



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Commentary

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Supporting local responses to extractive abuse: Commentary on the ND-Burma report *Hidden Impact*

Eighteen years of KHRG field research indicates that regular extractive abuses by the SPDC Army and NSAGs threaten local livelihoods and are a fundamental human rights concern for villagers throughout eastern Burma. These abuses appear to be the product of the established SPDC Army and NSAG practice of supporting military units via extraction of significant material and labour resources from the local civilian population, enforced by implicit or explicit threats of violence. These findings were recently affirmed by ND-Burma, which last week released a report documenting the prevalence and impact of arbitrary taxation for communities across Burma. This commentary is designed to support ND-Burma's report, by offering additional recommendations based upon evidence that civilians have developed and employed a range of strategies for protecting themselves from extractive abuse or its consequences. These responses vary between contexts, and have been formulated based on first-hand awareness of the local dynamics of abuse and potential space for safe response. Seeking to understand, and then support, these local protection efforts should be the starting point for any external actors interested in improving human rights conditions in eastern Burma in both the short and long term.

"I've served as a village head for seven years... I've had to deal with both sides: I have to face SPDC forced labour, and also DKBA¹ demands. The SPDC soldiers order villagers to provide them with chickens and pigs when they arrive in the village. The villagers don't have many animals to feed the SPDC; they're poor and just working for their daily survival... As a village head I've been coping with various kinds of demands, therefore I'm so tired of the demands."

Saw A--- (male, 39), C--- village, Bu Tho Township (July 2009)

On September 1st 2010 the Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma (ND-Burma) released its first report, *'We have to give them so much that our stomachs are empty of food: The Hidden Impact of Burma's Corrupt and Arbitrary Taxation* (hereinafter *Hidden Impact*),² documenting the widespread use of various forms of 'taxation' by State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) authorities to extract resources from Burma's civilian population. KHRG welcomes the release of this report, and supports ND-Burma's decision to focus attention on a human rights issue that is of such priority for communities across Burma.

The findings of *Hidden Impact* are consistent with information collected by KHRG over almost two decades of field research in eastern Burma. KHRG's research focuses on reporting local perspectives on, and responses to, human rights abuse. Villagers' testimonies consistently describe how regular extractive abuses by SPDC Army authorities – and by non-state armed

¹ The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), formed in 1994 after splitting from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The DKBA has operated in cooperation with the SPDC Army, and parts of the organisation formally came under the SPDC as a 'Border Guard Force' in August 2010.

² *'We have to give them so much that our stomachs are empty of food: The Hidden Impact of Burma's Corrupt and Arbitrary Taxation System* (hereinafter *Hidden Impact*), Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma (hereinafter ND-Burma), September 2010.

groups (NSAGs) – severely undermine local livelihoods, making such abuses a predominant and urgent human rights concern for many communities.³ Extractive abuses by the SPDC and NSAGs documented by KHRG include various forms of arbitrary taxation and ad hoc demands for financial and material support, as well as demands for various forms of forced labour including: fabricating and delivering building materials; construction and maintenance of roads; portering; forced recruitment into military service; guide, sentry, and ‘messenger’ duty; construction of army camps, fences, schools, libraries and clinics; and forced agriculture.⁴

“They don't pay us any money for carrying rice and they also don't pay for the three people who go to work inside the camp. We have to go whenever they issue an order. If villagers can't go, they have to hire another villager to replace them. They have to hire them for 15,000 kyat (US \$15.23) for three days... When villagers are forced to leave their work and don't have time to do their livelihoods, their wives and children have to go and look after [their fields and plantations]. So, they don't have enough food to eat. To have enough food for everyone, they have to struggle.”

