



**Report from the Field**

October 15, 2009 / KHRG #2009-F18

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## **Starving them out: Food shortages and exploitative abuse in Papun District**

*As the 2009 rainy season draws to a close, displaced villagers in northern Papun District's Lu Thaw Township face little prospect of harvesting sufficient paddy to support them over the next year. After four straight agricultural cycles disrupted by Burma Army patrols, which continue to shoot villagers on sight and enforce travel and trade restrictions designed to limit sale of food to villagers in hiding, villagers in northern Papun face food shortages more severe than anything to hit the area since the Burma Army began attempts to consolidate control of the region in 1997. Consequently, the international donor community should immediately provide emergency support to aid groups that can access IDP areas in Lu Thaw Township. In southern Papun, meanwhile, villagers report ongoing abuses and increased activity by the SPDC and DKBA in Dwe Loh and Bu Thoh townships. In these areas, villagers report abuses including movement restrictions, forced labour, looting, increased placement of landmines in civilian areas, summary executions and other forms of arbitrary abuse. This report documents abuses occurring between May and October 2009.*

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Concentrated attacks by joint Burma Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces on Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Papun District have been predicted since KNLA 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade lost control of three camps in Pa'an during June 2009.<sup>1</sup> To date, KHRG researchers have not reported a significant increase in armed conflict. They have, however, reported increased military activity in the government-controlled areas of southern Papun. These activities include increased army patrols, planting of landmines in civilian areas, forced labour, restrictions on travel and trade, arbitrary violence and summary executions.



The photo, taken on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009, shows displaced villagers in Papun District as they carry food supplies obtained from an aid group near the Thai-Burma border.

[Photo: KHRG]

The recent increase in abuse by the SPDC and DKBA has prompted at least 30 villagers to flee northwards, to areas in northern Papun's Lu Thaw Township already populated by high concentrations of internally displaced people (IDPs). These newly displaced villagers are arriving in an area that has been facing food shortages since the State Peace and Development

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the loss of KNLA positions in Pa'an, see Brian McCarten, "Victory over the KNU, new order on the Thai-Burma border," *Mizzima*, July 5th 2009. For predictions of a increased conflict in Papun, see Saw Yan Naing. "Villagers Fear September Offensive," *The Irrawaddy*, August 2009; Saw Yan Naing. "DKBA Takes Aim at Brigade 5," *The Irrawaddy*, October 2009.

Council (SPDC) began an offensive in northern Karen State during February 2006.<sup>2</sup> As the 2009 rainy season agricultural season draws to a close with prospects for only a very limited harvest, veteran researchers, relief workers and community leaders say that IDPs already hiding in Lu Thaw are amidst a food crisis more severe than anything suffered since 1997, when thousands of villagers began to be displaced by SPDC attempts to consolidate control of the region.

## Food shortages and a deliberately damaged harvest

*“The hunger that villagers face now is more serious than any crisis that villagers have faced since 1997. In 1997, the Burmese government used only the army to attack villagers and took control of a few areas. Some villagers fled to Thailand, but the remaining villagers were helped once or twice by KORD [Karen Office of Relief and Development], CIDKP [Committee for International Displaced Karen People] plus other CBOs; later the villagers could support themselves again. Due to the SPDC offensive in Northern Karen state [starting in 2006], the army not only attacks villagers, also now the army controls more land, cuts connections between villages and patrols near hiding sites. Following this, the villagers haven’t had enough land to farm and [there are] fewer places to hide.”*

- Saw L---, KORD relief coordinator (October 2009)

Beginning during November 2005, KHRG began reporting significant military build-up and concentrated attacks on villagers in Toungoo District, which by February 2006 had spread to nearby Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts. Since then, the SPDC has systematically attempted to consolidate control of these northern Karen areas by forcibly relocating thousands of villagers to military-controlled relocation sites. Thousands of villagers that have instead chosen to flee into hiding in the area’s forested upland areas are now targeted by Burma Army and DKBA patrols, who shoot villagers on sight as well as employ other tactics designed to force them out of hiding, including burning villages, farm fields and food stores.



This photo, taken on May 18<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows villagers from B--- village, Buh Tho Township, as they work together to cultivate a hillside paddy field. SPDC and DKBA abuse has prevented villagers from regularly accessing paddy fields elsewhere in Papun District, contributing to severe food shortages that some are describing as worse than anything seen for more than a decade. [Photo: KHRG]

The Burma Army has successfully deployed these tactics – in a campaign referred to by KHRG as the ‘Northern Karen State Offensive’<sup>3</sup> – to significantly undermine food security for villagers. Prior to 2006, Burma Army attempts to extend into northern Karen areas were cyclical, typically only occurring during the winter and hot seasons and subsiding again during the monsoon rains. Villagers have sometimes likened these attacks to a hot wind blowing through the area, painful and difficult to withstand but survivable if one could wait it out. Since 2006, however, Burma Army troops have sustained their attacks through all seasons, setting up and occupying camps near IDP hiding areas and conducting patrols year round.

