

Report

“I have no more left in my hands:” Human rights conditions in southern Ye Township and northern Tavoy District

I. Introduction

Burma's southern peninsula, made up of Mon State and Tenasserim Division, is home to some of the country's most lush jungle and difficult terrain. It has, consequently, become the natural staging area for the operations of a variety of armed rebel groups. Though the area, like much of Burma, saw a decline of armed resistance through the 1990s, it has not been brought under complete control. In the 1990s, the SPDC found extra motivation for its counter-insurgency efforts in the area: the Yadana gas fields, which produce significant volumes of natural gas, lie just offshore in the Andaman Sea. Two overland pipelines transport gas across the peninsula, with one running due east into Thailand and the other running north, through Mon State and into Karen State. Human rights violations surrounding the development of the Yadana gas project in the 1990s have been well documented, and violations continue as the SPDC works to maintain and expand control of the area.

This report focuses on the middle of the southern peninsula, where residents say that abuses have seen a comparative increase over the last year. Based on research by HURFOM field reporters, as well as interviews with residents and former residents displaced to the Thai-Burma border, four main categories of human rights violations are regularly committed by army battalions in the area, including:

- A. Interrogation, assault and summary execution
- B. Travel restrictions and surveillance
- C. Punitive taxation, quotas and looting
- D. Forced labor, including conscription of porters and human minesweepers for military operations

Though this report documents abuses in over thirty villages, numerous human rights violations undoubtedly go unrecorded. As a female resident of Khaw-Zar told an IMNA/HURFOM field reporter, “If you get all the news from [southern Ye], you will become too tired to keep writing. There is not enough room in your notebook. On one day the beat someone at one house. The next day they confiscate property from someone at another house. Every day, something happens.”

II. Background

Ethnic Mons, as well as ethnic Karens and Tavoyans, predominantly populate the middle of the southern peninsula, which is classified as southern Ye Township in Mon State and northern Tavoy District in Tenasserim Division. Most inhabitants are employed in fishing or agriculture, working on rice paddies and rubber, fruit and betel nut plantations. Though residents of the area live in relatively strong economic circumstances compared to other parts of Burma, many people still struggle to get by and survive on between 20,000 and 25,000 kyat a month (\$16 to \$20 USD). The area is also home to some of Burma's thicket jungle and most difficult terrain, making it a natural and durable staging ground for armed insurgents. Until the mid 1990s, at least thirteen armed groups conducted operations in the area, including: the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA); former prime minister U Nu's People's Progressive Party; various factions of the All Burma Student's Democratic Front; the Mergui-Tavoy Union Front (MDUF); and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). The area has also seen intense operations by armed Mon groups, including: the armed wing of the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLF); Gen Yap's Hongsa Command; the Ramanya Restoration Army; the Mon Army Mergui District; and a group lead by Nai Bin and Nai Hloin.

Most of these groups have ceased operations, most notably the NMSP/MNLF, which agreed to a ceasefire in 1995 but still maintains control of some areas on along the Thai border. KNLA Brigade No. 4, however, remains active in the area, though KNLA sources say they have not launched any recent operations. In 2001, an NMSP splinter group known as the Monland Restoration Party (MRP), which operated as the Hongswatoi Restoration Party until 2003, began activities in the area between southern Ye and northern Tavoy. Another armed Mon splinter group, lead by Nai Chan Dein and known locally as the “Chan Dein group,” has also been active over the last five years.

Both Mon groups are small, with an estimated 30 to 35 and 20 to 25 people currently under arms, respectively. They have, however, managed to harass and harry local battalions; four soldiers from SPDC Infantry Battalion (IB) No. 31 were killed and three more injured in clashes with the MRP in June 2008. The relationship between Mon splinter groups and local residents are, like civilian-rebel relations throughout Burma, complicated and the insurgent groups are not above committing abuses. Villagers often find themselves caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, in which they are pressured, even forced, to support insurgent groups and then harshly punished by SPDC battalions for doing so.

In Cha Pone, for instance, during December 2007, Mi Mi Ngae, 45, and her husband were detained by Mon rebels. After being released, the couple fled to Yebyu, where they hid for nearly eight months. When they returned in August, they were immediately detained and interrogated by the Burmese army, before being released after paying a 300,000 kyat ransom. In August 2008, twelve more villagers from Cha Pone village were ransomed by the MRP. During the same period, residents in Khaw Zar also reported being afraid to travel to their plantations for fear of the MRP. "We are afraid of being taken hostage by the rebel group. After they release us, we are again arrested by government troops and tortured. We have to pay the troops after paying the rebels for being released," said a Khaw Zar resident "This is the time for harvesting the areca nut [betel nut], but we do not dare to go to the plantations because of the Mon rebels."

