



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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SPDC mortar attack on school in Papun District

One 15-year-old student is dead and two other students are injured after an 81 mm mortar fired into an IDP hiding site in Lu Thaw Township, Papun District, landed in a school set up by the villagers. As of February 21st, the site's 353 residents remained in hiding and are actively seeking to avoid being shot-on-sight by SPDC Army troops that remain in their area.

**The original version of this report was modified on March 16th 2010 to include new information. Details regarding injuries to the boys harmed by the attack and an explanatory footnote have been added to the second paragraph.*

On February 19th 2010, soldiers from State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Military Operation Command (MOC) #7 based in Hsar Law Kyoh, Lu Thaw Township, killed a 15-year-old student and injured two others after firing an 81 mm mortar into the T--- hiding site for internally displaced persons (IDPs). This site was inhabited by 353 civilians that had fled their home villages, including the entire population of Thay Thu Kee village, as a means to resist ongoing attacks against villagers in northern Papun District designed to drive civilians into SPDC-controlled areas. Such attacks have been a well-documented and direct consequence of the increased military presence in Papun since the initiation of the Northern Karen State Offensive in November 2005.¹ Even though the SPDC had withdrawn from some camps previously located near IDP areas of Lu Thaw Township, the residents of T--- had not yet felt it safe to permanently return to their villages. They had instead chosen to stay in the hiding site and had even built a school so that their children could continue to receive an education during displacement.²

KHRG researchers report that the school in T--- was hit by an SPDC mortar just after 9:00 am on February 19th. The attack occurred during the school's exam period; students had arrived at school and were sitting an exam when the shell landed. Three schoolboys were injured by fragments from the mortar: Saw R---, 15, who was wounded in his stomach; Saw Hs---, 8, who sustained injuries to his leg; and Saw E---, 10, who was injured in his arm. The three were sent to a clinic at Kay Bpoo village to receive treatment for their injuries. Saw R---'s condition was too serious to be treated at Kay Bpoo clinic, and the medics sent him south along the Yunzalin River to another hospital at Bp'na Ay Bper Ko, Lu Thaw Township, where his injuries were again deemed too severe for treatment. The boy was then sent on to Kaw Lu Der hospital, where he

¹ For details on the exploitative abuses resulting from the Northern Karen State Offensive in Papun District, see "IDPs, land confiscation and forced recruitment in Papun District," KHRG, July 2009; "SPDC and DKBA road construction, forced labour and looting in Papun District," KHRG, March 2009.

² For an update on SPDC operations in Papun since withdrawing from some forward positions during December 2008, see "Starving them out: Food shortages and exploitative abuse in Papun District," KHRG, October 2009.

was admitted for medical care, but by this time his health had deteriorated and his injuries were no longer treatable. Saw R--- passed away at about 3:00 am on February 21st 2010.³

KHRG has confirmed that, prior to the attack, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) had not been active in the area into which the mortar was fired. This indicates that the soldiers from MOC #7 did not fire the mortar as a response to a prior attack or in an attempt to strike a legitimate military target, but as a deliberate attack on the civilian population of the T--- hiding site. This is consistent with numerous accounts of similar assaults documented by KHRG, including mortar attacks on villages and shooting civilians on sight, by SPDC units since the start of the Northern Karen State Offensive.⁴ Prior to this incident villagers from T'B---, a 1.5 hour walk from Kay Bpoo, reported to KHRG that they had escaped after soldiers from MOC #7 shot at them in January; the soldiers had entered their village on patrol and opened fire after seeing the villagers working in their fields.

This incident also illustrates the way that militarization and measures designed to consolidate control over villagers in hiding impact essential services such as health and education. Though only one shell fell on the T--- hiding site, it not only injured and killed three children, but disrupted school for all the students; as of February 21st, the residents of T--- had not been able to return to the hiding site and the students' exams remained on hold.⁵ That one of the boys injured in the mortar attack had to be taken to three different locations before a clinic was found that could treat him, and that he ultimately died from his injuries, is also the predictable result of SPDC Army forward camps and patrols that force health organisations to operate covertly, on pain of being shot on sight.⁶ Movement and trade restrictions imposed by SPDC authorities in areas under their control, meanwhile, further undermine access to health services and create a shortage of basic medicines in areas both under and beyond military control. The cumulative impact is that, for displaced villagers in hiding, flight and evasion as tactics for resisting abuse become increasingly difficult to sustain.

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

- *Starving them out: Food shortages and exploitative abuse in Papun District* (October 2009)
- *IDPs, land confiscation and forced recruitment in Papun District* (July 2009)
- *IDP conditions and the rape of a young girl in Papun District* (April 2009)
- *SPDC and DKBA road construction, forced labour and looting in Papun District* (March 2009)
- *Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Papun District* (February 2009)

³ The Free Burma Rangers (FBR) has also reported this incident, citing different ages for the boys injured in the attack. See, "FBR REPORT: Burma Army Kills One Child and Wounds Two in Attack on School," Free Burma Rangers, February 24th 2009. The discrepancy in age likely reflects the fact that villagers in rural areas, particularly IDPs in hiding, often do not keep track of specific birth date information for themselves or their children, and may not have birth certificates or other identification documents by which to determine their exact age. They may therefore only be able to guess at their own or another villager's actual age, and give inconsistent information to different interviewers. Similar lack of formality regarding identifying information may also explain a difference in naming reported by KHRG and FBR: the boy referred to as Saw Hs--- by KHRG in this report is identified as Saw Ree Re in FBR's report. The discrepancy appears to be the result of one interviewer being told the boy's actual given name, Saw Hs---, and another being told the boy's nickname, Saw Ree Re, by which many other villagers would know and refer to him.