<sup>2</sup> See, *Food Crisis: The cumulative impact of abuse in rural Burma*, KHRG, April 2009.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the northern Karen State offensive, see *One Year On: Continuing abuses in Toungoo District*, KHRG, November 2006.

The consistent Burma Army presence has disrupted normal agricultural cycles for villagers, who were in the past able to farm and produce food supplies during the rainy season and then rely on them through periods of SPDC dry season activity. Since 2006, however, villagers have been unable to regularly access farms, causing them to miss crucial stages in the planting season and leaving their fields vulnerable to disease, weeds and destruction by insects and wild animals.

*“All of us can’t get enough rice. Almost everyone had finished their rice [stores]. There are some who can continue one month longer. There’s no way to get enough food for the whole year. I don’t know how to give advice. Just as we experienced in the past, we have to look after each other. If we can find paid labour, we will do it. It’s because of the SPDC that we can’t work very well and there’s not enough space for everyone to prepare hill fields. So, the problem of food shortages happens.”*

Saw Th--- (male, 51), Gk--- village, Lu Thaw Township (Feb 2009)

*“We couldn’t get enough rice because the SPDC came and [we] dared not work in good places [where there was sufficient arable land]. All the places that are good for growing rice are located close to SPDC camps. The places we stay now are not good [for growing rice]. We don’t dare to go and look for food freely because of the SPDC. If we go somewhere and we meet with them [the SPDC], they shoot us.”*

- Saw M--- (male, 47), G--- village, Lu Thaw Township (Feb 2009)

For villagers in northern Papun, three full agricultural periods have now passed without the ability to effectively farm. Though SPDC activity decreased in some areas from December 2008 to May 2009, it was not enough for villagers to regularly access farm areas. Moreover, even though the Burma Army abandoned 13 camps in Lu Thaw Township during December 2008, villagers were mostly afraid to farm arable land near these camps because of patrols that continued to return. October signals the approach of the 2009 harvest period, and villagers say that they do not expect to reap paddy sufficient to support them for more than a few months. This will be the fourth harvest season since the Northern Karen State Offensive began disrupting farming in Lu Thaw.



These photos, taken on February 30<sup>th</sup> 2009, show hill fields belonging to residents of Kh--- village, Lu Thaw Township. In order to cultivate paddy in this area, villagers have had to carefully monitor the movements of SPDC soldiers based at a nearby camp. [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers predict a weak harvest in 2009 for five main reasons. First, available land is shrinking while demands for land continue to increase. The number of IDPs in hiding in Lu Thaw continues to increase even as the SPDC has steadily expanded areas it can effectively operate or threaten operations in Lu Thaw, limiting areas that IDPs can regularly access for farming. Second, not all of the land in IDP hiding areas is suitable for rotational hillside agriculture. Third,

land that is suitable for paddy cultivation is becoming increasingly depleted of nutrients. A typical family would normally expect to farm a 5 hectare (12.35 acre) field<sup>4</sup> for 2 or 3 years before leaving it fallow for up to 7 years so that soil can recover and replenish nutrients.<sup>5</sup> As IDP hiding areas have become more populated, space for families to rotate fields has become more difficult. When one considers that a given family actually needs significantly more land than it farms at any given moment to sustainably support itself, it becomes clear that the current concentrations of IDPs in Lu Thaw would likely struggle to support themselves in the best of circumstances. Fourth, circumstances have not been good; villagers report that the weather in 2009 has not been suitable for growing paddy. Fifth, villagers say that Burma Army patrols and movement restrictions have prevented them from maintaining and nurturing their fields as necessary.

The difficulty villagers who have chosen to avoid living under SPDC control have supporting themselves does not appear to be lost on Burma Army forces in the area. Villagers leaving SPDC-controlled areas are prevented from carrying more than a small tin of rice. This prevents IDPs from travelling to SPDC-controlled areas to purchase food supplies, or villagers from SPDC-controlled areas from meeting IDPs in 'jungle markets' where villagers often meet to exchange goods and news. The Burma Army is, in other words, starving out villagers who remain in hiding.

Villagers already displaced and in hiding are not in a position to provide support for themselves, in spite of their best efforts, nor are they prepared to support newly arrived displaced people. Influx of new IDPs has placed further strains on already limited and overtaxed farmland. On August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 for instance, 30 villagers in five families from Ny--- and Dt--- villages, M--- village tracts, Bu Though Township, left their homes in an SPDC-controlled area to hide in the forest near Bw--- village tract. These villagers already faced difficult livelihood circumstances due to exploitative abuse by the SPDC and DKBA. Already drawing from limited resources, they could also only carry limited food supplies during flight. Because the farming season is too far advanced in August, these families would not be able to produce food supplies sufficient to last them through the winter and summer seasons until the next planting period in May and June.

