

SHRF MONTHLY REPORT - JUNE 2008

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COMMENTARY

Rampant Extortion

In the eyes of the Burmese junta's troops, the civilian population seems to be no more than a pool of resources from which they can always extract whatever they want, e.g., forced labour, crops, money and other possessions, etc..

In Shan State, in addition to doing what they like to the people, i.e., killing, raping, torturing, arresting, enslaving, etc., with impunity, the SPDC troops appear to be always thinking of ways or excuses for extorting money from the people or/and robbing them of anything of value.

Although they always do such things without having to fear any consequences, they seem to often need to create excuses to justify their deeds in the attempt to clear their image, however absurd they may seem to other people, for they do not want to be seen as being what they actually are.

Furthermore, they want to be seen as being beneficent, and even as saviours of the people, and use whatever opportunities they can to display such an image, as could be seen recently in the junta-run media about them helping victims of cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy delta in lower Burma, when in reality it is quite the opposite.

In this month's issue, apart from some reports on rape, arrest, relocation threat and forced labour incidents, the rest are about extortion of money and possessions from the people by the SPDC troops in Shan State, using various cunning methods to make it seem as if people deserved to be punished.

In one incident, SPDC soldiers let their cattle eat the rice in villagers' farms and accused the owners of stealing their cattle, and extorted money from them.

A WOMAN GANG-RAPED, HER BROTHER HELD UP, IN MURNG-PAENG

In October 2007, a woman was gang-raped, while her brother was held up, by 3 SPDC troops from LIB528, near Wan Hen village in Yaang Mai village tract, **Murng-Paeng** township.

On 21 October 2007, Naang Taan (not her real name), aged 18 and her brother, Zaai Saam, aged 9, of Wan Hen village were returning from visiting a neighbouring village, Waeng Kao, when they were stopped on the way by 3 SPDC troops, at a bridge some distance north of their village.

The 3 SPDC troops were led by a Sergeant named Than Swe and were from locally based LIB528. The Sergeant and one of the soldiers seized Naang Taan, dragged her to a roadside bush and the Sergeant raped her, while the third soldier seized and held Zaai Saam at the road.

After raping Naang Taan to his satisfaction, Sgt. Than Swe took his turn to hold her brother, Zaai Saam, and let the 2 soldiers rape her until they were all satisfied. As they left, the SPDC soldiers warned Naang Taan and her brother not to tell anyone about the incident and threatened to come back and kill them if they did.

However, Naang Taan and Zaai Saam did tell their parents and the village

leaders about their plight but no one dared to do anything about it for fear of reprisal. They had already witnessed several similar cases in which complaining only brought more troubles to the villagers.

SPDC troops from LIB528 were quite notorious for often stealing villagers' livestock and farm produce, and sexually harassing and/or raping women if they had a chance, in the area. They were also quick to punish those who dared to oppose them.

A WOMAN GANG-RAPED IN MURNG-PAENG

In November 2007, a woman who was returning from working at a farm was gang-raped by 3 SPDC troops from LIB528 at a place between Naa Thawn and Wan Phit villages in Wan Phit village tract, **Murng-Paeng** township.

Naang Maad (not her real name), the victim, was a villager of Nawng Khai village in Wan Phit village tract in Murng-Paeng township. On the day of the incident, Naang Maad had gone to work reaping rice plants at their farm as it was harvest time.

On 19 November 2007, at about 3:00 p.m., Naang Maad was returning home alone to Nawng Khai village from their farm some distance away when she ran into 3 SPDC troops from LIB528 at a remote spot on the way between Naa Thawn and Wan Phit villages.

The 3 SPDC troops stopped Naang Maad and dragged her into a roadside bush and gang-raped her. As she was being raped, Naang Maad struggled and screamed and shouted for help several times. But the place was so remote that no one seemed to hear her and the SPDC troops did not even care to silence her but concentrated on holding her down and raping her.

After they were all satisfied and as they left the place before Naang Maad, the SPDC troops said to her not to tell anyone about the incident or they would come after her and kill her as they knew her and where she lived.

However, Naang Maad did tell her parents about her plight and they reported it to the village headman. But there was no one who dared to file a complaint with the SPDC military authorities for fear of further abuses.

TRAVELLERS DETAINED, FORCED TO WORK, MONEY EXTORTED, IN MURNG-PAENG

In November 2007, 2 travellers who were going towards Thailand on a car were detained for 3 days and 2 nights, during which they were forced to work, by SPDC troops of IB43 manning a checkpoint in **Murng-Paeng** township.

