

# **Shoot on Sight**

**The ongoing SPDC offensive  
against villagers in  
northern Karen State**

**November 2005 - current (December 2006)**

**Burma Issues**

### ***Editors Notes***

The term 'Burman' and 'Burmese' are not interchangeably used in this report. 'Burman' refers to the ethnic group, while the term 'Burmese' applies to the entire population of Burma, regardless of ethnic origin. Thus while the Burmese army is mainly made up of ethnic Burman, there are also soldiers from other ethnic groups.

# Acknowledgement

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This report would not have been possible without the stories and testimonies of grassroots people from northern Karen State. Villagers bravely told their stories, so that they could be shared with the world despite continued displacement and oppression by the Burmese army. This demonstrates the strength of the people, that even in the face of such brutality and adversity they will continue to raise their voices and not be silenced.

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This report is dedicated to the people of Burma who refuse to allow themselves be oppressed and continue to struggle against one of the world's most brutal regimes.

**Zetty Brake & Saw The Blay  
Special Publication Team**

**December 2006**

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*A village that was burnt down in Toungoo District earlier this year*

## *List of Acronyms*

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DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion
LID	Light Infantry Division
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

## *Military Brigades*

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No.	KNU Terminology	SPDC Terminology
1	Brigade 1 = Du Tha Htu District	Thathon District
2	Brigade 2 = Taw Oo District	Toungoo District
3	Brigade 3 = Kler Lwee Htu District	Nyaung Lay Bin District
4	Brigade 4 = Mergui-Tavoy District	Tavoy District
5	Brigade 5 = Muthraw District	Pa Pun District
6	Brigade 6 = Duplaya District	Kyaiw Seik Kyi District
7	Brigade 7 = Pa-an District	Pa-an District

# Map of the Offensive Area

## Karen Districts



©Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005

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

## *Executive Summary*

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The Burmese army launched a large scale offensive in the districts of Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw in northern Karen State in November 2005 targeting the civilian Karen population. This offensive has been ongoing for over a year and it continues today. Villages are being shelled with mortars, looted and burnt to the ground. Crops and food supplies are being destroyed. Burmese soldiers are ordered to shoot on sight, regardless of whether it is a combatant or a defenseless civilian. As a result more than 27,000 people have been forced from their homes, either hiding in the jungle or trying to find refuge in Thailand. The Burmese army continues to increase its military presence in these areas and carry out attacks against villagers.

In addition to the increased number of military attacks and militarisation of these districts, which has been ongoing for a number of years, in particular since the Karen National Union (KNU) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) agreed to a verbal ceasefire in January 2004, there has also been a rise in human rights abuses perpetrated by the army. These include: force labour and portering demands, land confiscation, rape and other gender based violence, looting and destruction of property, arbitrary taxation, restriction of movement, torture and extra-judicial killings.

Despite the fact that this offensive has been underway for over a year now there is not a clear singular reason behind the attacks. However, a number of contributing factors have emerged: the move to the new capital Pyinmana and the establishment of a five kilometre security zone around it, the acquisition of land for national development projects, and the need to secure transportation routes to and from these sites. Additionally, the three districts targeted are considered the 'heartland' of Karen resistance to Burmese oppression. Despite the armed struggle though the KNU and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) against the regime, it is the people, the civilian villagers, that pose the biggest threat to local and regional SPDC power these days. The non-violent resistance strategies, such as defying orders from the military and fleeing into the jungle rather than being controlled, employed by the villagers make them active participants in the struggle for peace and justice in Burma, not passive victims.

Nonetheless, the reasons behind the offensive do not detract from the fact that the Burmese army is attacking the civilian Karen population without any form of provocation. In addition to purposely attacking villagers the Burmese army is also undermining the grassroots people's ability to survive. The villagers in the offensive area, who are mainly farmers, were beginning to harvest their crops when the offensive began last November. As villagers had to flee to safety in the jungle, their crops either rotted in the fields or were eaten by animals, leading to food shortages.

This acute food shortage will be further exacerbated next year. As the offensive continued over the past twelve months more villagers had to flee the Burmese troops. This meant that they could not prepare for next years crop. Consequently in November and December 2006 there will be no crop to harvest and food scarcity will continue next year, regardless of the political situation.

Most of the 27,000 people who have been displaced have very little, if any, food. Their diets are supplemented with food that they can find from the jungle. Due to the severe landmine contamination of the areas, it is extremely dangerous to search for food.

In addition to food scarcity internally displaced persons (IDPs) face serious

health issues, especially during the wet season. Malaria is prevalent, as are skin diseases, dysentery and malnutrition. It is the children and the elderly who suffer the most under the given conditions. Heavily pregnant women also face additional hardships as they have to flee the same as other villagers, walking for days and giving birth while on the run. Villagers, as a result of military attacks, are more likely to be injured by a landmine or through soldier violence, for example being shot or stabbed. Access to medical services is virtually non-existent, and what is available is gravely insufficient. As a result people often die from preventable and curable diseases and treatable injuries.

The regime prevents all non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies inside Burma giving humanitarian aid to the villagers affected by the offensive. The junta prohibits organisations traveling to these areas and documenting human rights violations and the humanitarian crisis. It is virtually impossible to bypass these regulations, as the region is very mountainous and all transportation routes, apart from walking, are controlled by the SPDC.

Some community-based organizations that work cross-border from Thailand manage to bring some assistance to the IDPs, but it is only a tiny amount of what is needed. The SPDC deems the activities of these groups illegal and if the Burmese army catches workers they will simply disappear – never to be heard of or seen again.

While the majority of IDPs choose to stay in hiding near their villages as a form of non-violent resistance, others decide to travel to Thailand to seek refuge in the camps along the Thai-Burma border. So far this year Thai authorities have allowed approximately 3,000 people to cross the border and enter a refugee camp near Mae Sariang, Thailand. However, the Thai authorities have not consistently kept the border open and have frequently refused IDPs entrance to the kingdom, reasoning that they are not fleeing fighting, but are merely capitalising on the resettlement opportunities that are being opened up to the refugees in the camp.

As a result of the border's sporadic closure, approximately 1,400 IDPs (a figure that is continually rising) are living in a makeshift camp along the Salween River, on the Burmese side of the border. This temporary IDP settlement receives aid from organisations working along the Thai-Burma border, at the discretion of the Thai authorities, but there are numerous protection issues associated with the camp. There is a Burmese army base that is only an hour's walk away, making the IDPs vulnerable to a potential attack.

This is the worst offensive that the junta has conducted since it joined ASEAN in 1997. However, the offensive is not an isolated event, but rather the continuation of a campaign by the military junta to control the population of Burma. Despite the fact that this offensive has been underway for over a year, the international community is yet to find a solution that will persuade the SPDC to stop their attacks on civilians. Throughout the numerous military campaigns thousands of lives have been lost – all valuable and irreplaceable.

## *Introduction*

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### **Background**

Burma is a country located in the south-eastern part of Asia and it has been ruled by a succession of military dictatorships since 1962. The country's population is estimated to be between 48 and 50 million; however, there has not been a reliable population survey for over half a century. Burma's population is made up of an ethnically diverse mix with more than 100 distinctly different ethnic groups and sub-groups. Each ethnic group has their own individual culture and language. The majority of Burma's population are ethnic Burman. The Karen are the second largest ethnic group. The majority of people from Burma are Buddhist though there are also Christians, Muslim, Animist and people of other indigenous religions.

In 1885 Burma became a British colony. In the central areas of Burma, where the population was mainly Burman, the British ruled directly, whereas the administration of the frontier areas, predominantly ethnic areas, remained with traditional leaders under loose colonial supervision. During World War II the Japanese invaded Burma and ousted the British colonial government. The Japanese had been helped by the Burmese population who believed that they would receive independence once the British left. Instead the Japanese became another colonial ruler, severely oppressing the people. Meanwhile the British prepared their comeback to Burma, with Karen nationalists as one of their main allies inside the country. In return for their loyalty and assistance the British promised the Karen an independent state, once the Japanese were defeated.

However the British did not honour their promise to the Karen. After World War II the British returned to Burma in hope of reestablishing their colonial rule. Confronted with a strong nationalist movement however they soon came to realize that this would be an impossible undertaking and granted independence to the Burmese population under one condition: that the new nation-state would include all ethnic groups - breaking their promise to the Karen. Although Karen State was recognised as a separate state within the newly found Union of Burma, it was not given the right to secession from the union after 10 years which had been granted to Karenni and Shan States.

Following independence the Burman majority dominated the political institutions, marginalising the ethnic minorities. The state framework did not create a sense of political equality for all the ethnic groups and nationalities, leading to tensions among the different actors. There were attempts to quell these tensions; however they were not successful and armed rebellions began.

The central government faced escalating armed insurgencies from a number of different ethnic and minority groups including the Karen and the Communist Party of Burma. The Karen started their armed insurgency against the central government in Insein (north of Rangoon) in January 1949, fighting for equality and the right to self-determination. Despite facing several armed oppositions in the countryside, Prime Minister U Nu managed to retain power and tried to develop the country's economy, especially in the central Burman cities. However, the government could not stabilise the county: armed conflict continued and pressure from the ethnic minorities increased.

Against this backdrop General Ne Win, whom U Nu had appointed as head of the Burmese army in 1949, staged a military coup in 1962. Following the coup Ne Win consolidated his position by purging the country of suspected enemies. He was

Burma's first military dictator and during his 26-year reign he ruled the country with an iron fist.

Ne Win introduced and implemented a strange political ideology, the "Burmese Way to Socialism", which incorporated ideals from socialism, nationalism and Buddhism. Under this policy he nationalised all privately owned businesses virtually overnight. All foreign trade arrangements were cut and as a result Burma became completely isolated from the rest of the world. Further compounding the situation was Ne Win's mass economic mismanagement, including the overnight devaluation of a number of bank notes. As a result, he gradually drove the country into poverty.

In 1988, a sudden nationwide uprising led by university students and Buddhist monks occurred in Rangoon, Mandalay and many provincial towns. Ne Win responded violently to the demonstrators by cracking down on them with machine guns and bayonets. Thousands of protestors were killed and thousands more fled to the border areas out of fear of reprisal from the military. Following the protests, Ne Win's government collapsed and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took control of the country's administration, declaring a state of emergency and martial law. Despite the appearance of a new administration body, it was widely believed that Ne Win was still in control, but from behind the scenes.