Since soon after independence in 1948, Burma's army has been carrying out a scorched earth campaign in the country's ethnic areas. In mid 1960s, this campaign took a more organized form, and an official new name: *Pya Ley Pya*, or the "Four Cuts" strategy. The four cuts refer to food, funds, intelligence and recruits. In application, the strategy is an attempt to sever the connection between insurgents and their civilian supporters by systematically clearing rebel controlled, "black" areas by killing, threatening and forcibly relocating villagers. Such areas became free fire zones, with all residents who remained assumed to be rebels or rebel supporters. The strategy proved effective, and was a determining factor in weakening large and powerful armed groups like the CPB and KNU/KNLA. Though the strategy has since been officially disavowed, its shadow can clearly be seen lurking behind present-day SPDC conduct.

III. Human rights violations in Ye and Tavoy, 2008

A. Interrogation, assault and summary execution

Residents of southern Ye and northern Tavoy regularly face assault and abuse. Ostensibly, violence is often a part of soldiers' attempts to gather information. In other cases, violent reprisals are used to intimidate villagers out of cooperating with rebels. In February 2008, for instance, IB No. 31 burned over twenty rubber plantations in southern Ye after it failed to capture an MRP group. Villagers also reported being abused simply so that they would pay money to be left alone or freed from detention, or because soldiers had been drinking and knew they could act with virtual impunity.

On October 11th, IB No. 61 arrested two residents of An-Din village, in western Ye Township. According to an NMSP source who recently traveled to An-Din, Captain Myint Zaw and 25 troops from IB No. 61 accused the two men of supporting the Chan Dein rebel group, interrogated and beat them until a 300,000 kyat ransom secured their release.



A group of IDPs who recently fled from southern Ye and northern Tavoy into Thailand

On October 9th, Column #1 of LIB No. 285, lead by Lieutenant Colonel Khin Maung Than, arrested four villagers in Thabyut-Chaung village, southwest of Yebyu Town. The four men were interrogated and beaten. Three of the men were ransomed for between 50,000 and 100,000 kyat each. The fourth was released after he was stabbed repeatedly and had 120,000 kyat worth of belongings looted from his home. A day earlier, in Myay-Khan-Baw village, Colonel Khin Maung Than also arrested four area PDC officials. According to an eyewitness from the area, Saw Dae, 35, the headmen were chosen arbitrarily, interrogated and detained for six days. An eyewitness who saw them upon their release said they looked as if they had been beaten.

In August 2008, a former MRP soldier surrendered and informed soldiers that residents of Alae Sakhan village in Yebyu had been supporting the insurgents. Eight people were subsequently arrested, placed in wooden stocks and beaten by soldiers from LIB No. 282.

In July 2008, Col. Win Then and soldiers from IB No. 31 stopped, interrogated and assaulted a group of young boys returning from hunting in the woods outside Khaw Zar town. The group included four young brothers, ages 10, 11, 13 and 15, who were beaten, stabbed in the face and detained without food and water. The brothers were eventually released to their family, which feared future abuses and fled to an IDP camp on the Thai-Burma border.

In June 2008, Colonel Myint Oo and 30 troops from LIB No. 273 executed four villagers in Dani kya village, in southern Ye Township. A member of the NMSP Tavoy District office verified the four deaths, as well as said that more than fifteen Dani kya villagers have been similarly executed in the last decade.

In June 2008, six people, including three village PDC members, were arrested in Yin Ye village after clashes between SPDC and MRP troops. "The soldiers beat our village headman the way someone would beat cattle and pigs to death. They beat them in front of the villagers," said an eyewitness. In May, three people including a former NMSP medic from nearby Yin Dein village were arrested and accused of hiding a bomb at a polling station. The villagers denied placing the bomb and contended authorities had planted it, but were tortured and made to confess their guilt. The medic sustained permanent brain damage and is now unable to speak coherently.

Nai Chain, a villager from Amae in Yebyu, described the summary execution of a civilian encountered by LIB No. 273 during a March 2008 operation. "At that time, I was along with [LIB] No. 273, led by Colonel Myint Oo, on a military operation in the area between Cha-Pone and Mae-San-Taung villages," said Nai Chain. "When we got near Cha-Pone, the troops met a suspected man, Nai Ha-Pwe-Dut, 50, a native of Amae village, and asked for information about rebel activities. He was so frightened he refused to answer the questions with his limited Burmese. Then, a soldier beat him with the butt of the guns and shot him dead in front of us. He died on the spot."

