

SHRF MONTHLY REPORT - MAY 2008

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COMMENTARY

Forced Labour

One more “May Day” celebration has passed. But in Burma, labour rights are still only a farfetched dream.

Despite all the continuous efforts by the ILO and the international community to steer the Burmese military junta towards abandoning the use of unpaid civilian forced labour, there has so far been little improvement. Forced labour is still being widely used by the Burmese military authorities in Shan State.

In many areas, instead of being improved, the situation has been increasingly worsening over the recent years.

In the agriculture sector, while still being obliged to routinely cultivate seasonal crops for the military every year, people have been forced to also cultivate plantations, e.g., physic nut, etc., which require constant care all year round.

Even the practice of taking great numbers of people to serve as unpaid forced porters during military operations, which has somewhat reduced in recent years or been replaced by prisoner-porters, seems to have been revived again at the end of last year.

Many other types of routine forced labour such as maintaining military camps, running errands and doing menial work for the troops, fetching water and collecting firewood for military camps, etc., have been going on unbroken for many years up to the present.

Occasional use of mass forced labour in building military bases and camps, and in building other infrastructure such as roads and dams, etc., has also been going on unabated.

SITUATION OF FORCED LABOUR IN SHAN STATE

Unpaid forced labour of the civilian populations has still been widely used, occasionally as well as routinely, by the Burmese military authorities in Shan State during 2007.

It has been used in military operations, in state-run plantations of various crops, in construction of infrastructure and military facilities, and in maintaining military camps and serving the soldiers at the camps.

In requisitioning forced labour, the authorities often extorted money from the villagers, either as a fine for failing to provide the demanded forced labour or to be used for other purposes that may not even be related to forced labour.

In this issue are instances of unpaid forced labour of the civilian populations used by the SPDC authorities during the second-half of 2007, which have been collected by SHRF's field workers:

FORCED LABOUR IN MILITARY OPERATIONS

In large scale military operations, large numbers of civilian porters were still occasionally used, even though prisoners were used in most cases.

In small scale military operations, e.g., small patrols of local SPDC troops in their respective areas, however, local villagers were routinely used as guides and porters.

The following are some such instances:

MASS FORCED PORTERAGE IN KUN-HING

In December 2007, more than 80 villagers were conscripted and forced to serve as unpaid porters for several days by a patrol of combined SPDC troops from IB246 and LIB524, in **Kun-Hing** township.

On 15 December 2007, a patrol of about 150 SPDC troops from IB246 and LIB524, led by Maj. Khin Maung Lwin and Maj. Hla Oo respectively, came to Saai Khaao village in Saai Khaao village tract, Kun-Hing township, and stopped for the night in the village.

Around midnight, however, the SPDC troops forcibly conscripted 30 male villagers, aged between 20 and 50, in Saai Khaao village and forced them to serve as porters as they left the village and marched towards Wan Lao village tract during the night.

When they arrived at Wan Lao village the following morning, the SPDC troops put the 30 porters in a school building and detained them there. During that day, 16 December 2007, the troops conscripted 53 more porters from Wan Lao and surrounding villages, including Kot Pung, Naa Mon, Long Maw and Wan Khe villages.

The 53 porters were also locked up during the night in the same school building with the porters who were already there. The next morning, all the porters were forced to carry all sorts of things including rice, other food stuff, ammunition, clothes, pots and pans, etc., as the SPDC troops left Wan Lao village.

The porters were forced to go with the SPDC troops for several more days as they patrolled the areas of Wan Lao, Ho Yaan and Kaeng Kham village tracts, stopping for rest only at night, in Kun-Hing township before they were released.

At about the same time, many villagers from Nawng Mai, Paang Hok and Khaai To villages near Kun-Hing town were conscripted by SPDC troops of Kun-Hing-based artillery unit and detained at the military camp for several days, during which they were said to be kept on standby to carry artillery parts and ammunition.

VILLAGERS ROUTINELY FORCED TO SERVE AS GUIDES AND PORTERS IN KUN-HING

Over the last few years up to the present, SPDC troops of IB246 have been regularly conscripting villagers in several village tracts in **Kun-Hing** township to serve as guides and porters during their regular patrols of the area.

At least once a month, often 2-3 times a month, IB246 sent out a column of troops to patrol the areas of several village tracts, including Wan Lao, Ho Yaan and Kaeng Kham, etc., in Kun-Hing township. Virtually every time, the SPDC troops conscripted about 10 villagers from a village to serve as guides and porters.