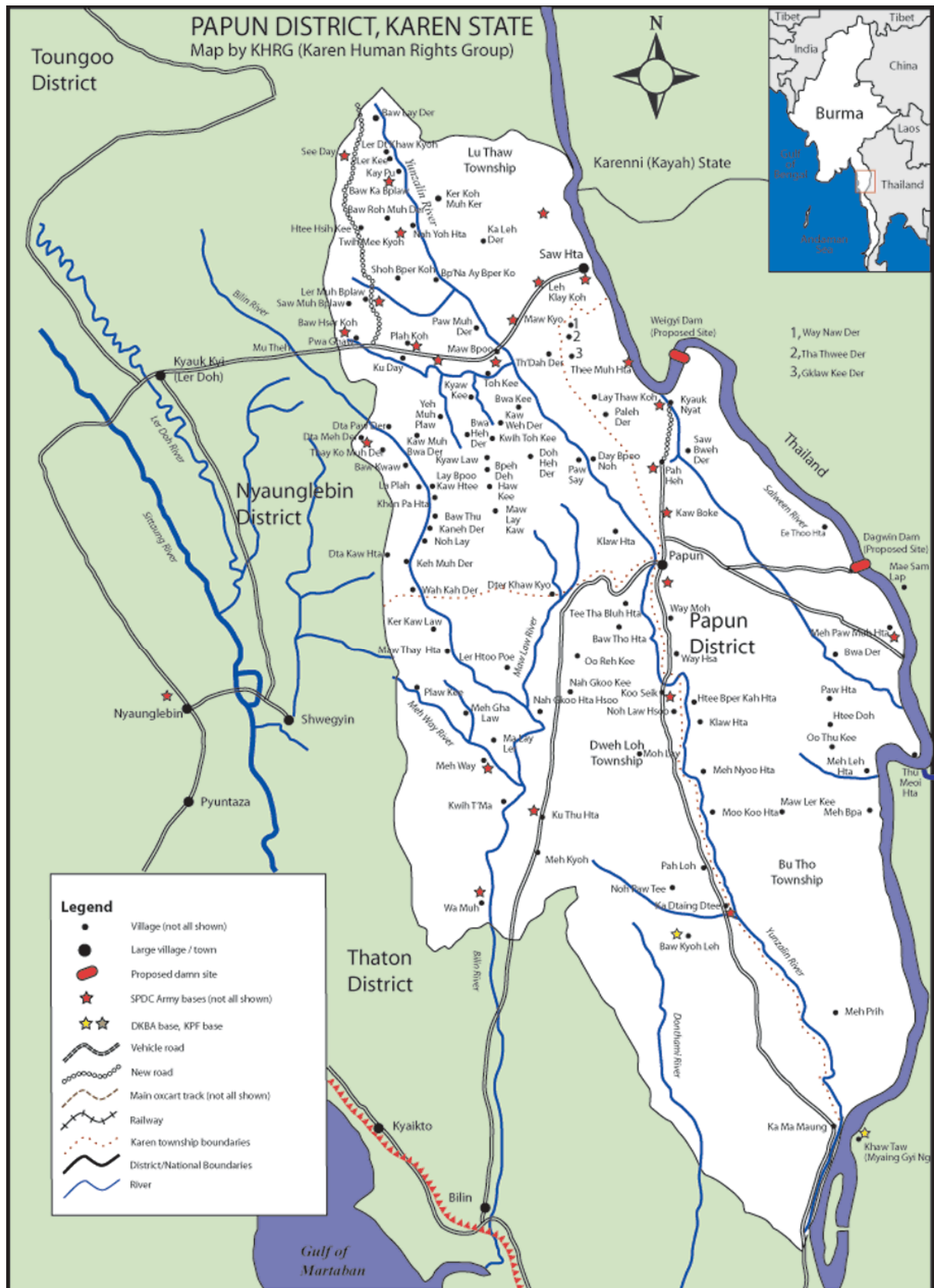
⁴ See, for example, "Mortar attacks, landmines, and the destruction of schools in Papun District," KHRG, August 2008.

⁵ For more details on the way SPDC Army patrols disrupt education and health services for children, see *Grave Violations: Assessing abuses of child rights in Karen areas during 2009*, KHRG, January 2010.

⁶ For a description of some of the problems faced by medical teams attempting to operate while also evading the SPDC Army, see *Provision of Primary Health Care among Internally displaced people of Burma: Mid Year Report 2009*, Backpack Health Worker Team, June 2009.

- *Mortar attacks, landmines and the destruction of schools in Papun District (August 2008)*
- *Burma Army attacks and civilian displacement in northern Papun District (June 2008)*

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



Karen Districts



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