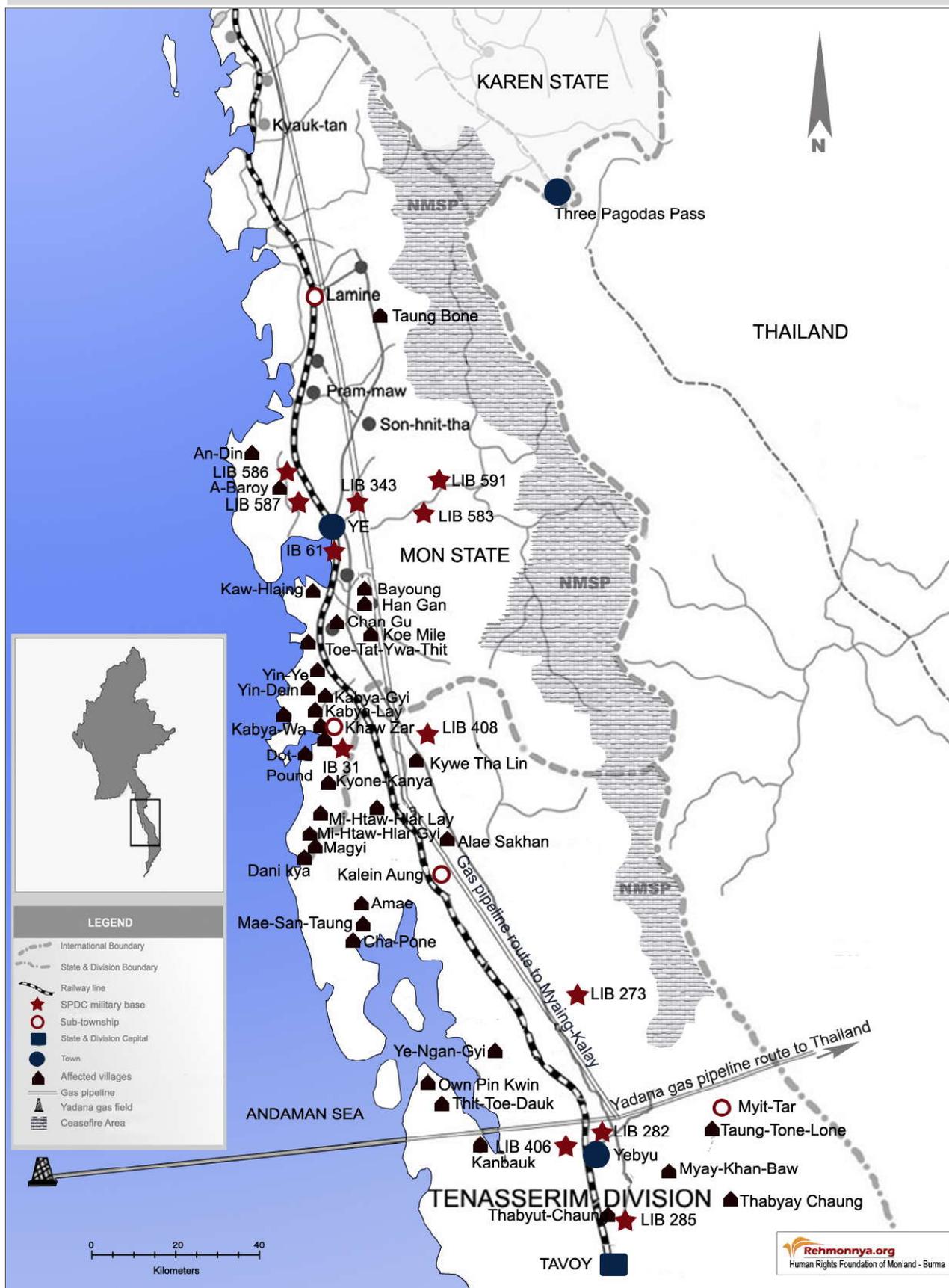
B. Travel restrictions and surveillance

Villagers are under a variety of travel restrictions. Some reported having to purchase new identity cards for travel as well as daily travel permits. Other reported not being allowed to sleep at – or even work on – their farms and plantations.

