Der village in Lu Thaw township of Papun District travelling on foot loaded up with personal possessions and food supplies. When SPDC LIB #501 attacked their village in March 2007, they took whatever belongings and food they could carry before fleeing into the forest to make their way to a more secure hiding site. *[Photo: KHRG]*

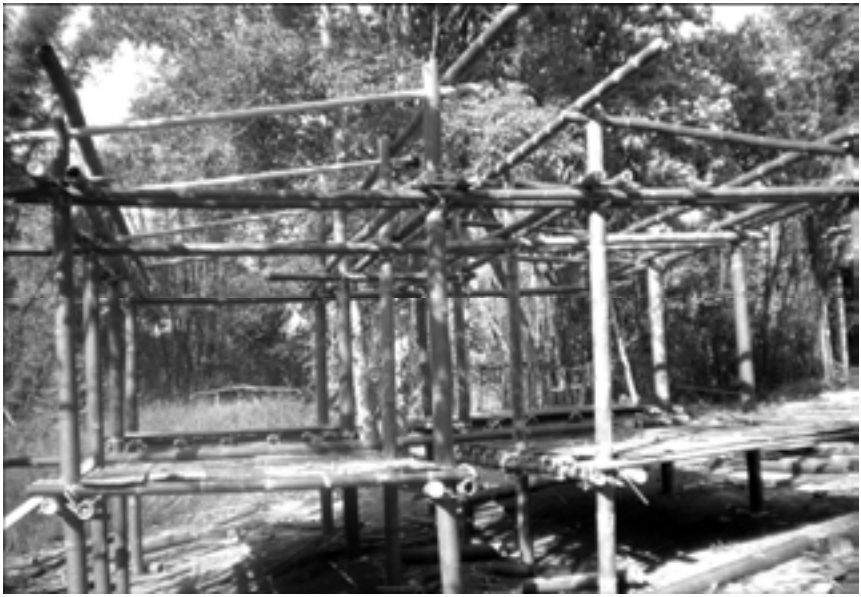
As a form of resistance, evasion of State forces through displacement into hiding depends on civilians' abilities to sustain themselves in the face of military attacks and restrictions and the consequent humanitarian challenges of life in hiding. In this context, villagers have, therefore, adopted a range of strategies that support their efforts to evade State control. These include, amongst other strategies, establishing covert hiding sites and hill-side farm fields in the forest; hiding food stores in preparation for expected displacement; retrieving food and other supplies left behind during flight; accessing indigenous mobile health teams delivering aid

cross-border; setting up temporary schools in the forest to educate children; trading at clandestine 'jungle markets' with villagers from SPDC-controlled areas; sharing food amongst community members; concocting and using traditional natural medicines; utilising advanced warning systems to relay information about SPDC troop movements and locations between displaced communities; and taking care of fellow family and community members. Given the overtly political character of villagers' choice of displacement over life under SPDC-control, these strategies to support a life in hiding, examined in more detail below, should be seen for what they are: *resistance* strategies (and not simply apolitical 'coping' strategies).

Advanced preparation of hiding sites

> "*Late the other day we returned again to our village. When we heard the SPDC soldiers coming close to our village, we ran away. After they were gone, we went back. Regarding this issue, we decided to build a secret hut for ourselves deep in the jungle. If the soldiers came, then we ran immediately to our own hut [at the hiding site]*."
> - Naw R--- (female, 35), N--- village, Tenasserim Division (May 2007)

Many displaced or other non-SPDC-controlled communities who live with the ever-present possibility of military attack have sought to facilitate repeated flight from their villages by setting up shelters at covert locations in the surrounding forest. These sites are typically located in relative proximity to the home villages or other communities in which villagers reside. Some villagers have told KHRG that they remain close enough to their abandoned villages to be able to still hear gun and mortar fire. This proximity is important not only to reduce the distance and time of the initial flight but also to allow for a possible return to abandoned settlements – even if only to collect belongings or tend fields. The structures set up at these hiding sites are usually simple bamboo shelters with adjacent cooking areas. Should villagers need to stay longer, they may subsequently expand the settlement, setting up hill-side paddy fields and building a more durable school, church or other structure.



The photo above shows a partially constructed school at a hiding site in Nyaunglebin District on April 22nd 2008, shortly after villagers fled from their homes. In the photo below, villagers are preparing bamboo posts on the same day for the construction of new homes at the same hiding site. *[Photos: KHRG]*

"*When the SPDC attacked the village, we had to flee to the hiding site that we had prepared. If they attacked the village in the day-time, we had to flee in the day-time. If they attacked in the night-time, we had to flee in the night-time. We never knew the exact time [when it would be required] to flee from them*."

- Saw Y--- (male, 35), H--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

Hiding food stores in the forest

"*Now, the soldiers are near to us so we dare not to do anything. When they came to our village, we had to flee for our lives into the forest. We built our rice storage [shed] secretly in the forest. If the SPDC Army soldiers hadn't come to our village to disturb us, we wouldn't have needed to worry about our survival*."

- Naw H--- (female, 48), T--- village, Nyaunglebin District (May 2008)

As with the advanced construction of shelters at hiding sites, the preparation of hidden food stores requires clear foresight regarding a likely, indeed often imminent, military attack. Typically, these food stores comprise quantities of rice packed in woven baskets sufficient to support a given household anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. Like the homes from which villagers flee, however, these food stores risk being discovered and destroyed by patrolling Burma Army soldiers. The search and destroy missions which Burma Army patrols have been conducting in northern Karen State have targeted such hidden food stores along with shelters located at civilian hiding sites.

"*The SPDC often came to our village and, whenever they came, they burnt down some houses or paddy stores. And if they could catch people they killed them. Whenever the SPDC soldiers approached, we ran away from our village and we had to carry clothes, rice and some other things such as salt and chilli. When we ran to escape into the jungle, it sometimes took about one month. When we ran we carried as*

> *much rice as we could and when the rice was finished, we went and took it [more rice] from our secret stores in the jungle where we had hidden our things before the SPDC came. We had to go back during the night to retrieve the rice from our secret place*."
>
> - Saw D--- (male, 16), L--- village, Papun District (Feb 2007)

Monitoring troop movements and advanced warning systems

> "*Every time I went to my hill field to cut the grass, I had to be careful of the enemies [Burma Army soldiers]. I had to climb up a tree to check for security. Twice a month they [Burma Army soldiers] arrived at my village*."
>
> - Saw T--- (male, 35), M--- village, Toungoo District (April 2008)

Following a military assault against villages or other hiding sites and villagers' flight and displacement into hiding (whether or not at prepared hiding sites), it is crucial for displaced civilians to maintain some awareness of the movements of those Burma Army troops who attacked their community or any other Army units operating in the area. Such information is initially crucial so as to inform displaced communities of the approach of army patrols to their hiding sites and thus provide a window of time during which these populations can flee again into the forest. Beyond this immediate necessity, however, the monitoring of Burma Army movements in and around abandoned villages is an important means by which displaced villagers can determine whether or not it is safe to return to their former homes.