SLORC announced in 1990 that democratic general elections would be held, in an effort to quell the growing demands from the people for democracy and international pressure. However, the SLORC leadership was so out of touch with the people that they did not consider the possibility that they could lose the election and were shocked at the result. The National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory (more than 82 per cent of the votes), but the ruling junta have so far refused to transfer power.

The junta, now called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), still rules the country. Over the past two decades it has negotiated a number of ceasefires between the military and the ethnic armed groups. In many cases the ceasefire agreements have led to increased militarisation of the area and a higher prevalence of human rights abuses.

Currently the SPDC is forging ahead with their highly criticised "Roadmap to Democracy", including the much-questioned National Convention. Despite joining ASEAN in 1997 and member states engaging in a policy of constructive engagement with the junta, the SPDC has made no real progress towards democracy or national reconciliation.

### **The Karen**

The Karen are descended from the Mongolian people. There are two large groups among Karen tribes, namely, Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen and there are more than ten sub-groups which mostly reside in northern Karen State today.

In the beginning, the Karen came from Htee-Hset-Met-Ywa (Land of Flowing Sands), a land that bordered the source of the Yang-Tse-Kiang River in the Gobi Desert, which is located in China and Mongolia. From there, they started to look for green pastures, migrating southwards and gradually entering the land now known as Burma in about 739 B.C. According to most historians, the Karen were one of the first settlers in this new land along with the Mon people. They named this land Kaw-Lah, which means the Green Land. The Karen began to clear and till the land and they changed the name of the land to Kaw-Thoo-Lei (land without evil) because they believed it was a pleasant, plentiful and peaceful country. As other tribes migrated to what is called Burma today the Karen were pushed further and further south until they

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were separated into different areas of Burma, namely the Pegu Yoma, Irrawaddy Delta, in the south-eastern part of Burma and later into the hills of Thailand.

Today there are between five and seven million Karen in Burma and about 350,000 in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> Half the Karen in Burma live in Karen State, while the others live in the Irrawaddy Delta area, Rangoon, Mergui/Tavoy and other parts Burma. Seventy per cent of Karen people live in rural areas, while the rest inhabit urban centres. For those who live in rural areas, 60 per cent reside in the hill areas, while the other 40 per cent live in the plains and lowlands.<sup>2</sup>

The Karen have all the essential qualities of a nation. They have their own history, language and literature, their own culture, land of settlement and their own economic and education system. Agriculture is the major livelihood of the Karen. Rice plantation and animal husbandry are the main occupation for Karen people. Traditionally the Karen go hunting and fishing and share the food with their neighbours. The Karen people manage their livelihood from forest production such as harvesting honey, hunting and the manufacturing of herbal medicine and other goods. However for more than 50 years the traditional way of life for the Karen has been disrupted by the junta's military attacks, offensives and campaigns.

The Karen are known to be quiet, unassuming and peace loving people, who uphold moral qualities such as honesty and loyalty and are pious in their religious beliefs.

Despite the continued resistance to the junta and military rule, there have been numerous internal fights and power-struggles within the Karen leadership structure and armed forces (currently this is the Karen National Union (KNU) and the KNU's armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army). This has meant that the Karen have never been able to create a unified platform. Due to the internal fighting, the junta has been able to 'divide and conquer', playing factions of the Karen against the others.



*Villagers working in their field in northern Karen State*

### **Past Offensives:**

The current offensive is not an isolated series of military attacks, but rather the continuation of an ongoing campaign to control and oppress the population of Burma. For most of Burma's history as a nation-state the country has been in civil war, as minority groups, in particular ethnic groups, demanded self-determination and equal-

ity from the Burman majority. During the country's short lived democracy, from 1948 to 1962, the government tried to quell these insurgencies with talks, armed conflicts and development programs. However, they failed.

Following the military coup in 1962 the situation deteriorated. Ne Win's objective was to obtain absolute control, regardless of whom or what he had to crush. Offensives by the Burmese army intensified during this time the Karen were forced to retreat from the Irrawaddy Delta (lowlands in central Burma) to the Pegu mountain range in eastern Burma. The military continued to push the Karen into the mountainous border areas by launching attacks in Karen State and targeting the civilian population under the guise of counter-insurgency campaigns, especially following the introduction of the Four Cuts policy (see next section). The SPDC and its predecessors aimed to turn the country's black zones (opposition controlled areas) into brown zones (contested areas) and eventually into white zones (controlled by the SPDC).

Villagers were attacked and relocated to areas where they could be easily controlled and monitored, thus undermining the support that the armed groups drew from the population, in the form of money, recruits, information and supplies. As this support began to dwindle, weakening ethnic insurgencies, it enabled the Burmese army to launch attacks along the border to gain control over the area and the trade routes between bordering countries. This meant another setback for the resistance groups as these routes were a large source of income, and for the most part, funded their activities.

Since then, offensives in Burma's ethnic areas have been nearly an annual event. While extra-judicial killings and other forms of direct violence still take place, the army concentrates its efforts on destroying survival structures. Houses and food sources are destroyed, people are forced to undertake labour intensive projects, entire villages are forcibly relocated and land confiscated. While not directly killing people, these tactics slowly and systematically erode their livelihoods, the people's spirits and eventually their ability to survive.

These offensives have been occurring for over 30 years, with families being displaced numerous times because of the actions of the junta. Consequently, the villagers' ability to feed their families, provide education and health services, or even ensure their safety has been undermined time and time again. Their ability and desire to resist the Burmese army has been worn down, leaving them with two options: either flee to Thailand or submit to SPDC control.

#### **Four Cuts Policy:**

The Four Cuts Policy (Pya Ley Pya) was introduced by General Ne Win in the early 1970s as a counter insurgency strategy. However, instead of targeting the armed groups the policy was aimed at the civilian population, who were, and continue to be, a support base for insurgent groups. The policy was designed to cut resistance groups from four essential supplies: recruits, food, intelligence, and finances (that they received from the civilian population) in the hope to diminish the armed group's ability to effectively resist the Burmese army.

As a consequence, minorities living in resistance areas were inevitably regarded as potential insurgents or sympathisers and thus became the targets of military counter-insurgency campaigns. Any kind of human rights violations was conceived as legitimate by the army, if it was considered necessary to ensure the integrity of the country. Forced relocation, burning of villages, destruction of crops and rice fields, confiscation of property, rape, torture and murder became part of the military activities leaving local people impoverished and traumatised. Those who refused to move to relocation sites experienced gross violations of their human rights and were shot on

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sight. Those who did move to relocation sites faced acute shortages of medicine and other necessities.

Subsequent administrations have continued their repressive campaigns against ethnic minorities and the Four Cuts policy persists today. In areas, where fighting continues, Burmese troops plunder villages for food and livestock and eventually raze them to the ground. People have to resettle into mass relocation sites where they face ill-treatment. In addition, the military has combined their actions against innocent civilians with a policy of forced labour and portering obliging each village to provide a certain number of people to the army. For those unable to meet the extensive demands the only option is to flee and hide in the jungle.

*"The army considers all the ethnic Karen people to be members of the group that fights against them, so big or small, all must be killed. If the children grow up, the army thinks they will fight against them," - Villager<sup>3</sup>*

### **Ceasefire:**

Over the past decade the SPDC had made ceasefire agreements with a number of ethnic groups (17 at last count). These agreements for the most part were negotiated by Khin Nyunt who was the Prime Minister of Burma and head of the Military Intelligence until October 2004 when he was ousted and placed under house arrest by members of the upper echelon. The SPDC has largely used these ceasefire agreements and the subsequent 'peace' to increase economic and military control over ethnic areas.

By inviting these ceasefire groups back into the 'legal fold', they become semi-recognised entities by the junta, rather than terrorist organisations working to dispose a State government. Groups that have returned to the 'legal fold' can 'participate', in a very restricted manner (generally only as observers), in government activities such as the National Convention.

Strategically, the military dictatorship is trying to turn armed groups, who have support among the grassroots people, into allies. This is achieved by offering the leaders of armed groups economic concessions upon re-entering the legal fold. Yet these concessions have often been rescinded without explanation, as was the case with the New Mon State Party after it agreed to a verbal ceasefire with the junta in 1995.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past five decades, five peace talks between the Karen and the junta have taken place, but distrust between both groups had been a major obstacle to successful negotiations. The talks in 2004 were different from past negotiations, because the SPDC did not demand that the KNU enter the 'legal fold' and the KNU did not call for a nationwide ceasefire; issues that were previously sticking points. As a result an informal, verbal 'gentlemen's agreement' was reached between the two parties.

This gentlemen's agreement called for a cessation of hostilities from both sides. However, without a written formal agreement and clear ground rules, clashes between both sides have continued, for example in 2004 169-armed clashes occurred between the two groups.<sup>5</sup>

The SPDC has used the ceasefire as cover to militarise the area further. Through out Karen State the SPDC has improved and expanded their network of roads and established new military camps, utilising forced labour. Military equipment, such as weapons, troops and rations have been moved into the region creating a number of stockpiles.

Additionally, as the troops from the Burmese army had unrestricted movement throughout Karen State they exploited this opportunity venturing further into the ethnic areas, where they had been previously afraid to go. Due to the ceasefire, the KNLA soldiers were unable to prevent this encroachment on their land, and could do little more than watch. Their orders from the KNU were to adhere to the ceasefire and not to engage with the SPDC troops.

Not surprisingly the situation for thousands of Karen villagers did not improve following the gentleman's agreement. Food scarcity and access to healthcare became worse. Militarisation and subsequent human rights abuses continued, as did internal displacement. The situational uncertainty that hung over the villagers' heads prior to the ceasefire has not gone away, and distrust between the grassroots people and the SPDC multiplied.

Under these circumstances, this farce of a ceasefire was officially broken in October 2006. Karen representatives met with members of the junta to discuss the ceasefire and to get the SPDC to cease attacking Karen villagers. The SPDC said that the previous ceasefire was invalid because it had been negotiated by Khin Nyunt and that they would have to reach a new arrangement. However they did not to commit to a date for these discussions and have continued attacking villagers in northern Karen State.

## The Offensive

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### General Information:

*"It is really hard for us to continue to survive under the SPDC persecution" - Villager<sup>6</sup>*

In November 2005 the SPDC began the offensive in Ho Kee village tract, Toungoo District, by shelling villages and destroying houses and rice barns.<sup>7</sup> Since then the Burmese army has expanded its campaign into Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw Districts, and has continued launching military attacks through out the dry and wet seasons. In the past, most offensives stopped with the onset of the rains, enabling villagers to return to their homes, to start rebuilding. In spite of the rain this offensive has been ongoing.

