



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

October 31, 2011 / KHRG #2011-B42

Toungoo Situation Update: May to July 2011

This report includes a situation update submitted to KHRG in August 2011 by a villager describing events occurring in Toungoo District between May and July 2011. It describes a series of trade and movement restrictions imposed on villagers in June and July 2011, due to frequent clashes between Tatmadaw and non-state armed groups, and road closures between Toungoo Town and Buh Sah Kee. The report also examines in detail the serious impacts the road closures have had on the livelihoods of villagers who have been unable to support themselves by transporting and selling agricultural produce and purchasing rice supplies as usual. The report further describes incidents of human rights abuse by Tatmadaw forces, including the summary execution of two civilians in July 2011 by soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #379; forced labour including the portering of military supplies, the production and supply of building materials, guide duty and sweeping for landmines; and an attack on a village previously reported by KHRG and the subsequent destruction of villagers' homes and food stores.

Situation Update | Toungoo District (August 2011)

The following situation update was written by a villager in Toungoo District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This report was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including one other situation update.²

Introduction

In Toungoo [Taw Oo] District there are two townships: Tantabin [Taw Ta Tu] Township and Than Daung [Daw Pa Koh] Township. The people who face human rights abuses are civilians who live in areas under the control of the military SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]³ and people who live

¹ KHRG trains villagers in eastern Burma to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When writing situation updates, villagers are encouraged to summarise recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important, and present their opinions or perspective on abuse and other local dynamics in their area.

² When these documents have been processed and translated by KHRG and when sufficient information has been compiled and analysed, a full Field Report on the situation in Toungoo District will be available on the KHRG website. Until then, KHRG's most recent analysis of the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the recent Field Report, "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

³ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) and *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) are commonly used to refer to the Burmese government or to Burma's state military, the Tatmadaw. Many older Karen villagers who were accustomed to using the phrase *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) before 1997 continue to use that phrase, even though the SLORC has not officially existed since 1997. Similarly, despite the official dissolution of the SPDC in March 2011, many Karen villagers continue to use the phrase *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) to refer to the Burmese government or to the Tatmadaw; see:

in IDP [internally displaced person] areas. As there are ongoing human rights abuses, civilians who live in the [Toungoo] area remain poor and cannot obtain a higher standard of living.

Forced labour and demands

At the places where SPDC Army bases are close to Karen villages, they [Tatmadaw soldiers] order villagers to serve as *set tha* [messengers].⁴ Every day, each village has to send one person to serve as a messenger. Moreover, whenever they need help, they force villagers to go and carry things for them from where the vehicle road ends to their army camps.

During the SPDC Army columns' patrol operations they force villagers to go [with them] and show them the way. Villagers have to walk in front of them. They also use villagers to walk in front of them as landmine sweepers.

For example, Klaw Mi Der [Yay Dta Gone], Play Hsa Loh, Yeh Loh, Lay Ahoh Loh, Plaw Baw Der, Bpaw Pa, Shah See Bo, Yay Shah, Taw Gkoo, Zee Pyu Gone, Kler La [Bawgali Gyi], Gkaw Thay Der [Yay Tho Gyi], Gklay Soh Kee, Maw Pah Der, Gkaw Soe Koh, Ker Weh and Ka Thaw Pwe are those villages that always face forced labour demands by the SPDC Army, because those villages are close to SPDC Army bases.

The SPDC Army bases located close to the villages demand chickens, vegetables, fruits and other things from villages. Moreover, for repairs for their camp, they always demand villagers to supply them with bamboo, thatch shingles and wood.⁵

Between Toungoo and Kler La [Bawgali Gyi], motorists travelling by car or motorbike have to have a written travel permit. They have to pay for the travel permit in Kler La at the SPDC Army base. They have to pay at the SPDC Army base for different types of permits, ranging [in cost] from 500 kyat (US \$0.60)⁶ and up to 10,000 kyat or 100,000 kyat (US \$12.05 to \$120). A motorbike travel permit costs 1,000 kyat (US \$1.20) and has to be paid for at the Kler La SPDC Army base. Checkpoint costs depend on whether you are driving a car or motorbike. You have to pay more at a big checkpoint, while you have to pay less at a small checkpoint. There are many checkpoints along the vehicle road and each checkpoint costs at least 500 kyat to pass. Even when the villagers are only transporting vegetables or fruits by vehicle or cart the SPDC Army soldiers [at checkpoints] still demand payment. If villagers are returning from town, they have to bring snacks, fish, vegetables, alcohol and other things to give which they [Tatmadaw soldiers] demand at the checkpoints. Checkpoints are located in Kler La, Bpeh Leh Wah, Gkyaw Koh, 20-Mile, 6-Mile, Pya Sakan, 4-Mile and close to Toungoo bridge. There are other checkpoints along the road too.