## Consequences for children, education and health

*"Usually sickness causes more problems for children. Children are getting colds and runny noses. Sometimes they've suffered stomach aches. Older people don't usually get sick."*

- Saw M--- (male, 47), G--- village, Lu Thaw Township (Feb 2009)

*"We had fields to farm. We couldn't work very so we couldn't get enough rice. Now we have people with problems like getting sick, but we have no one to look after them. We ourselves have to treat these illnesses."*

Saw K--- (male, 20), Gk---village, Lu Thaw Township (Feb 2009)

The chronic food shortages in Papun mean that villagers are more vulnerable to health problems, with children among the most affected. In September, villagers began reporting incidence of a "mysterious" disease, describing symptoms akin to a serious and rapidly progressing flu. On September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009, the Karen Teachers Working Group reported that the

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Burma Ethnic Research Group, 60% of farmers in Karen State cultivate agricultural land of less than 5 hectares (12.35 acres). See, *Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma*. Burma Ethnic Research Group, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on the traditional agricultural practices of Karen villagers in upland areas, see *Village Agency: Rural Rights and Resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008.

Th'Dah Der village middle school had been closed on September 7<sup>th</sup> because 300 students had become sick.<sup>6</sup> On the same day, *The Irrawaddy* reported that the Backpack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) had sent a team of medics to the area to treat victims and determine the nature of the illness, which BPHWT described as involving sore throats, coughs and high fevers of 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). KHRG has not been able to confirm the nature of the disease, but field researchers sent to the area say that 7 villages with a population of 1,476 people have been affected. The villages include Ta Da Der, Ta Oh Der, Ta Kaw Toh Baw, Tay Muh Der, Htee Shee Kee, Bp'Deh Der and Thoo Bpo Kee, all in Lu Thaw Township. On October 12<sup>th</sup> 2009, BPHWT released a statement saying that it was working with residents of 8 villages and an affected population of 2,000. In the same statement, the group said that tests retrieved from Lu Thaw and processed in Thailand indicate that the symptoms are explained as seasonal human influenza with an “*unusual seasonal peak*.”<sup>7</sup>

In spite of resource shortages, IDPs in Lu Thaw have been able to operate some schools, though on limited schedules and not for full school years. In some cases, schools have been temporary bamboo shelters or natural clearings near forest hiding sites. Cross-border support from groups in Thailand has enabled some schools to operate more effectively, even in cases where families are unable to continue supporting their children. In N--- village tract, Lu Thaw Township, for instance, the Thaw Khee Der school is able to provide education for 39 students whose families can no longer feed them. Of the total, 11 are under 9 years old, 15 are between 10 and 14 years old and 13 are between 15 and 18. In other places, such as Kay Bpoo village tract, fewer families are sending their children to school than in 2008. These families say they must rely on their children to help look for food in the forest.



This photo, taken on March 28<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows children from the N--- village tract, Lu Thaw Township. These children no longer have parents, and could not attend school without outside support from groups based in Thailand. *Photo: KHRG*



This photo, taken on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows children from L--- village tract, Lu Thaw Township. They are now longer able to attend school because their families are struggling to find food. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## Increased SPDC and DKBA activity in southern Papun

Beginning in mid-May, SPDC and DKBA forces increased activity in Bu Tho and Dweh Loh townships, issuing new movement restrictions, demanding food and supplies and conscripting villagers as porters and forced labourers. During May, soldiers from SPDC Light Infantry Division (LID) #11 and DKBA Special Battalion #777 (also called Gk'saw Wah, or 'White

<sup>6</sup> “Mysterious Illness Closes Mutraw Middle School,” Karen Teacher Working Group, September 2009.

<sup>7</sup> “Statement by BPHWT regarding on FLU out-break in Papun District, Karen state, Burma,” Back Pack Health Worker Team, October 2009. On file with KHRG. Two weeks earlier, the Burma Campaign UK had suggested the symptoms might be those of H1N1 ‘Swine Flu.’ See, “Serious Illness Hits Kachin and Karen Children,” Burma Campaign UK, September 2009.

Elephant' Battalion) briefly attempted to clear the Maw Low River area in Dweh Loh Township of KNLA 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade Battalion #102. DKBA soldiers were led by Officer Pah Nah Dee. Based upon KHRG radio monitoring, KNLA soldiers made radio contact with the DKBA and warned them not to cross the Maw Low River. The joint SPDC/DKBA force did not cross the Maw Low River, though it remained active among villages to the southeast of the river, where it planted landmines and issued movement restrictions.