Advanced warning systems and the monitoring of troop movements are often carried out by one or two villagers who remain behind somewhere with an adequate view of the abandoned village and of the troops operating there. Such lookout posts are situated between the abandoned village and the new hiding site so that those serving watch are able to quickly return to inform their communities whether soldiers are advancing towards the new hiding site, moving away (back to their camp or base) or remaining to set up a camp at the site of the abandoned village.

Residents of Kwih Lah, Ler Wah and Tee Thu Kee villages in Nyaunglebin District constructed the above shelter after fleeing a September 21st 2005 SPDC attack on their homes. This shelter, located about halfway between the abandoned village and a more distant IDP site to which the villagers fled, served as an outpost where a handful of villagers remained to monitor SPDC troop movements. When the SPDC soldiers withdrew from the area by November 3rd, those monitoring the troops informed their fellow villagers who then quickly returned to harvest their by then overdue crops.[24] *[Photo: KHRG]*

Retrieving food and other supplies left behind during flight

> "*No one lives in the village. But if [the villagers] don't hear SPDC [troop] activity, we go back to our village and tend our crops that we've planted. And if we hear the SPDC again, we run again into the forest*."
>
> - Saw S--- (male, 62), K--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

[24] For more details on this incident, see *Nyaunglebin district: SPDC operations along the Shwegyin River, and the villagers' response*, KHRG, December 2005.

Utilising the strategy of monitoring Burma Army troop movements, lookouts are able to inform fellow displaced villagers if and when patrols move away from the abandoned village. In such cases, lookouts inform their community, the members of which can then begin returning to their homes. These return trips may only be temporary excursions to collect whatever food or other supplies escaped the looting and destruction of departing soldiers. Villagers may be able to collect small amounts of rice, pots, plates or other items. If any livestock escaped alive, these can be collected as well. Paddy crops or plantations that were not destroyed can either be harvested (possibly earlier than desirable) or (if the security situation allows) tended until the crop is fully ripe and thus ready for a full harvest. Depending on the security situation, displaced villagers may either remain at their hiding sites, returning only intermittently to tend and eventually harvest their crops, or, alternatively, return to reoccupy and reclaim their abandoned farm fields and homes. Such return trips, however, remain precarious as army patrols can return and may have also deployed landmines in and around village confines prior to their departure.

> "*The SPDC soldiers came to T--- village in B--- area on November 2nd 2006. My hill fields were near to the SPDC Army camp. So, [after fleeing] I tried to retrieve my crops at night time. But I only got 20 baskets of rice. So for the coming year my family will face problems*."
>
> - Saw Y--- (male, 50), T--- village, Papun District (Dec 2006)

Cultivation of covert agricultural fields

A situation of heightened insecurity at abandoned villages (whether due to ongoing Burma Army patrols in the area or the heavy deployment of landmines in and around abandoned villages) may prevent even the temporary return of displaced communities. In such situations, these individuals will need to find alternative means to address subsistence, as even pre-arranged food stores are typically insufficient for a prolonged period of displacement. Displaced communities, therefore, often set up new hillside paddy fields or

small-scale plantations of cardamom which, being a relatively small and durable crop, makes a practical trade-good for displaced communities. Whereas hillside paddy crops can, once harvested, serve immediate subsistence needs, cardamom can be sold for cash to buy crucial supplies not otherwise available to displaced communities.

> "*We're hiding in the forest. We've been in the forest for over two years already and the place we live is called L---. We stay here with 81 people. We cultivate hill fields [hillside paddy fields] for our survival*."
>
> - Saw K--- (male, 50), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)

Covert trade and 'jungle markets'

> "*We didn't have enough food so we had to buy it from Papun District and Karenni State from such places as M--- and Ht--- villages. We had to go secretly to get there. We had to worry about our security while we were on the trip. We had to go by ourselves. Nobody [no KNLA soldiers] provided security for us. If they [SPDC soldiers] saw me along the way they would have apprehended me*."
>
> - Saw B--- (male, 53), Gk--- village, Toungoo District (Aug 2007)

Burma Army-imposed restrictions on travel and trade in and from non-SPDC-controlled areas severely obstruct the efforts of displaced civilians in hiding to address subsistence, livelihoods and healthcare needs. Many cooking and medical supplies as well as diversified food stuffs are simply unavailable in situations of displacement unless brought in from elsewhere. In response, displaced villagers in hiding have pursued multiple strategies to circumvent the relevant trade and travel restrictions. One such measure is the establishment of temporary 'jungle markets' located at intermediate areas outside the consolidated control of the SPDC yet close enough for civilians from these areas to easily venture out to meet with displaced communities in hiding. At these markets, hiding villagers can sell or

trade crops they have grown at covert farm fields and plantations and can purchase food and other supplies of which they may be in need.

Villagers from northern Tenasserim Division established this temporary and covert 'jungle market' in July 2007 for trading among displaced communities. As the SPDC Army enforces strict movement and trade restrictions between civilians living in hiding and those under SPDC control, such markets provide one of the few means for many IDPs to access supplies that are not available locally. *[Photo: KHRG]*

The size and locations of such 'markets' vary. Sometimes, such 'trade' may simply be one-off exchanges where a displaced villager in hiding has contacted a member of an SPDC-controlled village and arranged to meet on the village periphery in order to sell or purchase a small amount of food or supplies before departing back to their hiding site in the forest. Alternatively, displaced villagers in hiding may risk travel into SPDC-controlled villages and towns in order to trade and/or purchase supplies. These villagers may even covertly seek out wage employment within such SPDC-controlled communities and then use their earnings to purchase necessary supplies. In such cases, these villages risk detention, torture or

execution by Burma Army personnel should they be caught. As these villagers are typically without official SPDC-issued identification documents, they must avoid encountering or at least being questioned by SPDC personnel. Nevertheless, displaced villagers in hiding do continue to pursue such options in order to acquire food and other crucial supplies.