The SPDC has claimed that the offensive is purely a security measure against 'terrorists'. Information Minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan said *"The Government has the duty to protect the lives and property of the people. Hence, with a view to preventing KNU atrocities and sabotage acts and ensuring the public safety, the Government has to clear up the surrounding areas and those areas where KNUs and hardcores could take refuge... the Government is not in favour of war: that it is taking security measures. As KNU has been time and again jeopardizing and harming the lives and property of the people, the Government has to take security measures. The national people dare not live in their native villages due to power struggle, massacres, bullies and coercion of KNU"*.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite the claims that the purpose of the offensive is to protect the civilian population from ethnic insurgents, the tactics employed by the Burmese army directly target the villagers - not the KNU or KNLA. Therefore, what is disguised as a counter-insurgency is in reality a campaign against Karen villagers. Given the SPDC's loose definition of who is a rebel and who is a villager, there usually is no differentiation between the two by the Burmese soldiers. The Karen villagers, along with other Burmese people, want to live peacefully in their communities with little interference from external groups, organisations or institutions. They want to be free from human rights violations and, as most villagers are farmers, they also want the physical security to be able to grow their crops and feed their families.

Given the desire to be left alone, villagers' deplore the encroachment of the SPDC on their land. Villagers employ a number of strategies, a form of non-violent resistance, to mitigate the impact of the Burmese army. However, just because the villagers offer a form of resistance, it does not make them soldiers or combatants. They are strong, resourceful people who have managed to live in a protracted conflict situation where the State is actively trying to oppress them. They are not collateral damage of a counter insurgency.

### Military Build Up:

As mentioned above the SPDC used the ceasefire to establish a stronger military presence in Karen State in preparation for the current offensive. New military bases have been established in strategic locations, which have disrupted trade routes between the lowlands and the hills. In addition, satellite camps have been set up so that soldiers do not have to withdraw back to the main base to restock their supplies.

Consequently, troops can stay in the field longer, carrying out more military attacks. Currently 40 per cent of the SPDC's frontline troops nation-wide are in eastern Burma,<sup>9</sup> with a large concentration of those soldiers in northern Karen State.

### **Tatmadaw Military Activities:**

*"We face many problems because there are many SPDC troops in our area. We had to flee our village, but our hiding place is close to the SPDC troops. It was very difficult for the older people to flee and some could not run away. We did not want to abandon them, because they are our parents, but we had no choice. Because the soldiers were very near we had to be careful. The parents who had noisy children, as children are usually noisy, had to keep them quiet. Mothers who were breastfeeding had to overfed their babies so that they would not cry," -*

*Villager<sup>10</sup>*

Since November 2005 the Burmese army has employed a number of different military tactics in order to achieve their goal of controlling the civilian population in Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw Districts. On approaching a village the SPDC soldiers shell the community with mortars even though the communities are undefended. The surrounding areas are also shelled to hinder villagers who may be attempting to flee the attack and to target those hiding in the jungle. Once the initial artillery has stopped, troops enter the village and fire hand weapons into houses and buildings. The soldiers have shot at fleeing villagers.

Once the village has been deserted, or the civilians left behind have been subdued, the Burmese soldiers loot the community, taking money, belongings, and food (including livestock). Fences around gardens and fields are pulled down so that animals can eat the crops. Afterwards, soldiers often set fire to houses and food stores, kill the remaining animals (chickens, goats, pigs, buffalos, etc.) and plant landmines around the community in strategic places where villagers usually walk or stand, preventing them from returning home.

Undoubtedly, the soldiers are leaving a trail of destruction and devastation in their wake. Even after a village has been destroyed the troops do not withdraw from the area. Columns are continually patrolling the hills in search of IDPs, hidden food stores and crops. When a food store or crops are found they are destroyed. IDPs, who are considered by the SPDC as enemies of the State, that are discovered are either killed, forced to go to relocation sites, or used as porters and forced labourers. Proactively searching for IDPs and destroying their means of survival clearly demonstrates how the Burmese army is targeting the civilian population.

In order to make these searches more effective, two or more groups of soldiers are dispatched to an area. After locating a group of IDPs the soldiers position themselves on different sides of the IDPs, restricting the villagers' movements. By encircling the IDPs, the Burmese army traps them between SPDC patrols, leaving no escape and making them more vulnerable to oppression and human rights abuses. In some instances, the Burmese soldiers have forced the villagers to move to locations where another group of troops were waiting. As the villagers have come into view, soldiers have opened fire on them.<sup>11</sup>

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### KNLA/KNU:

*“No KNU should shoot or hurt a SPDC soldier. If the KNU shoots or kills one of us, we will kill more than 10 villagers,” -  
Zaw Niang Myo LID 66, Tactical 3, Infantry 35 column 2 <sup>12</sup>*

Until the ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ was broken the KNLA limiting their actions to either assisting the villagers in avoiding the SPDC or providing them with protection. KNLA troops kept villagers up-to-date on movements of the Burmese army and guided them through dangerous areas where there was high presence of SPDC soldiers. They also escorted villagers from where they are hiding in the jungle back to their homes to collect food and supplies. There were some clashes, however, these were sporadic. Following the cancellation of the ceasefire agreement in October 2006 concerns have been raised as to whether the military attacks will intensify.

### Landmines:

Throughout this offensive the Burmese army has extensively laid landmines in Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw Districts. For years beforehand these areas had been severely contaminated with landmines, with thousands of landmines being laid by the Burmese army, as well as its proxies the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, Karenni Solidarity Organisation and Karenni Nationalities People’s Liberation Front. The KNLA has also used mines.<sup>13</sup>

In this offensive the SPDC has laid landmines to restrict villagers’ movements, in particular preventing people from the hills traveling to the plains and vice versa. The Burmese army frequently lays landmines along roads and foot paths, preventing unauthorised movement of the people, for example, the SPDC has mined trails and roads that link the plain dwellers and hill communities in Toungoo District, consequently ensuring that people from either community can not meet, share food, or trade goods. Villagers rely on these trade routes as they are their only means to exchange goods. By isolating these communities villagers’ access to food and goods becomes limited. The subsequent hardships associated with food scarcity can eventually lead villagers to stop their resistance and acquiesce to the relocation orders of the Burmese military.

Moreover, the areas along the Thai-Burma border and routes leading towards the border are heavily mined, as a result of military activities and campaigns, both past and present. This deters the movement of people and prevents them from fleeing to Thailand.

As mentioned before it is also very common for the Burmese army to plant landmines around abandoned villages in locations where villagers are most likely to walk, such as in paddy fields, at the bottom of ladders leading to houses, along tracts in and out of the villages, around rice stores and schools.

*“We had fled our village before the SPDC came and burnt it down. After they destroyed our homes and food stores they planted landmines around the village. We were scared to go back,” - Villager<sup>14</sup>*

By planting the mines in these locations, the Burmese army wants to prevent villagers from returning to their homes; out of fear of death and mutilation from a landmine injury.

Following a landmine injury most victims either bleed to death or die of shock. On average it takes 12 hours before a mine victim can receive treatment. More than

90 per cent of landmine survivors lose at least one limb, 40 per cent sustain an eye injuries, such as blindness and impaired vision, and 21 per cent from complete or diminished hearing loss. In Karen State, prior to the offensive, it was estimated that there was one civilian landmine amputee every day.<sup>15</sup>

Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that there is no systematic mapping system for landmines in Burma by either the Burmese army and their proxies, or the KNLA. Areas contaminated by mines are rarely signed. On occasions when they are marked, it is usually a cross on a tree and branches being broken across a path. Combatants from the KNLA report that they give villagers verbal warnings where landmines are, however, villagers say that the warnings are often unspecific about the location.<sup>16</sup>

There are numerous reports of people being forced to carry out atrocity demining by the Burmese army. Villagers and porters are forced to walk in front of soldiers to detonate the mines, resulting in the person being maimed or killed. If landmines are detected, people are forced to remove them without safety equipment, proper tools or training.

As the KNLA does not have enough troops to prevent the Burmese army's encroachment into their territories, they use landmines to block paths and roads which stops, or at least slow down, the SPDC's troops. The KNLA deployment of landmines have contributed to the severe mine contamination of Karen State and have resulted in many villagers being killed or injured.

Currently there are no humanitarian mine clearance programs in Burma. Opposition forces including the KNLA sporadically clear mines to create a safe path for people to walk on. These mines are then stockpiled and are re-used by the insurgent groups.

Landmines kill and maim indiscriminately. Villagers are particularly vulnerable, as they are exposed to landmines from all parties: the Burmese army, its proxies and the KNLA.



*Villagers transport a landmine victim to a medic relief team*

### **Child Soldiers:**

A number of child soldiers are fighting in the current offensive that is being carried out in northern Karen State. The Burmese army forcibly and systematically recruits children, some as young as eight<sup>17</sup> into the army, and currently has an estimated 70,000 child soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Soldiers regularly approach boys in public places such as the market, bus and train stations asking to see their ID cards. When the child is unable to produce an ID card, because they have to be 18 to apply for one,

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they are then told they will be arrested unless they join the army. After recruitment, child soldiers are sent to a holding camp and then on to a training camp. Following the completion of an intensive four to five months of training, child soldiers are deployed to battalions, including those on the frontline.

On the frontline child soldiers are forced to perpetrate human rights abuses on civilians while carrying out military attacks on villages and IDPs' hiding places. They are physically abused by older and superior soldiers. Their wages are withheld, their leave is denied and their food is stolen. Furthermore they are often given the most degrading, menial and dangerous tasks, such as being used as a human shield by older soldiers.<sup>19</sup> As child soldiers often lack proper training and experience they are more likely to make mistakes in battle. They are also at risk of being injured or killed by a landmine due to the severe mine contamination of the areas where they are serving.

Earlier this year the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan highlighted the fact that three armed groups in Burma, the SPDC, KNLA and Karenni National Progressive Party, used child soldiers. The systematic recruitment procedures used by the Burmese army makes it the largest offender, however, the KNLA has an estimated 500 child soldiers among their ranks (the KNLA has between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers).<sup>20</sup> In the KNLA children are sent to the frontline and engage in combat.