At the end of July, KHRG researchers report that DKBA activity in Bu Tho and Dweh Loh decreased while commanding officers returned to the group's central headquarters at Myaing Gyi Ngoo for a large meeting. In September, however, the group resumed activity along with the Burma Army. SPDC soldiers in Bu Tho and Dweh Loh are in Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) #212, 216, 219, 243 and 434 all under the command of LID #11,<sup>8</sup> led by Commander Than Htunt headquartered at the Lay Kay army camp in Thaton District. DKBA troops cooperating with Burma Army soldiers are from Brigade #333, Special Battalion #666 and the Gk'saw Wah Special Battalion #777. Reports of increased DKBA and SPDC activity in Lu Thaw have also been confirmed by the Karen Information Center (KIC), which reported on September 23<sup>rd</sup> that an offensive had begun against KNLA 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade.<sup>9</sup>

## Movement restrictions, summary execution and landmines

*"When they [Burma Army soldiers] entered the village, they ate villagers' animals and planted landmines near the village. Villagers got injured by the SPDC landmines. They [Burma Army soldiers] didn't give any payment for what they took."*

Saw Ht--- (male, 56), Gk--- village, Lu Thaw Township (Feb 2009)

SPDC and DKBA soldiers continue to enforce stringent movement restrictions on villagers across Bu Tho and Dweh Loh townships. Villagers have reported travel restrictions in Th---, KI-- , P---, K---, KI---, L---, Th---, T---, Ht---, Me1---, Bp---, Ma---, Me2--- and Me3--- villages.<sup>10</sup> Residents of these villages have long been under nightly curfews, while they also report sometimes being put on a blanket, 24-hour restriction in which they are not allowed to leave their villages for weeks at a time. Life under such movement restrictions disrupts agricultural cycles much as the armed patrols undermine farming for villagers hiding in Lu Thaw Township. Villagers in Bu Tho and Dweh Loh risk being arrested, tortured and summarily executed as accused KNLA supporters if caught violating the movement restrictions, even if only to tend to their farms. Left uncared for, crops are vulnerable to wild animals, bugs and disease while crucial moments in the agricultural period are missed.

On June 19<sup>th</sup> 2009, for instance, soldiers from Burma Army LIB #243 led by Deputy Battalion Commander Thaw Hteh Oo based in Gkay Gkho military camp, Dweh Loh Township, placed villagers in Ma--- village tract under movement restrictions. Villagers were ordered not to leave their villages and warned that they would be treated as 'rebels' and shot on sight if encountered by soldiers outside. Villagers have not been able to access their farms since this time, guaranteeing that their crops have been destroyed. In G--- village, crops in twelve hill-fields and

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<sup>8</sup> SPDC Light Infantry Divisions, as with Military Operations Commands, are typically made up of 10 battalions and command their operations in combat areas.

<sup>9</sup> "Offensive starts in KNU Brigade 5," Karen Information Center, September 2009.

<sup>10</sup> This report includes reference to a number of villages with similar names. Typical KHRG practice is to retain the first initial of village names while obscuring the rest with a series of three dashes. In this case, for the purpose of clarity, "Me1--- village," "Me2 --- village," etc. have been used rather than four or more instances of "Me---."

twelve wet paddy fields are confirmed have been ruined. This ensures that the households of twenty-four local villagers will not have paddy during the coming year.<sup>11</sup>

On September 18<sup>th</sup>, a 17-year-old villager from Meh Gkoo Htar, Bu Thoh Township, was shot after he failed to hail to a checkpoint. According to KIC, the boy was both deaf and mute.<sup>12</sup> In the same update, KIC also reported that DKBA soldiers led by Pah Nah Dee shot and killed Saw Htoh Gkoh, 35 years old, as he worked on his betel nut plantation outside Htee Doh Htar village. Htee Doh Htar has been under full SPDC control since 1995, but Saw Htoh Gkoh was in violation of a movement restriction and the soldiers accused him of making contact with the KNLA.

On September 27<sup>th</sup> 2009, two villagers from Way Sa village in Bu Tho Township were accused of making contact with the KNLA, taken by soldiers to a camp used by LIB #434 and then executed. The victims were Saw Hah Nay, a 28-year-old Karen man and Ah Ka Ma, a 35-year-old Muslim.

Two days later, on September 29<sup>th</sup>, Burma Army LIB #434 accused, arrested and executed three more villagers from Way Sa village. The victims were Ah Sa, a (different) 30-year-old Muslim man, and La Myint and Win Gyi, 20 and 32-year-old Burmese men.

Villagers also report that from May until June and again since September the DKBA has increased the number of landmines it has placed in civilian areas throughout Bu Tho and Dweh Loh townships. According to the villagers, they are not being notified of the location of the new landmines, which are on busy paths used by villagers, in farm field huts, around paddy fields and along the banks of canals. According to a report from a KHRG field researcher in September, one of these newly placed landmines recently killed Saw Pah Bploh, 50 years old, as he walked home from tending to his buffalo near Me4--- village tract, Bu Tho Township. *"They don't inform villagers where the landmines are,"* said the researcher. *"It causes big problems for villagers. Now they do not dare to go and work... in their fields."*

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, two buffalo and a dog owned by villagers from T--- village in Me4--- village tract, Bu Thoh Township, were killed by landmines planted by soldiers of DKBA Special Battalion #666 under the command of Saw Ba Thay. Every village in Me4--- village tract is currently occupied by DKBA soldiers, who are requiring villagers to do daily 'set tha' messenger duty.<sup>13</sup> Paths connecting Me4--- village and Me3--- were also mined by the DKBA in September, cutting people off from the neighbouring village tract. The DKBA is apparently attempting to limit flows of information from SPDC controlled areas to Me4---, which it believes to be accessed by the KNLA.

