

Report

The Coming Crisis of Brigade No. 6: Analysis of the Current Abuses Committed Against the Karen Population

Introduction:

At the end of February 2009, the Karen Democratic Buddhist Army (DKBA) and State Peace Development Council (SPDC) joined forces in preparation for a campaign against the Karen National Union (KNU) territory to rout and destroy the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The ensuing campaign has changing the face of regional politics, long dominated by the presence of the KNU and its armed wing the KNLA. With the loss of KNU Brigade No. 7, the KNU has been placed in an endgame position, preparing to defend the heart of its territory, Brigade No. 6, heavily populated with ethnic Karen. The fallout from Brigade No. 7's defeat produced a tide of refugees who fled to locations along the Thai-Burma border, and the UNHCR administered refugee camps. They arrived bearing reports of abuses committed by SPDC and DKBA forces. As the joint SPDC and DKBA force positions itself to carry out their assault on Brigade No. 6, HURFOM focuses this month's report on the on going human rights abuses in the southern Brigade No. 6 area, that will form a crisis broader and more terrible than that seen with the fall of Brigade No. 7.

The information contained in this report has been collected during the recent conflict between the DKBA, SPDC and KNLA. The interviews and accounts of villager experiences have been conducted by HURFOM field reporters in 18 villages located in the southern area of Brigade No. 6.

Background - Previous attacks and the fall of Brigade No.7:

In an attempt to strengthen security by seizing KNU controlled and in the eastern border territories, and to serve as the Burmese Junta backed border guard force, the DKBA has been increasing its attacks against KNLA forces since early January 2009. According to military action watchdogs and analysts, these attacks on KNLA controlled territory have been systematically organized by the Naypyidaw government to manage all Karen ceasefire groups by granting them administrative control of areas that include business and trading benefits. The SPDC's aggressive strategy of backing the DKBA attacks against KNLA forces is also part of its policies regarding the post 2010 election. The arrangement of the BGF and acquiescence of the ceasefire groups satisfy intended state goals, and allow for greater control over what would effectively be administrative territories on the eastern Thai-Burma border.

In early April 2009 the joint forces of the Burmese army and the DKBA mounted attacks on KNLA controlled areas in Pa-an District, Brigade No. 7 and overran KNLA Battalion No. 201 near the Valaeki area, eastern Karen State. According to a Karen humanitarian worker who lives in Mae Sot, because of the attacks committed by the joint force of Burmese army and DKBA, about 500 ethnic Karen families fled to Thai soil, many losing their property and food. In addition to the displacement, the humanitarian worker reported that at least 220 young men were pressed into service as DKBA soldiers. "We have received two DKBA soldiers (aged 23, and 24) who were seriously injured during the fighting between KNLA military camp No. 201 and DKBA Brigade No. 907. They just joined the DKBA, having been forced to join about 2 months ago. They are originally from Shwe Gun township, where the DKBA forced them to join their army," she said.

According to the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), around 200 civilians fled to Thai-Karen villages located on Thai soil, as a result of the fighting. HURFOM field reporters have confirmed that even now many displaced families are still located at Thai-Karen border villages. In certain instances the assaulting joint force crossed the border to pursue refugees. "They [DKBA troops from Battalion No. 907] even attacked and looted peoples' belongings inside Thailand, on Thai soil in the second week of May [2009]."

After a month of fighting between the SPDC and DKBA joint campaign against the KNLA, the headquarters of the KNLA Brigade No. 7 fell on June 21st, 2009. A Karen community leader who lives on the Thai-Burma border, explained in a post-conflict analysis the struggle between the Karen groups, and the fall of brigade No.7:

This is the first time that the Burmese government has been able to claim control over these KNU/KNLA areas, with the help of a Karen ceasefire group, in 60 years. But this civil war ended in over 4,000 villagers having fled their homes, around 250 troops dead from both sides, at least 30 villagers killed on suspicion of supporting rebels, some Karen ladies were raped, many under aged children suffered starvation and thousands of Karen residents lost their agri-business and food for their families. So, if the pro-junta forces, DKBA, think deeply about this victory, they should not feel proud. This is not their victory but their master's – the Burmese Junta's victory over all Karen people.

The loss of this territory over the past months has been the most drastic defeat for the KNLA forces in years. Brigade no. 7 served as major military hub, comprised of camps and a base that was the headquarters of KNLA Battalion No. 201. As the keystone defensive position in the region, when Battalion No. 201 fell on June 21st, the other camps were effectively decapitated.