Saw M--- (male, 56), K--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

KHRG's research also strongly indicates that the forced extraction of significant financial, material, and labour resources from civilian populations by SPDC and non-state military units is an established, widespread practice throughout eastern Burma. Military personnel who engage in these practices do not appear to be punished or otherwise held accountable for their actions, suggesting that the practice of SPDC units supporting themselves via local extraction is ignored or tacitly condoned, if not explicitly mandated by SPDC policy.⁵ KHRG therefore supports *Hidden Impact's* findings that extractive abuse is linked to deliberate SPDC Army practices. KHRG has previously made several specific recommendations focusing on the revision of SPDC Army practices that entail the extraction of significant resources from civilian populations and severe impacts on local livelihoods.⁶

KHRG has also documented widely, however, that civilians employ a variety of strategies to avoid or reduce demands like those described above, and thereby protect their communities and livelihoods from extractive abuse and/or its harmful effects.⁷ Local protection⁸ strategies

³ KHRG conducts research in an area sometimes locally referred to as ‘Karen State.’ According to designations used by the SPDC, this includes all or portions of Kayin, Kayah and Mon states and significant parts of Bago and Tanintharyi Divisions. For a small sample of recent KHRG reports detailing the widespread use of forced labour, taxation and other extractive abuses levied against the civilian population by the SPDC Army and NSAGs, and impacts on community livelihoods, see: *Shouldering the Burden of Militarisation: SDPC, DKBA and KPF order documents since September 2006*, KHRG, August 2007; *SPDC and DKBA order documents: October 2007 to March 2008*, KHRG, August 2008; *Food Crisis: The cumulative impact of abuse in Rural Burma*, KHRG, April 2009; *Abuse, Poverty and Migration: Investigating migrants' motivations to leave home in Burma*, KHRG, June 2009; *SPDC and DKBA order documents: August 2008 to June 2009*, KHRG, August 2009.

⁴ An overview of extractive practices confronted by villagers is available in *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008, pp.40-76. This overview also describes additional forms of forced labour not listed above, such as mandatory attendance at meetings. See also: *Submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review: Human rights concerns in KHRG research areas*, KHRG, July 2010.

⁵ The SPDC Army's consistent reliance on forced extraction of resources, labour and material support from the civilian population has been referred to as the ‘live off the land’ or ‘self-reliance’ policy by KHRG as well as respected scholars of Burma's military history. Andrew Selth, for example, dates the policy to 1997, when Burma's War Office reportedly issued an order instructing the country's Regional Commanders that troops “were to meet their basic logistical needs locally, rather than rely on the central supply system.” See, Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*, Norwalk: Eastbridge, 2002 p. 136. See also, Mary Callahan, “Of kyay-zu and kyet-zu: the military in 2006,” pp. 36-53 in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds.), *Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment*, Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2007 p. 46.

⁶ See for example: *Submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review*, KHRG, July 2010, Section 3.

⁷ For examples of KHRG reports detailing local attempts to protect communities from extractive abuses and/or its harmful effects, see: *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November

documented by KHRG include: complaints and negotiation; bribery or payment of 'fines' to avoid fulfilling a demand, including negotiations to reduce payments; lying; refusing; confronting; seeking intervention or mediation from alternate mutually-recognised authorities or respected figures; various forms of discreet partial or false compliance; and evasion. For detailed analysis and examples of these strategies, see Appendix 1 below.

"I've been a village head for two years already... I have to represent the villagers. When the SPDC and DKBA order me, I have to meet with them. If they ask for something I have to come back and discuss it with villagers, and we solve the problem together."

B--- (male, 45), D--- village, Bu Tho Township (July 2009)

The strategies described above are not always effective; indeed, they can sometimes expose villagers to new risks. Villagers interviewed by KHRG have reported violence or threats of violence used by military personnel to enforce unmet demands. In cases where the threat or spectre of violence is not overt, threats are intimated clearly enough that villagers recognise that responses other than compliance risk dangerous consequences. Even the use of a formalised forced labour complaint mechanism, established by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in cooperation with the SPDC, can be dangerous for civilians.

"They [SPDC Army soldiers] demanded people from eight villages. Forty villagers and eight village heads had to go to rebuild the bridge. If we didn't follow the order, they threatened us that they'd destroy our village. [They said] 'If you all dare to stay in your village, you can do that [refuse to follow the order] and see what will happen to you.'"