In February 2008, IB No. 31 declared that everyone in Khaw Zar Sub-township must purchase new travel documents. The documents cost 1,000 kyat per person, and people caught traveling without the document are subject to detention and interrogation. "The military is empowered to query everybody that travels to and from the farms," said a local resident. "They even stop women and children as they now expect us all to hold this document. We were previously allowed to hold one pair of documents per household but they now refuse this rule, opting instead to enforce one document per person."

According to a November 2008 interview with Nai Yan, 48, from Kabya-Gyi village, movement of residents in his area is strictly controlled. "The Burmese Commander ordered to every villager not go to farms or plantations that are surrounding our villages. This order also affected fishermen in Kabya-Wa village [60 percent of villagers in Kabya-Wa subsist by fishing]. So that even in the harvest time, like previous months, we could not collect our betel nut and rice. We totally rely on income from betel-nuts plantation. Because of the restriction order from the battalion, we lost all of our families' income. No one dared to go to their work places because if the army found them, they would be killed." Travel on main roads and in populated areas is also controlled, and Nai Yan said that residents who wish to visit other villages must inform soldiers in advance and receive permission.

Na Pae, 38, also interviewed in November, told HURFOM that residents of the area around Magyi village are allowed to visit their plantations, but must purchase daily travel permits. "All villagers were blocked by the Burmese troops in the village entry road. No one could travel without permission. If we want to go out or visit the neighbor villages, we have to pay 1,000 kyat for a day. I could not work on my betel nuts plantation because of I could not afford to pay that amount of tax everyday. I heard that the villages in surrounding area like, Kyone-Kanya, Kabya-Gyi, Kabya-Lay and Dhani-Kya were also restricted by the LIB 273, IB 61 and IB 31. Most villagers in our village have farmland outside the villages and we have no chance to go and work on paddy fields, fruit plantations and to the sea for fishing. When the Burmese troops met us on our farms, or on the way to our farm, we could be punished by accusing of rebel supporters or contact persons. Some villagers have been killed and tortured before." Visitors wishing to spend the night must also register with authorities, Nai Pae said, and pay a weekly 3,000 kyat fee.



Areas with documented human rights abuses in southern Ye and northern Tavoy

Nai Pakao Ong, a resident of Amae village, in Yebyu, told HURFOM that travel restrictions are less severe than in Khaw Zar. “The travel restriction was not very strict,” he said, “but everyone must still inform to the battalion when people travel in and out of the village. However, spending the night on their farms or plantations located outside of the village was prohibited by the Army.” Though comparatively less limiting, residents said the restriction on night-time access to farms left their crops vulnerable to wild animals and thieves, while rubber plantation owners said their trees could only be effectively sapped at night and in the early morning.

Residents repeatedly said they feared violating the travel restrictions on pain of death. Their fears are well placed. In March 2008, a husband and wife were shot before dawn as they worked on a rubber plantation near Yin Ye village. The husband was seriously wounded while his wife died at the scene.

Other villagers reported forced relocations. In February 2008, residents of Kyone-Kanya village were forced to move their homes closer to a road linking Khaw Zar to Ye Town. According to a HURFOM source, Lieutenant Colonel Ye Lwin Oo and Major Tun Tun Naing, of LIB No. 31 issued the order, saying it would “improve development of the village.” After clashes with Mon rebels killed three Burmese army soldiers in July 2007, LIB No. 583 forced one hundred households from nearby Bayoung-ngae village to relocate. At least two houses were burned, while others were looted and wrecked. Fifty villagers were also arrested and accused of supporting the rebels. Six months later, soldiers from LIB No. 299 assaulted forty of these villagers when they attempted to return to their old homes to retrieve lumber and other abandoned items.

Elsewhere in Khaw-Zar, residents reported being forced to purchase permission to relocate. Nai Tun Sann, from Kabya-Wa, said that moving his family required giving 50,000 kyat to the army to purchase permission. Nai Pae, from Ma-Gyi village, said that troops in his area also require villagers to pay between 30,000 and 50,000 kyat before they are allowed to move. “When we left, we had no cash to give the battalion as permission fees,” said Nai Pae, who recently arrived on the Thai-Burma border. “I lied to them and said that I and my wife were only going to fish for a few weeks. Then, we fled... We are free now, but my eighteen years old daughter is still left in the village and I am very much worried about her. Because many torture cases have occurred in the past when family members fled to other places.” Both Nai Tun Sann and Nai Pae said that they had heard that possessions they left behind had been seized by the military.