*A column of IDPs moving to the next hiding place*



*Villagers displaced during the current offensive in northern Karen State crossing a river*

## ***Reasons behind the Offensive***

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There does not seem to be one singular reason for the offensive in northern Karen State, however there appear to be a number of contributing factors. This offensive is not an isolate series of attacks against the Karen villagers in Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw, but the continuation of a military campaign to oppress and intimidate the civilian population.

### **Security Zone:**

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the SPDC announced it was moving the country's capital city from Rangoon to Pyinmana approximately 320 kilometres north of Rangoon. The announcement caught everyone by surprise including government officials who had not received any prior notice of the move. The new capital city did not have the infrastructure to support the country's administrative body, let alone all the government personnel and their families who were required to relocate.

The change of the country's capital coincided with the launch of the offensive raising speculations that there was a connection between the two, especially following reports by media outlets linking the two events. In the Bangkok Post it was reported that the SPDC was establishing a five kilometre security zone around the new capital.<sup>21</sup> Villages that were in this security zone were being relocated.

Yet, if the SPDC was clearing a five kilometre security zone around the new capital there would be an increased military presence and activities in Karenni and Shan States as well. However, there has not been any unusual SPDC activity in these areas. Instead the SPDC has sent thousands of troops to parts of Toungoo and Muthraw Districts, which are more than 100 and 200 kilometres away from Pyinmana respectively. Villages in southern Nyaung Lay Bin have also been attacked numerous times during this offensive, despite being located closer to Rangoon than Pyinmana.

Consequently it is unlikely that the creation of a defined security zone with Pyinmana at the centre is sole reason behind the offensive. However, perhaps the security zone is not a stagnant body with clearly established parameters. It is well known that the junta is extremely paranoid, especially about another people's uprising and a split within the army and government. The offensive may be a pre-emptive strike to ensure that if an uprising or split did occur near the new capital, there would be no sympathetic villagers or opposition forces close by to support it.

### **Hydroelectric Dams:**

The SPDC has planned to build six new hydroelectric power plants in or near the offensive area. Prior to beginning construction, there needs to be a certain level of stability within and around the project site. In order to secure complete control villagers are often relocated to areas close to military bases where they can be easily controlled and monitored by the SPDC. The military launches offensives to search for villagers who are resisting relocation orders, by remaining in their villages or hiding in jungle. Once an area has been depopulated it is easier for the SPDC to begin a development project.

In the process of depopulating an area the Burmese army commits serious human rights abuses: villagers have been forced at gunpoint from their land, their livelihoods have been taken away, and they have been forced to work without pay-

ment on infrastructure projects associated with the dams, such as road construction.

Villagers have not been included in the decision-making processes relating to the development of the hydroelectric dams. They have no say and are often unaware of the situation until an offensive is underway, orders for relocation are posted, or cross-border workers are informing them.

Numerous reports from community based organisations have documented that past hydroelectric dam projects have brought little benefits for the grassroots people. Promises of community improvements or access to electricity are often empty.

One of the six planned dams in the offensive area will be built on the lower Day Loh River, also known as the Thauk Yay Ka River, Toungoo District. The Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power and a Japanese firm, Tokyo Electric Power Service Co Ltd, have said that all the primary studies of the site and a pre-design report had been completed. The Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power has stated that commencement of the project should begin by the end of this year (2006).<sup>22</sup>

There are also plans to build two new hydroelectric dams, Bawgata and Shwe Kyin near Shwegyin Township, Nyaung Lay Bin District. The Kansai Electric Power Co, another Japanese firm, is supposed to start construction later this year. In Muthraw District attacks have been focused along transportation routes to the proposed Weh Gyi, Da Gwin and Hat Gyi dams on the Salween River.<sup>23</sup>

Encroachment onto ethnic territory for so called 'development' is not a new phenomenon. Since the early 1990s the SPDC has been gradually invading land traditionally belonging to ethnic populations for the sole purpose of development projects.

While the dams are a contributing factor to the latest offensive, they are not the sole reason behind these large scale attacks against the Karen populace.

### **Other Development Projects:**

Apart from the dam projects the SPDC needs to obtain land and create stability for the exploitation of its natural resources. Burma's border areas are especially rich in natural resources, especially gold, jade, lead and wood. The SPDC and their partners (local and international) can only start exploiting these resources when they have secured a level of stability and built adequate infrastructure.

Two local businessmen involved in the jade and logging businesses near Muthey, Nyaung Lay Bin District, are Maung Khaing and Ma Nan.<sup>24</sup> The dramatic increase in military activities in and around this area can be attributed to the need to control this area in order to start mining and logging activities.

### **Resistance to the SPDC:**

*"If we are going to die, we want to die on our land."*<sup>25</sup>

*"The SPDC hates us because we are Karen. Whenever they see a Karen person, big or small, young or old, they kill them. They don't analyse anything" - villager*<sup>26</sup>

Northern Karen State has always been a stronghold for the Karen resistance to the junta's rule. This resistance does not just involve the KNU's and KNLA's fight against the SPDC and its predecessors, but also the people's struggle and desire to be free from oppression and to have control over one's life and future.

Ever since the SPDC managed to gain control over most of the border areas in the late 1980s, early 1990s, it is no longer the KNU and the KNLA that are seen as the strongest form of resistance to the junta, but the people. By defying forced relocation orders, bribing officials to avoid forced labour quotas and fleeing to the

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jungle rather than being controlled, the villagers are staging their own resistance movement.

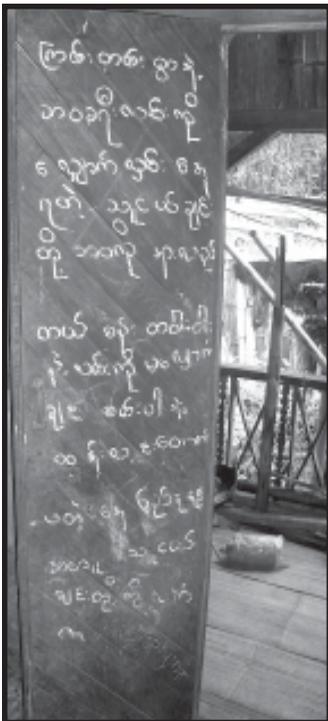
*“In the past people saw themselves as ordinary villagers who needed the KNU to resist the military government. Now villagers see that they are responsible for resisting the regime and that they don’t have to be a soldier to offer resistance,” - Karen human rights activist<sup>27</sup>*

*“As for the SPDC government, we do not want to go back to the SPDC government and controls us. The SPDC government does not love peace and they will break down our Karen ethnic group” - Villager<sup>28</sup>*

After decades of military attacks and offensives, villagers have developed a number of coping strategies that aim to minimise the impact of the SPDC’s violence and abuse. Villagers monitor troop movement through a number of different channels including displaced villagers passing through their area, pre-established communication networks among local communities (for example regular meetings between members of different communities to share information), civilian security guards and opposition troops. These earlier warning systems enable villagers to prepare and flee before SPDC troops arrive, avoiding the threat of violence and human rights abuses.

In addition to early warning systems, villagers also establish a number of household risk management practices, that include: hiding food supplies and crops, preparing an emergency evacuation procedure, moving location, working at night to avoid detection and paying fines and complying with forced labour orders. Village level risk management plans are also established, in which the community works together and pools their resources in order to avoid the SPDC troops.<sup>29</sup>

The non-violent tactics employed by the people have become the biggest threat to local and regional SPDC power in the eyes of the regime. The SPDC have realised that if they want to gain control over the entire area and population, they need to attack the villagers, not the KNU or KNLA.



*The writing (on the door of a building in an abandoned Karen village) tells the villagers to stop walking in the dark and calls them to come into the light. By this the Burmese soldiers are telling the villagers to should stop running into the jungle and surrender to SPDC control and return to the ‘legal fold’.*



*Children, like this boy, have to flee their villages with their families because of the SPDC. The families that choose to stay in hiding near their villages are staging a non-violent resistance against the SPDC. These non-violent resistances are seen as the greatest threat to the SPDC's local and regional authority.*

## *Impacts of the Offensive*

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The impact of any offensive is devastating, but due to the length and intensity of this campaign it has been especially difficult for villagers. However, it is not only the civilians who are targeted that suffer; countries that share a common border are also affected, as are the international community and ASEAN countries.

### **Grassroots:**

The grassroots people are most affected by this offensive. The impact is nothing less than devastating and demonstrate the SPDC's disregard for people's lives.

### **Internal Displacement:**

Due to the military attacks on villages, including shelling, shooting, laying of landmines and invasion by ground troops, people cannot stay in their villages because of the threat to their safety and lives. The villagers who been forced from their homes but do not cross an international border become IDPs.

The level of displacement in Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw Districts fluctuates, depending on the severity and intensity of attacks. However, it is estimated that over 27,000 villagers have been displaced from their homes during the past year as a result of the current military activities and attacks. The displacement caused by the latest offensive further exacerbates the ongoing, chronic displacement crisis in eastern Burma. Prior to the start of this offensive in November 2005, there were 90,000 IDPs in Karen State and more than half a million displaced villagers



*A n IDP walking through a deserted village*

## **Naw Lay Lay Paw's Story**

*We had to flee our village in March. A person from our village had gone to another place to take medicine and on the way back he saw the Burmese troops. He ran home, avoiding the soldiers, and warned the villagers that the army was near. We started to prepare, then we split into two groups and fled. We slept that night in the jungle and the next day we found the other group and fled again.*

*The SPDC troops had also divided into smaller groups. They had too many groups and they found our camp where we had been hiding. The SPDC battalion 522 which had split into two groups saw a rice store and burnt it down. They then went to another place and saw a villager, Saw Thay Has Paw who was 38, and shot him. He died. When this group of SPDC soldiers arrived at the Klaw Khee village they entered the village and caught more than 60 chickens and ducks that the villagers had to leave behind when they fled. They took or killed all the animals. The next morning as they were leaving they saw two grandmothers that were hiding. They threatened them by shooting on either side of the old grandmothers, as well as putting a knife in the barrel of the gun and threatening the women with this makeshift bayonet. The soldiers left the scared women and continued their trip until they saw two tents full of villagers' belongings, which the soldiers stole. When this SPDC group arrived in Klee Has Khee village they killed a student who was 18 years old. We did not dare bury him for a while after his death because the SPDC usually leaves landmines in the villages where they have been. The villagers were afraid of the landmines and nobody dared to go there.*

*We slept in the jungle for nine nights. We have to stay in the place where a lot of wild animals live, such as wild buffalo and many other animals. Moreover, there were no plants that we could eat. There was only one small stream and we worry for the children because the stream has mwee (very small water-based leeches). The mwee get into the children's noses, mouth, ears and eyes and it becomes a problem as they suck the children's blood and get bigger and bigger.*

*After nine nights in the jungle we came back to our own village. Even though we could go back to our village we were still in danger. We get news from the SPDC porters that the SPDC offensive will continue for this whole year. Now many SPDC troops are coming and they are sending many cars with food to the frontline. After sending the food, they will continue their military activities. So we are always very worried about the situation and have to be careful.*

*When you live in the jungle it is the same as you live in constant trouble. We are surrounded by the army and if they see fire or smoke they will come and find us. The other thing is we are afraid to make a loud noise and stay quiet otherwise the soldiers might come and search for us. We have to stop our children crying and make them play quietly. It is hard for our children to live in this situation and it means they have no freedom when we are fleeing from the SPDC. We always have to be prepared and ready to escape from the army. We have no time to live in freedom and each day we have to be aware of the SPDC situation because we don't know when they will come again.*

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across eastern Burma.<sup>30</sup> Following the offensive the number of IDPs in Karen State has increased and currently there are more than 100,000 villagers in Karen State who are unable to return to their homes because of the Burmese army.