The latest situation in the area

In the month of May 2011, SPDC Army LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #376 and LIB #541 deployed from Kler La and Gkaw Thay Der to Naw Soh and Buh Sah Kee in Tantabin

“Mission Accomplished as SPDC ‘dissolved’,” *Myanmar Times*, April 4-10 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this report and “SPDC” is therefore retained in the translation of this report.

⁴ *Set tha* is a Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases and serving as a go-between to deliver orders from army officers to village heads, but also involving other menial tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

⁵ For the full translated contents of 86 forced labour order letters sent by Tatmadaw officers to villagers in Toungoo District between January and October 2010, see *Civilian and Military order documents: March 2008 to July 2011*, KHRG, October 2011.

⁶ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the fluctuating informal exchange rate rather than the government's official fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1. As of October 25th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 830 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

Township. When they arrived, they went to an IDP area and burned and destroyed Maw Thay Der villagers' huts, paddy stores and other possessions: everything they could find in the village.⁷ Also, villagers who live in the eastern part of Gkaw Thay Der village tract are now afraid of the soldiers from LIBs #376 and #541. Even in the rainy season, they [villagers from eastern Gkaw Thay Der] moved [fled] to another area. Moreover, because they moved in the rainy season many children and adults became sick. Some villagers left rice crops that they had grown. They have not grown any more rice this year in the place they moved. Some villagers returned [to Maw Thay Der] and saw that their paddy fields and stores had been destroyed by rain, rats and other animals. Because villagers could not work as normal and because of the damage [to crops], there is now not enough food. Some villagers have fallen sick and cannot work, and the consequences of this are making the problem worse and worse.

Fighting and road closure

On June 19th 2011, there was fighting on the vehicle road. Following that, the SPDC Army closed the road between mountain areas and Gkaw Thay Der, Kler La and Toungoo towns. In the plains areas, the stretches of the vehicle road between Toungoo, Tantabin and Zayatkyi were closed for a week. If people went out, they [SPDC Army soldiers] checked people's bags: men and women alike, they checked them all. Before the end of June there was a bomb that exploded in Toungoo Town, so the SPDC Army closed the vehicle road [again].

On July 8th 2011 there was fighting in Bpeh Leh Wah, Maw Pah Der, Gkaw Soe Koh, Kler La and Buh Sah Kee. At this time, SPDC Army soldiers ordered villagers not to travel, especially by car or motorbike along the vehicle road.

Villagers who live in the Gkaw Thay Der village tract depend on this vehicle road for their livelihoods. They go to sell fruits and vegetables they harvest in Kler La and, with the money that they get, they buy rice and other things they need. The food that villagers buy comes from Toungoo Town and the fruit and vegetables villagers sell in Kler La are sent to Toungoo Town to be resold.

Because the SPDC Army closed the road, villagers could not go and sell their fruits and vegetables, such as durian, dog fruit, betel leaf, mangosteen and others. They did not allow [villagers] to go, so, day by day, their incomes were negatively affected, costing some of them hundreds of thousands [of kyat]. As they could not go and sell things [their agricultural products] anymore, they have faced problems buying rice. Some have not been able to buy enough rice, so this has become a worry for them.⁸

Table 1: Average output and plantation profits when the roads between Toungoo Town – Kler La and Kler La – Buh Sah Kee are open

Type of plantation	Average units produced per plantation	Market value per unit (kyat)	Average income
Durian	5 fruits	1,000	5,000 (US \$6.02)
Mangosteen	50 fruits	100	5,000 (US \$6.02)

⁷ This incident was previously reported by KHRG on June 2nd 2011; see "Joint Tatmadaw patrol burns field huts and seed stores, displaces six villages in Toungoo District," KHRG, June 2011.