Saw Hp--- (male, 43), Si--- village, Dweh Loh Township (November 2009)

"Even though our village is small, they demand three people for portering. I've told them that three people is too much for us [to provide] because we have just a few households but they said 'No, you have to provide them.' We have to give them porters because the DKBA has power over us... We have to suffer a lot. Villagers aren't rich but they have to give up their time to go and porter; it takes five or six days each time they go... They don't pay us. If we don't do it, they'll line us up on the road and shoot us. It hasn't been done, but we can't say that they won't do that."

Saw E--- (male, 56), K--- village, Dweh Loh Township (February 2010)

Given the prevailing threat of extreme violence faced by many communities, outside observers should not assume that because some villagers can reduce or avoid extractive abuse, all villagers can use similar strategies to safely or successfully protect themselves. Conversely, observers should not assume that because some villagers are unable to do anything but fully comply with an abusive demand, all villagers have similarly limited options for responding to abuse. The local contexts within which civilians face abuse vary widely, as do the power relationships that dictate villagers' available options for protecting themselves.⁹ Local villagers

2008; "Ongoing accounts of village-level resistance," KHRG, July 2009; "Southern Papun District: Abuse and the expansion of military control," KHRG, August 2010.

⁸ KHRG has also referred to some types of local responses as 'resistance strategies,' a term which emphasises the political character of strategies which function as implicit statements about the legitimacy of local power relationships that facilitate resource extraction and extractive abuse across Karen State. See, *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008. This report will refer to these practices as 'local protection' or 'self-protection' strategies, however, in an effort to emphasise the degree to which they are in line with traditionally understood humanitarian protection objectives. For the most commonly accepted definition of 'humanitarian protection,' see *Strengthening Protection in War: A Search for Professional Standards*, International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), 2001, pp.28-37. The ICRC defines protection as "all activities, aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. human rights, humanitarian and refugee law)."

⁹ These facts provide an important reminder that outside actors should be careful not to encourage or pressure villagers to engage in self-protection activities that may place them in danger.

have first-hand awareness of these relationships, the space available for attempting to avoid complying with certain demands, and ultimately the protection strategies that they can feasibly employ without risking punitive violent responses from military authorities. Uses of these strategies comprise one part of a dynamic relationship, in which civilians continually test the limits of what they can do to safely resist abuses, and in which the range of viable protection strategies evolves according to local circumstances. That communities and community leaders in eastern Burma are sometimes able to reduce or avoid extractive demands illustrates not only the courage and creativity with which villagers respond to threats to their security and livelihoods, but also that local actors are best able to assess the obstacles and threats they face, including protection concerns, and develop commensurate and effective responses.

“The other thing I want to talk about is the DKBA demanding soldiers. Our villagers didn’t want to go [and become soldiers] and [so] we gave them money. They demanded 1,000,000 kyat (US \$1,020) but we gave them only 520,000 kyat (US \$530)... I told them about the difficulties in my village and that my villagers hadn’t come to give me [all the] money, yet... As the villagers couldn’t give me enough money to reach the amount that they demanded, they couldn’t do anything... Ga--- village didn’t have to give any recruits, therefore our villagers sometimes complained that although the other villages didn’t give any recruits, they can stay [they don’t have to flee their villages or be relocated]. For us, we gave them as much as we could so that we’d be able to stay, too. So some villagers have decided not to continue paying the money anymore. I also went to meet with a monk, and the monk told me that we don’t have to give [money] anymore, but we have to tell them [the DKBA] wisely and deal with them patiently. The monk suggested I wait until October and see... Now, they’ve asked me once when I’m going to give them the last 48,000 kyat (US \$49). I replied that I wasn’t sure about the date. ‘If the villagers come to give it to me, I’ll come and give it to you’ [I said]... At first, our village decided not to give the rest of the money, but when we saw that they arrested people from M---village... we re-considered. At first they had demanded only one person, but if they arrested people, they’d arrest two or three villagers, and we’d face more difficulties.”