Most IDPs choose to stay near their villages and fields rather than attempting to seek asylum in Thailand, because they hope to return to their villages and start rebuilding their communities. Villagers can sometimes return home for a period of time before they are forced to flee again, while on other occasions they can only go back for a couple of hours to collect belongings and search for food. In the worst case it is impossible for them to return at all.

While on the run IDPs face a number of hardships, of which some are examined later in this section. In addition to these, villagers hiding in the jungle are exposed to extreme temperatures and weather conditions. In the cold season temperatures are near freezing, while in the hot season they can reach nearly 40 degrees celsius. For five months (June to October) it is the wet/monsoon season, which dumps metres of rain on the IDPs, causing flash flooding which can cut villagers escape routes. All the IDPs have to protect themselves from these elements is what they could bring with them when they fled, and this is rarely adequate.



*An IDP woman protecting herself and her two children from the rain under a thin tarp*

In addition to the environmental conditions that the IDPs face, the Burmese soldiers are continually hunting for villagers hiding in the jungle. Columns of soldiers have been deployed to search for IDPs. As a result villagers are always on the run, finding no peace or respite from the ongoing attacks. Furthermore, troops are often very close to where the IDPs are hiding, sometimes only metres away, forcing entire communities to live in constant fear.

In addition to hiding in the jungle, there is a temporary IDP settlement along the banks of the Salween River called Ee-Thu-Hta. This camp currently houses approximately 1,400 people,<sup>31</sup> and this figure is constantly rising. The displaced villagers in the camp have journeyed to the border area in search of safety. However, there are numerous problems associated with the camp. The most pressing is a protection issue, as a Burmese military base is only an hour's walk away. Additional concerns relate to the provision of humanitarian services, such as healthcare (especially in relation to emergency health cases), food supplies, education and income generation. Currently aid is being allowed to cross the border; however, this is at the discretion of the Thai authorities.

**Food Scarcity:**

*“The problem we face when we are displaced is hunger. When we flee we do not have any food and we cannot go back and get our food from the village. We had to borrow food from our friends, however, we could only borrow food for one day because they did not have much and could only help us a little” - Villager<sup>32</sup>*

Villagers have the capacity to grow enough food for their families, and to use any excess crops to trade for other food items or goods. However, during this campaign the villagers’ ability to effectively farm has been constantly undermined resulting in food scarcity. The offensive began in 2005’s harvesting season. Villagers had to flee their homes and fields, and take refuge in the jungle. This meant they could not harvest their fields, and the crop was either eaten by animals or rotted. As the attacks have continued, villagers were unable to return home and prepare for the next harvest. Other villagers were displaced, and they too have not been planted their crops. In the 2006 harvest season these people will have no crop, nor will they have food for the next year. In addition to the loss of two crops, Burmese soldiers have destroyed the villagers food stores and killed livestock during military attacks. Food scarcity is further exacerbated through land confiscation (see later section) as it decreases the available farmland. The use of civilians for forced labour and portering by the military also decreases the crop as people can devote less time to their own agricultural work.

As a result of this offensive over 87,000 baskets of paddy (when the rice is still on the plant) were abandoned, destroyed or stolen by the soldiers in the past year. This paddy would have provided a year’s supply of rice for over 5,000 villagers. Also more than 10,000 baskets of husked rice (rice that has been removed from the plant, but still needs to be pounded before it can be eaten) and 1,000 baskets of milled rice (rice that is ready to eat) were destroyed, stolen or abandoned. Additionally, 420 cardamom gardens, 30 betel nut gardens and 150 coffee gardens have been destroyed or abandoned.<sup>33</sup>

It is very difficult for the villagers to find alternative sources of food supply: trade with other communities is virtually impossible since roads are blocked by the SPDC, while at the same time the search for food in surrounding area is extremely dangerous because of landmines. To make things worse the price of rice has sky rocketed over the past year as a result of these travel restrictions, demands from the military for the villagers to sell a quota of their rice to the SPDC and nation-wide inflation. In upland parts of Toungoo District the price of rice has increased by 100 per cent in the past year.<sup>34</sup>

Under such circumstances villagers often have not other option than searching the jungle for food. Statistics show that villagers whose food supplies have been compromised are 4.6 times more likely to be injured by a landmine than those whose food supply is secure.<sup>35</sup>

*“If we had the chance to work planting paddy this year we could survive the coming year. But because we couldn’t work in our fields and had to continue fleeing we cannot survive and will have to leave our homelands and take shelter in the border or in refugee camps” - villager<sup>36</sup>*

Apart from the food shortage itself it is also displacement that affects the number of meals people have per day. As families usually cannot take proper cooking utensils with them it makes it hard to prepare meals in the jungle. Moreover, as

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SPDC troops patrol the jungle, people are scared of being spotted if they cook during the daytime. So the only opportunity to cook a proper meal is after dark.

*“The problem was that we had stopped to eat, we could not cook because the SPDC soldiers were near. We had to wait for the SPDC soldiers leave,” – Villager<sup>37</sup>*

### Health:

The health situation that villagers in Muthraw, Nyaung Lay Bin and Toungoo are facing is terrible, and it is made worse by displacement, lack of food security and human right abuses, such as gender based violence, torture and portering.

Often people have little or no time to collect food, blankets, mosquito nets or tarps before fleeing. Consequently very few have adequate shelter while they are hiding in the jungle. As some areas where villagers are hiding are in the mountains high above sea level, temperatures can drop dramatically, very suddenly. Without adequate shelter exposure to cold temperature makes villagers more susceptible to disease and infection, such as colds, the flu, coughs, etc. Additionally, in the three districts where the offensive is underway, villagers are suffering from malaria, dengue fever, scrub typhus, dysentery and skin diseases.

*“Some children get sick and their parents cannot help them. As we are hiding in the jungle we get sick a lot. We are vulnerable to the weather and sometimes we have no shelter to sleep in,” - Villager<sup>38</sup>*

Sadly villagers who are ill or injured rarely receive medical treatment. Clinics that had been in the area were abandoned when the villagers fled. People are too scared to visit the few state run clinics that are around due to threats from the SPDC that they will shoot villagers on sight. Very rarely, IDPs and villagers cross paths with mobile medics of the KNLA or humanitarian Karen groups that work in these areas. The assistance these medics can give is also limited and what is needed far exceeds what can be provided. Consequently people die from curable and preventable diseases, such as diarrhoea.

*“My wife is pregnant and she is also sick but we can not find any medicine for her,”  
- Villager<sup>39</sup>*

*“It takes over five hours from our village to the place we flee to, because we have patients, so we have to walk slowly. People have to carry the sick and some died on the way. There was a man who was about 50 years old. He was sick before we had to flee the SPDC and he died. We did not have any medicine to give him and we could not help him,” - Villager<sup>40</sup>*

The acute food shortage also has a horrible impact on the health situation. Malnutrition is rife. People whose food was stolen or destroyed by the Burmese army are 50 per cent more likely to have a death in the household. Furthermore, children of these households are 4.4 times more likely to suffer malnutrition than families whose food supplies had not been compromised.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore in addition to these health issues, there has been an increase in people being injured by landmines and through soldier violence (such as being shot or stabbed) as the result of attacks by the Burmese army.

As a result of people not being able to access medical care villagers rely on traditional healing methods or outdated medicines that they brought with them. In

most cases these methods are inadequate and cannot prevent people from dying.

### **Education:**

*“Since the soldiers approached our area we could not run our school. In the past we had a school from Kindergarten until 3<sup>rd</sup> Standard. In the future we cannot have school in our village because the SPDC come and destroy our houses and school all the time,” - Villager<sup>42</sup>*

Even without an offensive it is difficult for children in Burma’s ethnic areas to receive an education. In times of military attacks and offensives it becomes nearly impossible.

Schools close down when villagers have to flee their villages. When villagers flee, they can only take the essentials with them: food, cooking equipment, blankets, tarps, etc. Educational materials are seen as a luxury item that people cannot afford to carry with them. Often schools do not have a large quantity of equipment for students to begin with.

*“On June 1<sup>st</sup>, the SPDC came to our village and we fled to another place. When we left we had to close our school. While we were fleeing we set up temporary schools, but when the SPDC troops come near to where we were hiding we had to close it and move to another place. Finally we set up a school in They Maw Ku Hta. The school had been opened for a week before we had to close it and flee again,” - Villager<sup>43</sup>*

Once a school has been abandoned, the soldiers, after they have taken everything they want, often loot it and burn it down. In some communities landmines have been planted around the school, with the aim to maim or kill children and adults that return to the area.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the difficulties people still want their children to be educated. In some IDP hiding places, especially where there are a number of families hiding together, make-shift schools have been established for the children. However, there are a number of obstacles that affects the children’s ability to attend school. Children have to help their family forage for food or look after younger children while their parents go off into the jungle looking for food. Additionally due to the health situation many children are sick and are unable to attend class. Also teachers are not always able to hold classes, because they are in the same situation as all the other families and are struggling for their survival.

