



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Report from the field

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SPDC and DKBA extortion and forced labour in Thaton District

Militarisation in practice is not always uniform. As the SPDC and DKBA rotate their army units in Thaton District, western Karen State, villagers confront shifting patterns of authority and abuse. While villagers living around the SPDC's army camp at Yoh Gkla continue to face forced labour, extortion and threats of arbitrary detention and execution, the local SPDC battalion that has been deployed there since July 2008 has patrolled less frequently than its predecessor. This decreased patrolling has led to a weakened ability to enforce movement restrictions on villagers. This report documents incidents which took place between July and October 2008.

Army battallions of the State Peace and Development Coucil (SPDC) operating in Thaton District of western Karen State regularly rotate to different areas of the district approximately every six months. On July 15th 2008, SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) #61 was transferred out of Yoh Gkla army camp and replaced by IB #62, led by battalion commander Win Min Htun and deputy battalion commander Kyaw Thoo Rah. Since the arrival of IB #62, villagers have noted some changes in SPDC operations. While the previous battalion, led by Captain Hlaing Soe, had regularly patrolled the villages in the area and deployed sentries along the road to monitor whether villagers violated movement restrictions, IB #62 has, since its deployment at Yoh Gkla army camp, patrolled amongst local villages much less frequently. This has meant a decreased ability to enforce movement restrictions. Villagers have, therefore, been able to exploit this opening to more freely travel around the area, tend farm fields located outside of their villages, and visit neighbouring communities. IB #62 authorities also told villagers at a monthly Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) meeting that they would begin constructing what will reportedly be a free medical clinic for local residents living in the areas of Yoh Gkla army camp. But it remains to be seen whether the clinic will be ever be completed and, more importantly, whether it will provide the promised services.¹ Despite such relative shifts in local military practice, IB #62 continues to extort money, demand forced labour and arbitrarily detain villagers. There is so far no evidence to suggest that the change in military practice observable at Yoh Gkla is anything other than the idiosyncratic behaviour of a new SPDC commander, especially as the recent patterns of military acivity around Yoh Gkla army camp have not been adopted in any systematic way elsewhere in Karen State.

Extortion

Soldiers of the SPDC and the allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) operating in Thaton District regularly extort materials from villagers living under their control, including

¹ For more information on the inadequate provision of medical services at health clinics and their forced construction in Karen State, see *Development by Decree: The politics of poverty and control in Karen State*, KHRG, April 2007.

money, livestock, agricultural crops and other food. On October 9th 2008, DKBA Brigade #333, Battalion #1, under the control of Battalion Deputy Commander Thaw M'Nah extorted 510,000 kyat (approx. US \$401.57) from 11 different villages in Thaton District. The table below details the village names and amounts given:

#	Village names	Amount of money
1	Noh Law Bplaw	100,000 kyat (US \$78.74)
2	Bpwoh	100,000 kyat (US \$78.74)
3	Htee Pa Doh Kee	50,000 kyat (US \$39.37)
4	Meh Theh	50,000 kyat (US \$39.37)
5	Meh Theh Kee	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
6	Noh Kar Day	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
7	Meh Gk'Na Kee	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
8	Gkyaw Kay Kee	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
9	Htee Gkyaw Kee	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
10	Tar Thoo Kee	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
11	Htee Gkyoo	30,000 kyat (US \$23.62)
	Total	510,000 kyat (US \$401.57)

In previous years, DKBA authorities have exploited the Karen New Year as an excuse to extort money from local villagers.² As a consequence, villagers in Thaton District have told KHRG that they are concerned about being forced to provide funds to the DKBA for the coming Karen New Year's festival which is set to take place on December 27th 2008.