Often after 2-3 days, the SPDC troops would release the porters after conscripting villagers from another village to replace them. This routinely went on until the SPDC troops wound up their patrolling, usually after 5-6 days, and returned to their base, but only to be replaced by a new patrol of new troops who also

conscripted new villagers to serve as their guides and porters.

FORCED LABOUR IN ACTIVITIES RELATED TO AGRICULTURE

The use of forced labour of the civilian populations in cultivating crops for the military has been widespread since many years ago up to the present.

People have been forced to grow seasonal crops, e.g., rice, corn, soya bean, peanut and sesame, etc., routinely every year by the SPDC troops based in their respective areas. This happened virtually everywhere in the rural areas where there were military bases or camps.

Since the last 3-4 years, forced labour of the people has also been widely and routinely used in cultivating physic nut plantations all over Shan State.

The following are examples of such incidents:

PEOPLE FORCED TO BUY RICE SEEDS AND GROW THEM FOR MILITARY IN MURNG-NAI

During the last wet rice growing season, from June to November 2007, people in Kaeng Tawng sub-township area, in **Murng-Nai** township, were forced by the SPDC authorities in the area to buy rice seeds and grow them for the military.

In June 2007, SPDC authorities in Kaeng Tawng issued an order requiring all farmers in the area to grow a certain strain of rice known as 'Shwe Yin Aye' for the military. Each plot of rice field was required to be grown 1 basket of such rice seeds, which farmers were forced to buy from the authorities at the rate of 10,000 kyat per basket.

Farmers had to allot parts of their rice fields, about 1 acre for 1 basket of rice seeds, and grow the said rice at the same time as they cultivated their own strain of rice in other parts of the fields. They were required to do all the necessary work up until the harvest of the rice crop.

After harvest, farmers were required to give the authorities 8 baskets of the rice for every basket of seeds they were forced to grow. Although the farmers had to buy the seeds, they had to give the rice back to the military free of charge.

There were hundreds of farmers in Kaeng Tawng area who have been required to cultivate rice every year to help feed the SPDC troops of at least 5 battalions that are based in the Kaeng Tawng area, the same troops that have been oppressing and abusing local communities.

FARMERS FORCED TO GROW RICE FOR MILITARY IN HO-PONG

During the last wet rice growing season, farmers in Wan Yaen village tract in **Ho-Pong** township were forced to grow rice for the military on several acres of rice fields temporarily seized from them by the SPDC troops of LIB425.

In June/July 2007, SPDC troops of LIB425 seized several acres of rice fields from the villagers of Nawng Waan, Ho Ten and Nawng Zaang villages in Wan Yaen village tract in Ho-Pong township, and forced villagers of those villages to grow rice for them.

The seized rice fields were about 24 acres at Nawng Waan village, 30 acres at Ho Ten village and 35 acres at Nawng Zaang village. The SPDC troops provided the rice seeds and villagers were required to grow them at their respective villages.

The SPDC troops did nothing except for providing the rice seeds and the villagers had to do everything necessary for cultivating the rice from start to finish,

using their own means and tools, up until the harvest and the rice grain was transported to the military base.

A farmer from Nawng Zaang village described how he and his fellow villagers had to work for the SPDC troops. The villagers had to start with fixing and building small dams in nearby streams to divert water into the fields and clear the bushes and tall grass off the embankments surrounding the fields, and prepare small plots of seed beds and sow the rice seeds.

After that they had to till and plough the fields, which together were about 35 acres, using their own mini-tractors and buffalos, at least 4 tractors and 9 buffalos each day, for several days and planted the rice seedlings in them, which took until around mid August to complete.

The villagers were then required to look after the fields regularly and make sure that the rice plants got enough water and grew properly for about 3 more months until the rice ears were ripe for harvest. Then the villagers had to reap and thresh the rice plants and finally transport the rice grain to the military base, using their own means of transport.

FARMERS FORCED TO GROW WINTER RICE FOR MILITARY, THREATENED WITH LAND CONFISCATION AND EXTORTION, IN MURNG-PAENG

During the last cold season, from November 2007 to February-March 2008, farmers in Hawng Kaang village tract in **Murng-Paeng** township were forced to grow rice for the military by the SPDC troops of IB43 and LIB528.