> "*They [displaced villagers] haven't been able to get enough rice and [therefore] we've had to go to other places to look for rice. We have to look for money in these difficult circumstances. We have to go back and forth secretly. We carry things [work as porters] for the residents of Gh--- village and they give us money and [with this money] we buy rice.*"
>
> - Saw K--- (male, 50), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (June 2008)

Sharing food with friends and family

> "*We couldn't do anything, so when we ran out of our food we had to ask for it from our friends. If they have [any], they share [it] with us. If our friends also run out of their food, we have decided that we will go to a refugee camp [in Thailand]. This is an appropriate decision that we've made*."
>
> - Naw Y--- (female, 32), Hs--- village, Toungoo District (2008)

Where food supplies are limited with no immediate access to alternatives, familial and social networks within the community are crucial for meeting subsistence needs. Those villagers with sufficient food supplies – whether due to having prepared hidden food stores prior to flight or having taken larger amounts of food along during departure – are able to provide temporary subsistence relief to relatives and fellow community members. In some cases, when rice supplies are especially low, villagers cook up a form of watered-down rice porridge containing an assortment of leafy greens foraged from the vicinity of the hiding site. This latter option, while providing temporary relief from hunger, is of little nutritional value. Nevertheless, the social capital of intra-village networks remain

integral components of supporting the continued evasion efforts of displaced communities in hiding.

> "*When I face a food problem, I meet with my friends and they help me a little bit but they have problems as well. I live in the jungle year-round and I understand that neither my living situation nor my occupation is very secure*."
>
> - Naw S--- (female, 42), H--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2006)

Utilising locally available food and medicines

> "*My house and rice store were burnt down. I've fled to the jungle but we don't have enough rice to eat. We've had to eat boiled rice together with our children. But now we don't have anymore boiled rice to eat and we have to forage for vegetables in the jungle. We dare not go back to our village and we've also begun to face a severe problem with our food supply*."
>
> - Naw S--- (female, 42), H--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2006)

As food and other supplies are scarce at hiding sites, displaced villagers residing at such locations regularly utilise locally available plants for both food and medicine. Karen communities have long had a strong tradition of natural medicine. Knowledgeable villagers concoct such treatments from locally available ingredients and use them to treat a wide variety of ailments including malaria, diarrhoea, cough, fever and toothache among others (KESAN 2005: 19). This medicinal tradition is of particular relevance to displaced communities in hiding as ingredients are indigenous and remedies focus on locally-prevalent illnesses. Traditional remedies, however, are not always effective and displaced villagers in hiding continue to fall ill and die despite their use.

> "*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 hiding 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 [natural] medicine."

- Saw K--- (male, 42), Dt--- Village, Papun District (June 2007)

Accessing indigenous organisations providing aid cross border

"*Some medics from the Karen side such as the Free Burma Rangers have also arrived in our village in order to distribute medicine to the villagers. Mostly, people in the village face diseases such as malaria*."

- Naw Th-- (female, 16), Ht--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Oct 2007)

The social capital of community networks extends beyond immediate displaced communities. Such networks also link to indigenous humanitarian organisations which provide crucial aid supplies. These local organisations include groups such as the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD), the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), the Backpack Health Worker Team, the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), the Karen Education Department (KED), the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) and the Karen Teachers' Working Group (KTWG). Given the ongoing security threats in areas of high internal displacement, these groups often operate with KNLA escorts. Only some, however, are officially part of the KNU hierarchy.

"*To make our children healthy and happy we need to protect ourselves. The Backpack Health Workers usually come once every year or once every two years and support us. They tell us that we need to use mosquito nets when we sleep. We need to use toilets to protect against diarrhoea. We also need to wash the vegetables that we eat very carefully and keep our drinking water clean. They always come and give [us] health knowledge. Those who listen and practice, they are better off than those who don't practice.*"

- Saw M--- (male, 28), M--- village, Papun District (Dec 2007)

A team of mobile medics from the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) distribute medical supplies to displaced villagers living in hiding from the Burma Army in northern Papun District on August 8th 2008. Displaced villagers in hiding access such mobile medical teams as one means of maintaining their evasion of the military forces that are trying to clear them out of the hills. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Forms of assistance provided by such groups include provisions of rice, medical supplies and school supplies, cash payments for use purchasing rice locally and the delivery of medical treatment by indigenous medics. While delivered by mobile teams of local staff (typically ethnic-Karen in Karen areas), the provisions themselves are typically purchased inside Thailand and brought across the border into Karen State for humanitarian purposes. Calling such assistance cross-border aid, however, can be misleading as it suggests a greater degree of foreignness than is actually the case. On top of the immediate humanitarian benefits of such aid provisions, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC 2007: 4), which works with local humanitarian organisations that operate inside Karen State, stated that the majority of internally displaced people surveyed for its annual report on internal displacement in eastern Burma "*report that*

the provision of aid strengthens their economic and social links across political conflict lines or contributes to a decrease in human rights abuses". The work of such organisations is, therefore, not only commendable but a crucial facet of displaced villagers' own efforts to address their varied humanitarian concerns amidst a life in hiding.

Villagers from Dtay Thoo Der and Yeh Muh Bplaw village tracts collect rice from a Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) distribution centre at a KNU regional office in Lu Thaw township of Papun District in September 2006. The systematic destruction of hillside rice fields, food stores and food storage containers has forced large numbers of villagers to rely increasingly on alternative sources of food such as these cross-border provisions. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Community education and social services

> "*The Burmese soldiers took some of our text books. Our teacher had to write words down on the surface of a rock and we just repeated them when [the teacher] read out the sounds of the words.*"
>
> - Naw S--- (female, 14), K--- village, Nyaunglebin District (Feb 2008)

Military attacks and civilian displacement inevitably mean a disruption of local education. As Karen communities traditionally place great importance on education, villagers are quick to organise some form of education for village children following displacement into hiding. This may initially just mean lessons taught under trees in which a rock face, charred bamboo slats or wooden planks are used as a blackboard. If displacement persists and villagers are unable to return to their homes, displaced communities will typically construct more durable structures for use as schools with thatch roofs and long benches and desks.

Villagers are unlikely to prioritise school supplies amidst a military attack on their communities and so pencils and school books are often left behind during flight. School supplies at new displaced hiding sites are, therefore, generally limited. Furthermore, schools at abandoned villages are frequently burnt by Burma Army troops along with other structures. This destruction of schools prevents communities from returning to retrieve school supplies for use at displaced hiding sites. Local educational organisations, however, such as KTWG, KED and KSNG provide school supplies to displaced communities in hiding and to villages located in non-SPDC-controlled areas. In interviews with KHRG, villagers have sometimes lumped together such aid and seen it as all coming from the KNU.

