

Report from the field July 1st 2008 / KHRG #2008-F7

Attacks, forced labour and restrictions in Toungoo District

While the rainy season is now underway in Karen state, Burma Army soldiers are continuing with military operations against civilian communities in Toungoo District. Local villagers in this area have had to leave their homes and agricultural land in order to escape into the jungle and avoid Burma Army attacks. These displaced villagers have, in turn, encountered health problems and food shortages, as medical supplies and services are restricted and regular relocation means any food supplies are limited to what can be carried on the villagers' backs alone. Yet these displaced communities have persisted in their effort to maintain their lives and dignity while on the run; building new shelters in hiding and seeking to address their livelihood and social needs despite constraints. Those remaining under military control, by contrast, face regular demands for forced labour, as well as other forms of extortion and arbitrary 'taxation'. This report examines military attacks, forced labour and movement restrictions and their implications in Toungoo District between March and June 2008.

The onset of the rainy season, usually between May and June, marks the start of the paddy cultivation cycle in Karen State and other areas of Burma. It is also the time for the new school year to begin. In much of Toungoo District, however, Burma Army operations have continued despite the rains and have obstructed both planting and study, especially for those internally displaced (IDPs) living hidina. persons in Furthermore, the wet conditions mean the mountain slopes have largely turned to mud and leaches are everywhere.

Displaced villagers in hiding have also been hampered in their cultivation efforts by the Burma Army's continuing



These children were among the newly displaced residents of Sho Koh village who fled their homes when SPDC forces arrived on April 5th 2008. Sho Koh village had previously been outside SPDC control before the arrival of the soldiers. [Photo: KHRG]

application of its shoot-on-sight policy, while those living under military control have had to deal with regular forced labour and draconian movement restrictions that prevent them from freely travelling to their farm fields or to trade and establish relationships with neighbouring communities. In some cases (examined below) violations of movement restrictions have resulted in arrest, fines or execution. With the increased Burma Army presence in Karen State and ongoing construction of new camps and bases many displaced villagers have fled further east towards Karenni State or southeast towards Papun District. Yet given continuing military attacks in these areas, neither offer any more than a marginal increase in security.

Attacks on displaced hiding sites

"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. When they arrived at my village, if they saw pots, plates or spoons they took them with them. The villagers whose property the soldiers took were M---, Naw M---, A---, Mu--- and They also killed two Kh---. villagers whose names were Tar Poh and Saw Pah Bee... Saw Pah Bee had a family and



Displaced villagers from Sho Koh village, shown here on April 5th 2008, after having fled their homes to avoid encroaching SPDC forces. *[Photo: KHRG]*

four children. He was 27 years old. He was killed at Yaw Loh village in Muh Thee Gkwee area. He was killed by the enemy [Burma Army] on Wednesday, March 26th 2008. The name of the commander of that army unit is Thein Win Aung, [SPDC] Light Infantry Battalion #361."

- Saw T--- (male, 35), M--- village, Tantabin township (April 2008)

Burma Army forces operating in Toungoo District have continued military operations against civilians unabated since the end of 2005. Since the start of 2008, Burma Army troops have established new camps in areas of Tantabin and Than Daung townships previously outside their control. At the same time, the Burma Army has maintained its shoot-on-sight policy across much of Toungoo District where it lacks a consolidated hold on the civilian population. These military attacks on villages have included the destruction of homes and farm fields and the looting of property not destroyed in the initial assault.



These two photos show items left behind after a Burma Army attack on displaced villagers in Toungoo District. The broken pot (above left) and other belongings (above right) were photographed on March 20th 2008. *[Photos: KHRG]*

On March 26th 2008, SPDC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #36 operating under Military Operations Command (MOC) #10 attacked Maw Thay Der IDP hiding site where they fired on displaced villagers; killing one in the process. The individual killed was 28-year-old Saw Ah Baw Tha. The other displaced villagers living at Maw Thay Der were able to escape but were unable to bring all of their belongings with them. Soldiers from LIB #36 took with them

upon departure some of the property the villagers had left and destroyed whatever they did not steal. The troops from LIB #36 responsible for this incident remain active in the area of the See Kheh Der vehicle road and Yaw Loh, Saw Tay Der, Saw Mu Der and Koh Loo villages.