C. Punitive taxation, quotas and looting

Residents of southern Ye and northern Tenasserim reported having to pay a variety of “taxes” and “fees,” which were often levied arbitrarily, inconsistently and without prior announcement. Their homes, farms and plantations were also subject to looting, and many reported being forced to provide troops with food and baskets of paddy. This can at least partially be explained as the result of SPDC budgetary practices. The SPDC, which is hard pressed to fund the second largest army in Southeast Asia, instructs the armed forces to be “self-reliant.” Such a directive, when given in a context in which the army conducts itself with virtually no oversight or culpability, is tantamount to giving the armed forces carte blanche to tax, extort and steal from civilians however it sees fit. Perhaps the best illustration of the extent to which military funds are extracted from civilians occurred in March 2007: in an example that would be morbidly comical were the circumstances less dire, eight people in Kabya-Wa were made to give IB No. 31 280,000 kyat, to pay for bullets fired into the air when soldiers mistook children swimming in a river for insurgents.

“Both [battalions in my area] have farms as part of the army’s ‘Self-Reliance Program,’ but it is never enough. They always make people provide them with cash, food and other goods,” reported a source from Yebyu. In nearby Thabyay Chaung, on October 2nd, 2008, LIB No. 407 ordered every household to make additional monthly payments, of 800 to 1,000 kyat. “The money is to support army families while soldiers are away on military operations,” said a thirty-year-old villager from the area. This new payment comes on top of a now standard 2,000 kyat monthly payment. “We normally pay about 2,000 kyat every month,” concurred a resident from Magyi village in Khaw Zar. “But when the soldiers come, we have to give more money to our headman to pay for feeding them while they stay awhile in the village.” This is up from one year ago, when residents to the north in Taung-Bone complained that IB No. 31 raised taxes from 1,500 to 1,700 kyat a month. Just outside of Khaw Zar town, a villager from Kabya-Wa estimated that he and his neighbors paid soldiers at least 50,000 kyat a year, while wealthier residents, especially rubber plantation owners, paid over 100,000 annually. Government authorities or members of junta-backed civilian groups like the USDA are typically not, however, required to make such payments, said a former resident of Khaw Zar. These demographics are often exempt from paying taxes, confirmed field reporters and local sources.

Additional taxes are often levied by authorities promising to pay for specific projects or supplies. On October 31st in Yin Ye, for instance, officer Tun Tun Naing of IB No. 31 ordered over thirty rubber plantations to pay 10,000 kyat, allegedly to cover the cost of new batteries for army communications equipment.

In September, betel nut farmers in Thabyay Chaung village reported that LIB No. 406 and No. 407 had ordered them to pay a tax of at least 50 kyat per viss of betel nuts. A viss is a unit of measurement used in Burma, equivalent to 1.633 kilograms. “According to village Peace and Development Council officials, next month LIB No. 406 is going to tax betel nut more than last year, but I don’t know how much more. I am worried because I could barely make enough after the taxes last year,” said a farmer who lives near Thabyay Chaung. Officers said the betel nut

taxes were to pay for repairs to the road connecting Thabyay Chaung to Thit-Toe-Dauk village. Residents were skeptical, however, said Daw Thit. "They already made us pay for construction on that road in June and July. Every household had to pay 300 kyat. But we haven't seen any improvements." In February 2007, residents of Yin Ye and Toe-Tat-Ywa-Thit were ordered to 15,000 and 2,000 to 8,000 kyat respectively for bridge repairs.

At the end of October, every village in Khaw Zar was also forced to pay for a Sub-township football tournament. According to a source in Kaw Hlaing village, officials raised 10 million kyat. Each household in the township was required to pay 3,000 and 4,000 kyat, depending on income, said the source. Every village in Khaw Zar was also ordered to field a team for the tournament; Kaw Line village was ultimately fined 500,000 kyat for refusing to play after disputing an umpire's call.

Battalions also command villagers to simply give them agricultural products. On September 25th, Major Myo Swe from IB No.282 sent a letter to village headman in Yebyu Township ordering them to direct betel nut farmers to set aside part of their crop for the army. "All villagers who have betel nuts plantations in Kywe-Tha-Lin must provide at least 500 to 800 betel nuts depending on the size of their plantations," said Nai Kon Dut, 45, a resident of Kywe-Tha-Lin. "I don't have a betel nut plantation but my brothers each own five acres and they have to provide 800 betel nuts to Major Myo Swe's troops. In Kywe-Tha-Lin village, there are about 120 households who own betel nut plantations and I guess the Army will benefit a lot." Nai Ong, 60, agreed: "Last winter, they [LIB No. 282, then under different command] got more than 30,000 betel nuts and made many million kyat from the whole township."