For many area residents daily life and survival has been difficult since the fall of Brigade No. 7. As clashes occurred between the joint force of the DKBA and SPDC against the KNLA thought June, over 3,000 villagers have fled from the Pa'an, North and East Dooplaya Districts – territory previously controlled by KNLA Brigade No.7 – to the Thai-Burma border. The number refugees driven from their homes by the assault and the subsequent abuses against Karen civilians indicate the very real danger which people have faced during attack on, and the fall of, Brigade no. 7.

By looking at the previous human rights violations committed by the joint SPDC and DKBA campaign, in comparison, the scope of the coming conflict over the Brigade No. 6 territory has much greater potential to become a significant humanitarian crisis.

Brigade No. 6:

Brigade No. 6 is effectively the heart of Karen territory. Established at the beginning of the insurgency in 1947, the area contains 20% of the total Karen population. According to a KNLA Captain from Brigade No. 6, who is inactive due to poor health, Brigade No. 6 is also the backbone of the KNU because of the economic support the area provides. He explained also that besides benefits from taxation, they receive the support of the people. The area's strength is derived from the peoples desire to be a community and support their fellow Karen people. This civilian network provides surveillance, political, and physical support. Despite the increasing numbers of DKBA and KPF since 1997, the KNU's power has not diminished because, he explains, of the support of the people. For the Captain, without the support of the people, the Karen cause would become weaker and weaker.

Research and interviews for this report focused on the four areas of the KNLA Brigade No.6 territory. These are: the east and west Zami river areas, Maekatha area and Ko Du Kwel area between Three Pagoda and Kyainnseiky townships. As the violence between the DKBA, SPDC, and KNLA intensifies, the 18 villages in the area will bear the brunt of abuses and casualties that result directly from the advance of the combined force against the KNLA. The area is primarily populated by Karen people though other ethnicities reside there as well. Based off the information available, HURFOM estimates that there area population is 70% Karen, 10% Mon, 10% Burmese, 10% Shan and Indian. The livelihood of residents mostly consists of farming, with 70% of villagers working as farms to survive, 15% working as day laborers, and 15% making their living as traders and sawyers.

Deployment: SPDC, DKBA, KPF:

The SPDC armed forces, also known as the 'Tatmadaw', have been primary adversary of the KNLA since it began fighting for its independence on February 7th, 1947. In advancing towards Brigade No. 6, the SPDC has stationed its troops in the Anankwin village, Three Pagoda township. In addition, they have deployed Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 357 in Tounng zun village and Infantry Battalion (IB) No. 32 in Three Pagoda town, under the Tactical Command No.2. It is dividing into two battalions, LIB No. 357, which will operate and defend the Chaung-Son areas and LIB No. 356 that is based out of Taung Thee village. This in turn is divided into 2 columns, No.1 and No.2. Most recently HURFOM has learned that on July 26th General Thet Nai Win, deployed IB No. 22, originally from Pa'an, which will command LIB's No. 201, No. 204, No. 206, No. 208 and No. 209.



Two DKBA privates from Battalion No. 907 are seen observing the area.

Burmese troop activities have also extended beyond the Three Pagoda area, to KNLA brigade No.6 territory east of the Zami River in Kyainnseikyi township. The main SPDC battalions in the area are IB No. 203, in Paya-Ngoke-Tho village, IB No. 208, in Khut-Khwar village and SPDC Artillery Regiment (AR) 313 based near the Three Pagoda Town.

The DKBA formed in 1994 after its leaders, Chairman That Htoo Kyaw and monk U Thu Zana split from the KNU. On April 13th, 2009 its commander Tha Tu Jaw met with Southeast Command (SEC) General That Nai Win, and officially accepted the

SPDC's offer to reform as a Border Guard Force (BGF). This effectively placed it under Burmese government control in exchange for material support. The DKBA currently fields 5 brigades, divided into 22 Infantry Battalions, for a total of over 6,000 soldiers, and, according to DKBA sources, intends to recruit another 3,000 troops by the end of 2009.