Sometime in November 2007, 2 young men, Zaai Thun (m) and Zaai Sai (m), age not known, who were travelling on a car were forced down and detained by the SPDC troops from IB43 manning a checkpoint in Ho Tang village tract in Murng-Paeng township.

The men were villagers from Kun-Hing township and could not speak Burmese very well. They were heading for the Thai border with the intention to find work in Thailand if they had a chance, when they were stopped and detained by the SPDC troops.

The villagers were detained for 3 days and 2 nights during which they were forced to work for the SPDC troops and were fed only one meal per day. They had to work sharpening bamboo stakes all day and also do things ordered by the troops

in between.

On the third day of their detention, the villagers were told to pay a fine of 5,000 kyat each if they wanted to continue their journey. The villagers quickly complied because they had no choice and they wanted to get away from the SPDC troops as soon as possible.

On releasing the villagers, the SPDC troops put them on a passing car and told the driver that they had fined the 2 young men 5,000 kyat each for being under-aged and still wanting to go to work in Thailand, before letting them go.

EXTORTION OF MONEY FROM OPIUM FARMERS IN MURNG-NAI AND NAM-ZARNG

At the end of 2007, money was extorted by SPDC troops of LIB569 from several opium farmers in **Murng-Nai** and **Nam-Zarng** townships for not destroying their opium farms and letting them continue to cultivate opium.

On 29 December 2007, a column of about 45 SPDC troops from LIB569, led by commander Aung Than Win, based some distance northwest of Kun Mong village in Kaeng Town area in **Murng-Nai** township, went out to patrol the areas west of their base.

When the SPDC patrol got to a place where a village called Loi Saai once stood (the village was forcibly relocated several years ago), they found 3 plots of opium farms close to each other in the same place but no farmer was in sight at the time.

The SPDC troops then destroyed the opium plants in about 1 acre of each of the farms and left the rest, more than 10 acres, of the farms intact. While destroying the opium, the SPDC troops took pictures of their own actions and of the destroyed parts of the farms, but not the parts left intact.

After finding out who the owners of the opium farms were, on 30 December 2007, the SPDC troops continued their patrol and searched some of the areas in the adjacent Nam-Zarng township. In the area of a deserted village, Kung Maak Keng (relocated several years ago), in Kho Ood village tract, **Nam-Zarng** township, they found an opium farm while a farmer was working in it.

The farm was about 15 acres big and the owner-farmer was Saw-Nan-Da (m) from Kho Lam village, where he had been forcibly relocated from his original village, Kho Ood, several years ago. He had been secretly coming back to the area of his original village to grow rice and other crops to feed his family for several years, and over the last couple of years, he also tried his luck on opium.

Saw-Nan-Da was told by the SPDC troops to pay 150,000 kyat of money as a tax or as a protection fees if he did not want his opium farm destroyed. He immediately complied with the demand of the SPDC troops, went back and brought the money from Kho Lam and gave it to them, and his opium farm was safe.

After returning to their base, on 31 December 2007, the SPDC troops summoned the 3 owners of the opium farms they had partly destroyed to the base and told them to pay together 250,000 kyat of money as tax or protection money if they did not want their opium farms completely destroyed.

The 3 farmers, Mu-Ling (m), Zaa Leng (m) and Pan-Ta (m), were all from Kun Mong village in Kaeng Tawng area just near the military base. They also immediately complied with the demand of the SPDC troops to save their opium farms from being further destroyed.

VILLAGERS ACCUSED OF GROWING OPIUM, MONEY EXTORTED, IN MURNG-PAN

In November 2007, villagers of Nawng Lur village in Naa Wawn village tract, **Murng-Pan** township, were accused of growing and trading in opium and money was extorted from them by SPDC troops from LIB575.

On 1 November 2007, a patrol of 70-80 SPDC troops from LIB575, based in Naa Law village tract in Murng-Pan township, led by 2 commanders locally known only as Maj. G-2 and Maj. G-3, came to Nawng Lur village in Naa Wawn village tract in the same township.

After stopping and taking up positions in Nawng Lur village, the SPDC troops called up 6 villagers, who looked to be most well-off in the village, to a meeting and accused the villagers of Nawng Lur of secretly growing and trading in opium.

After leveling their accusation especially at the 6 villagers, the SPDC troops ordered them to provide 1,500,000 kyat of money as protection fees and threatened to arrest and put the villagers in jail if they did not get the demanded money.

The villagers were not allowed to argue or explain, and they knew they would have to comply with the demand whether they really grew opium or not, or they would be actually arrested even if there was no evidence to support the SPDC troops' accusation.