Saw I--- (male, 45), L--- village, Dweh Loh Township (November 2009)

These local responses to abuse should be understood as serving a function that is in line with the humanitarian protection objectives of all actors interested in improving human rights conditions in eastern Burma.¹⁰ Political and practical difficulties associated with using outside advocacy to obtain sincere commitments from senior SPDC officials to alter abusive practices, as well as obstacles to communicating and enforcing reform throughout the chain of command, suggest that supporting existing local processes for assessing and addressing communities’ protection concerns remains the best available option for improving protection of civilians and civilian livelihoods in the short term. Any actor interested in improving the protection of human rights for civilians facing extractive abuses in eastern Burma, then, should make their starting point supporting local strategies for self-protection. Efforts should be made to increase the number of villagers able to actively pursue protection of their human rights, broaden villagers’ range of feasible options for self-protection, and reduce the risks for villagers that attempt such activities. Outside actors could, for example, seek to support villagers’ attempting to negotiate reductions in abusive demands by encouraging the SPDC to make clear policies about what constitutes legal taxation, encouraging the punishment of violators and then widely publicising information about such punishment. While such policies would not likely be immediately or

¹⁰ The importance of supporting local strategies for human rights protection has been noted by, for example, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the European Community Humanitarian Office and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. For discussion of these and other examples of the way local self-protection strategies cohere with international humanitarian protection objectives, see *Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State*, KHRG, August 2010 pp.50-52. See also, Casey A. Barrs, *Preparedness Support: Helping Brace Beneficiaries, Local Staff and Partners for Violence*, research paper released under the auspices of the Cuny Center, May 2010 pp.1-2.

comprehensively obeyed, the existence of such a law – particularly if it has been enforced even in an ad hoc manner – might serve as a useful negotiating tool in some local contexts.

Support for local protection efforts must be based on a detailed understanding of local dynamics of abuse, community priorities, and local capacities for – and threats to – response. This means seeking first to understand the particular strategies used by different communities to respond to abuse, and then crafting external responses to support those local activities. Policies and programmes fashioned in this way will be best positioned to positively strengthen local capacities for self-protection in the short-term. Detailed understanding of dynamics of abuse and local response is also crucial to ensuring that no well-intentioned activities inadvertently undermine local attempts at human rights protection. Many communities, for instance, attempt to reduce demands by providing false population statistics; if a village home to 70 households is sometimes ordered to provide fewer forced labourers than a village of 100, large villages may feel it behoves them to appear smaller. Actors providing aid or development support should thus be careful not to undermine these attempts by, for instance, initiating or supporting registration processes that contradict strategically falsified local information.

Ultimately, local attempts to protect villagers from abuse are an important method by which regular people are able to seek control over their lives despite an absence of institutionalised democracy. Supporting these processes is not to abandon attempts at effecting national-level political change in Burma; in many ways, strengthening local capacities for human rights protection is a prerequisite for sustainable, long-term political change. Local responses to abuse, particularly those that involve engaging with power holders or cooperation within or between communities, represent a vital opportunity for developing civil society networks and forms of local accountability. Such developments are painstakingly slow and will not alone guarantee protection of civilians from human rights abuses. But they are a vital method for rebalancing existing power relationships between civilians and a large, powerful and unaccountable military that is not likely willing or able to change abusive practices overnight via administrative fiat, or regime change. Given these realities, every possible effort should be made to support local efforts at human rights protection; no villagers' human rights should be sacrificed for any external agenda while methods exist for improving local human rights conditions, today.

Appendix 1: Local responses to extractive abuses

Extractive abuses such as forced labour or arbitrary taxation are backed by implicit or explicit threats of violence. Failure to comply with such demands risks violent responses by army or state personnel, the risk increasing the more overt the lack of compliance. Despite such risks, however, rural villagers employ a variety of strategies to minimise or avoid complying with exploitative demands. These strategies range from simple requests for reductions in ‘taxation’ quotas to aggressive challenges for military personnel to withdraw their demands. Relying on firsthand knowledge of and experience with local military personnel – and repression – local villagers are often deft at discerning how much or how little space exists to oppose particular orders. Strategies which villagers employ in areas under the consolidated control of the SPDC Army or NSAGs include, amongst other techniques complaints and negotiation; bribery or payment of ‘fines’ to avoid fulfilling a demand, including negotiations to reduce payments; lying; refusing; confronting; seeking intervention or mediation from alternate mutually-recognised authorities or respected figures; various forms of discreet partial or false compliance; and evasion. The following Appendix provides details on these strategies, including direct testimony from villagers describing their experiences across eastern Burma. Sections of this Appendix were previously published by KHRG in the November 2008 report *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*.