> "*Yes, we had a school in the village up until grade four. It was built by the villagers and the village head. There were two teachers and they were [local] villagers from H---. They received support from the villagers. There were over 20 students attending the school. The students got some school supplies from the KNU side. Some students didn't have a chance to attend school even though they would like to go to school*."
>
> - Naw Hs--- (female, 63), H--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

The varied strategies examined here which displaced villagers in hiding have adopted to address their needs are just a selection of the wide variety of measures which villagers have employed. As the

success of any given strategy is contingent on the local context, displaced villagers are regularly adapting their efforts to constantly changing circumstances. Given the political character of the choice of displacement into hiding as a means of resisting military control, it is important to reiterate once again that these are *resistance* strategies which reflect underlying political views and concerns. These political choices must be kept in mind when developing initiatives to address villagers' humanitarian or other concerns.

Displaced villagers make use of a felled tree for a makeshift bridge to ascend a muddied slope and cross a stream in Toungoo District as they evade SPDC patrols in June 2007. The women and children shown here make their way barefoot loaded with personal belongings over the slippery log soaked by the heavy June rains. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Implications

- Ten -

Dissent in the ranks

Corruption and diversity within Burma's armed forces

> "*[T]oo much focus on the regime as a monolithic entity [is] distorting, since the government is made up of different branches (the military and the administration bureaucracies to begin with) as well as individuals within those entities whose actions do not follow on the putative interests of their institutions*" (Jordt 2007: 130).

As this report aims to highlight general patterns within the ongoing State-society conflict currently playing out in Karen State – with rural villagers on the one side and the institution of the military on the other – there is a risk that the 'State' will be mistakenly seen as a homogeneous entity without internal dissent or other fissures. Not only would such an understanding be inaccurate, but it would also miss many of the ways in which villagers, especially those living under SPDC control, have found openings through which to minimise their compliance with particular demands.

If the individual agency of rural villagers is to be acknowledged, such an understanding cannot logically be denied members of the armed forces. To be sure, the SPDC leadership has aggressively sought to limit internal divisions and to present the armed forces as a unified entity with a flawless veneer. Division within the armed forces appears to be a central concern of the SPDC leadership which reportedly "*harbours deep-seated fears that the armed forces will once again be riven by serious internal dissension, possibly causing the military government to fall*" (Selth 2002: 88). Irrespective of the junta's efforts, there are sound reasons to suspect widespread tension within Burma's armed forces. Testimonies by villagers in Karen State, furthermore, regarding their experiences with local military personnel, support such a view. A key factor of this tension is the class conflict within the armed forces wherein the "*life of a senior officer is now typically one of great comfort*," (Callahan 2007b: 41)

while the life of frontline foot soldier is one of overwork, under-nourishment, often brutal treatment and poor compensation. Burma military analyst Mary Callahan (2007b: 39) described the military's internal class conflict as "*the growing gap between rich and poor inside the army or between senior-level officers and the sprawling and relatively impoverished rank and file and junior members of the officers' corps*." In support of this claim, consider the following statements by two deserters from the Burma Army who spoke to KHRG in 2008.[25]

> "*The rice wasn't good and even though we got rations, we didn't get enough rice. They [the officers] are doing their own business. If they can get one thousand [kyat], they take one thousand [kyat] [i.e. they are greedy]. They [the officers] get more rations than us [the soldiers] and they also get some surplus. They take their own rations and they sell the surplus rations. They don't explain to the soldiers the reason [why they sell off the surplus rations]. When the battalions rotate, they sell the rations to the incoming battalion*."
>
> - Ko M--- (male, 23), SPDC deserter (April 2008)

I'm dissatisfied with the SPDC…

"They [Burma Army officers] were bad. They ordered things from us [soldiers]. If we didn't give these to them, they would just take them from us. Every time they arrived in a village they demanded things. If they saw fish that we [the soldiers] had caught, they would take all of them. If we didn't give them to them, they would chain-up our boat and not allow us to catch fish. Sometimes when they saw the fish, they took them all. If we opposed them, they said 'we

[25] Burma Army deserter testimonies quoted here are available in full in the KHRG reports, *Life inside the Burma Army: SPDC deserter testimonies*, May 2008 and *Interview with an SPDC deserter*, July 2008.

[officers] can say that you are rebels and kill you now and destroy the evidence.'…

I'm dissatisfied with the SPDC because they collect people and order them to do military service. Among those people [who must serve in the military], there are old people who are 50 and young people who are 16 and 17, who have not yet reached their [legal] age. They gave us a salary but they also deducted money from us. They didn't explain to us the reason for deducting the money. For example, when a soldier died they would collect money from us and also in other cases. We also had to dig a canal at the military training camp in Thaton. They didn't give us the money that we should have got for digging the canal. In reality we were hired for 700 kyat [US $0.60 per person] to dig it."

- Ko Y--- (male, 20), SPDC deserter (April 2008)

As such discontent festers, low-level soldiers operating in Karen State have responded in varied ways. These include desertion, an unwillingness to implement orders and even violent retaliation against superior officers. The following statement, for example, was given by a Burma Army soldier who ended up shooting his superior officer dead before fleeing his army unit. He subsequently spoke to KHRG in April 2008.

"*It was deputy battalion commander Nay Myo Aung [who ordered the work], so most of our soldiers were dissatisfied with him. Even though we did a lot of work, we couldn't get enough rice. Once one of the officers with one star [the rank of 1st Lieutenant] asked a Corporal [who ranks lower] to shoot a deer. But the Corporal wasn't able to get that deer and so the officer with one star beat and punched the Corporal and when our soldiers saw this we couldn't tolerate it. So we punched and beat the officer in return. After that we were satisfied with each other. When I arrived at a pier [along the river] I shot [deputy battalion commander] Nay*

Myo Aung's assistant Lwin Ko Oo [also an SPDC officer] dead, as I had planned. I shot him once."

- Ko M--- (male, 23), SPDC deserter (April 2008)

While the evidence from Karen State suggests that such violent responses against superior officers are not particularly common, desertion, by contrast, is quite regular. Nonetheless, there are many pressures on soldiers to conform despite the tensions they face. These include risk of violent punishment or detention for disobedience, as well as the lack of viable livelihoods opportunities outside of the armed forces. The following deserter's statement gives some idea of the coercive character of contemporary soldiering in Burma as well as the socioeconomic factors underpinning recruitment and enlistment.