## Arbitrary violence

Villagers in government-controlled areas frequently report arbitrary violence by SPDC and DKBA soldiers. These incidents should be recognised as sharing a distinct character that distinguishes them from violence that KHRG usually refers to as extrajudicial or summary. In incidents of the latter type, such as summary or extrajudicial execution, soldiers punishing or killing villagers do so while providing allegations of KNLA support or other excuses that they

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<sup>11</sup> These households are headed by Saw N---, Saw T---, Saw T'G---, Saw H---, Saw S---, Saw A---, Saw M---, Saw Ma---, Saw Maw---, Saw Y---, Saw M---, Saw G---, Saw T---, Saw S---, Saw K---, Saw P---, Saw M---, Saw A---, Saw B---, Saw P---, Saw M---, Saw K---, Naw W--- and Saw H---.

<sup>12</sup> KIC, September 2009.

<sup>13</sup> 'Set tha' is a Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases and serving as a go-between to deliver orders from army officers to village heads, but also involving other menial tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

believe to legitimate the violence. These abuses are arbitrary insofar as they are subject to the whim of particular officers or soldiers rather than a legal code or process by which villagers can present a defence. In many cases the allegations are specious or potentially cynical cover for other motives.<sup>14</sup> Still, it is useful to highlight the difference between cases where the SPDC or DKBA feel compelled to provide at least a nominal legitimating explanation for violent abuse, and cases in which no explanation is provided at all. Cases of the latter type serve to effectively highlight the fact that military personnel operate with such impunity they do not necessarily feel compelled to provide even the most cursory justification for violent abuse.

On July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009, for instance, Deputy Battalion Commander Tin Win and soldiers under his command from DKBA Brigade #333 Column #1 entered D--- village, Me3--- village tract, Bu Tho Township. Upon arrival in D--- village, Tin Win called a meeting with area villagers. As the meeting opened, most of the villagers in attendance greeted Commander Tin Win with the Burmese language phrase “*Nyein chan ba say*,” meaning ‘peace be with you.’ This is the phrase villagers are typically required to use when greeting DKBA officers. On this day, however, Saw N--- greeted officer Tin Win with the casual Karen language phrase “*Gaw Ler Gay*,” meaning ‘good morning.’ In response, Saw Tin Win ordered Saw Naw Day to be bound, kicked and punched him repeatedly and then left him with a cut and badly bruised face and potentially broken left arm.

On August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, soldiers from DKBA Brigade #333 Battalion #1 led by Saw Pah Mee conducted an extensive search for a deserter along the road to Ma Htaw village, Dweh Loh Township. During the search, a DKBA truck carrying officer Saw Pah Mee encountered a truck owned by U A---, who was transporting wood for bridge repairs. Saw Pah Mee ordered U A--- to make way for the DKBA column, but the villager could not move his truck far enough off the road because heavy rains had made the ground muddy and soft. At this point, Saw Pah Mee pulled U A--- out of his truck, threw him to the ground and beat him with a piece of wood meant for bridge repairs. Saw Pah Mee then un-holstered his pistol as if to kill U A---, but the villager’s profuse apologies were sufficient to convince him to put away his weapon without firing. The DKBA column then proceeded on towards Ma Htaw village.

## Forced labour, ‘taxation’ and looting

*“The DKBA demands that we pay ‘porter fees’ for three months and 10,000 kyat [US \$9.40] per month. The last time I paid them was February 25<sup>th</sup> 2009. I had to go and give [money] to the village head. The person who demands these porter fees is Saw Hser Htih. He’s a company commander based in Papun at Ah Naunt Beh Gka... On February 15<sup>th</sup> the DKBA demanded 150 thatch shingles. We had to send them to the W--- village head.”*

- Saw P--- (male, 62), G--- village, Papun District (March 2009)

Villagers living in government-controlled areas continue to report exploitative abuse by the SPDC and DKBA, including demands for forced labour providing materials as well as acting as porters, guides and ‘human minesweepers.’ Villagers also report looting by DKBA soldiers, who have entered homes and taken cash and jewellery as well as food, household supplies and equipment.