Negotiation

Rural villagers are sometimes able to negotiate to reduce or avoid demands placed upon them. Because demands for taxation and other resources are often issued to village heads rather than individual households, leaders are sometimes able to appeal to military personnel for reductions. Such negotiation takes different forms, with leaders invoking a variety of arguments based upon the local context.

“When [SPDC officer] Myo Maung was there, they used to demand two bullock carts from us once a month to carry all their rations from K’Lay Kee camp to Kyaikdon. The distance is so far that I cannot tell you how many hours it took. The bullocks that went looked bad and could barely walk by the time they arrived back at the village. We complained that it was difficult to find bullock carts to go, so he reduced it to one bullock cart. We complained about the distance and they reduced the distance and said we’d only have to carry [the rations] as far as Plaw Pa Taw.”

Naw K--- (female, 53), N--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

Such successful negotiation efforts notwithstanding, attempts at negotiating a reduction in demands are not always effective and the initial order may stand unchanged.

“At the moment, the [SPDC] Operations Commander Aung Kyaw Nyein is forcing us to do castor planting. We have to do it ‘without fail’. They called us to a meeting... [and] forced us to buy castor seeds. They sold us one basket full for 70,000 kyat [US \$56.91]... When the seeds arrived at my village, I had to explain to my villagers that the price of the seeds would have to be shared among the villagers. The villagers also have to work on their fields so they don’t have time to plant this castor. I told the soldiers about the villagers’ problem, but it didn’t work. I am in the middle of the soldiers and the villagers. I couldn’t persuade either so now I am in trouble. The villagers don’t want to plant it and don’t know how to plant it, so they don’t want to pay me the money... I don’t want to be the village head anymore because I feel really worried and afraid.”

Daw K--- (female, 40), B--- village, Dooplaya District (June 2006)

Bribery

Bribing officials is often intertwined with forms of negotiation as examined above. These two strategies can function together to reduce the total requirements placed on a given village. So long as the cost of the bribe is less than the cost of compliance, this strategy bears tangible savings for the local community. In May 2009, for instance, a village head from M--- village, southern Papun District, described to KHRG her attempt to reduce a demand made upon her village by DKBA soldiers. The soldiers had arrested two of her villagers for violating a curfew, and said they would not be released until the village paid 2,000,000 kyat (approx. US \$1,818). Rather than pay the large amount, the village head was able to negotiate with and bribe the local commander, telling him:

"I've tried to follow the order as much as I can, but now my villagers have many problems with their livelihoods. And as it's now the rainy season, the villagers don't have work to earn a [cash] income. So, we don't have money to give you. However, we've brought you a goat and one viss [about 1.64 kg. / 3.6 lb.] of chicken [valued together at about 30,000 kyat (US \$27.28)]."

Nevertheless, bribery occasionally has its limits:

"For the villagers, they have to do both their own work and forced labour [maintaining a farm for a local battalion] and they are also having food problems. The villagers are in trouble now. They came frequently to discuss it with me [the village head]. They came and asked, 'If we have to do the broadcasting [tossing seeds out in a wide arc into a fertilised nursery field] and transplanting [moving paddy seedlings from the nursery to a larger agricultural field], can we hire people to go instead of us? Or can we pay them money instead?' But the Operation Commander won't take money. He said he needs only people to do the work."

Daw K--- (female, 40), B--- village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

Lying

Rural villagers sometimes lie and use deceit to reduce demands placed upon them by military personnel. Because these demands are often issued at a level proportionate to either the village population or number of households, a common strategy is to underreport the number of villagers or households in a given village, allowing villagers to reduce the total amount requested. In some contexts the savings are divided amongst the village, while in others the strategy is used to lessen the burden on vulnerable households, such as those headed by widows or orphans.