"*I didn't want to be a soldier. If I had tried to run away, I would have had no one that I could have relied on. I would have had to live with my stepmother and I can't depend on them [his stepmother's family]. I have one younger sister and we've been separated since we were children and I don't know where she is. When I ran, if they had been able to recapture me, I would have been imprisoned and I would have had to suffer beatings and punches and many kinds of torture. They would have also have given my family members trouble. So I had no choice. Even though I didn't want to do it [be a soldier], I had to. Many soldiers are in these [types of] circumstances. If we didn't do what they ordered, it would have been death for us. If they ordered [us] to shoot, we had to shoot. Even when we knew that a place was full of landmines and that if we went on we could die, if the officer ordered [the soldiers] to go ahead, we had to go. We couldn't go backwards. If we moved backwards, we would have died under their bullet fire*."

- Ko S--- (male, 28), SPDC deserter (July 2008)

Such coercion is applied to enforce obedience of soldiers and low-level officers and ensure the implementation of abusive orders on

village communities amongst which these soldiers operate. To provide a soldier's perspective on the forms of exploitative abuse described in chapter four above, consider the following deserter's description of events.

> "*If the villagers couldn't pay, the soldiers would frighten or torture the villagers until they got what the battalion commander wanted. If not, when they returned to the battalion, they would be tortured as well. For me, I didn't do that [torture villagers] because I empathised with them*."
>
> - Ko S--- (male, 28), SPDC deserter (July 2008)

Despite the coercive mechanisms used to enforce obedience within the Burma Army, soldiers and low-ranking officers may be willing to allow for, or to overlook, villagers' non-compliance with military demands. There are a number of reasons for this. Army personnel tasked with enforcing such demands may simply not wish to exert themselves, they may feel such non-compliance is not significant or will not be otherwise noticed by their superiors, they may believe that villagers are honestly unable to comply or they may even feel that a particular order is excessive or unjust. As an example, while Karen language education has not been officially allowed to be taught in school, in the quote below a woman from Thaton District relates how villagers' violation of this restriction was overlooked by local SPDC personnel.

> "*There were four teachers. One teacher was a primary teacher and the other three were nursery [school] teachers. Everything [for the school] was supported by the villagers. This year, the children had good opportunity to attend school and even though the SPDC soldiers saw that the children were studying Karen language, they didn't say anything to them*."
>
> - Naw Bp--- (female, 48), T--- village, Thaton District (July 2007)

This discrepancy between, on the one hand, those soldiers and officers who may be willing to overlook non-compliance with

demands or violations of restrictions and, on the other hand, those who seek to rigidly enforce such orders leads villagers to express opinions of relative approval or disapproval regarding the conduct of particular military personnel.

> "*The [SPDC] LID #44 army soldiers usually killed their soldiers who deserted from them at Khaw Pler... They had to rotate their place [of deployment] with [SPDC] LID #66. These soldiers [from LID #66] were nicer than the previous soldiers [from LID #44]*."
>
> - Saw N--- (male, 44), T--- village, Thaton District (Aug 2007)

Some villagers have told KHRG that local SPDC officers are more interested in being promoted than actually implementing difficult demands. In one case of forced relocation from Papun District, for example, the implementing officer told the relevant village head that he was solely concerned about the *appearance* of compliance on the part of the villagers. This could be done, he suggested, by having a minimum number of villagers temporarily present themselves at the relocation site when the operations commander came to inspect the area. So long as his superior believed that he was effectively implementing his orders (and thus suitable for promotion), the officer said that he was not concerned about actually enforcing the relocation and the villagers could remain at their village, whilst those who came temporarily for the operations commander's visit could return home. In the following quote, the local village head relates what happened.[26]

> "*[At the meeting] they [local SPDC authorities] spoke about moving the village to Thee Muh Hta for Su See Ywa [grouping the villages together in a relocation site]. In my understanding, the commanders tried to do this because they would like to improve their rank. If they can organise the villagers then they will be promoted. They said that we could*

[26] For more information regarding this incident, see KHRG, *Village-level decision making in responding to forced relocation: A case from Papun District* (March 2008).

> *go and stay there and then return when the operation commander left. The operation commander hoped that other nearby villages would also move to the relocation site. [The camp commander told us that] if other LIDs [Light Infantry Divisions] come, he would tell them not to burn those villages, that they were already in his area, and that the villagers would not need to run when troops were coming... Now the operation commander is about to come, so they [the SPDC authorities at Thee Muh Hta relocation site] are hurrying - they are trying to show what they have done [to relocate the villagers in the area] so that they will be promoted*."
>
> - Saw L--- (male, 39), Gk--- village, Papun District (Feb 2008)

The opportunity for non-compliance in this case was actually facilitated by the local SPDC officer involved. Noting that corruption within Burma's armed forces has, since the 1990s, reached "*unprecedented levels*," (Selth 2002: 267) internal dissent and self-serving disobedience on the part of military personnel can be expected to continue. Not only does realisation of this fact challenge a misunderstanding of Burma's armed forces as a monolithic entity, but it also allows for innovative local-level approaches to minimising the required level of compliance to demands and to widening space for civilian resistance to abuse. In situations where military personnel are willing to take small bribes to reduce harmful demands, mislead their superiors in order to avoid complying with difficult-to-implement directives or even refuse to enforce abusive orders, corruption and dissent form significant factors underlying the success of many of the village-level resistance strategies outlined above.

- Eleven -

Practical applications of a village agency perspective

The preceding chapters have sought to convey a sense of the exploitative root causes behind the deteriorating livelihood and humanitarian situation in Karen State and, furthermore, how villagers, on their own initiative, have sought to resist this exploitation and claim their rights. More than this, these chapters have sought to make clear the vast extent to which this resistance has proven a materially beneficial way of addressing issues of livelihood vulnerability, poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity and personal security. A corollary of this success, of course, has been that these resistance strategies have been materially harmful to local military forces inasmuch as they have served to deny these forces the full amount of money, labour, food and other supplies which were desired.[27]

The concept of village agency has further implications, both for conventional understandings of contemporary politics in Burma and on illuminating ways in which on-the-ground political processes can be positively influenced. The village agency concept highlights the significant political role which tens of millions of villagers living across rural Burma persistently assert on a daily basis through their engagement with, and resistance to, the local-level implementation of abusive State policy. Recognition of villagers' ongoing resistance to oppression allows for external expressions of respect and solidarity for those who resist, rather than solely detached pity for those who suffer.