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<sup>14</sup> This is the argument made by villagers in Wah Gka, where village headman Oo Soe Myint was executed by DKBA officer Shwe Ah See, Brigade #999 Loyalty Battalion #1, on August 27<sup>th</sup> 2009. Though the DKBA publically stated that Oo Soe Myint had been arrested for contacting the KNLA, local sources say Shwe Ah See owed personal debts to Oo Soe Myint, which he did not want to pay. For more on this incident, see “Abuse in Pa’an District, Insecurity in Thailand: The dilemma for new refugees in Tha Song Yang,” KHRG, September 2009.

On May 8<sup>th</sup> 2009, for instance, a joint force of SPDC and DKBA soldiers entered Me3--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, and began issuing demands for food, money and porters. The force was made up of 70 soldiers from Burma Army LIB #219 under the command of Deputy Battalion Commander Aung Zaw Oo and 45 soldiers from DKBA Battalion #777. LIB #219 demanded one goat, 5 viss (8 kgs./17.5 lbs.) of pork and 2 chickens. Based on local prices, the meat and livestock were worth 40,000 kyat (US \$37.56). The DKBA soldiers demanded 20,000 kyat (US \$18.78) in cash, and then ordered the head of Me3--- village tract not to inform their superiors that they had taken the money.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, the joint force left Me3--- village tract and forced the village tract head and five other villagers to porter supplies and accompany them to Me5--- village. Upon arriving in Me5--- later that day, soldiers demanded goods valuing 61,000 kyat (US \$52.28), including another goat, 1 basket (25 kgs./55.2 lbs.) of rice and 18 more chickens. The soldiers then released the porters from Me3--- village, ordered fifteen villagers from Me5--- to replace them and left the village.

On June 11<sup>th</sup> 2009, Burma Army soldiers from LIB #243 led by Deputy Battalion Commander Thaw Hteh Oo based out of Gkay Gkoh camp, Dweh Loh Township, forced 22 villagers from Koo Thoo Htah village and 29 villagers from Gkay Gkoh village to carry paddy. The villagers taken as porters by LIB #243 were gone for two days.

Elsewhere, villagers are required to pay porter fees rather than provide labourers to carry goods. In Gkyoh Klee Loh village area, DKBA Gk'saw Wah Special Battalion #777 Deputy Commander Saw Hser Htih has been demanding porter fees since November 2008. Large villages must pay 15,000 kyat (US \$14.08). Villages with fewer households must pay 8,500 kyat (US \$8).



This photo, taken on April 19<sup>th</sup> 2009, shows villagers from M--- village as they prepare to carry thatch shingles for SPDC soldiers based at M--- army camp. *Photo: KHRG]*



This photo, taken on April 9<sup>th</sup> 2009, pictures Naw M---, from M--- village, as she shows her strong box, which was looted by SPDC soldiers. *[Photo: KHRG]*

During a period of just over a week, from May 10<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>, soldiers from DKBA Special Battalion #666, lead by Pah Nah Dee, demanded large amounts of paddy from residents of Me4--- and Me5--- village tracts, Bu Tho Township. Paddy provided by villagers without compensation shown in the table below:

#	Villagers' name	Items taken	Amount
1	Saw P---	Paddy	30 baskets
2	Saw W---	Paddy	90 baskets
		Husked rice	11 baskets
3	Saw G---	Paddy	120 baskets
4	Saw P---	Paddy	45 baskets

5	Saw N---	Paddy	165 baskets
6	Saw P---	Paddy	70 baskets
7	Saw P---	Paddy	50 baskets
		Husked rice	4 baskets

In addition to making ad hoc demands for food support, soldiers in government-controlled areas enter the homes of villagers and take personal belongings. On May 12<sup>th</sup> 2009, DKBA Soldiers from Special Battalion #666 led by Pah Nah Dee entered KI--- village and took property belonging to two villagers. Goods taken by the soldiers are shown in the table below:

#	Items taken	Approximate value
1	5 gold rings	---
2	5 gold earrings	---
3	1 gold necklace	---
4	13 pots	---
5	Cash	350,000 kyat
6	4 bowls of rice	---
7	50 cubits <sup>15</sup> of rope	500,000 kyat

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2009, the same soldiers took the following goods from Saw W--- in Ht--- village, Bu Tho Township:

#	Items taken	Approximate value
1	1 box	300,000 kyat
2	2 boxes	250,000 kyat
3	3 boxes	180,000 kyat
4	3 big pots	120,000 kyat
5	10 small pots	80,000 kyat
6	15 plates	60,000 kyat
7	1 rice mill	-----

On May 18<sup>th</sup> 2009, Soldiers from DKBA Special Battalion #666 under the command of Pah Nah Dee took still more property, this time from Saw P--- in Bp--- village, Bu Tho Township. Goods taken by the soldiers are shown in the table below:

#	Items taken	Approximately cost
1	7 small pots	34,000 kyat
2	4 big pots	75,000 kyat
3	13 plates	39,000 kyat
4	3 bowls	21,000 kyat
5	30 viss of salt	30,000 kyat
6	12 viss of tobacco	48,000 kyat

Every year as the rainy season begins to draw to a close, soldiers typically order villagers to work as forced labourers providing supplies for the repair and maintenance of army camps. From August 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> 2009, DKBA Battalion G'kah Hsaw Wah Special Battalion #777 under the command of Saw Hser Htee based in Ma Htaw military camp, Dweh Loh Township, forced villagers from five villages to cut bamboo and provide bamboo for camp repairs. Affected villages included Thwah Koh Loh, Ta Huh Loh, Thah Ma Suh Loh, Khaw Gkiah and Gka Dwee Koh.