Another common form of extortion employed by SPDC and DKBA soldiers in Thaton District has been to accuse villagers of conspiring with the Karen National Union / Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) and then to intimidate them into giving some form of payment in order to avoid detention or other forms of punishment.³ Such accusations are often unfounded and simply used by the SPDC and DKBA to justify extortion. For example, in Kaw Hai village on September 2nd 2008, DKBA soldier Shwe Aung accused Ko M---, a local villager, of contacting the KNLA. They subsequently imprisoned him. The DKBA then told Ko M---'s family that they would have to pay 120,000 kyat (approx. US \$94.49) for his release or else they would execute him. The family had planned on paying this fee by the end of October.

Forced labour

The SPDC is currently developing a network of roads through Thaton District that will connect to the Asia Highway, a major artery set to pass through the town of Myawaddy in eastern Karen State and then into Thailand. KHRG has previously documented cases of land confiscation and forced labour committed by SPDC forces in order to develop the Thaton section of the Asia Highway.⁴ More recently, from October 3rd to 17th 2008, SPDC authorities in Thaton District forced villagers living in Shwe Yung Bpyan village tract to carry materials, including bags of sand and loads of bricks for use in the road construction. At this time, four individuals were brought in from Bilin town with SPDC soldiers in order to oversee

² See, for example, *Forced Labour, Extortion, and Festivities: The SPDC and DKBA burden on villagers in Pa'an District*, December 2006.

³ Additional cases and information of villagers being accused of contacting the KNU/KNLA are available in the KHRG report, *Villagers responses to forced labour, torture and other demands in Thaton District*, October 2008.

⁴ For more details of the SPDC's construction of the Asia Highway and related cases of land confiscation and forced labour see *Development by Decree: The politics of poverty and control in Karen State*, KHRG, April 2007.

construction, possibly as civil engineers. Each household in the area was required to give the soldiers 300 kyat to pay for curry and rice for these four individuals.



The section of road shown above on May 14th 2008 connects Gkyeh Gkaw, Thay Zay, Bp’Nweh Gkla, Lay Gkay and Yoh Gkla villages in Thaton District. Villagers have been forced to repair this road annually each dry season. [Photo: KHRG]



Saw Gk---, a 13-year-old boy living in Thaton District, cannot attend school because he has to assist with his parents’ work (as shown here on April 19th 2008). Whenever the SPDC or DKBA demand forced labour from his family, he has to go so that his parents can oversee their farm. [Photo: KHRG]

In another forced labour incident in the vicinity of the SPDC’s Yoh Gkla army camp, SPDC IB #62 met with villagers throughout the area on July 29th 2008 and told them they would be required to provide building materials for a perimeter fence and roofs at Yoh Gkla camp. The villagers were forced to collect, prepare and deliver 1,000 bamboo poles and 1,000 thatch shingles to the local SPDC forces.

Conclusion

Viewed within a context of continued forced labour demands, extortion and intimidation, the relatively minor shift in practice by SPDC forces deployed at the Yoh Gkla army camp in Thaton District appears more a function of the commanding officers’ personality than any change in military policy. While a new clinic, if it were to provide any free (or even affordable) services could provide tangible benefits to local communities, such gestures remain inconsistent with widespread policies of civilian control and abuse which underpin the region’s health and livelihoods situation. Any substantive improvement of villagers’ standards of living requires an end to the abusive demands that put physical, economic and emotional strain on residents of Thaton District. In the meantime, external efforts to aid villagers should focus on ways to strengthen their ability to resist such abuses.⁵

For background on the human rights situation in Thaton District see the following reports:

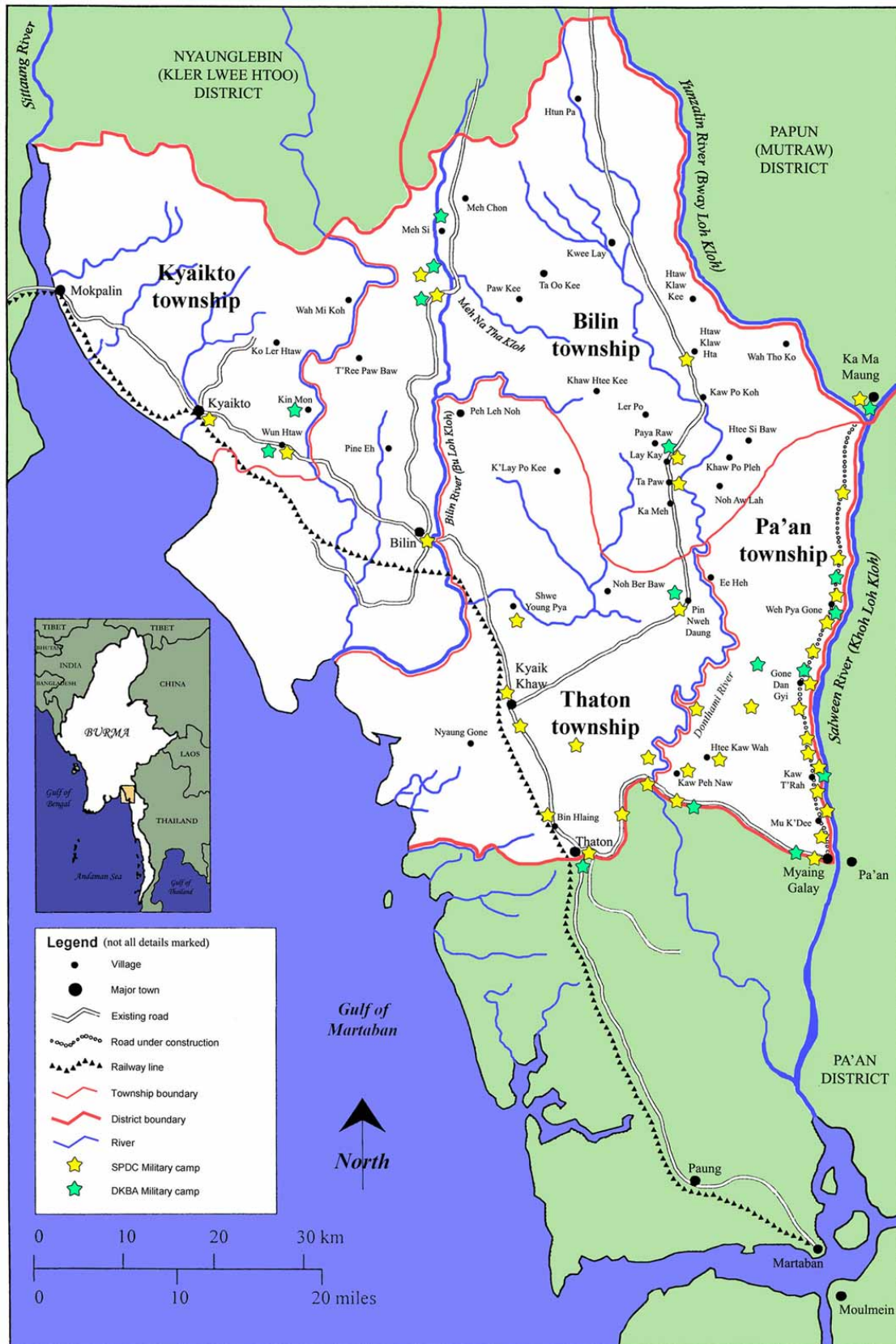
- *Villagers’ responses to forced labour, torture and other demands in Thaton District* (KHRG, October 2008)
- *Oppressed twice over: SPDC and DKBA exploitation and violence against villagers in Thaton District* (KHRG, March 2008)

⁵ For more details of villagers resistance strategies and concrete recommendations to the international community about how these strategies can be supported, see *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008.

- *State agencies, armed groups and the proliferation of oppression in Thaton District* (KHRG, September 2007)
- *The Compounding Consequences of DKBA Oppression: Abuse, poverty and food insecurity in Thaton District* (KHRG, July 2007)

Photos documenting attacks on villages, displacement and other abuses in Thaton District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007*. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at www.khrg.org.

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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Karen Districts



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Scale: 1 cm to 22 km
1 in. to 35 miles