Such an approach to engagement with contemporary Burma requires the inclusion of rural voices in the country's ongoing political processes. Rather than further entrenching political models that favour the elite, the objective of engagement should be to

[27] Heppner (2006: ii) suggests that these resistance strategies "*have arguably weakened the state more than all the battles fought by the armed resistance*."

recognise and assist local strategies so that villagers can build their own political empowerment from the grassroots.

The rest of this chapter briefly surveys some areas where a village agency perspective and, more concretely, the concerns and initiatives of villagers, can, and indeed should, be incorporated.

Conducting human rights impact assessments for all humanitarian and socioeconomic development programmes

Due, at least in part, to the SPDC's concern over politically subversive intervention in Burma, aid agencies operating in the country via Rangoon have been at pains to reassure the junta of their ostensibly apolitical intentions. Following the devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis on May 2nd to 3rd 2008, for example, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that "*I have sought to avoid politicisation of the humanitarian crisis… this is not about politics. Our focus is saving lives*" (IPS 2008). However, as is evident in villagers' testimonies throughout this report, humanitarian and socioeconomic concerns in Karen State and presumably across rural Burma, are intimately political, insofar as they remain inseparable from local power relationships. The humanitarian situation deteriorates when military control and abuses increase and improves when village-level resistance to this abuse is successful. This pattern has been evident in the SPDC's pursuit of a development agenda aimed at strengthening State control over the civilian population.[28] In Karen State, for example, the SPDC has made use of land confiscation and forced labour to construct roads used to facilitate the increased deployment of military forces and to provide access for logging and mining companies to extract natural resources under traditional ownership by local communities. Other development projects that might otherwise have had some benefit for local communities, such as the construction of schools and health clinics, are often built with forced labour and left un-stocked and unfunded.

[28] For a comprehensive account of the SPDC's use of 'development' programmes to further militarisation in Karen State, see *Development by Decree: The politics of poverty and control in Karen State*, KHRG, April 2007.

Despite the abusive character of the SPDC's development agenda, there is a great need for increased international donor and logistical support for socioeconomic development projects in rural Burma.

> "*I want to say that I would like other organisations to help us with regards to education for the future and also, if it's possible, to support us with health care*."
>
> - Daw S--- (female, 50), Gk--- village, Papun District (Nov 2007)

However, international NGOs, as well as UN and bilateral agencies, need to be wary of SPDC attempts to co-opt externally-funded development projects, which may occur without the knowledge of expatriate staff. This may take place, for example, through civilian registration requirements which can later by used to demand payment from recipients for goods or services that were intended as free or through increasing exploitive demands on the grounds that aid recipients are in a better position to comply. Furthermore, some development initiatives may undermine villagers' own strategies to address their needs. For example, development aid provided to relocation sites (often misleadingly called 'model villages' by the SPDC) may undermine villagers' efforts to negotiate a return to their former villages on humanitarian grounds as local SPDC officials may claim that external assistance can make a given relocation site more sustainable. Likewise, it will not necessarily prove beneficial for development agencies to blindly support agricultural initiatives if agricultural policy is forced on farmers, costs of capital inputs are extorted from them and all excess produce is simply skimmed off by local military personnel.

Given the above risks, it is imperative that international NGOs, as well as UN and bilateral agencies operating in Burma ensure that their projects neither contribute to abuse nor undermine the efforts which local communities employ to resist that abuse. The most effective way to ensure this is through the use of human rights impact assessments which allow uncensored, qualitative input from local communities regarding any potential harm associated with a

given project. More specifically, a human rights impact assessment is defined as

> "*the process of predicting the potential consequences of a proposed policy, program or project on the enjoyment of human rights. The objective of the assessment is to inform decision-makers and the people likely to be affected so that they can improve the proposal to reduce potential negative effects and increase positive ones*" (Hunt 2006: 4).

While such assessments are crucial, they are also politically sensitive and something the SPDC has sought to restrict. In 2006, for example, Burma's Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development issued new guidelines delimiting the work of international organisations operating in Burma. These included prohibitions on "*conducting or distributing any surveys not mentioned and approved in the original project documentation*" (GAO 2007: 18). The UN reports that the resulting "*data weaknesses have impeded international organizations' efforts to assess needs, conduct strategic planning and implement programs*" (GAO 2007: 24). These restrictions serve to suppress indigenous voices speaking of human rights issues and thus obstruct humanitarian agencies' efforts to incorporate protection concerns into development or humanitarian relief programmes. They also limit the ability of external agencies to monitor aid distribution and potential misappropriation by State officials.

Despite such restrictions, the imperative of accountability to local communities requires that international agencies operating in Burma strive to carry out unrestricted human rights impact assessments for all humanitarian and development initiatives, seek out and freely allow in-depth qualitative input from affected local communities, and adjust their projects according to the views and concerns expressed.

Strengthening independent civil society

Civil society is generally used to refer to the locus between the State and the household occupied by networks of civilians who come together voluntarily to bring about shared goals. While an examination of the many potential benefits of civil society is beyond the scope of the present report, one notable positive feature of a strong civil society in relation to village agency is its role as an alternate seat of power (however small) and a counter-balance to the totalitarian ambitions of the State. Through grassroots networking and support for civilian interests outside of State power relations, civil society offers an opportunity for local ownership of social change. Furthermore, such support networks potentially allow for the discreet strengthening of villagers' efforts to resist State abuses. While there continue to be heavy restrictions on civil society in SPDC-controlled areas of Burma, local citizens are increasingly finding opportunities to widen the necessary space to act outside of direct State-controlled institutions and parastatal organisations. Such civilian participation also has long-term implications for democratic change in Burma.

It is important, however, not to limit external support for civil society organisations to solely-SPDC-controlled areas. In areas under the control of ethnic ceasefire groups as well as mixed administration areas (with both SPDC and ceasefire groups operating), incipient civil society networks have begun to develop. These include religious organisations, village associations and local NGOs which address issues like welfare, literature and culture (South 2004: 246). These groups can play a role as an alternate seat of (relative) power, responding to locally perceived needs and serving to strengthen the social capital needed for long-term peace-building and grassroots democratisation.

Increasing support for aid delivered cross-border

While it is important to support civil society groups operating in areas controlled by the SPDC and ethnic ceasefire groups, such assistance must not be seen as an alternative to supporting

indigenous organisations operating via non-SPDC-controlled areas and often getting logistical support cross-border from Thailand or other neighbouring countries. As these groups have expanded and developed since the early 1990s, they now provide extensive and crucial assistance in health, education, nutrition and livelihood support for disparate communities across large areas of Burma (far beyond the country's immediate 'border regions' and often in areas inaccessible to Rangoon-based INGOs). Furthermore, local groups providing assistance in this way have greater freedom than those under State control to address civilian concerns divergent from the SPDC agenda and to support civilian efforts to resist abuse by local authorities. Indeed, much of the success of indigenous organisations providing assistance to communities in Burma cross-border has been due to their ability to evade State control (TBBC 2008: 20-21).