"The SPDC soldiers demanded taxes for the plantations, hill fields and flat fields. They also asked us for the number of households in our village. We told them we had only over 80 households, not over 100 households. We took out the widows' and orphans' households because we thought that if they demanded taxes from us, the widows and orphans shouldn't need to pay them."

Pu Ht--- (male, 48), Dt--- village, Dooplaya District (Nov 2006)

"The villagers elected me. My duty as village head is to provide them [SPDC officials] with things when they demand them. And if they order us to find things for them, then we must find them. If they fine us, we must pay them. Even if we don't have the money, we can't refuse them. The most difficult thing for me as village head has been when they've demanded bullock carts. If the Burmese [SPDC] demand bullock carts at night, then I have to go looking for some and it bothers the villagers because they have to do it

too. Our village has 45 households, but I've reported that there are 30 households [to lessen SPDC demands]."

Naw K--- (female, 53), N--- village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

Refusing

Outright refusal to comply with stated demands is a step up in the scale of confrontation between villagers and local authorities. As such, the decision to employ this tactic requires that the cost of compliance outweighs the risk of violent or other retaliation by military personnel. Villagers familiar with particular local officials are, therefore, in a better position to predict the possible responses which their actions may incur. Villagers have refused outright to comply with a range of orders issued by military personnel including, amongst other things, arbitrary taxation, forced labour and ad hoc demands for food.

"They [the SPDC] ordered the villagers to provide them thatch and money. The first time they ordered us to give them 150,000 kyat (US \$156), but I didn't give it to them. Then they said, if the villagers couldn't pay as they ordered, to give them just 50,000 kyat (US \$52). I continued to act like I've lost my hearing; even though they reduced the amount money [demanded from villagers], I didn't give them any. The DKBA also demanded thatch. I sent it to them."

P--- (Male, 38), village head, Hta--- village, Bilin Township (June 2009)

"[The soldiers at] the DKBA camp on top of Meh Gyi hill demanded bamboo from us, but we haven't cut it for them yet. I told them 'we also have to work at Meh Gyi pagoda and you've also ordered us [to do work] here, so we can't do that [preparing and delivering the bamboo poles]."

Saw G--- (male, 38), H--- village, Bilin Township (May 2008)

"Recently they ordered us to rebuild their bridge. We refused it; we gave the reason that we didn't dare to do it because we were afraid of landmines."

Saw Mo--- (male, 45), Do--- village, Bu Tho Township (October 2009)

Such refusal may, however, not be an outright rejection of entire demands, but rather a unilateral reduction in amount or simply a delay in compliance. Even so, reduced or delayed compliance provides tangible benefits to civilian communities. For instance, for farmers that must invest in seasonal inputs like seeds and fertilizer, taxation demands at an inopportune moment can force the sale of property or push households into debt. Alternately, if payment can be delayed until after a crop is harvested and sold, farmers may be more able to make a payment without having to resort to high-interest loans or sale of property.

"They've demanded 800 bamboo poles from us, but we haven't given anything and didn't inform them, yet. Also, they've demanded 400 thatch shingles and we haven't gone and informed them, yet. They often make demands from us. They demanded these [materials] in November 2009. They also demand many other things from us and never pay us money. Sometimes, as they often make demands from us, we cannot always give them [what they ask for]. Therefore, we have to go and apologise to them. To apologise, we don't dare to go alone. All village heads in the same group have to get together and go to apologize."

Saw Hp--- (male, 43), Si--- village, Dweh Loh Township (November 2009)

"I always face problems with the DKBA. They always order me to send bamboo poles and thatch shingles. A few days ago, they ordered me to send bamboo poles and thatch shingles to Meh Mweh. The commander's name is Pa Yoo Khay. His position is

company commander. They have a military camp in Meh Mweh. They ordered me to collect bamboo poles and thatch shingles and send these to them by next month. I had to collect 200 bamboo poles and 300 thatch shingles. But as of now we haven't yet started cutting the bamboo poles because it's time to harvest. So I've reported to them 'the villagers are busy now. We'll do it for you next month.'

Saw My--- (male, 42), M--- village, Papun District (Nov 2007)

As outright refusal is a much more overt form of resistance and thus an explicit denial of formal authority, violent or other retaliation is more likely. As such, these acts of refusal are all the more courageous.