The DKBA has stationed Battalions 901 and 906 in Kyainnseikyi town and Tha Gon Daing village. Additionally, the DKBA constructed an economic and liaison office in the Three Pagoda town. This office is used for fundraising and community liaising throughout Three Pagoda area and the Southern Duplaya District. The DKBA economic and liaison department is commanded by Soe Moe Aung. According to information gathered from the DKBA community, Saw Lar Bwel (a.k.a) Hna Khan Hmwe will lead the DKBA troops in the coming assault on Brigade No. 6. As of July 26th, Nga Khan Mhwe has been made Brigade Commander of DKBA Battalion No. 5

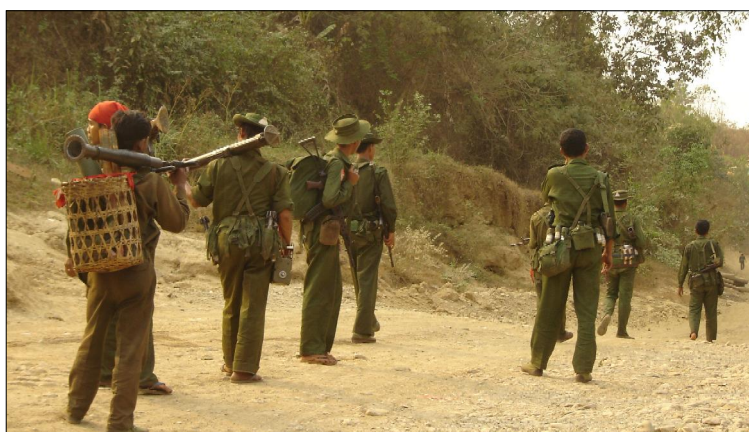
The KPF split from KNU In 1997. On March 30th, 2009, its leadership met with SEC General That Naing Win, to accept a position as a BGF in Three Pagoda town under the SPDC command. In accepting the position they were allowed to undertake a special military training conducted by SPDC forces. The KPF can field a force of 3 battalions, or at least 500 soldiers. KPF battalion No.3 is based in the Three Pagoda area, and has set up 2 checkpoints to regulate traffic.

Brigade No. 6 is the goal:

After defending against the sustained 10 months of attacks, the KNLA has lost most of their administrative areas especially with the fall of Brigade No.7 and northeastern Brigade No.6 areas. Additionally, because of this prolonged offensive, the KNLA has lost its intensity and ability to maintain controls over the rest of their area, where most of their administrative bodies are situated, in the southern Brigade No. 6 territory along the eastern Thai-Burma border. According to analysis based on movements of the Burmese army and its backed DKBA battalions, other large-scale assaults will be conducted against the KNLA Brigade No. 6 areas. This certainty of continued violence, and the fall of brigade No. 7 headquarters, has instilled a great deal of fear amongst civilians living in the Brigade No. 6 areas.

A 58 year old resident, who requested his name be withheld, and who is well acquainted with the armed conflicts in the Karen territory, explains:

When one looks at their [SPDC & DKBA] military activities, they will bring their guns to bear on Brigade No. 6 [KNLA]. We heard that the Burmese army is including LIBs No. 275, No. 356, No. 357, AR 313 and IB No. 32 in its preparations in the three pagoda areas. Similarly, the DKBA Kloh Htoo Baw Tactical Command, managed by Commander Saw



A group of Burmese soldiers from Infantry Battalion No. 32 is seen near Three Pagodas township.

Lar Bwel, and his senior fighters have been planning to carry out another offensive against Brigade No. 6. In reviewing these preparations we can see another round of intense fighting will continue soon.

Nai Lwin, a business man who has lived and run his business for over 30 years in the Brigade No. 6 area explained that based on his experience, the joint attacks of the SPDC army and DKBA forces will not be succeeded, and unlike Brigade No. 7, the geography and political support in the area are specifically tailored to be able to support and allow for the long term survival of KNLA troops in the area. "I don't think the Burmese Army and its militia can beat the KNLA again in this [Brigade No.6] area. The Karen rangers from KNLA side will be more cunning than other side in these [Brigade No.6] areas."

The prospective civilian crisis:

As has been seen in Brigade No. 7 area, the potential for violence to the Brigade No. 6 civilian population is enormous. According to a high level officer from KNLA brigade No.6 administrative area, if violence breaks out, around 5,500 villagers who live in these areas will be directly affected. Because of the season, fall out from the conflict will reach beyond immediate displacement, to long-term debilitation of the local economy. The KNLA officer explained, "We are especially concerned about the local rice farmers. If they do not finish cultivating crop during this rainy season, they will be in trouble throughout the whole year. Violence could resume at anytime in these areas right now."

Based on the information that has come from the KNU Kyainnseiki township office, the affected populations will be more numerous than the above officer estimated:

Dooplaya District has lots of wide and flat, as well as hilly areas. People have been living in these areas many years. Most of what people farm here is rice, betel nuts, rubber and vegetables. If there are more armed clashes between the Burmese army, DKBA and KNLA, at least 7,000 villages will drive from their homes. They will flee to the eastern and southern borders where the UNHCR refugee camps are located. For those people who live in Kyaik Don, Azin villages (of Kawkareik township), Win Lone, Phaw Nae Mu, Mae Sa Kit villages (of Kyainnseiki township) will use the jungle road to flee to the Noh Poe refugee camp run by the Thai government and the UNHCR. Similarly for those villagers living in the areas of Ko Du Kwel, Kyun Chaung and Ta Dein villages (of Three Pagodas township), they will have to flee to Baan Tom Yan refugee camp located near Halockhane Mon resettlement camp on the Thai-Burma border.