On September 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, soldiers from Burma LIB #216 led by Company Commander Yeh Lay Htoh also based in Ma Htaw military camp forced five nearby villages to each fabricate and

<sup>15</sup> A cubit is a measurement used in Burma, equivalent to approximately the length of a forearm or about 18 inches.

deliver 100 thatch shingles. Affected villages included Thwah Koh Loh, Ta Huh Loh, Thah Ma Suh Loh, Khaw Gklah and Ma Htaw.

## Villagers' protection strategies

On August 28<sup>th</sup> 2009, LIB #217 left Gka Hee Gkyo military camp, Bu Tho Township, to be replaced by LIB #216 as part of a regular Burma Army troop rotation. As LIB #216 approached Gka Hee Gkyo, the battalion attempted to conscript villagers to walk in front of the battalion as human minesweepers and advance warning of KNLA ambush. As the soldiers approached H--- village, however, they were seen by Saw W---, who was leaving the village to work on his farm. Saw W--- returned to H--- village to warn the other residents, most of who were able to flee in time and avoid conscription. LIB #216 was still able to capture Saw L---, age 57, who they ordered to act as guide. Soon afterwards, the soldiers triggered a landmine as they walked. The Deputy Battalion Commander and a private were killed. LIB #216 slept in H--- village that night and, after burying the two soldiers, left the village at 8 am the next morning, taking Saw L--- with them.

Worried about the safety of Saw L---, H--- village headwoman Naw Th--- organized an attempt to negotiate his freedom. First she travelled to nearby Ht--- village, whose headwoman Naw G-- is famous locally for the fearlessness with which she has stood up to SPDC and DKBA soldiers in the past. The two headwomen then walked to Kaw Bpoo military camp, where they found LIB #216 as well as the villager Saw L---, who had not been harmed. Naw Th--- requested that Saw L--- be allowed to return with her to their village, but the camp commander refused saying that he had to be taken to Papun Town. Naw Th--- replied that if the soldiers took Saw L---, she would escort them because she believed the soldiers would kill him if she did not. On August 31<sup>st</sup> she returned to Papun Town with soldiers from LIB #216 and Saw L---. Later the same day both villagers returned to Hsaw Bwe Der unharmed.

## Conclusion

*"For the future, if possible we would like to go back and stay in our old village to farm our fields which were destroyed by the SPDC. If the SPDC moves away, we'll go back... and have better livelihood conditions. Our children will have a chance to study smoothly, and then they'll know what to do next... They [the SPDC] didn't come to develop our village. They destroyed the village and made us poorer. There's no hope that they'll develop the village; they only make destruction and kill people."*

- Saw M--- (male, 47), Gk--- village, Lu Thaw Township (Feb 2009)

Villagers in government-controlled areas of Papun continue to face a set of abuses that make their daily livelihoods incredibly difficult: movement restrictions, risk of accusation of KNLA support and the threat of harm by landmines constrain villagers' abilities to work on their farms, trade and undertake other activities to support themselves. Exploitative abuse such as forced labour, 'taxation' and looting, meanwhile, further deplete what resources villagers are able to muster. As a result, villagers continue to flee, seeking refuge in IDP areas like Lu Thaw Township.

The situation in Lu Thaw Township is dire. As the 2009 farming season draws to a close, villagers are looking towards a harvest that will not likely support them. Though villagers have recognized the role the weather has played in this year's weak paddy performance, their vulnerability to the vagaries of meteorological chance is the direct outcome of the Burma Army's attempt to starve them out of hiding. As of October 2009, these tactics are succeeding, insofar as some villagers are on the brink of starvation. It is important to emphasize that Lu Thaw

Township is not an area that humanitarian aid agencies operating from Rangoon are permitted to access. At the end of September, Refugees International issued a report concluding, “*Cross-border assistance remains a vital tool in meeting the humanitarian needs of displaced Burmese who can not safely reach Thailand.*”<sup>16</sup> This conclusion applies directly to the situation in Lu Thaw, and the international donor community should immediately provide emergency financial support to aid groups that can access IDP areas in Lu Thaw Township.