"When they ordered the villagers to do loh ah pay I didn't let them [the villagers] go and they [the soldiers] came and shouted at me. Being a village head, I have faced many terrible things from the SPDC soldiers."

Daw T--- (female, 55), K--- village, Thaton District (June 2007)

Confronting

Direct confrontation is the most overt form of resisting demands placed upon villagers (short of outright violence). In many respects confrontation overlaps with the various forms of refusal examined above. The effectiveness of confrontation over the implementation of abusive demands depends, like the various forms of negotiation and refusal examined above, on the particular relations and balance of power between the local military official and (typically) the village head; both parties' perceptions of the legitimacy of a particular demand; and the possibility of violent or other retaliation. Village heads or other civilians employing such confrontation must thus weigh the cost of compliance against the risk of retaliation.

"They [the villagers] had to carry things for the SPDC and also had to cut bamboo poles for them. I didn't want to see it [the forced labour], so I warned them [SPDC authorities] that 'If you continue to order the villagers to do these things, the news [of the forced labour demands] will spread out from BBC and VOA¹¹.' After that they reduced the forced labour. At first the villagers had to cut bamboo poles twice a month or once a month. After I confronted them the villagers didn't need to do this [particular type of] work anymore."

Ko K--- (male), T--- village, Papun District (Oct 2007)

It is important to note that direct confrontation is not always successful. Confrontation can result in villagers simply being ignored by military personnel or worse, in the case of violent or other retaliation. In the quote below, for example, the village head's complaint to a local SPDC official was simply dismissed with a denial that any action could be effectively taken to address the issue being raised. However, even when confrontation fails to obtain material benefits, such acts of resistance can still serve to uphold villagers' dignity.

"Some villagers came to report to me that the soldiers had stolen their chickens. So I went to report it to their battalion commander. Then he said to me, 'did you yourself see the soldiers steal the villagers' chickens?' I told him, 'I didn't see it myself, but my villagers reported it to me and asked me to report it to you.' Then he replied, 'When the soldiers enter the village, I don't have time to look after them all the time. What they do or eat is up to them. I don't have time to look after or talk to them. Even my bodyguard has stolen people's things.'"

K--- (male, 30), G--- village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2006)

¹¹ BBC and VOA; Foreign Burmese-language news radio stations which broadcast into Burma.

“They’ll often demand porters as long as they operate in the area. One of the villagers went to tell them to reduce their demands for porters and a DKBA soldier slapped him.”

Saw Pa--- (male, 44), K--- village, Dweh Loh Township (December 2009)

Appealing to mutually-recognised authorities or respected figures

While the presence of SPDC Army, allied and opposition NSAG, as well as civilian authorities in some areas of eastern Burma can lead to greater extractive demands being levied on certain communities, villagers and village leaders have also reportedly used this circumstance to limit the extractive activities of one group. Villagers have described complaining about multiple demands levied by different authorities when negotiating with local commanders to reduce or avoid demands; others have reported appealing to more senior or alternate authorities, or mutually-respected figures to intervene and mediate or order the withdrawal of a demand issued by local authorities. When dealing with the DKBA, for example, some villagers have described being able to consult with senior monks to help them avoid complying with demands made by DKBA military personnel.

“[The DKBA] demanded rice and forced military recruitment. At first they ordered our village to provide them with ten people but we refused it. I went to see U Thuzana and reported to him about the [local] DKBA’s forced military recruitment. He called them and demanded they stop forcing villagers to provide people.”

Naw Pi--- (female, 54), Ga--- village, Dweh Loh Township (October 2009)

Various forms of discreet false-compliance

False compliance entails a response whereby the appearance of compliance is maintained without villagers actually meeting demands in full. This type of strategy has included, amongst other things, delaying compliance, foot-dragging on forced labour assignments, shoddy workmanship on construction projects, ignoring order documents, partial compliance (i.e. incomplete provisions of money, labour, food or supplies) or the provision of poor quality paddy or other supplies to meet demands.