*“We are trying to set up a school but it is difficult when children do not have enough food. Some parents cannot give their children enough food. As for the learning materials it is very difficult to get,” - Villager<sup>45</sup>*

With constant disruptions to lessons, the level of education children receive is very basic. It is difficult for them to progress further, especially when they are facing life as an IDP or are living in the fluid state between IDP and villager.

### **Human Rights Abuses:**

The systematic violation of people’s human rights sadly is nothing new in Burma. Villagers are subjected to a wide variety of human rights abuses, all which undermine the grassroots people’s survival structures. Often people cite human rights abuses

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as a contributing factor to their displacement. History has shown that increased militarisation is closely linked to human rights abuses against civilians, and this offensive has not been different.

### **Forced Relocation:**

The implementation of the Four Cuts policy has resulted in the forced relocation of hundred of thousands of villagers from brown and black zones into government-controlled white zones. By evicting and relocating villages in conflict zones, the SPDC aims to increase control over the civilian population, while severing opposition groups' access to support from villagers. The depopulation of tracts of land also enables 'development projects' to be established as elaborated above. The main consequence of forced relocation on villagers is the lack of security, in relation to land, food and livelihood, and virtually non-existent access to welfare services such as health and education.

Little warning is given to people prior to relocation. People often do not even have enough time to adequately prepare to move, but are only permitted to take what they can carry with them. The rest of their belongings, crops and livestock are left behind and cannot be collected at a later date - a great loss which the SPDC does not compensate.

On arrival at the relocation site villagers are faced with building a new community from the ground. In doing this they do not receive any kind of help and have to rely on the resources they have brought with them and what they can find. The land people are forced to relocate to is often barren and over populated. As the good land has usually been claimed by the original inhabitants or confiscated by the soldiers, villagers' livelihood options are limited. There are also very few employment opportunities in forced relocation sites. Additionally, the majority of relocation sites do not have sanitation facilities or electricity and only 13 per cent of households have access to safe drinking water.<sup>46</sup>

Most times relocation sites are located close to military camps and bases, which increase people's vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. The villagers are subjected to forced labour demands from the soldiers and arbitrary taxation. They are also exposed to the threat of torture, murder and rape by soldiers. There have been numerous reports documenting that the Burmese soldiers have subjected women to systematic sexual violence. The lack of electricity at night makes them vulnerable to gender based violence from the soldiers. Additionally the villagers' movements are heavily restricted. Villagers' have to purchase passes from local authorities to travel outside the site. Usually passes are valid only for one day, from dawn to dusk.

*"The SPDC ordered 12 villages (Kler Lah, Kaw Soe Ko, Ler Ko, Wa Thoo Kho, Klay Soe Khee, Kaw Tay Der, Ghar Mu Der, Der Doh, Te Kaw Der, Ku Plaw Der, Maw Kho Der and Maw Pa Der) to relocate to May Daw Ko. In 1994 May Daw Ko had been set up as a military camp and the soldiers had laid landmines around it. The villagers refused to relocate there because they were scared of stepping on a landmine," - Villager<sup>47</sup>*

Hundreds of villages have been given orders to relocate since the beginning of the offensive, for example, more than 6,000 people have been forced to move to the SPDC controlled relocation site in Kyaukgi Township, Nyaung Lay Bin District.<sup>48</sup> While some have moved to the sites, others have fled to the jungle to resist and others have bribed the soldiers to stay in their villages.

In some cases villagers were forced to relocate not to the nearest site, but close to development project locations. It is a common tactic of the SPDC to relocate villages near development sites so that they have a source of free labour to use when the project begins. One example is the villages near Kler Lah. These villagers were ordered to relocate to Klaw Mi Der, despite the fact that there was a relocation site at Kler Lah that was closer to all the villages. Notably the Klaw Mi Der site, which is closer to the proposed Thauk Yay Ka dam site.

### **Forced Labour:**

*“We villagers will become the slaves of the SPDC” - villagers<sup>49</sup>*

Despite the fact that Burma became a signatory to the Convention Against Forced Labour in 1955, the practice of conscripting people to work without compensation is common through out the country. Reports from numerous groups show that forced labour is one of the most common forms of human rights abuses that villagers suffer. Despite the overwhelming evidence that the state systematically uses forced labour, and condemnation from the international community and the International Labour Organisation, the SPDC still denies that the practice exists.

However, given the size of the military (the largest in Southeast Asia with nearly 400,000 soldiers), the fact that the SPDC actively encourages the soldiers (by not providing them with adequate rations or supplies) to become self sufficient and that soldiers are indoctrinated with the idea that forced labour is not a human rights abuse, but rather a proud Burmese custom, it is very unlikely that Burmese troops refrain from forcing villagers to work for them.

Task that villagers are forced to perform include:

- ◆ Construction or repair of military camps and facilities
- ◆ Portering (carrying military equipment, rations, supplies, etc. during military activities)
- ◆ Other support activities for the military camps (sending messages, acting as guides, cooking, etc)
- ◆ Income generation for the military (working on military plantations)
- ◆ Building or maintaining national or local infrastructure projects
- ◆ Militia duty
- ◆ Sweeping for landmines

This is no where near an exhaustive list of the labour tasks villagers are forced to perform.

*“Even though we were not interested in working for them (the Burmese Army), we have to do as they order because we fear their weapons. Demands of forced labour will continue as long as the SPDC retains power,” - Villager<sup>60</sup>*

Villagers living in the SPDC controlled areas are forced to perform labour tasks for the soldiers. They are informed by the soldiers how many workers they are required to provide each day. If this quota is not filled with men, the SPDC conscripts women and children to work on the project.

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*“The SPDC battalion commander 48 Tun Nay Lin forced 11 villagers, nine women and two men, to construct a military camp in Sha Si Bo village, Toungoo District,” - Villager<sup>61</sup>*

Forced labour directly contributes to food scarcity, loss of income, loss of opportunity to go to school and consequently poverty, when villagers are forced to work for the SPDC for extended periods of time and thus neglect their own livelihoods. Their ability to survive is severely undermined.

*“The reason why we have problems is the SPDC soldiers order us to work for them everyday”, - Villager<sup>62</sup>*

Furthermore, while performing these acts of forced labour villagers are also subjected to additional human rights abuses, such as beatings, destruction of property, rape, and even extra-judicial killings.

Some villagers choose to flee into the jungle and become internally displaced or travel to Thailand to seek refugee status rather than remaining in their homes and be subjected to forced labour. Other villagers bribe or pay a fine to avoid having to work for the SPDC, sometimes paying other villagers to work instead of them.

### **Porters:**

Due to the mountainous terrain of northern Karen State where the offensive is taking place, it is difficult to transport materials and supplies to the front line. As there are few roads and animals cannot effectively travel over the terrain, human labour is needed to move the loads in the region. The SPDC forces both civilians and prisoners to work as porters.

Villagers are often used as ‘porters of opportunity’, which means they are usually picked up arbitrarily if they cross paths with soldiers and forced to carry out whatever labour is necessary at that time and place. This includes guiding soldiers to the next village. ‘Porters of opportunity’ are kept for both long and short term use. In the past there have been reports of porters being paid, however, there have been no accounts of this happening since this offensive began.<sup>53</sup>

Prisoners also serve as porters. They are randomly taken from jails and used as porters until they die or escape. Following criticism from the International Labor Organization and labour rights groups, the junta has dramatically increased its use of ‘prison porters’ over the past few years because their legal rights are less clear than other types of porters. The junta believes that labour and rights activists are less likely to defend the human rights of prisoners than civilians.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, the military needs a large labour force that can be replenished easily. Villagers are an unpredictable labour force, because they can flee into the jungle and avoid being forced by the Burmese army to porter for them. However, jails have a constant supply of prisoners who can be taken and made to carry out portering duties.

In this offensive prison porters have been taken from a range of jails across Burma including Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States, as well as Mandalay, Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Pegu and Magwe Division.<sup>55</sup> It is believed that by taking prisoners from areas far away from where the offensive is taking place, the porters will be less likely to escape, because they do not know the language or the area.

The use of both types of porters suggests that the SPDC needs a very large labour force to support their military attacks against the civilian population in northern Karen State. While it is estimated that there are between 3,000 and 5,000 prison porters in the offensive area, large scale recruitments of civilians for portering also

### Escaped Porter's Story

*I was arrested in November 2005 and sentenced to two years imprisonment. Before I was arrested I was living at a Buddhist temple. Because I did not follow the rules of the temple, the local authorities warned me to obey the rules or I would be arrested (in Burma there is a law which protects the national religion, Buddhism, and people can be arrested and imprisoned for committing acts that harm Buddhist traditions and customs). When I broke the rules a second time, I was arrested. Before I finished my prison sentence the SPDC took me out of Toungoo prison and sent me to the frontline in Saw Hta area, Muthraw District, to be a porter. When I arrived to the frontline I realized the Burmese army was cruel to the porters, and that they tortured and killed them.*

*I think there were 2,000 people in prison but the SPDC took 990 to be porters. Some people were happy to be taken as porters, because they thought they could escape. Others could bribe the prison authorities so that they could stay in prison and were not sent to be porters.*

*One SPDC battalion took us from Toungoo prison to Kyauk Kyi SPDC military camp. Day after day they forced us to carry at least 64 milk tins of rice (15 kilograms) and other food items. When we were portering the soldiers forced us to wear army uniforms so that the KNU would think we were soldiers. The days were longer when other porters became too weak to carry their loads. I saw the SPDC kill seven porters because they were too weak to continue.*

*When I reached the frontline I was assigned to the Light Infantry Battalion 368. When I walked with them I saw two SPDC soldiers step on landmines. The soldiers were injured. Afterwards we had to carry the soldiers, as well as our loads. The soldiers set up landmines in the same places where the soldiers were injured. When the other porters came toward us, they stood on the landmines and died.*

*In addition to carrying the load we also had to clean their dishes after breakfast, lunch and dinner and wash their clothes.*

*We carried our loads to the Saw Hta on the banks of the Salween. It took six days and five nights. While portering I got sick but they did not give me any medicine to take. When we were portering the soldiers made us wear SPDC uniform so the KNU would mistake us for soldiers.*

*I ran away at 1PM when the soldiers fell asleep. I fled along the valley and was very thirsty. I came to Saw Hta village and asked for water, but they didn't understand Burmese language. At the same time I saw two Burmese soldiers and I ran north until sunset. At ten o'clock in the morning I met some people in a hut and asked for a meal, after the meal I went to a KNU checkpoint and they sent me to a KNU military camp. I appreciated that if no one had met me in the jungle I would have starved of food and die.*

*First KNU asked me some question as they thought that I was a soldier, I explain to them and said that "I am not a soldier I am a prisoner SPDC forced me to be porter to carry for them". I met information collector and I gave my life experience that I was in prison and porter in frontline.*

continues.<sup>56</sup> In one instance more than 800 villagers including men, women and children were forced to carry rations, supplies and ammunition for the military.<sup>57</sup> Other incidents where civilians have been forced to porter for soldiers have been well documented by Burma Issues' Human Rights Documentation team.