Ongoing Human Rights Abuse in the area:

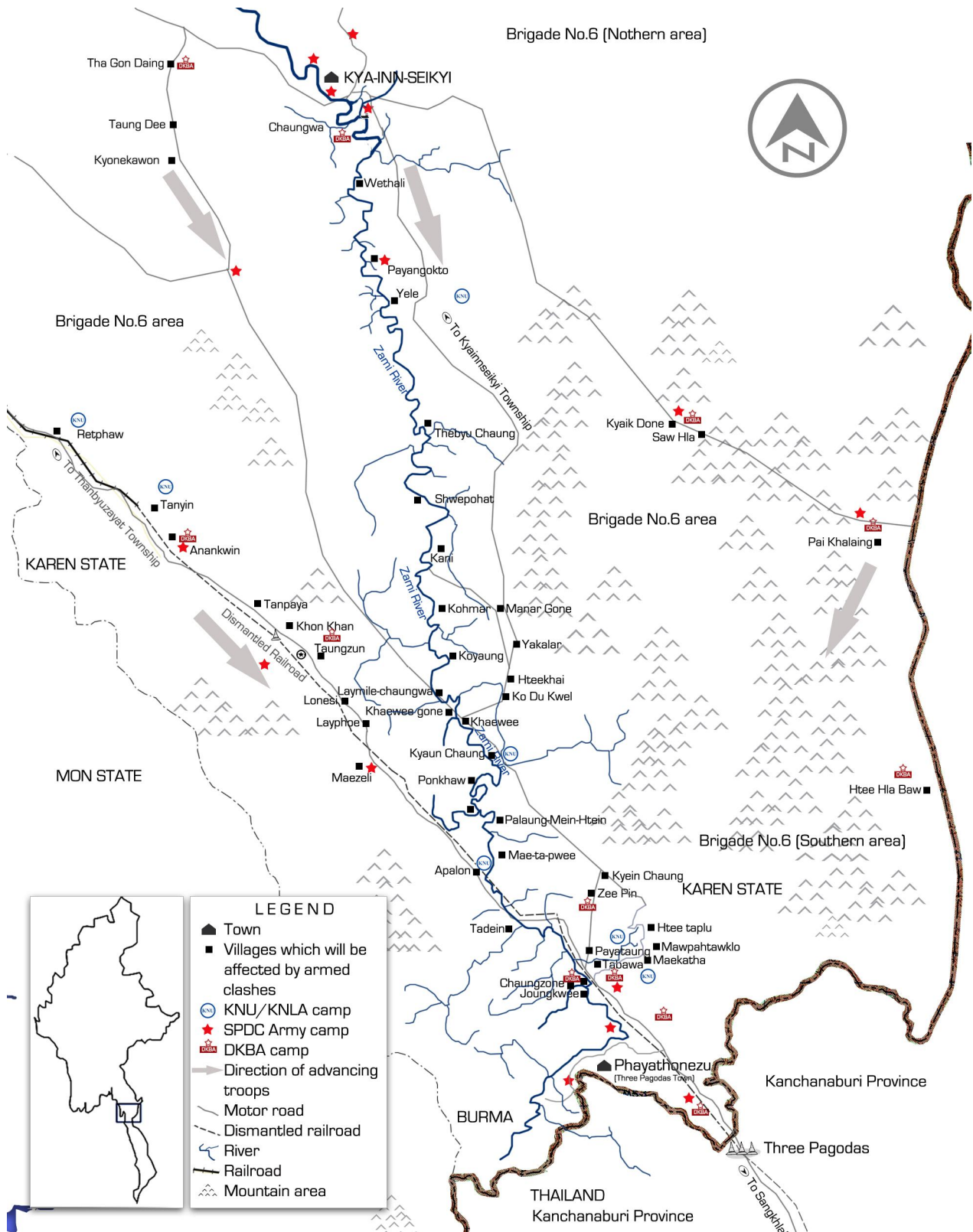
In advance of the assault on Brigade No.6, appropriate attention must be paid to the potential for human rights violations in this area to be far more numerous and sever then those documented during the fall of Brigade No. 7. HURFOM's field researchers have collected information documenting the experiences of villagers in Brigade No. 6 area that have suffered human rights abuses at the hands of SPDC and DKBA forces. The reported instances of abuse are broken down into 4 categories of the most commonly occurring abuses:

- a) Seizer of Supplies
- b) Travel Restrictions
- c) Forced Recruitment
- d) Forced Portering.