Residents in Yebyu must also fill a paddy quota, enforced by LIBs No. 406, 407 and 408. For the last seven years, every household in villages around the battalions' headquarters has had to provide the army with three baskets of paddy rice. The paddy requirements strain villagers struggling to subsist, especially in years when rice crops are not bountiful. Even families that do not farm rice must supply the paddy, forcing them to purchase baskets, which each typically cost 5,000 kyat.

Residents also reported being forced to supply soldiers with food when they were away from their headquarters. Others said they saw soldiers looting homes and farms. Nai Pae, from Ma Gyi, says he often had to provide Burmese troops with food supplies and sometimes even had his livestock stolen. A resident of Alae Sakhon reported the same experience, and said that LIB No. 282 has recently been taking large farm animals like cattle, as well as farming equipment. Nai Chain, 37, from Amae village in Yebyu, also said that he had witnessed LIB No. 273 and 282 looting villages during offensives in rural areas. "They looted belongings owned by villagers. I saw the soldiers go into villages like Byaw, Cha-Pone and Mae-San-Taung," said Nai Chain. "The soldiers looted food, livestock like chickens, ducks, goats and even valuable belongings owned by local villagers. They were like robbers."

Belongings left behind by migrant workers and displaced people are also seized by soldiers, said recent arrivals interviewed on the Thai-Burma border. "I have no more left in my hands," said Nai Chain. "They [Burmese soldiers] had already seized ten acres of my land [mature fruit trees producing lemon, lime and durian] in 2005. Now, I heard that after we left the village, they destroyed my house and seized five tons of lumber. So, I am left with nothing and I have to start from zero. I would like to live in a peaceful place where there are no abuses and no Burmese Army."

D. Forced labor

Villagers reported a variety of forced labor projects, from building roads and bridges to aiding military operations by portering munitions and other supplies, standing sentry or walking patrols and serving as human minesweepers. In most cases, laborers must bring their own food and tools, as well as pay for supplies and any necessary transportation costs. Battalions conscripted laborers in a variety of ways, typically by instructing village headman to choose a group of laborers or simply to complete a project. Acting as village headman, a much sought after honor in most villages, is to be feared and avoided, said some residents of Yebyu and Ye, because headmen have to liaise with the army and choose the unpaid laborers. "The village headman becomes the 'porter' for the army," said Nai Pae, drawing an analogy between the treatment of the headmen and the way the army frequently forces civilians to carry heavy loads of ammunition and supplies. In some places, fear of acting as liaison between the village and the army is compounded by language differences. Most villagers in Magyi, for instance, speak Mon and possess only limited Burmese language proficiency. Soldiers of the ethnic-Burman dominated army typically speak only Burmese.

In some villages, forced labor is common enough that a permanent rotation of workers must be ready to work daily. "Conscription of unpaid labor used by the Burmese troops and village sentry duties has been continuing everyday," said Nai Pae, from Magyi. "All of the unpaid works were arranged by the village headmen groups which involved five volunteer in rotate system. No one wants to be headmen in Magyi village because people have to be afraid of both sides [insurgent and Burmese army troops] and this is one of the most difficult jobs in Magyi. Everyday, these five people have to present themselves at the battalion to receive the orders. Most orders or

demands are forced labor, patrolling duties and report about the rebel movements.” A Ko Mile villager reported a similar system in August 2008, and said that he must work for LIB No. 299 twice a month. Villagers typically repair roads, clear brush, maintain battalion headquarters and even work in officers’ homes. Owners of gas-powered grass trimmers in Ko Mile were especially exploited, and have to work four days a month clearing brush around roads, as well as the barracks and rubber plantations of LIB No. 299. Residents reported that fuel costs ran to around 5,000 kyat a day, with a 12,000 kyat fine for failing to work.



Photo: HURFOM
Unpaid forced laborers making road repairs in southern Ye Township

In the first week of November, Nai Noe, 55, saw forty men near Own Pin Kwin village, in Yebyu, being lead by a captain from LIB No.

273. According to a Karen woman from the area, the men were en route to make repairs to fortifications around the battalion headquarters. In Alae Sakhan, Nai Soe, 40, reported that on October 30th residents of his village began being forced by LIB No. 282 to make similar repairs. Residents of at least three villages around Ye Ngan Gyi village were also required to repair embankments by Lieutenant Colonel Khin Maung Tun, from LIB No. 273.