While some of these organisations are linked to armed opposition groups such as the KNU/KNLA, they have become increasingly independent in their administration and project planning. This managerial development means that such 'cross-border' aid groups are now more competent to meet the accountability and transparency requirements of international funders. Furthermore, increased capacity building and logistical support alongside financial grants to these groups can serve to further develop whatever organisational requirements new international funders may have regarding issues of accountability.

It is also important to note that, through their evasion of repressive State control, such 'cross-border' aid groups are able to more freely discuss local concerns with villagers. In this way, they have been able to operate with far more accountability towards the local population than much larger international aid agencies operating under SPDC restrictions. This 'downwards accountability' means that villagers are able to more effectively utilise 'cross-border' aid in support of self-perceived needs and efforts to resist State abuse. Due to their relatively small-scale and grassroots operations, such local groups are also able to operate far more efficiently than large-scale international aid agencies with expensive foreign staff and other high overhead costs.

Incorporating civilian protection into humanitarian relief efforts

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, protection refers to "*all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of individuals in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law, refugee law)*" (Inter-Agency 1999: 4). While most humanitarian agencies operating in Burma and elsewhere have not as of yet become heavily involved in protection efforts, there has, nevertheless, been a global push for greater incorporation of protection measures within the mandates of humanitarian agencies (Inter-Agency 1999: 3). On-the-ground civilian protection is something that needs to be effectively incorporated into all humanitarian and development programmes implemented in Burma due to the sheer pervasiveness of abuse.

In Karen State, protection is particularly pertinent in relation to internal displacement because, as the body of this report has shown, military abuse underpins displacement pressures and, thus, displacement itself. There have also been sustained efforts by Rangoon-based humanitarian agencies to expand their access into "*conflict-affected*" regions of Burma where the highest documented concentrations of IDPs currently reside (South 2008b: 17).

Given that village-level resistance strategies are the most effective protection measures currently employed in Karen State, the key to effective implementation of any civilian protection mandate by international humanitarian agencies is direct and tangible support for villagers' own resistance strategies; support which strengthens villagers' positions in their 'relations of power' with local authorities and increases the options through which they can decide for themselves how to best respond to abuse. As appropriate external support for local resistance strategies inevitably depends on local context, a point of departure would be the establishment of alternative fora free of State control where indigenous communities and community-based organisations can openly engage international humanitarian agencies, discuss their own efforts to resist abuse and proffer initiatives on how these efforts can be practicably supported. On top of this, these agencies must ensure that other aspects of their

humanitarian and protection work, through their strategies of delivery and civilian registration requirements, neither pressure local communities into submitting to abusive forms of State authority, nor undermine the resistance efforts which local communities already employ on a daily basis. As an example, indigenous organisations providing cross-border aid to displaced communities have been particularly effective in addressing issues of protection. Such aid has provided direct support to displaced communities outside of State structures and thus strengthened their position vis-à-vis military personnel and their ability to evade and minimise abuse.

Including villagers' concerns and suggestions in foreign policy planning (roundtables, conferences and think tanks)

In recognition of the limits of current foreign policy on Burma, a number of conferences have recently been held by governments, universities and international NGO networks to discuss and debate innovative ways to encourage positive change in the country. While such discussions can potentially provide fruitful contexts in which progressive foreign policy initiatives can be raised, it is crucial that the voices of Burma's overwhelmingly rural and agrarian population be included. If it is unreasonable, for logistical or other reasons, to expect the attendance of villagers from rural Burma at international roundtables on Burma policy, more effort can be made to canvas the views of rural communities residing in their home areas (or, at the very least, to study the reports of and communicate with those organisations that already do this) prior to such events so that villagers' views on issues can be included and discussed.

As was raised in the introduction to this report, Burma's predominantly rural and agrarian population often have concerns markedly divergent from the issues highlighted within the international media. Were rural villagers to be included in such fora, we might see, for example, reform of agricultural governance move out of its current place on the periphery of ongoing Burma debates and enter the realm of key foreign policy discussions.

Incorporating local voices into international journalism and advocacy

Given the erroneous external depictions examined in chapter two of this report, international journalism and advocacy on contemporary Burma can play an important role in presenting a more comprehensive picture of the current situation; one which elaborates on the context in which abuses occur and challenges harmful stereotypes of villagers as helpless victims. This can be done by incorporating the perspectives and concerns of rural villagers into news articles and advocacy campaigns, including the direct statements of these individuals within these same accounts, increasing the focus on structural abuse and exploitation (rather than isolated incidents of particularly emotive violent abuses) and highlighting the efforts which rural villagers have employed on their own initiative to resist abuse and claim their rights.

Further to this, there needs to be a concerted effort to advocate for the direct participation of villagers themselves in the ongoing political processes which affect them and their communities. Good intentions notwithstanding, external attempts to encourage positive change in Burma cannot effectively precede an honest effort to understand the country's current situation from the perspective of local people themselves.

Involving refugees in potential repatriation negotiations

Negotiations over the repatriation of refugees are an especially salient issue as they involve mass population transfers back into an area where those being repatriated may have a justifiable fear of harassment and other abuse. In such situations, it is obviously refugees themselves who should assess the feasibility of their own return. Donald Steinberg of the International Crisis Group notes the following in relation to the return of IDPs to their homes, but the comment is equally applicable to refugee repatriation:

> "*IDPs themselves are best positioned to know when it is wise and safe to return. They know what they need in terms of*

> *assistance packages, training opportunities, transport and rebuilding of basic social services*" (Steinberg 2008: 70).