The villagers managed to gather only 1,200,000 kyat of money among themselves and gave it to the SPDC troops, begging them to accept it because that was all they had. Fortunately, the SPDC troops were satisfied with that amount of money and dropped the case.

However, after getting the money and before they left Nawng Lur village, the SPDC troops warned the villagers not to tell any outsider and anywhere else about the incident. "If you let the news about this incident spread around, we will shoot all of you dead when we come next time around", they said.

VILLAGERS ACCUSED OF GROWING OPIUM AND SUPPORTING SHAN RESISTANCE, MONEY AND LIVESTOCK EXTORTED, FORCED LABOUR REQUISITIONED, THREATENED WITH RELOCATION, IN MURNG-NAI

In early 2007, villagers of Nawng Leng and Nawng Saai villages in Nawng Leng village tract, **Murng-Nai** township, were accused of growing opium and supporting the Shan resistance and money was extorted from them by SPDC troops from LIB518.

Sometime in early 2007, a patrol of about 50 SPDC troops from LIB518 based at Murng-Nai town, led by commander Htun Win, came to Nawng Leng village tract and stopped in Nawng Leng village to spend the night.

At night, the village headman and several other community leaders and elders were summoned to a meeting by the SPDC troops. At the meeting, the SPDC troops said that they knew that the villagers of Nawng Leng village and Nawng Saai, a neighbouring village, were secretly growing opium and providing rice for the Shan resistance.

The SPDC troops said that the 2 villages, Nawng Leng and Nawng Saai, together needed to give them 2,000,000 kyat as protection money and ordered the villagers to finish collecting it as soon as possible, which the villagers did in 3 days, and stayed at Nawng Leng village until they got the money.

During their stay at Nawng Leng village, 4 days and 3 nights, the SPDC troops

forced the villagers to provide them with 2 pigs worth 40,000 kyat and 1 ox worth 80,000 kyat without paying anything for them. Furthermore, when they went out to patrol the surrounding areas during the day, they took 6 villagers with them to serve as guides and porters, every day for 3 days.

As they left the village, the SPDC troops warned the villagers not to let news of the extortion of money and livestock spread around, otherwise they would have to move back to the relocation site at Murng-Nai town. Nawng Leng and Nawng Saai villages had once been forcibly relocated to Murng-Nai town during 1996-97, and were only permitted to return in 2003.

FORCED LABOUR AND EXTORTION IN CLEARING GROUND FOR BUILDING PHYSIC NUT OIL MILL IN KUN-HING

In late 2007, villagers of Nam Khaam village in Wan Paang village tract, **Kun-Hing** township, were forced to clear a plot of land by the SPDC troops from LIB524 to prepare the place for building a mill to produce physic nut oil for the military. Villagers were also forced to pay for the fuel of a grader used to level the ground surface.

For several days in August 2007, more than 20 villagers of Nam Khaam had to work clearing the said place which was situated on the Kun-Hing - Ta Kaw road and a short distance west of Nam Khaam. The villagers had to work from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day using their own tools and providing their own food.

When a grader machine, apparently from a Thai construction company working in the area, was used to level the ground surface for one day on 5 August 2007, the villagers were made responsible to pay for the fuel used by the grader. There were over 80 houses in Nam Khaam village and each house had to provide not less than 1,500 kyat to buy diesel fuel.

Even though the mill itself had not yet been constructed at the time this report was received in early 2008, villagers felt that they would surely be forced to provide forced labour and/or money when it was actually built, at least partially simply because of the proximity of their village.

CATTLE LET INTO FARMS, FARMERS ACCUSED OF STEALING THEM, MONEY EXTORTED, IN NAM-ZARNG

In late 2007, SPDC troops of IB247 deliberately let their cattle into rice farms of villagers and accused them of stealing them and extorted money from them, at Nawng Khaa village in Wan Pung village tract, **Nam-Zarng** township.

Sometime in September/November 2007, early in the morning, 3 SPDC troops from IB247 came to the farms of Lung Ta Lu (m) and Lung Poi (m) of Nawng Khaa village in Wan Pung village and accused the farmers of stealing their 2 buffalos which they said they found grazing in the farms.

The farmers suspected that the SPDC troops had broken down the fences surrounding their farms and deliberately let their buffalos in to graze on their rice plants, which were pregnant with rice ears that were almost ripe and ready for harvest, in their farms during the night.

Before the farmers could complain about the SPDC troops letting buffalos into their farms to eat their rice plants, the SPDC troops accused the farmers of stealing the buffalos and hiding them in their farms, and extorted money from them, threatening to put them in jail if they refused to comply.