According to *Kwekalu*, a Karen-language news agency, SPDC soldiers from LIB #47 who were active in the Htee Wah Day area, shot and injured two villagers from Yer Loh village on May 23rd 2008. The soldiers attacked Yer Loh village in Tantabin township of Toungoo District around 4:00 pm that day. One of those injured was 27-year-old Saw Tar Tay Nay, son of Pa Tee Muang Yoo Heh. The bullet hit and injured his hand. The other villager was 16-year-old Naw Gka Tee, daughter of Pa Tee Saw Thu Thu. Both of her two legs were injured to the point where she was unable to walk.¹

On May 22nd 2008, 42-year-old Saw Koh Koh, a resident of Gklay Kee village and son of Pa Tee Saw Theh Bphweh was detained by SPDC soldiers from MOC #21 who, for apparently no reason, subsequently executed him.



This hill field, shown here on March 14th 2008, remains empty as local villagers have been unable to plant this year's paddy crop due to the presence of SPDC troops in the area. *[Photo: KHRG]*



Villagers abandoned this home in Khoh Kee village due to increased SPDC troop activity in the surrounding area. When this photo was taken on March 20th 2008 some of the building had already collapsed; having been already abandoned for some months. [*Photo: KHRG*]

Forced Labour

"Two villagers had to serve as set tha² [messengers] per day. Sometimes they had to go to the [SPDC] military camp and had to clean the camp or carry water for the soldiers. If they had an emergency trip they ordered the set tha to lead them to the place where they had to go³."

- Saw A--- (male, 57), Gk--- village (April 2008)

¹ "SPDC continues execution in 2nd Brigade," *Kwekalu*, May 27th 2008.

 $^{^{2}}$ Set tha; literally 'messenger' in Burmese, involves relaying orders from army commanders to village heads but also includes other menial tasks at army camps when no messages are in need of delivery.

³ Work as a 'guide' for the SPDC involves leading military patrols through terrain with which they are unfamiliar. It also typically includes walking in front of these same patrols to set off any potential landmines, a practice known as 'human minesweeping' or 'atrocity de-mining', as well as to serve as a shield to deter potential KNLA ambushes.

Forced labour remains pervasive in those areas of Karen State under SPDC military control. In Toungoo District this labour has recently included work as porters carrying rations to army camps and bases, road construction, clearing forest growth from the sides of the roads, constructing buildings at army camps as well as other menial tasks at army camps. As a consequence of persistent forced labour, villagers have not had sufficient time to work for their own household livelihoods. For the mostly agricultural communities of Toungoo District this has reduced harvest yield and thus reduced income from paddy sales and increased debt from purchases of rice and other goods; which would have most likely been unnecessary had the cultivation cycle been undisturbed and harvest yields normal. Villagers are furthermore required to pay arbitrary 'taxes' to local army units and occasionally face unexpected costs like medical bills. According to one Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) researcher active in Toungoo District, there is so much forced labour in the district that not a day goes by without some villagers having to take part in some form of forced labour.

"On February 8th 2008 we had to construct a road. They [SPDC soldiers] didn't feed me anything to eat. We also had to spend a day of our time there. They said the road would be advantageous for the villagers... Again on February 10th 2008, we had to repair his [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 (April 2008)

On March 11th 2008, soldiers belonging to SPDC Military Operations Command (MOC) #10 based at Gklay Soh Kee forced one person from each house in Gklay Soh Kee village to clear the forest growth from the sides of the vehicle road at Naw Soh. Those villagers in possession of motorcycles had to transport sand, stones and bricks with their vehicle to Naw Soh for the construction of a pagoda.

On April 11th 2008, soldiers from SPDC MOC #10, under the command of Ko Ko Lat, forced Saw A---, a resident of Kler La town, to transport military rations and other military supplies with his own truck from Kler La town to Naw Soh military camp. Subsequently on April 12th, officers from MOC #10 ordered Gkaw Thay Der villagers to provide seven motorcycles for the transport of military rations and supplies to Th'Aye Hta military camp. The owners of the motorcycles were as follows:

#	Name	Age
1	Saw T	20
2	Saw Gk	28
3	Saw M	21
4	Saw B	28
5	Saw M	20
6	Saw M	?
7	Saw O	21

Not only did the local SPDC troops force the villagers to use their vehicles to transport military rations and supplies, but they furthermore restricted these same villagers from driving their vehicles outside of their village for their own non-military purposes.