Seizer of supplies - money and food:

In an internal document issued on July 19th, 2009, the Burmese military Southeast Command (SEC) instructed Tactical Command No.1 based in the Anankwin, Three Pagoda township to demand that households give two baskets of rice and other vegetables (1 basket equal to 32 Kg) to military forces. If a household does not have the rice to meet the demands, the military will take 10,000 kyat.

While it was not ordered in the document, as an additional threat military forces have been telling villagers if they cannot afford to pay they will be forced to work as porters instead. SPDC forces have been collecting food supplies from Anankwin, Taung Son, Ko Du Kwel, Khone Khan, Tanpayar, Laypoe and Lone Si villages. These



Map of village locations which can be affected by the armed clashes in the KNLA's southern Dooplaya District [Brigade No. 6.]

requisitions of food supplies do drastic damage to each household's economic potential. For many the food taken had served as the only means of survival for the family.

A 45 year-old Anankwin villager, who is a victim of these arbitrary seizers, explains how he has been affected:

I already gave them 2 baskets of rice. Now, I have nothing left in my house. If you can't afford 2 baskets of rice you need to pay 10,000 kyat. But, if you can afford to pay with rice or money, they will force you to serve as a porter. Now, I need to work hard and replenish my rice for this rainy season.

Saw Mann Lay (name changed due to security issues) a 28 years-old Ko Du Kwel villager explains about wide spread seizure of supplies, and about the difficulty this causes a village as a community:

On that day, the SPDC soldiers collected rice and other food supplies from about 90 households in Taung Son village. In our village Meh Pra [locally known as Ko Du Kwel], over 50 households have had to pay rice and food supplies. But we don't know yet what will happen with the villagers who can't afford to pay either money or rice. If they can't, our village has to support them. We don't have any other way; either some villagers help them to give supplies to the military, or they will be serving in the porter service.

The military telegram acquired by HURFOM specifically orders SPDC forces who are gathering food to tell each household that the supplies will be used to support the DKBA soldiers led by the Saw Lar Bwel, who are advancing towards KNLA Brigade No.6 territory. According to a DKBA liaison officer in Three Pagoda Town, "We have not commanded troops to collect food supplies from the villagers. Also, we never allowed our troops to collect food supplies from the villagers."

Travel restriction:

Travel restrictions have been placed on villages throughout the area of advancing SPDC and DKBA forces. These restrictions, used as a security measure, to cut off potential aid villagers are able to provide KNLA forces, undercut the local economy, and provide justification for arbitrary shootings carried out by the SPDC.

On July 12th, in Anankwin and Taung Zun, Operational Command No. 2, a division of LIB No. 357, banned villagers from entering or leaving villages located between Three Pagoda and Kyainnseikiyi villages. According to HURFOM field reports, this restriction has caused problems for many villagers whose survival is dependent on farming in the areas outside of their villages.

A 24 years old Karen villager, who lived in the Anankwin area, told a HURFOM field reporter that they have been banned from working a full day at their farms, and the dangers of trying to continue to farm:

On July 12th, the LIB No. 357, Column No.2, started to operate in the area — there are about 50 soldiers included in the Column. They commended the villagers not to work outside the village. In blocking the roads, our villagers who make their living in farming, have been struggling to survive. They [LIB No.357] commend the villagers that they must stay in the village 24 hours a day. As for me, I rarely go back to sleep at home — I just stay on my farm. Because of this I need to hide whenever I see the SPDC soldiers come around. If I didn't hide they would think that I'm with the rebel groups and they would kill me. At the moment I'm facing difficulties because I alone can't work my farm."

According to filed reports, travel restrictions have been placed on Anankwin, Tanpaya, Khon Khan, Toungzun, Lay Pho, Maezali, Lonesi, Apalon, Thet Kel, and Myintharyar villages.

By banning travel outside of villages, 70% of villagers are now without work. Because most villagers' sole income comes from their ability to cultivate and harvest their crops, travel bans destroy the local economy and people's ability to survive. However it is important to note that in some cases where villagers have been kept from farming for a living, they have taken to trading in order to survive.