The 2 separate farms, which were adjacent to each other, were in the same enclosure of bamboo fences through which the SPDC troops had made a hole and let their cattle in. Local villagers also believed that the SPDC troops deliberately let their cattle into the farms to feed on the rice plants and at the same time create an opportunity to extort money.

No farmers would have let any cattle, be they their own or stolen ones, eat their rice crop in such a manner because they stamped on and destroyed more rice plants than they actually ate, they said. However, the villagers dared not argue with the SPDC soldiers for fear of further abuses and had to comply with their demand.

The SPDC soldiers demanded 300,000 kyat but the farmers could only provide 250,000 kyat which was all they had and could find at that time. The soldiers seemed to be satisfied with the amount and took the money, and left the farm pulling along their 2 buffalos with them.

According to the local people, there were 20-30 head of cattle at every SPDC battalion base in the area, kept and looked after by the soldiers themselves. These cattle were not originally property of the SPDC troops nor had they been brought from somewhere else, but were originally property of the local villagers.

After the massive forced relocations in the area about a decade ago, tens of thousands of head of villagers' cattle had been abandoned because they could not take them with them. These cattle have often been shot for meat by roaming SPDC troops and also caught and kept at military bases as their property, up to the present.

VARIOUS TYPES OF EXTORTION IN KUN-HING

Since late 2007 up to at least early 2008, money has been extorted many times from people in Ka Li village tract, **Kun-Hing** township, as fines or punishment for knowing or not knowing about the situation of Shan soldiers in the area, by the SPDC troops of LIB524 and IB246.

Military patrols from the said battalions which patrolled the villages in Ka Li village tract randomly entered villagers' houses and asked the occupants whether they had seen Shan soldiers in the area. If the villagers said that they had, the SPDC troops forced them to pay 5,000 kyat as a fine for failing to report it.

If the villagers said that they had not seen any Shan soldier, the SPDC troops said they had hard evidence of the presence of Shan soldiers and accused the villagers of lying and trying to hide and protect the Shan soldiers, and forced them to pay a fine of 6,000 kyat.

The SPDC troops did this to a few houses in a village and moved to another village and did the same. In this way they had extorted money from several houses in several villages on each patrol, and there were at least 1-2 patrols every month.

In Ka Li village alone, the main village in Ka Li village tract, during November and December 2007, not less than 300,000 kyat had been extorted from the villagers in this way by the SPDC troops from LIB524 and IB246.

Since October 2007, taxes that had been collected regularly by the SPDC troops of LIB524 from shop owners in Ka Li village on a monthly basis have increased 10 times. Before October, up until August and September 2007, the taxes were from 1,500 kyat up to 15,000 kyat, based on the sizes and values of the shops.

In October 2007, however, the SPDC authorities increased the lowest tax level

up to 15,000 kyat for the small shops and up to as high as 150,000 kyat for the large shops. Although many shop owners complained that there would be no profits for them if they had to pay such large amounts of taxes, the authorities said that they were only following orders from above.

The shop owners, however, in turn increased the prices of their goods to avoid having to sell them in deficit. The eventual result was that people who were already struggling to make ends meet had to buy their basic necessities at very high prices, 80 kyat for an egg and 250 kyat just for a packet of ready-made dried noodles.

The SPDC authorities have also put more burden on the people of Ka Li village tract by issuing an order at the end of 2007 that couples who wanted to get married would be required to pay taxes before they could tie the knot.

The tax was 8,000 kyat for a couple, which was to be paid in half equally by the bride and the groom. The SPDC authorities said it was a new law, and those who failed to pay the obliged tax would not be allowed to get married.

In late 2007, people of Saai Khaao village in Saai Khaao village tract, Kun-Hing township, were forced to provide pigs and chickens by patrols of SPDC troops from LIB569 and LIB574.

Sometime in October and November 2007, a patrol of about 30 SPDC troops from LIB569 came to Saai Khaao village and ordered the villagers to provide them with pork and chickens for them to eat as they patrolled the area.

The SPDC troops forced the villagers to kill a pig and grill the pork for them, saying that they were going through the jungle and would have no time to cook it. But they took the chickens alive with them. Altogether they took away about 15 viss (1 viss = 1.6 kg) of pork and about 9 viss of chickens.

About a week after that, a patrol of about 40 SPDC troops from LIB574, based in Murng-Nai township, came to Saai Khaao village and forced the villagers to give them 20 viss of pork and 5 viss of chickens. The villagers had to weigh the pork and the chickens and give them exactly the demanded amounts.

The market price of pork at the time was 5,000 kyat per viss, and 6,000 kyat per viss for the chickens. However, the villagers never received anything from the SPDC troops in return for their possessions and labour.