Villagers also reported being forced to "donate voluntary labor" for "community development" projects like road repairs. In September and October, LIB No. 31 ordered villagers along the Ye to Tenasserim road to repair damage done by the rainy season. The orders applied to at least eight villages, including Han Gan, Chan Gu and Dot-Pound villages in Ye Township and Toe-Tat-Ywa-Thit, Yin-Ye, Yin-Dein and Mi-Htaw-Hlar Lay in Khaw Zar Sub-Township, which were required to repair the road and clear brush and small trees. Each of the villages is home to around two hundred households, and every household was required to provide one person to assist the project. If people do not participate in the road construction work, they have to pay a 10,000 kyat fine.

In both cases, the forced labor came at a time when farmers were struggling to complete their harvests during unseasonably heavy rains. “At this time, most farmers in [Alae Sakhan] are busy with their own jobs. Farmers have been harvesting their paddy and some are preparing their lands to grow beans and other crops,” said Nai Soe of the forced dike repairs at the end of October. “Now, most of them have to stop their farm works and instead build dikes for the battalion.” The work in September caused problems for betel nut farmers as well. “I have a lot of my own work to do during these days. I am a betel nut farmer, and this month is very important for me to produce betel nuts. Most nuts are ripe and it is the time to pick them, but I am forced to work here and I don’t think my wife can finish all the work on the plantation alone,” said Nai Nyein, 32, a resident of Yin Ye.

Residents of Khaw Zar town were also forced to work on projects. “I saw a total of nine women including a seventy-five year-old lady being forced to repair the army’s road [connecting IB No. 31’s headquarters to Khaw Zar]. They were made to carry stone, sand and soil to fix the road,” Mi Nyo, 28, a witness from Khaw Zar, said in the third week of September. In August, over twenty carpenters were also made to build a new high school in Khaw Zar town. U Kyaw Moe, the chairman of the Khaw Zar PDC, divided the men into three groups, which must work twice a week. “We have to build the high school on orders from the PDC,” said one of the carpenters. “The authorities pay for nothing. We have to bring all the materials, even our food.”

Villagers in at least fifteen rural villages in Yebyu and Ye Townships also reported being forced to stand 24-hour sentry, guarding against attacks by rebels. Forced sentry duty was ordered by at least three battalions, including LIB No. 343 and IBs. No. 61 and No. 31. Rotating groups of between twelve and twenty-five people are required to stand guard per day. “A village sentry duty persists 24 hours a day and seven days a week in rotation system. They forced about twenty villagers per day to guard and patrol the rebel movements around the village and the areas nearby,” said Nai Pakao Ong, from Amae village in Yebyu. “We are like the protective cover of the army. It means we villagers will die first when the rebels come and attack them. I have served like that many times during the last five years.”

Nai Chain, also from Amae, confirmed Nai Pakao Ong’s report: “another hated abuse for me is the rotating sentry or patrol duty. Every 24 hours a day, seven days a week, twenty villagers are required to patrol and report back to them [LIBs No. 273 and No. 282] everything, whether we found any rebels or not. Even though when informed to them, sometimes we have been beaten without any reason. Sometimes, when we have no information to report, we are accused as rebel-supporters and as punishment, they demanded us to bring the food supply for them.”

Households who could not provide sentries are required to pay between 5,000 and 10,000 kyat to hire a replacement. Major Kyaw Zay Ya of IB No. 31 is also reported to have forced women to stand sentry duty in Yin-Ye, Changu and Toe-Tat-Ywa-Thit villages, in spite of the danger. "There are many bad events regarding women patrolling the village in the past. I want to bring up that there are a lot of rape cases which were committed in the past by Burmese soldiers while the women guarded this village at night," said a farmer, 50, from Yin Ye. "We really don't want to hear that kind of cruel news again."

Villagers also reported being forced to work as porters, carrying munitions and supplies, for the army. Battalions conscript porters for two types of activities, said a former member of the MDUF, who still maintains a network in Yebyu. Porters are sometimes conscripted for short periods during military patrols in specific areas. In these cases, the MDUF source said that villages in the area are required to send daily groups of at least three porters to the nearest army outpost. In the second type of operation, porters are conscripted for offensives against rebels in contested and rebel-controlled areas. These operations are typically longer term, with porters gone for weeks or months at a time.