A 45 year-old Tanpaya villager explains the extremely difficult situation travel restrictions place upon villagers who try to make a living farming:

The SPDC declared that they would not provide security for the people who are working on their farms or in the jungle. In addition, they said not to blame them [SPDC] whenever they mistake someone as a member of a rebel group and shoot them if they're working on a farm or in the jungle. That is the reason the SPDC has frightened people to not leave the village. As for me, I just have this job during the rainy season. If we don't have an opportunity to work on our farm in this year, I can't imagine where my family will get rice for eating during the next years. We also do not have other jobs to do. Therefore, we are waiting for the SPDC soldiers to leave the area and allow us to work on our farms."

A lieutenant from the KNLA Battalion No.16 said of the travel restrictions:

[The] SPDC army heard about some of the DKBA and KPF soldiers deserting to the KNU armed group. In July, some members from KPF Battalion No.3 and DKBA Battalion 901, which is based in Chaungwa,

Kyainnseiky township, Lieutenant Saw Kae Kae and the members [of his unit] deserted to the KNLA Battalion No. 16. I think...that's the reason the SPDC wants to block communication and food supplies between the local people and KNLA army around Anankwin. Also, the SPDC can separate the villagers and the rebel groups. Therefore, the SPDC has banned residents from going out from their village.

U Pho Hla, (name changed for security purposes), a 60 year-old Taungzun villager explains how villagers have faced this abuse before, and how it affects their livelihoods:

Four years ago, the SPDC soldier also banned the villager to go to their farms. Now, the villagers are facing many problems because the SPDC banned travel during the farming season. They can't cultivate their farms. If they can't work on their farms this year, they will not have food for the next year...If they don't have money to buy anything, they won't be able to survive anymore. At the movement, we do not know the SPDC will let us travel again. The village headman dares not ask LIB No.357 to end their travel restriction. We can only guess at what will happen next in the area.

Columns No.1 and No.2, from LIB No.356, which is based in Taungdee, declared that villagers cannot sleep on their farms, in Taung Thee village. From Column No.2 Captain Myo Aung announced that they would not take responsibility if they mistook a farmer for a sympathizer with the rebel groups. As a result many people are frightened...and dare not to go to their farms.

Daw Aye (name changed for security purposes), a 54 year-old Taungdee villager described how SPDC forces have shown little regard for the lives of villagers who must farm under travel restrictions:

LIB No. 356 allows work on farms in the daytime. However, they are not allowed to sleep on the farms at night time. If forces from LIB No. 356 suspected anyone of communicating and providing food support for the other groups, they will arrest and kill them. Therefore, our farmers don't have security anymore. Because of the worse security, the farmers in the area dare not go to work on their farms...Last year, the SPDC soldiers mistook people on the farms as working with the rebel groups and killed two villagers in the area. They did not take any responsible after they shot them. They just said, 'We mistook them for part of a rebel group'.

A 45 years old of Mon trader, who trades dry goods in the areas, explained to HURFOM field reporters that even traders have been banned from travel:

In the early morning of July 11th, we tried to trade our dry goods in Maekatha. We couldn't get across the road because the DKBA guard said Lieutenant A One banned crossing and wouldn't allow traders to cross. Before we could pay money to open it whenever they block the gate. Now, even though we gave money, they didn't accept it and didn't open the gate. They [DKBA] said that security was too tight. Today we also tried to go to Three Pagoda but they didn't allow us and we are driving back now."

Forced recruitment:

As the SPDC and DKBA combined force prepare for the coming conflict, they have pressed villagers into service to bolster their ranks. Starting in the second week of May, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) battalion No.999 began recruiting villagers to enter into military service. Villagers unwilling to join were extorted by the DKBA for large sums of money. "DKBA Battalion No. 999 General Chit Thu commanded that at least 30 villagers have to enlist in the military service. The new soldiers must be single and between 18 to 30 years old," said a 27 year-old Karen villager from Htee Leh village, Pai Kyone township. "We have to pay 25,000 baht if we refuse to join the service; in comparison, they will pay us 25,000 kyat per month if we join."

Forced recruitment began after the Mon State Peace and Development Council (PDC) Chairman General That Naing Win met with DKBA and Karen Peace Force (KPF) leadership separately at the end of April. "After DKBA leaders met with the General That Naing Win, they started to recruit and collect new soldiers for their battalions," said the Karen Nation Union (KNU) District-level Chairman from Pa-an District.

The DKBA and KPF leaders met with the General That Naing Win in April to discuss changing their armed groups into BGFs. That Naing Win announced that each border guard battalion would consist of 326 soldiers. If they didn't have the necessary number of soldiers they would have to combine two battalions to achieve the numbers that they were required. According to sources, the DKBA didn't want to destroy their old battalion and

didn't want to combine with KPE, so they began a campaign of forcing villagers enlist in their military service to achieve the necessary number.