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Life as a porter is inhumane. They are required to carry heavy loads, weighing between 33 and 44 kilograms, for extended periods of time, with little food, water or rest.<sup>58</sup> While carrying these loads for several hours, porters are required to keep up with well rested soldiers, who carry only their weapons and ammunition. Once they have reached a campsite, porters have to collect water, light fires and build shelters for the soldiers.

Porters are also forced to carry out atrocity de-mining by walking in front of troops in order to clear the path of landmines before the soldiers walk there. Reports from escaped porters show that porters are often killed or maimed by landmines.

As prison porters are seen as an expendable resource they are badly mistreated and tortured by the soldiers they serve, often resulting in death. Following beatings porters are expected to continue with their duties without complaint. Illness or injury is ignored by the soldiers and the sick are made to carry out their tasks. When a porter is unable to continue, they are shot and left. Reports from escaped porters describe how fellow porters were killed after they had collapsed from exhaustion.

*“Day after day they forced us to carry at least 64 milk tin (15 kilograms) of rice and other food as well. On the days when the porters couldn’t carry rice because they were too weak they were killed. I saw the SPDC soldiers kill seven porters. They shot them,” –Escaped porter<sup>69</sup>*

SPDC soldiers try to prevent porters from escaping by frequently threatening them with violence if they try to escape. The soldiers also intimidate them by saying that the KNLA would shoot them. On occasions the Burmese soldiers have forced prison porters to wear army uniforms so that outsiders cannot distinguish between the porters and the combatants. Additionally porters are also vulnerable to stepping on landmines while trying to escape, as mines have been extensively laid throughout Karen State.

Despite the obstacles, given the option of portering for the SPDC until death or escape, many porters choose to take the risk and run away. If they do escape and are not caught, there is no mechanism to deal with them. They cannot return home due to severe restriction of movement within Burma, not to mention possible re-arrest or having to cross the frontline of the offensive, and they are also unable to stay in the border area without continued support from local groups and communities, who are themselves struggling for survival.

Opposition groups, such as the KNLA, also use porters; however, these are mainly temporary porters. Reports say that they are fed, given necessary medical treatment and are treated to the same standards as the soldiers they porter for (which is generally quite poor). They are not tortured or mistreated and they are not used as human minesweepers.<sup>60</sup>

### **Restriction of Movement:**

Another impact of the offensive is the restriction of villagers’ movements by the SPDC. Villagers who live under the control of the SPDC can only leave their communities or relocation site after obtaining a valid travel pass from the Burmese soldiers or local authorities. These passes are usually issued only for one day; however, there have been reports of passes for longer periods of time being issued. It is difficult to obtain a pass as they are rarely issued and villagers have to pay local authorities for one. As a result of the restrictions, villagers cannot go to their fields, gardens or plantations. They are also unable to go to markets in neighbouring villages. Even if

villagers can obtain a pass, one day is insufficient for people to travel to their fields or markets, work and travel back. Consequently, such restrictions undermine people's ability to achieve food security.

*“SPDC Division #66 Strategic Operation Command 663 told us that no one from our village (Plae Hsa Loe) could go outside the village. The SPDC said they would punish us if they caught us outside the village,” – Villager<sup>61</sup>*

To make things worse the SPDC has ordered lowland villagers not to sell food to people from the East (the hills) of Burma. Traditionally the lowland villagers and the people from the hills would come to markets and trade their products. Through this system, both groups could access a variety of vegetables, rice, traditional medicines and other goods. The closure of these trading routes has further exacerbated food scarcity for the villagers.

To ensure compliance, the SPDC has warned villagers that they had planted landmines along the paths to the hills. Furthermore, the SPDC arbitrarily closed roads to all non-military travel in Toungoo, between the lowlands and the hills.

However, even compliance to these movement restriction rules does not give security to the villagers. There have been reports of arrest, torture, extra judicial killings outside the relocation sites, even though people had a valid pass. There have also been incidents of villagers being fired upon when they are outside their villages.

#### **Land Confiscation:**

Villagers rely heavily on agriculture as the main means of income generation, and consequently land is very important. The customary system of land ownership in rural Karen State is quite informal, and as a result there are limited records. Most transactions relating to the sale or purchase of land is done between the two parties, without any formalised documentation.

While there are customary ownership structures, the SPDC does not recognise these systems. Land confiscation is a common practice by the Burmese army whereby they inform villagers that they are taking their land. Very rarely are villagers compensated, especially in ethnic areas, and there is no course for redress. In addition to confiscating the land, the crops that are being grown on the land also become the property of the SPDC. Thus villagers not only lose their source of livelihood, but also their harvest, making them vulnerable to food shortages.

*“LIB 549 wrote a letter to us (Day Paw village) telling us that LIB 547, 548 and 549 will set up a military camp in T’Nay Hsah township and that the fields located on the T’Nay Hsah side of the village will be confiscated. As well as having our land confiscated, the Burmese soldiers forced the villagers to plough the fields and plant crops for the SPDC” – Villager<sup>62</sup>*

Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that sometimes villagers are forced to work for the Burmese troops on land their land after it has been stolen by the SPDC. This further undermines the villagers' ability to secure food for their families, as they lack the time to earn their livelihoods.

The SPDC confiscates land for three reasons: to control the local population, for development projects and to support the deployment and militarisation of areas (using the land to grow food for the soldiers). The practice of land confiscation increased in the 1990s when soldiers stopped receiving full rations and were encouraged to be more self-reliant. The reuniting of soldiers and their families in front-line areas has

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also contributed to the increased land confiscation. There are also cases where large areas of land have been confiscated for commercial development.<sup>63</sup> It becomes clear that land confiscation is closely linked to forced relocation.

### **Extra-Judicial Executions and Torture:**

*“He overheard Captain Ne Lin Oo talking to one of his officers after the Captain had recently returned from a meeting with the other army leaders. The Captain commented to his officers that this operation was very difficult because they were required to shoot everything they saw – including civilians, small children and resistance,” - Escaped porter<sup>64</sup>*

The SPDC has ordered their soldiers to shoot everything, including civilians and children. There have been reports of Burmese soldiers shooting at fleeing villagers and engaging in military tactics where a column of soldiers forces people from their hiding places and in a sense herds them to a pre-determined location where another group of soldiers is waiting to open fire on them. There are also reports of villagers being killed while working on their fields.

*“SPDC troops shot dead 5 villagers,” - Villager<sup>65</sup>*

Additionally prison porters, porters of opportunity and villagers performing forced labour tasks are also murdered by the SPDC troops, usually when they can no longer keep up, or continue. Some are tortured, prior to death, or merely wounded and left to die.

The acts of torture that people are subjected to are horrific. The Burmese army tortures men, women, the elderly and children. Soldiers beat people until the person falls unconscious. Body parts are removed, such as ears and noses. There have

### **Saw Eh Htoo's Story**

*My father, brother and I went to work on our farm cutting down trees. My brother, who was 12 years old, only had one leg because when he was younger a snake bit the other leg and it had to be cut off. The Burmese army came and began shooting at us while we were working. I had been shot three times, but I could still walk. My father could not walk. He told me to go to the village and send people back to get him and my brother. I made it to the village and told them what happened. The villagers could not go back immediately because they did not know if the soldiers had left or if they were still there. The next day someone told me my father and brother had been killed.*

*Our village is in the mountains so it is not easy to contact other people. There is no clinic but a few people know a little about medicine. I have to take care of my mother and my three siblings that are alive because my father is dead. I hate the soldiers who killed my father, but I cannot avenge my father and brother's deaths.*

*Saw Eh Htoo is 16 years old.*

been reports of people who were set on fire. This list is not exhaustive. Acts of torture are carried out to punish villagers for alleged wrongdoings, or simply because the soldiers can. There is no system of redress for villagers who have been tortured.

*“The SPDC Strategic Operation Command (1) Kler La Operation Commander Thain Tun arrested a 14 year old boy from Wa Tho Kho village because he helped two deserters from the Burmese army. They tortured him,” - Villager<sup>66</sup>*

#### **Arbitrary Arrest:**

The SPDC has arbitrarily arrested villagers during the offensive. Often the villages' alleged wrongdoings include: travelling without a pass and being caught outside a relocation site without permission. In some cases villagers are accused of passing information on to the KNU, with little, if any evidence.

*“The SPDC Strategic Operation Command Thain Tun arrested five men and three women. They accused these people from the Wa Tho Kho village of passing information to the KNU,” - Village<sup>67</sup>*

For those who find themselves arrested, their punishments depend on their alleged transgressions and the person who arrested them. In most cases villagers are forced to pay a fine or perform labour in exchange for their release. However, in other situations, the punishment can result in long prison sentences or execution. In ethnic areas the local SPDC authorities or Burmese army imposes the justice, which can be especially brutal. As the legal system in Burma is little more than a sham, the punishments handed down through this system cannot be classed as judicial. Consequently, when people are sentenced to death, their sentences cannot be seen as judicial killings. They should be classed as murder.

#### **Arbitrary Taxation:**

Arbitrary taxation (in the form of taxes, fees and fines) is another tactic used by the SPDC to control the civilian population. Often fines are linked to other restrictions imposed on the villagers, such as restriction of movement. For example, if a villager is caught outside the designated area without a valid pass they are fined. In other cases villagers are forced to pay money for construction of buildings or maintenance of already established structures.

For the villagers, being financially exploited further compounds the situation they are in. As their financial resources are constantly being depleted, their escape from poverty becomes less and less likely.

#### **Destruction of Property/Looting:**

When the Burmese army comes across a village, rice store, or hiding place in the jungle they steal whatever they want. The soldiers leave nothing behind that the villagers could use. Cooking pots and plates are bayoneted so that they have holes in the bottom and cannot hold water – making them useless. Christian churches and bibles have been desecrated and destroyed. Given the villagers' isolation, travel restrictions and poverty as a result of the SPDC's actions, it is not possible to replace these belongings, especially since the junta does not compensate them for their losses.