⁸ The soil quality and terrain in much of Toungoo District supports only limited rice or paddy farming. For this reason, most households are dependent on income generated from various plantation crops, such as betelnut, betel leaf, cardamom, durian and dog fruit. The loss of a year's crop can have devastating consequences for villagers' long-term food security as can the breakdown of local market dynamics due to the closure of trade routes and roads, as explained by the villager who wrote this report; see: "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

Dog fruit	8 bowls	1,000 per bowl ⁹	8,000 (US \$9.64)
Betel leaf	30 viss (48 kg. / 105.6 lb.)	3,000 per viss	90,000 (US \$108.44)

There are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 households engaged in agriculture in the area [affected by the road closure].

Villagers' occupations

Villagers that live in mountain areas cultivate plantations such as betel [areca nut] trees, cardamom, durian, dog fruit, mangosteen, coffee, banana and other [crops]. Few people farm [rice].

In the plains areas the SPDC Army does not allow villagers to sleep at their farms or other workplaces. When villagers go to work at their farms or workplaces they are only allowed to take two milk tins of rice (0.5 kg. / 1.1 lb.). If they take more than two milk tins, the Burmese Army [Tatmadaw] soldiers will punish them however they want.

Villagers who have harvested their fruits and vegetables cannot go out and sell their fruits and vegetables any more [because of the road closure]. Their fruits and vegetables have become ruined [rotten] and they have lost income. It will be difficult for villagers to survive in the area in the future. When we look back, we can see clearly that the SPDC Army soldiers deliberately planned to close the vehicle road and starve the villagers; they knew there would not be enough food for the villagers to eat. The civilians here can no longer maintain a decent standard of living. In the future, this [closure of the vehicle roads] could mean that civilians will not be able to live in the area anymore. As they have lost income, families do not have enough food and so the villagers' health declines; as for education, it is not easy for the parents to plan for their children. If this case continues, there will be many civilians who will move to other places. This is a worry for this area and for its future.

The Burmese Army closed the vehicle road and made demands, making it difficult for civilians to work [without disruption]. They [civilians] have been living in fear for a long time now.

Killing of villagers

On July 13th 2011, SPDC Army soldiers from LIB #379 of MOC [Military Operations Command] #9, led by Company Commander Soe San Moe, arrested two L--- villagers: Saw K---, 48, and Saw W---, 33. The SPDC Army soldiers arrested these two people and killed them at the road to Ler Ghee Koh Der Gkay village.¹⁰ Because columns from SPDC LIBs #374 and LIB #379 are active in Than Daung Township, west of the Day Loh Kloh [River], [the roads have been closed and] the local people are now faced with difficulties day after day. As already mentioned, they cannot go and sell their [agricultural] products, such as durian, mangosteen, dog fruit and betel leaf.

Table 2: Tatmadaw Southern Command, MOC #9¹¹ units in Toungoo District as of August 2011:

MOC #9	Area of Deployment
--------	--------------------

⁹ A bowl is a unit of volume normally used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. KHRG is unaware of any standard weight measurement for a bowl of dog fruit.

¹⁰ The villager who wrote this report did not provide any further information as to why Saw K--- and Saw W--- were killed.

¹¹ A Military Operations Command (MOC) typically consists of ten battalions. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three infantry battalions (IBs or LIBs) each.