HURFOM has confirmed that over 100 people have fled in response to attempts to forcibly recruit soldiers from Thi Sa Ma, Taung Soon and Naung Bo villages, in Pai Kyone township. According to a member of the KNU Township-level Administration of Bridge No. 7, "On May 20th, the villagers started arriving in Lae-Paw-Hae refugee camp. Now there are over 100 people in the camp. Most of them are near middle age and from Pai Kyone township, Pa-an District. Since Colonel Chit Thu began forcibly collecting manpower in the area, the villagers have fled their homes to find new shelter."

Kaloh Say, a 28 year-old Taung Soon villager, explained his decision to flee from his village:

I accepted the idea that Karen people can determine their fate by themselves; therefore, the DKBA emerged in the last couple of years. Believing the Burmese Junta's ideology and killing each other are unacceptable for all the Karen people. It's the reason why I don't want to participate with them [the SPDC]. I don't have 25,000 baht to pay them, so my friends and I decided to go to the Lae-Paw-Hae refugee camp."

Forced Portering service:

The forcing of villagers to work as uncompensated porters is another frequent abuse practiced by the SPDC and DKBA combined force. July is the height of the rainy season, making travel difficult, and porters are used to carry additional equipment and food as the force advances. The widespread use of forced portering appears to be a tactical decision and is practiced by both SPDC and DKBA forces. The porters, drawn from the local Karen population, have also been forced to guard military camps, being the first line of defense, and used as human mine sweepers, walking in front of the advancing column.

On the July 26th, a DKBA commander, Kyaw Kyaw, and about 20 soldiers, arrested 40 villagers from Asoon and Lamphan villages', which are located in Kyaninnseiky township. According to local sources the 40 villagers were forced to work as porters, carrying DKBA supplies of ammunition, food and additional equipment. It is unclear if the villagers were also forced to work as human minesweepers.

The Exact numbers of residents arrested to work as porters is unknown, and a concrete number is difficult to obtain. One victim of forced portering told HURFOM that numerous arrests occurred as troops passed through on roads and through farms, during working hours and at night.

On July 11th, SPDC IB No. 32 arrested 15 residents in Three Pagodas Pass town to porter in its continued offensive against KNU brigade No. 6. A source told HURFOM that this action was triggered by the desertion of 5 soldiers and that the 15 villagers would be used for portering and guiding the troops to try and catch the 5 soldiers.



An ethnic Karen family is fleeing to avoid the upcoming conflict between the joint troops and KNLA at Brigade No.6 areas.

According to a resident who lives near the IB No. 32 camp, all villagers arrested by troops were going to be used as porters and guides while the troops try and eradicate KNU brigade No. 6. "I am sure those people are going to be used to clear the land mines [as human minesweepers] and carrying things, because my friend has had such experiences."

According to sources, no one dares to walk on the road after 9 p.m. because the soldiers set up checkpoints for questioning and arrests. Some are afraid of going to work and others are afraid to sleep at home in case the soldiers come and arrest them.

U Maung Aye, a 39-year-old portering victim and resident of Yakalar told HURFOM that impending fighting between the DKBA

and the KNLA worries him. Aye's high-land rice paddy has not been harvested yet and he said that without a profitable harvest this year he would not be able to pay back loans he'd taken out in 2008. In that year, he was arrested by SPDC Infantry Battalion No.18, led by Lieutenant Colonel Hla Min, for a month of forced portering. When he got back from portering his crop was gone. He and his family rely on yearly crops from his cultivation.

"Because I could not harvest [last year's crop] I had to borrow 50,000 kyat to buy seeds for this year," he said. This year he doubled the size of his paddy crop from last year, wanting to earn enough to pay back his loans. If he fails this year, he told HURFOM, he has no idea what to do because the interest rate of his loan is high.

A 17-year-old boy from Htee Khein village explains his fear of being forced to work as porter for the SPDC:

I am so afraid of portering, when I was young my dad was arrested by SPDC soldiers and he didn't come back; some people said he went over a land mine and died. Also, some tell me SPDC soldiers treat their porters badly and I don't want to be porter. I don't know where I should go to be safe.