"Yes, we've already portered their rations two times. The first time we had to carry the rations to Gklay Wah. They ordered us to provide 40 people. And the second time was to Maw Gkoh Der. And this time [the second time] we had to provide 60 people to carry the rations. The eldest people were 45 [years old] and the youngest were 14 [years old]... The time when we carried their food to Gklay Wah, we had to spend four days of our time [portering].

We had to bring our own food. When we were sick they didn't provide us with medicine. We had to take care of each other by ourselves. Two people had to carry a big sack [64 kg. / 140.8 lb.] of rice, so we had to divide it up for carrying. For those people who were small the effort was very difficult for them. At that time there were more women than men going to carry the rations. While we slept they [SPDC soldiers] guarded us for our security. Since April 2008 we haven't had a chance to freely travel to our flat fields and hill fields and also we haven't been able to build relationships with other villages. We've just stayed in our village and the other villagers from other villages haven't been able to come to our village."

- Saw A--- (male, 57), Gk--- village (April 2008)

Destruction of cardamom fields

"Some huts were burnt at the same time when they burnt down our cultivation fields."

- Saw A--- (male, 57), Gk--- village (April 2008)

During March and April 2008, Burma Army troops burnt down a series of farm fields and cardamom plantations belonging to villagers in SPDC-controlled areas of Toungoo District reportedly as a means to pressure local communities to comply with demands by local authorities. Cardamom cultivation is a common means of livelihood for villagers in northern Karen State as it can be grown on small plots of land in mountainous areas and is small and durable and thus a convenient trade commodity. The primary order to burn the fields reportedly came from SPDC Southern Command Headquarters earlier in 2008. The destruction of these plantations creates a serious hardship as those villagers who cultivate cardamom typically depend on their crops to support themselves and their families. Some of the cases of cardamom plantation destruction are listed below:

Between March 20th and April 17th 2008, SPDC soldiers from LIBs #361 and #370, under the command of Ko Ko Lat of MOC #10 destroyed approximately 50 acres of cardamom plantations belonging to the following 12 residents of Gkaw Soe Koh village:

#	Villager's name	# of acres burnt
1	Saw H	5
2	Saw S	5
3	Saw T	12
4	Naw A	3
5	Т	2
6	Naw Kh	5
7	Т	3
8	Т	1
9	Hs	5
10	Gk	1
11	Saw R	3
12	Saw T	5

From March 25th until April 15th 2008. soldiers from SPDC LIBs #361, 364, 365, 366, 367 and 368, all also under command of the MOC #10 camp commander Ko Ko Lat, which were taking security for Kler La town destroyed 283 acres of cardamom plantations belonging to 64 local villagers.

Between April 8th and April 20th 2008, SPDC soldiers from LIB #361 burnt down a total of 102 acres of cardamom plantations as well as farm field huts belonging to residents of

Gkaw Thay Der village. The Gkaw Thay Der villagers whose fields and huts were burned are as follows:

#	Villager's name	# of acres burnt
1	Saw G	4
2	Saw Kh	12
3	Saw S	3
4	Naw N	4
5	Saw W	5
6	Saw Bp	5
7	Saw T	3
8	Naw P	4
9	Saw B	7
10	Saw B	6
11	Saw S	4
12	Saw E	5
13	Saw S	10
14	Saw Gk	7
15	Saw T	5
16	Saw T	12
17	Naw P	6

"[The incident occurred] because I accompanied the secretary⁴ out of the village. She was sent here by the government. She didn't like staying in Kler La village. She was worried about her old mother who was left with her brother in her village. Another reason is that she didn't receive her monthly salary on time. When I left the village with the secretary, he [the local SPDC officer] came to my house and asked for me. My wife told him that I had accompanied the secretary [back] to her village. He [the SPDC officer] became angry with me, so he burnt my cardamom field... After they [the soldiers] had burnt down my cardamom field they didn't allow me to go out [of the village]. If I went out, they accused me of belonging to 'tha bon' [Karen National Union (KNU)]. Now I just stay in my house. They always come to check on me at my house... Throughout my life I've been able to raise my family with my cardamom field. I've had nothing [else]. I've only had a cardamom field. Now I can't do anything because they burnt down all of my cardamom plants in the field. I'm very sad about it. Every year, I got money from it [the cardamom plantation]. I didn't need to worry for my daily food. But now I don't know what I must do for my family."