The precedent in eastern Burma, however, has been to exclude refugees from such repatriation negotiations. For example, following the January 2004 'gentleman's agreement' ceasefire between now-deposed SPDC Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and then KNU Chairman Bo Mya, the UNHCR entered into negotiations with the SPDC in February 2004 over the issue of preparing for the 'voluntary' return back into eastern Burma of 130,000 Thailand-based refugees. These negotiations were held while the SPDC was simultaneously expanding military operations in Karen State, forcibly relocating civilian populations, seizing villagers' fields to build new army camps and demanding forced labour.[29] By holding repatriation talks at this time, the UNHCR appears to have mistakenly assumed that displacement within and outside of Burma is primarily 'conflict-induced' and thus, being unaffected by ongoing human rights abuses, would have largely ended with a cessation of overt armed conflict between the SPDC and the KNLA. This error could have been quickly clarified by refugees themselves – had they been included in the discussions. Nevertheless, the UNHCR reported that the agency would "*begin providing assistance to improve basic health, education, community services and infrastructure facilities in locations of potential refugee return*" (UNHCR 2004). With the purge of Khin Nyunt in October 2004, however, and the SPDC's intensification of attacks on civilians in northern Karen State at the end of 2005, the SPDC-UNHCR arrangements were never implemented. Nonetheless, it is important to note that no refugees were reportedly involved in these negotiations over their future 'voluntary' return to eastern Burma.[30] As refugees themselves are

[29] On SPDC abuses during the ceasefire period see, for example, KHRG, *Papun and Nyaunglebin Districts: Continued Oppression During the Ceasefire* (September 2004).

[30] In another disquieting incident known as the Halochanee Crisis, Mon refugees were forcibly repatriated during the mid-1990s into an unsafe situation back in eastern Burma while the Thailand office of the UNHCR remained silent (South 2007b: 68).

the single most important stakeholders in the issue, it is crucial for them to be leading parties in any repatriation negotiations and to maintain control over the implementation of any repatriation processes.

Ensuring participation of affected communities in peace processes, tripartite dialogue and other political negotiations

> "*We want peace and we even pray in Church; we pray for peace. All people need peace*."
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 47), L--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

In peace negotiations, as with refugee repatriation negotiations, local villagers are leading stakeholders. As such, it is crucial that they have access to the fora where these negotiations are held. Not only do they have a clear stake in the outcome of such negotiations, but they are often the most aware of the underlying tensions which have fuelled conflict and their support for any peace process is critical. Speaking on the inclusion of IDPs in such processes, International Crisis Group's Donald Steinberg (2008: 70) has again aptly noted,

> "*IDPs are not mere victims of conflict but an essential piece of the puzzle in making and sustaining peace. Peace processes must benefit from their knowledge of local conditions, their power to generate civil society support for agreements, their willingness to return and rebuild stable societies, and their commitment to the future of their countries*."

However, it is also important to recognise that views on peace agreements are, like political views more generally, diverse amongst rural villagers:

> "*As we are villagers, we have to suffer under every army... We want both armies, KNU [KNLA] and SPDC, to stay peacefully.*"
>
> - Saw M--- (male, 55), T--- village, Dooplaya District (June 2006)

> "*Many [Karen] people would have a different opinion, but as for my opinion, we must continue our revolution*."
>
> - Saw P--- (male), Ht--- village, Papun District (Oct 2007)

Such diversity should not be seen as an obstacle to peace negotiations but rather an indication of healthy disagreement amongst the populace. The existence of dissenting views should encourage scepticism of sweeping claims for elite representation and strengthen the argument that the views and concerns of rural villagers should be included in any such political negotiations; their participation is, anyway, crucial for the sustainable success of any peace process.

To conclude this chapter, the above examination has offered but a cursory glance at some opportunities for politically-mindful external engagement in contemporary Burma. What should be evident from these options is that forms of engagement (albeit with political implications) supportive of civilian efforts to address their physical security, humanitarian, socioeconomic and other concerns are possible outside of and before elite political negotiation. Furthermore, where villagers themselves retain control over these inevitably political processes, they are far more likely to effectively address locally-perceived needs. By contrast, an unwillingness to engage with local civilian communities in a manner that strengthens their position in relation to State structures either requires no engagement at all or a form of engagement that risks strengthening already powerful and oppressive actors.

- Twelve -

Conclusion

A significant factor that has obstructed the development of more innovative and just forms of engagement in contemporary Burma has been conventional understandings of what constitutes political action. A narrow conception of politics as the struggle over, and control of, formal State authority has led to missed opportunities for positive engagement by actors across the ideological spectrum.

Averse to partisan support for select political parties or insurgent groups (for the sake of maintaining officially-granted access), a number of UN agencies, INGOs and some foreign governments implementing projects via Rangoon have sought to address humanitarian and socioeconomic issues in isolation of their political context. However, when such engagement is restricted to State-sanctioned measures and neglectful of on-the-ground political implications (in an implausible attempt to implement 'apolitical' assistance programmes amidst a State-society conflict) the risk is great that dissenting civilian voices will simply be excluded from the ongoing political processes which affect them, whilst already powerful actors are able to further entrench their positions of authority.

Likewise, a narrow focus on national-level political reform, dismissive of the possibilities for significantly improving current humanitarian or socioeconomic conditions in Burma, misses opportunities to implement politically-engaged forms of assistance outside of, and prior to, any change in government or elite political negotiation. Furthermore, such a narrow focus on formal State authority and a belief that political change remains dependent on free and fair elections also gives the false impression that politics in Burma has been largely stagnant since 1988. This dismal state of affairs is seemingly reinforced by the current weak and fractured state of 'organised' opposition in the country.

By contrast, what has hopefully become clear over the course of this report is that politics is more than just the struggle over formal

State power. Within a broader understanding of 'everyday politics', the predominantly rural and agrarian villagers of Burma have – through their daily successes at resisting abuse, challenging local expressions of State authority and asserting their dignity – persistently renegotiated power relations despite an absence of institutionalised democracy. By employing indigenously conceived and largely uncoordinated strategies, villagers in Karen State and elsewhere in rural Burma have made tangible achievements in addressing physical security, daily subsistence, livelihood vulnerability, health, education and other social concerns, and have, furthermore, asserted their dignity. In their persistent efforts to claim their rights, these villagers have also rejected the regime's efforts in the realm of ideology to legitimise an exploitative system which goes against their material interests.

These persistent efforts to resist abuse, furthermore, show as false those external representations which depict rural villagers as helpless victims lacking the initiative and capacity to critically assess and concretely respond to their situation. Recognised as active political agents, these individuals cannot be justifiably excluded from the ongoing political processes that affect them; whether these be socioeconomic development projects, humanitarian relief programmes, foreign policy debates on Burma, peace processes, refugee repatriation negotiations or otherwise. Rather, given the inevitably political implications of engagement amidst Burma's current State-society conflict, those seeking to support positive change must begin by listening to the voices of those they wish to assist, seek to understand local conceptions of rights and abuse and support the (albeit political) strategies that local communities are already employing to address these concerns, rather than unilaterally imposing external strategies upon them.

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