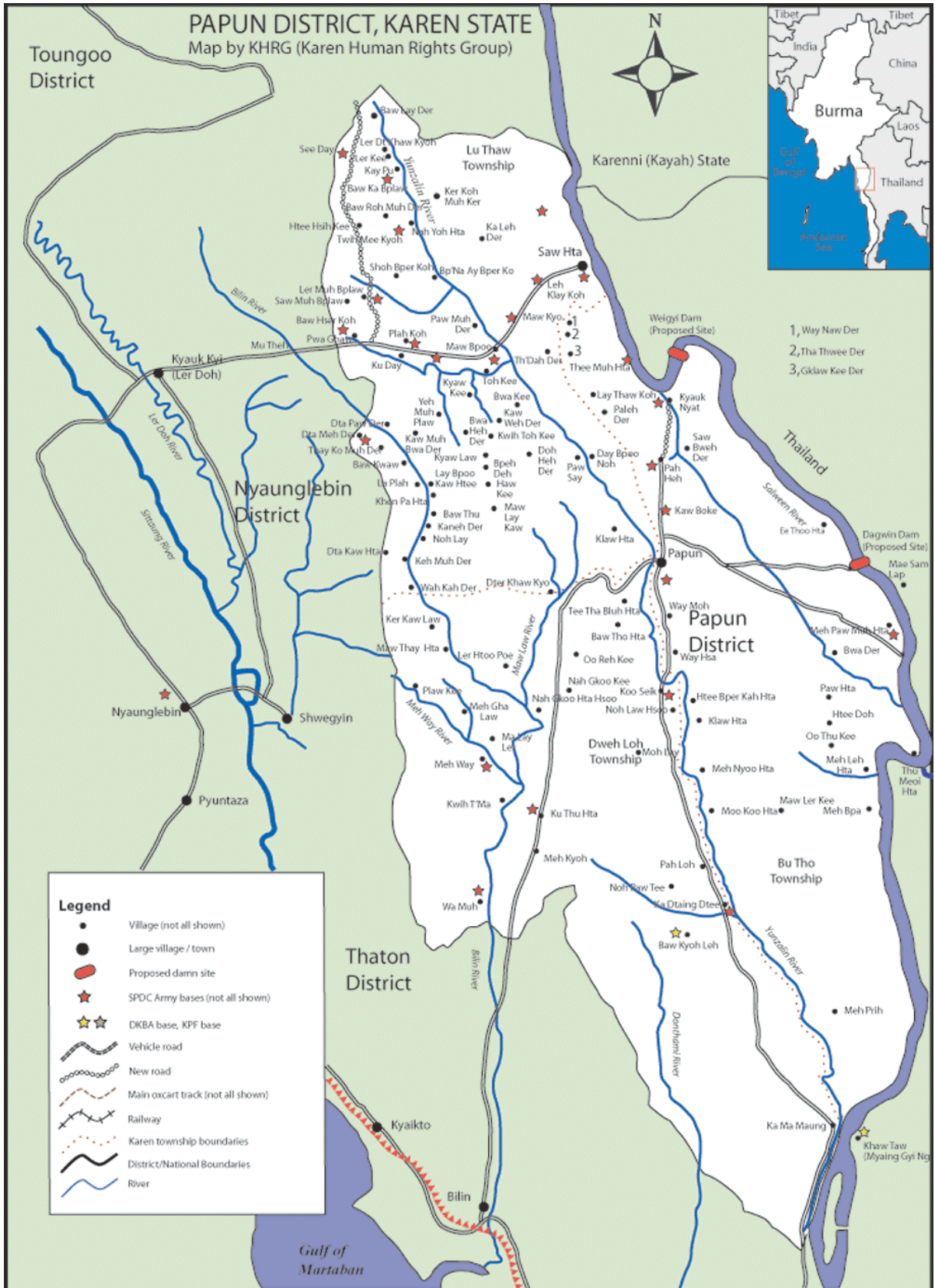
Further background on the situation in Papun District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- *Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance (July 2009)*
- *DKBA attack on villagers and the forced dismantling of a mosque in Papun District (July 2009)*
- *IDPs, land confiscation and forced recruitment in Papun District (July 2009)*
- *IDP conditions and the rape of a young girl in Papun District (April 2009)*
- *SPDC and DKBA road construction, forced labour and looting in Papun District (March 2009)*
- *Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Papun District (February 2009)*
- *Mortar attacks, landmines and the destruction of schools in Papun District (August 2008)*
- *Burma Army attacks and civilian displacement in northern Papun District (June 2008)*

Photos documenting the human rights situation in Papun District are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2009* (updated June 2009), *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008* (updated February 2009) and other previous KHRG photo galleries and photo sets. These and other reports are available on the KHRG web site at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

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<sup>16</sup> “In a time of active conflict, this assistance is of even greater importance,” continues Refugees International. “Donors should continue to encourage these [cross-border] initiatives, and to support creative means of accessing internally displaced communities.” See, “Thailand: New Problems Challenge Old Solutions,” Refugees International, September 2009.



# Karen Districts



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