Residents of the different villages endure similar circumstances, including Htee Khin, Ko Du Kwel, Khaewee, and Pon Khaw. These villages are on the way of SPDC troops traveling between Kyainnseiky and Three Pagodas town. Residents report having to leave home only at night out of fear of the SPDC arresting them and conscripting them into forced portering. In addition, more than 30 villagers from Htee Khein alone suffer from diseases including dengue fever and malaria

Perspective - Fears and opinions of local villagers on armed conflict:

U Po Ka Lar told HURFOM field reporters when he was young he served as a KNU soldier and has extensive combat experience. He has since retired and worked as a farmer. When the DKBA joined with SPDC troops to clear out KNU Brigade No.7 in June, U Po Ka Lar said that thousands of innocent Karen villagers suffered. He added that DKBA Lieutenant Colonel Saw Law Pwe, an expert on the area, will lead a joint offensive with SPDC troops.

He also said he would prefer not to go anywhere, because if he flees his home, he will lose the cultivation of his high-land rice paddy and will thus have no food for the coming year. "I pray for both the DKBA and the KNU to think about their residents, because I believe that for both of them the goal is the freedom of the Karen," said U Po Ka Lar.

Local residents told HURFOM that their situations are dire because they are too afraid to leave their villages for the cultivation of their crops and trading with other nearby villages for essential goods. Some fear SPDC troops because of past experiences: soldiers routinely rape women and arrested the men for portering.

According to U Nye, a 60-year-old Lay Ta Waw villager, in the Maekatha area:

Maekatha area has experienced nonstop gunfire. I grew up in this area and I know a lot about the conflicts of this area. Most conflict in these areas [have been over] territories [contested] by Karen and SPDC troops. Fighting did not last very long in the past. Now I am so worried because the DKBA will coordinate with SPDC troops, fighting will last longer and residents will face more problems [including poverty and starvation]...The DKBA and SPDC troops will not find it easy to clear the KNU out of brigade No. 6 because the area is very wide...the longer they take, the more residents will face bad situations.

HURFOM field reporters met with five residents from Lay Ta Waw village, which has 30 households and is located 9 miles outside Three Pagodas Pass Town; the interview subjects left their homes and moved to the temporary resettlement camp Ban Don Yan, located near the Mon resettlement camp of Halockhancee.

Most of villagers who live in the Maekatha area, Kyun Chaung area and Ko Du Kwel area mainly rely economically on high land rice paddy cultivation; when they heard about the DKBA cooperation with the SPDC troops and the plans to clear out the KNLA Brigade No.6, many villagers worry about their ability to tend to their crops and clear their land. If they are not able to do so, they will face a future food shortage when their next crops cannot be cultivated.

A 49-year-old female Go Du Kwel resident explained how fighting could cause significant starvation amongst civilians and soldiers alike:

If the KNU and DKBA are fighting, all of us villagers will face starvation in the coming year. They will also face this [situation]; we are their rice pot. If we can't harvest our crops this coming year it means that their rice pots will also have a hole. They also will face starvation and I pray for them not to fight each other at this time.

HURFOM field reporters questioned a low-ranking officer of the KNLA about what their army should do if the DKBA and SPDC troops clear out Brigade No.6. He replied that, "The KNLA is ready to fight but we will avoid it as much as possible because villagers are working on cultivating [their crops]."



A Burmese force from LIB No. 356 are seen near Anankwin village, Three Pagodas Pass area.

According to a betel nut plantation owner from Maw Pahtaw Klo village, Maekatha area, all the villagers are afraid the DKBA and SPDC troops will block the way for villagers escaping from the fighting. He said, "If the DKBA and SPDC troops block the way for villagers to escape from the fighting, all the villagers will die."

A 20-year-old Lay Ta Waw resident expresses her frustration over the length violence has gone on in Burma:

I am sick and tired of the civil war in Burma; they have been fighting since I was young, now I am growing up and they are not finished yet, and many innocent villagers suffer because of it...Karen people will kill the Karen, but what are they fighting for?

Conclusion:

After 60 years of fighting, the Karen National Union now prepares to fight the greatest battle for its survival in its history. With the loss of Brigade No. 7, Brigade No. 6 is the foremost bastion of KNU held territory. It is not difficult to recognize that the abuses that unfold from the fall of Brigade No. 7 will be mirrored in the coming assault on Brigade No.6.

HURFOM hopes this report makes clear the danger of a human rights catastrophe unfolding in the Brigade No. 6 area. The abuses committed by the advancing combined SPDC and DKBA forces make the potential for extensive civilian casualties likely. By restricting civilian travel, and taking food supplies, the forces trap the population with no means of survival. Those who are forced to porter, guard, clear land mines, or who are pressed into armed service, face death by being involved directly in the conflict. For many villagers their only interest is to live their daily lives without the threat of these abuses. The future livelihood of the Karen people is the livelihood of the KNU and DKBA – whatever the outcome of the assault on Brigade No. 6, the biggest loss will be a civilian one.

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