On 23 November 2007, village headmen of Hawng Kaang, Wan Maak and Lawn Zai villages in Hawng Kaang village tract, Murng-Paeng township, were summoned by the SPDC troops of IB43 and LIB528 and told to grow rice for the military.

The seeds, which were provided by the SPDC troops, were of a strain brought from China known only as Chinese winter rice strain. The villagers were told to be prepared to have sown all the rice seeds by 27 November 2007 for all the rice fields available in their areas.

There were about 145 acres of rice fields altogether in the areas of the 3 villages and all the villagers, including landless farmers and non-farmers, were required to work the rice fields. Those who failed to comply with the order would face land confiscation or a fine of 100,000 kyat and a 1 month jail term for those who did not have land.

The villagers were required to take all the responsibilities to cultivate the said winter rice from start to finish, although the SPDC authorities said they would provide some soldiers to help at times when mass labour was needed, e.g., for planting and harvesting.

FARMERS FORCED TO GROW SESAME FOR MILITARY, THREATENED WITH EXTORTION IN NAM-ZARNG

During the last cold season, from November 2007 to February-March 2008, farmers in Loi La and Wan Nawng village tracts in **Nam-Zarng** township were forced to grow sesame for the military by the SPDC troops of IB248 and IB247.

In early November 2007, villagers of Loi La, Pong Lao, Haai Oi and Loi On villages in Loi La village tract in Nam-Zarng township were forced by SPDC troops of IB248 to grow sesame for them. Each family was required to provide 1 basket of

sesame to the military at the end of the growing season.

The SPDC troops said they would pay for the sesame at the rate of 10,000 kyat per basket, which was many times lower than the contemporary market price in the area. Furthermore, they said that those who failed to hand in their sesame quotas after the harvest time would be fined 3 times the set value in cash, which was 30,000 kyat.

At about the same time, villagers of Wan Nawng, Kung Mong, Taak Led and Tin Loi villages in Wan Nawng village tract in Nam-Zarng township were also forced by SPDC troops of IB247 to grow sesame for them, under the same conditions as in Loi La village tract.

PEOPLE FORCED TO GROW RICE FOR MILITARY IN LAI-KHA, MINI-TRACTORS CONSCRIPTED FROM KUN-HING

During the last rainy season, people in Naa Poi village tract in **Lai-Kha** township were forced by SPDC troops of IB286 and members of a Shan ceasefire group to grow rice for them in the area of Nam Hoo Kaang village in Naa Poi village tract.

There were 8 villages in Naa Poi area that were required to take turns and cultivate the rice from start to finish. However, in order to quicken the ploughing of the rice fields, the SPDC troops in Lai-Kha asked for mini-tractors from the authorities in Kun-Hing township.

SPDC authorities in Kun-Hing town then conscripted 12 civilian mini-tractors and 24 drivers from **Kun-Hing** town and sent them to Nam Hoo Kaang in Lai-Kha township, which took one whole day to travel to. The tractors had to work 10 days to complete the job, using their own fuel and providing their own food.

Apart from rice, people in Naa Poi area, especially villagers of Nam Hoo Kaang village, were also required to grow other crops, e.g., sesame, peanut, soya bean and corn for the military base at Nam Hoo Kaang, which was jointly occupied by a Company of SPDC troops from IB286 and about 45 members of a Shan ceasefire group, over the last 3-4 years.

PEOPLE FORCED TO GROW CROPS FOR MILITARY IN SI-SENG

From mid 2007 up to early 2008, villagers of Huay Yae Khao and Phak Yaang villages in Wan Yaen village tract in **Si-Seng** township were forced by SPDC troops of LIB517 to grow several kinds of crop for the military.

In addition to having to grow physic nut plants and look after them all year round, villagers in Wan Yaen area were also forced to grow seasonal crops by the SPDC troops of LIB517. During the rainy season, they had to grow soya bean and corn, which required them to work for several months from start to finish using their own tools and providing their own food.

Following the harvest of the soya bean and corn, the villagers had to continue to grow peanut and sesame for the military by the same troops of LIB517. This also took them several months of work which they were required to do using their own tools and providing their own food from start to finish.