“The DKBA army from Meh Mweh demanded chicken and forced labour. They came to M--- and demanded ten people to do forced labour... They told us these people had to build their camp at Meh Mweh. The headwoman didn’t give them the people and they ordered five viss (8.2 kg. / 18 lb.) of chicken instead. She gave them three viss (4.9 kg. / 10.8 lb.) of chicken and apologized that she couldn’t give [more].”

U J--- (male, 46), M--- village, Dweh Loh Township (November 2009)

“On March 11th 2007, our villagers had to go and carry things to Gkay Gkaw. They [SPDC] demanded 100 people to go but we couldn’t [all] go and only 38 people were able to go. Then we had to carry [the military supplies] for two days. They [SPDC] didn’t say anything even though the number of villagers didn’t fully meet what they had demanded.”

Saw M--- (male, 34), M--- village, Papun District (March 2007)

Meeting demands only in part appears to be one of the most common forms of false compliance that villagers in Karen State have employed. It is a statement on the relative power of villagers that they are often able get away with providing an amount of money, labourers, food or other supplies below what soldiers initially demanded.

“The DKBA demanded 400 thatch shingles. When we give them thatch shingles, we have to send all of the thatch shingles to Oh Taw [DKBA camp]. I told them, we can’t deliver [the thatch shingles] to your place but we’ll collect money [instead] and give it to you. We wouldn’t be able to stay without meeting their demands. They’ve said ‘If you don’t give [what is demanded], how many rows [of soldiers] can the KNLA¹² make around your village for security [i.e. will the KNLA be able to protect the villagers from retaliatory punishment for non-compliance?]. For the four hundred thatch shingles, I gave them only the value [in cash] for three hundred thatch shingles... The SPDC has also demanded chicken and sesame paste but they haven’t paid any of the cost. The last time, they demanded one viss [1.63 kg. / 3.6 lb.] of chicken from me but I couldn’t find [enough] chicken, so I only gave them about a half a viss [0.82 kg. / 1.8 lb.] of chicken.”

Naw M--- (female, 49), N--- village, Thaton District (Jan 2008)

“We finished [preparing bamboo poles] for them [SPDC] and delivered [the bamboo poles] to them this morning. We had to carry [the bamboo poles] by ourselves. One piece of bamboo was more than one arm span long and two inches wide. We delivered only 1,100 pieces [of the initial 2,000 demanded]. We left out 900 pieces. If they order us to send the remainder, we’ll have to send it later.”

Saw N--- (male, 44), --- village, Thaton District (Aug 2007)

Evading

Temporary evasion by villagers of military personnel remains a frequently pursued tactic wherever possible. When effective, this strategy allows villagers to avoid compliance with demands for labour, money, food and other supplies (by avoiding the demand in the first place), without permanently abandoning their homes. Villagers able to get advanced warning of the impending arrival of army patrols or other military personnel likely to issue demands may simply ‘happen’ to be outside of the village when military personnel arrive. Sometimes a village head may receive news of the impending arrival of these military personnel and inform his or her constituents so as to allow them an opportunity to get away.

“Sometimes, villagers run away when the SPDC Army comes to the village and sometimes we stay in the village. It’s not under SPDC control. Sometimes, we have to go and meet with them... The villagers flee when they call for porters.”

Saw Hs--- (male, 42), K--- village, Dweh Loh township (December 2009)

“The SPDC did not ask us for forced labour because whenever they came we ran away, so they couldn’t ask for forced labour.”

Saw D--- (male, 16), L--- village, Papun District (Feb 2007)

“Sometimes I tell the village men to run away if they can manage to run, but some people can’t flee anymore... So, if they [SPDC soldiers] need them, we call them out. But if they [villagers] hear them [soldiers] coming from a far distance, all of them [villagers] will flee.”

Naw M--- (female, 37), W--- village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

“In the past, they ordered me to follow them to Gklaw Gklay Day. When I arrived there I escaped and came back to my village. A few weeks ago that army unit was rotated out, so they couldn’t come to find me in my village anymore.”

Saw Bp--- (male, 23), Bp--- village, Toungoo District (Dec 2007)

¹² Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), an armed group which has, in various forms, been in conflict with Burma’s central government since 1948.