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*“The SPDC burnt down 32 houses in Toungoo District, He Daw Khaw village. In addition to burning down the houses, a lot of the villagers’ belongings were destroyed,” - Villager<sup>68</sup>*

*“The situation in Daw Pa Kho Township in Toungoo is bad because there are a lot of soldiers in this area. The soldiers are trying to find where the village people are hiding property and food. When they find them, they destroy the stores,”  
- Villager<sup>69</sup>*

As villagers know their property is likely to be stolen or destroyed they have developed coping strategies to minimise the affects. Villagers hide some of their basic belongings, such as cooking pots, blankets and tarps, in the jungle so that if military patrols come to their houses, they do not lose everything. However, these hiding places, along with rice stores, are destroyed if discovered.



*Villagers property that was destroyed by the Burmese army. What the soldiers did not take, they destroyed.*

### **Sexual Violence:**

Women in particular are vulnerable in ethnic areas, as they are often the last ones to flee a community (the men flee earlier to avoid forced labour demands or accusations of supporting opposition forces). In addition to other human rights abuses, they are vulnerable to sexual violence, such as when performing forced labour tasks at a military base or living in a forced relocation site.

It has been well documented that the SPDC uses sexual violence against ethnic women as a tool of oppression and a tactic to further their “Burmanisation” of the ethnic population. However, victims often remain silent out of fear of further victimisation. The true number of women and girls who have been subjected to sexual violence during this offensive will never be known.

*“At 3 pm I was cooking rice and a SPDC soldier called me “A Moe, A Moe” (a common name that Burmese soldiers call Karen women). At first I thought he wanted some salt and fish paste, but he asked me “Where is your husband?” I replied that he had gone to the cardamom plantation. The soldier then asked “Where are your children?” I replied, “My children are at school”. Immediately he came into the house, pushed me down and lay on top of me. He covered my mouth with his hand and tried to rape me. I shouted loudly and fortunately my youngest child came home, so he could not rape me,” – Female villager<sup>70</sup>*

As perpetrators are rarely punished it is dangerous for victims to remain in the communities. For safety reasons and to avoid further abuse, women often leave their communities.

*“I don’t know the rank and name of the soldier who tried to rape me, but I know he belongs to Infantry Battalion 124. The name of the battalion is B’Yin Naung battalion, and they are located at Kler La hill. Some people advise it is not safe for me to go back to my village, because the soldier is still alive and there,” – Female villager<sup>71</sup>*

## **Regional Impacts:**

Burma’s regional neighbours (ASEAN member states, India, China and Bangladesh) are also affected by the actions of the junta, such as this offensive. These impacts compromise regional stability.

### **Exodus of people:**

Since the beginning of this offensive in November 2005 there has been an influx of displaced persons trying to cross the border into the refugee camps in Thailand. To date approximately 3,000 new refugees from the offensive area have entered Mae Ra Mu Luang, one refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border, near Mae Sariang.<sup>72</sup>

However, this figure could be considerably larger if the border remained open. The Thai authorities have frequently closed the border over the past year, often leaving IDPs in need of assistance on the Burmese side of the border. Despite overwhelming evidence that the villagers are fleeing fighting, the Thai authorities regularly prevent them from the crossing into Thailand. The reason they claimed was that the villagers were not genuinely fleeing fighting, but rather capitalising on the chance for resettlement to a third country, which is being offered to refugees in the camps (only a very small portion of the refugee population is being resettled).

Although humanitarian groups have lobbied the Thai authorities to keep the border open it is still prone to recurrent closures.

Furthermore, the 3,000 does not consider the people who have entered into Thailand and become illegal migrant workers. While this group of people may not seek refugee status for a number of reasons, they would often fulfill the definition of a refugee. Burmese migrant workers in Thailand constitute a sizable group, with as many as ten times more Burmese migrant workers than refugees in Thailand.

The constant movement of people across the Thai-Burma border as a result of the protract conflict and the humanitarian crisis has been caused by the actions of the SPDC. This movement puts pressure on neighbouring countries and destabilises human security: diseases that were believe to be contained, such as elephantitis, appear in the population, the employment market is flooded leading to a decrease in wages and unemployment, illegal activities such as drug use and human trafficking increase. While this list is not complete, any action that destabilises human security, also compromises regional stability.

### **Increased Aid:**

Another regional impact of this offensive has been the need to increase cross border aid to people in Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw Districts. While there has always been a small stream of humanitarian relief, primarily food and health services, to displaced communities the demands placed on these groups have grown

## Shoot on Sight

since the beginning of the offensive. Given the seriousness of the situation in these three districts community based cross-border relief teams are working exceptionally hard to provide assistance to communities in need. This strains not only their financial resources, but also their staff. Aid workers travel into a conflict zone for months on end with no 'protection' from a government or UN agency, endure living conditions similar to IDPs, face injury and death by landmines and torture and death if discovered and captured by the Burmese army.. Their work is exceptionally important, however, the risks they take are very real. As the only way to access these areas is overland across the Thai border, it has put increased pressure on authorities to open the border for humanitarian aid purposes.

### **International Image:**

Given the "saving face" concept that is present in most cultures of the members of ASEAN and regional countries; the behaviour of the junta and the persecution of the civilian population during this offensive must be embarrassing. As this is the largest offensive the junta has conducted since it joined the regional association; it clearly demonstrates a failure of ASEAN's "constructive engagement" policy. All the professed improvements and so-called successes as a result of engaging with the junta, such as the country's alleged progress towards democracy and national reconciliation through the junta's roadmap and the highly criticised National Convention, have turned out to be illusions dispelled by the attacks on civilians, further degrading the image of the grouping. The lack of concern from the generals about how their behaviour reflects on ASEAN begs the question: If the generals do not care about the reputation and image of ASEAN, why is ASEAN willing to ruin its credibility and reputation for Burma?

### **International Impacts:**

The impacts of this offensive transcend international borders. As the actions of the junta affect the regional stability, they in turn affect the international community.

### **Threat to Peace**

While Burma may be regarded a small, relatively unknown country in Southeast Asia, it actually has potential to destabilise regional and international security. Past issues that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) considered to be a threat to international security include:

- ◆ Overthrow of a democratically elected government
- ◆ Conflict among factions
- ◆ Humanitarian/Human Rights Violations
- ◆ Refugee Outflow
- ◆ Drugs, HIV/AIDS

Countries that the UNSC has considered to be a threat to peace, such as Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Cambodia, Liberia, Afghanistan, Yemen and Haiti, have all had one or more of these defined threats, which led to a UNSC resolution. All of these elements are present in Burma; however, while Burma has recently been put on the United Nation's Security Council agenda, there is yet to be a resolution.

Country	Resolution	Overthrow of a Democratic Government	Conflict Among Factions	Humanitarian Crisis of Human Rights Abuses	Refugee Outflow	Other (Drugs)	Other (HIV/AIDS)
Sierra Leone	SC 1132 (1997)	X	X	X	X		
Afghanistan	SC 1076 (1996)		X	X	X		
Yemen	SC 924		X	X			
Haiti	SC 841 (1993)	X		X	X		
Rwanda	SC 812 (1993)		X	X	X		
Liberia	SC 788 (1992)		X	X			
Cambodia	SC 668 (1990)		X				
Burma		X	X	X	X	X	X

*This table comes from the report “Threat to Peace: A call for the UN Security Council to act in Burma”, DLA Piper, 2005*

## ***Recommendations***

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The recommendations in this section are ideas from members of the grassroots communities in Burma, including villagers affected by this offensive. This is what the people want the SPDC, KNU/KNLA, ASEAN, Regional Countries (Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh) and the international community to do. Let their voices be heard, and given the due respect they deserve.

### **SPDC:**

1. Cease all military activities against the Burmese people immediately and implement a nationwide ceasefire to be monitored by an independent third part
2. Lift restrictions on aid agencies so that they can deliver humanitarian aid without hindrance
3. Stop all human rights abuses against all people of Burma and treat them respectfully and without prejudice, regardless of their ethnic origin
4. De-militarise Karen State and other ethnic areas; halt the use of landmines and initiate a national mine clearance programs
5. End censorship of the press and enable the media to be free and independent, with access to all areas of Burma

### **KNU/KNLA:**

1. Explore and employ non-violent methods of resistance
2. Continue attempts to create a ceasefire through dialogue and ensure that views, opinions and concerns from villagers are presented in these discussion
3. Create an evacuation plan in order to help as many villagers as possible in the event of an attack
4. Provide an open communication channel between the KNU, villagers, people of Burma and international community with news and information

### **ASEAN:**

1. Abolish the policy of non-interference
2. Assist in increasing the flow of cross-border aid in Thailand
3. Keep international border open so that those in need can cross it and take shelter or receive aid
4. Stop investment/development projects in Burma
5. Stop loans (direct or otherwise) to Burma
6. Call for a United Nations Security Council resolution
7. Monitor the human rights situation in Burma, especially in ethnic areas
8. Pressure, encourage and assist the SPDC reform the country's political structure
9. Develop a Human Rights Charter and make it mandatory for all ASEAN members to comply to it
10. Consider expelling/excluding Burma from ASEAN if they do not reform
11. Enforce a complete arms embargo

**REGIONAL (Thai, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh):**

1. Stop investing in Burma.
2. Stop investment/development projects in Burma, including loans (direct and otherwise) to Burma
3. Enforce a complete arms embargo.
4. China should abstain from voting on any UNSC resolution on Burma.
5. Assist in providing or helping non-governmental organisations with cross-border aid
6. Sign the Convention on Refugees and accept and help refugees
7. Allow media groups to contact people from the offensive area and receive first-hand information

**INTERNATIONAL:**

*"I hope the international community will hear and seriously consider our problems and help us to end our suffering" - villager<sup>72</sup>*

1. Enforce a universal arms embargo
2. Impose a universal economic sanction
3. Monitor the human rights situation in Burma, especially in ethnic areas
4. Push for a UNSC resolution on Burma
5. Mediate and monitor political reform in the country
6. Increase funding for cross-border aid
7. Pressure companies to stop investing in development projects in the offensive area
8. Ensure international groups do not give legitimacy to the SPDC by working with them

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