FARMERS FORCED TO GROW RICE FOR MILITARY IN MURNG-PAN

During the last wet rice growing season, farmers in **Murng-Pan** township were forced by the SPDC authorities to buy the seeds of a strain of rice called "Shwe

Pyi Aye” and grow them for the military in their rice fields as they grew their own rice crop.

In addition to having to grow rice in their own rice fields for the military, the villagers were also forced to grow rice in the rice fields of the military, which the SPDC troops had confiscated from the local farmers especially those who had fled to other places.

Each farmer was required to allot parts of his rice fields for the military and grow Shwe Pyi Aye rice, of which seeds had to be purchased from the SPDC authorities at the price of 10,000 kyat per basket, at the rate of 1 basket of rice seeds per plot of land.

There were more than 20 plots of rice fields which the SPDC troops had confiscated in Murng-Pan township, and the farmers were required to grow rice on them for the military at the rate of 2 baskets of seeds per plot. Although the farmers did not have to buy the seeds in this case, which were provided by the authorities, they had to take responsibility for cultivating them from start to finish.

FORCED LABOUR IN CONSTRUCTION OF STATE INFRASTRUCTURE AND MILITARY FACILITIES

In virtually all the construction built in the name of the state, there has always been the use of unpaid civilian forced labour in one way or the other, whether for roads, railways, bridges, dams, military bases or camps, etc..

The following are some such incidents:

VILLAGERS FORCED TO BUILD MILITARY CAMP IN MURNG-PAENG

For several months, during the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, villagers in Hawng Kaang village tract in **Murng-Paeng** township were forced to build a military camp by the SPDC troops of LIB528.

In November 2007, a patrol of about 40 SPDC troops of Co. 2 of LIB528, based in Murng-Paeng, led by commander Kyaw Min Htwe, came to Nawng Kaang village tract and camped at a deserted village of Paeng Kawm in the village tract.

After temporarily settling down, the SPDC troops called up villagers from 3 nearby villages and ordered them to build a permanent military camp for them at a place near where they were camping. The 3 villages were Yaang Paeng, Mawn Maak and Yaang Khe in Nawng Kaang village tract.

The camp was to be a sort of stronghold completed with bunkers, trenches, 2 layers of fences with booby traps of bamboo spikes laid between them, and barrack buildings for the troops to stay and sleep in, which were the first things to be built.

First the villagers had to gather and make building materials such as hardwood posts, bamboo and thatch roofing, and build houses or barracks into which the SPDC troops immediately moved to stay as soon as they were completed.

After that they had to build 2 layers of bamboo fences around the camp. Inside the fences they had to dig bunkers and trenches also around the camp. On the ground between the 2 layers of the fences, they had to put thousands of sharp pointed bamboo spikes.

Every day for several months, 15 villagers from each village, altogether 45 forced labourers, had to go and work at the construction of the camp until it was completed. As for the bamboo spikes, each household in the 3 villages was required to make 500 pieces and bring them to the camp.

FORCED LABOUR AND EXTORTION IN DAM BUILDING AND VILLAGE BEAUTIFICATION IN MURNG-TON

In December 2007, villagers of Naa Kawng Mu village were forced to dig ditches and build flower beds in projects run by the SPDC authorities, by the SPDC troops of IB65 at Naa Kawng Mu village in **Murng-Ton** township.

In mid December 2007, commander of IB65, Lt. Col. Kyaw Myint Than, ordered the village headman of Naa Kawng Mu village to provide 185 villagers each day for 3 days to work in the village electricity project and village beautification project.

The 185 villagers were divided into 2 groups and assigned to work in 2 separate projects. One group was required to build flower beds along the main road in the village, which were to be 2 feet high and about 120 yards long, at the village square where a new clock tower was erected.

The clock tower was said to be built with money extorted from the villagers, not less than 2,000,000 kyat in all, at the village square in the centre of the village and was completed on 5 November 2007, during which construction forced labour of the villagers was also partly used.

The other group was required to dig water diverting ditches at a dam, built with the intention to produce electricity, some distance from the village. The dam, which took some time to build, was also built with money extorted many times from the villagers, altogether not less than 220,000 kyat from each household during the course of the dam construction.

Even though the dam was built with their money, the villagers still had to provide forced labour every now and then in work related to it, like having to dig ditches in this case, and money was extorted as a fine from those who could not provide the demanded forced labour. In this case, it was 3,500 kyat per person per day, or a 1 month jail term for those who could not pay the fine.