The most recent confirmed report of forced portering occurred in March 2008, in Amae village. "I was regularly used as porter and unpaid labor over the last five years by both Light Infantry Battalions No. 273 and 282. Each times the soldiers do not define how many days I have to go and serve along with their troops. It depends on the operations. If they took me to the frontline, they would use at least one or one and half month. If they conducted only a military patrol in the area, only a week long. In the past, porter services were arranged by the village headmen. But due to lack of volunteer to be village headmen in Amae village, the Burmese troops directly arrange for civilian porter services. Each times, they collected twenty to thirty villagers to go along with to carry ammunition, rations and heavy weaponry," Nai Chain, from Amae village, told HURFOM in a November interview. "The last time they used me as a civilian porter was on March 2008. It was before the water festival. At that time, I was along with [LIB No. 273] led by Colonel Myint Oo and his troops launched military operation in the area between Cha-Pone and Mac-San-Taung villages."

Nai Pakao Ong, also from Amae village, told HURFOM that portering in his area was frequent. He was last conscripted as a porter, for the fifth time, in February 2007. "Porters are conscripted in our village and the villages nearby over the past ten years in many forms by the Burmese battalions...I was involved in these porter operations at lease five times in my life; the last time was on February 2007, I presume. At that time, fifty villagers from my village had to carry the ammunition, rations, heavy weaponry and other supplies... they took us for forty-five days and I suffered from serious malaria when I got back home."

Porters reported severe abuses during the operations, including being forced to walk in front of battalions as human mine sweepers. "LIB No. 282 always used the porters as human-shields. The soldiers made the porters walk in front of the military column to trigger the mines. When fighting happened between the rebel and the Army, porters were used as human shields for the Burmese troops," said Nai Chain. "The soldiers threatened to us that if we refused to [willingly help] we would be killed... Sometimes, when the porters were not able to walk or caused a delay, they were severely beaten by the lower rank soldiers," added Nai Chain, who said that the harsh treatment left some porters with chronic pain and permanent disabilities upon their return home.

IV. Conclusion

Residents of southern Ye and northern Tavoy live in extraordinarily difficult conditions. For people who typically only make 20,000 to 25,000 kyat a month, frequent taxes, even when small, create a significant obstacle to covering basic household expenses. These difficulties are worsened by frequent demands for food and agricultural products, as well as the permanent specter of looting by soldiers who can only be opposed under pain of death. Even were the fruits of villagers' labor entirely their own, residents are frequently kept from their workplaces by travel restrictions

Dear Readers,

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995 by a group of young Mon people. The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- monitoring the human rights situation in Mon territory and southern Burma,
- protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma

To these ends, we produce the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletter. We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or know someone who might like to receive the newsletter. Please email or mail us a name and address; our contact information is on the back page.

With regards,

Director
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

and the threat of violence. Villagers are also often conscripted as forced laborers, with the army showing no apparent regard for the timing of its demands; farmers repeatedly reported being kept away from their crops at crucial moments like harvest time.

Residents also reported the arrest, interrogation and violent beating of unarmed villagers. Ostensibly for information gatherings, local sources allege that at least some of these assaults were arbitrary

and designed to intimidate civilians out of supporting insurgents. In perhaps the most high-profile category of violation, HURFOM sources reported being conscripted as porters and human minesweepers. Dubbed “atrocious de-mining” by some, the practice has also been reported as recently as October in nearby Karen State, while forced portering was being reported in Shan State in the second week of November. According to a 2007 report by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, anti-personnel mines continue to be used by both the SPDC and rebel groups in Karen, Karenni and Shan States as well as Tenasserim Division. According to a 2004 report by the same group, Burma has one of the highest landmine casualty rates in the world.

Human rights violations in southern Ye and northern Tavoy are systematic, reprehensible and taking their toll; according to an October 2008 report by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, abuses in Mon State and Tenasserim Division have resulted in the displacement of at least 135,000 people, many of whom are undoubtedly from areas covered in this report. “No one could escape from the abuses of Burmese battalions,” said Nai Pakao Ong. “Our home village, Amae, has been totally destroyed under the rule of these battalions. Many of our neighbor households managed to flee to other places. In previous years, our village had more than one hundred and fifty households. There were only about sixty or seventy remaining when we fled.” Added Nai Tun Sann, from Kabya-Wa in Ye, “I would never go back again. We all would like to live life in peaceful places.”



Photo: HURFOM

Burmese troops patrolling an area in southern Ye Township

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