- Saw H--- (male, 40), ---- village (April 2008)

"After they [SPDC soldiers] burnt down our cardamom fields they spread the news that the rebels [KNU] had burnt down the villagers' cardamom. They wrote it in Burmese language and staked the letter onto trees. In reality, it wasn't true."

- Saw P--- (male, 39), K---- village (April 2008)

⁴ A 'secretary' is an SPDC-assigned post which involves serving in a village (from which they are not a local resident) and reporting back to township SPDC authorities about village activities.

Movement restrictions and their impact on villagers' livelihoods

"We've had to face food problems. It's very difficult for us to get food and very difficult to get money. If the situation isn't good, we're unable to work for a long time. We can only work in the workplace [farm field] once or twice a month, or sometimes once a week."

- Saw L--- (male, 23), M--- village, Tantabin township (April 2008)

As large areas of Toungoo remain outside the consolidated control of the SPDC, Burma Army forces have enforced heavy movement restrictions on local communities and applied a shoot-on-sight policy outside of SPDC-controlled villages. These movement restrictions obstruct villagers' efforts to tend farm fields located outside of the village proper, to collect firewood, naturally available foods and stream water, and to trade with neighbouring communities. Nevertheless, some villagers attempt to evade these restrictions in order to maintain their livelihoods, meet subsistence needs, or visit friends and relatives outside of their village. Those caught doing so, however, have been arrested and fined or shot and killed on sight. As an example, on April 8th 2008, the SPDC soldiers operating around Kler La town spotted Saw Kru Kra, a 35-year-old resident of Kler La. The soldiers reportedly shot and killed him on the spot. Saw Kru Kra had no family. A group of 15 villagers from the nearby area found his body in a valley. The soldiers allowed the villagers to bury the dead body.

In an earlier instance between March 4th to 5th 2008, a group of villagers from Pya Ka village went to a nearby mountainside to collect firewood. After they had collected some pieces of wood they were spotted and subsequently arrested by the SPDC soldiers. The soldiers ordered them to deliver all of the wood which they had collected to a nearby SPDC Army camp. The soldiers also fined the villagers 20,000 kyat for each cart of firewood they had collected. The villagers who had been collecting the wood and who were subsequently fined had come from Chaw Kya, Shwe Nya Kin, Zee Phyu Taung, Nah Ywa and Nah Tar Goo villages.

As of June 2008, two villagers from Toungoo District, 25-year-old Maw Ywa Doh and 16year-old Bpaw Lee Gka, have been imprisoned for one year. SPDC soldiers from Infantry Battalion #73 arrested these two villagers on June 9th 2007 when they were in the process of ploughing their fields. The SPDC soldiers accused the two villagers of sending rations to the KNU, detained them on the spot and sent them to Toungoo prison in Toungoo town where they still remain.

"I really want to say that for us civilians, we need peace and freedom of movement. If we were able to work freely and could go anywhere freely, then we could earn our livelihood very well. As I said before, if the situation becomes worse and worse, there will be a big problem and difficulties for us. It will be very difficult for us to get even a single mouthful of rice."

- Saw L--- (male, 37), P--- village (April 2008)

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

- SPDC spies and the campaign to control Toungoo District (March 2008)
- Militarisation, violence and exploitation in Toungoo District (February 2008)
- SPDC troops burn villages and step up operations against civilians in southern Toungoo District (December 2007)
- Villagers risk arrest and execution to harvest their crops (December 2007)
- Landmines, Killings and Food Destruction: Civilian life in Toungoo District (August 2007)

- Provoking Displacement in Toungoo: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks (May 2007)
- Bullets and Bulldozers: The SPDC offensive continues in Toungoo District (February 2007)
- One Year On: Continuing Abuses in Toungoo District (November 2006)
- Toungoo District: The civilian response to human rights violations (August 2006)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2006*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <u>http://www.khrg.org</u>