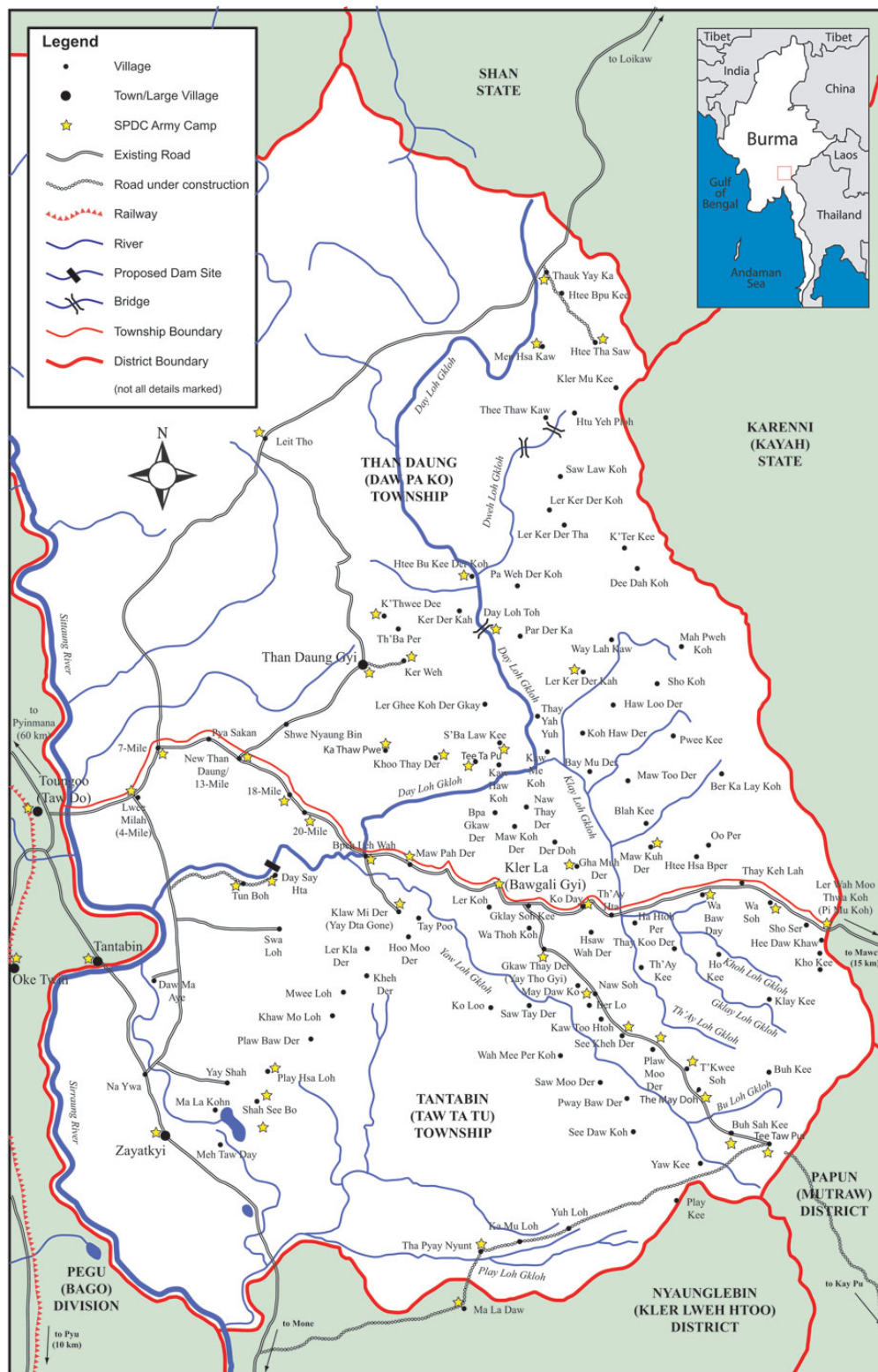
MOC #9 Commander	Lives in Zayatkyi
TOC #1	Kler La
TOC #2	Buh Sah Kee
IB #39	Thaw Yay Kat - Tun Boh Dam
IB #73	Yay Shah, Shah See Bo; Gk'Ser Doh
IB #124	Than Daung Gyi
IB #440	Htee Tha Saw
IB #603	Lay Tho Ya Bridge
LIB #374	Ker Weh; K'Thwee Dee; Ka Thaw Pwe
LIB #376	Buh Sah Kee; Lu Thaw Township (Papun District)
LIB #377	Gkyaw Koh; Bpeh Leh Wah; Maw Pah Der; Gkaw Soe Koh
LIB #379	Gkaw Thay Der; Naw Soh (Point 2906); Ker Weh; K'Thwee Dee; Ka Thaw Pwe
LIB #539	Play Hsa Loh; Klaw Mi Der
LIB #540	Th'Ay Hta; Ko Day (48-Mile); Kler La
LIB #541	Buh Sah Kee (Point 3919)

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

- "Toungoo Situation Update: April to July 2011," (October 2011)
- "Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011," (July 2011)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: April 2011," (June 2011)
- "Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011," (June 2011)
- "Toungoo Interviews: November 2010 to April 2011," (June 2011)
- "Joint Tatmadaw patrol burns field huts and seed stores, displaces six villages in Toungoo District," (May 2011)
- "Toungoo Incident Reports: March and April 2011," (May 2011)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010-B*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



© Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2006