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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Mu Traw District Situation Update: Indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw results in displacement in Lu Thaw Township, December 2020 to February 2021

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District from December 1st to February 17th 2021. During this period, the Tatmadaw sent more soldiers to Lu Thaw Township. They patrolled local areas and indiscriminately fired mortar rounds at nearby villages on several instances, resulting in displacement and disrupting access to education. On December 30th 2020, local villagers held a protest to call on the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the area. In parallel, COVID-19 travel restrictions have resulted in difficulties for local villagers, as food and medicine supplies are running short.¹

Introduction

This situation update describes the Tatmadaw² activities in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District between December 2020 and February 2021. It includes indiscriminate mortar shelling by Tatmadaw soldiers and displacement. In addition, this situation update highlights the situation of local villagers during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the living conditions displaced people face.

Protest

On December 30th 2020, 3,982 villagers from Lu Thaw Township held a protest to call on Tatmadaw soldiers to withdraw from the area. The protest was held in T--- village, Naw Yoh Hta village tract.³ The protestors came from multiple village tracts: Hkay Poo, Naw Yoh Hta, Ler Muh Plaw and Saw Muh Plaw.

COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 travel restrictions have resulted in difficulties for the villagers, notably when it comes to travelling, trading and buying or selling [inability to buy food and other household items, to sell their harvest, etc.]. However, local authorities allowed villagers to travel to buy food three days a month. The travel restrictions were put in place to prevent COVID-19 from reaching the local villages. The most common diseases that affect local villagers are malaria, runny nose, bloating,

¹ The present document is based on information received in February 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions on the ground. The names of the victims, their photos and the exact locations are censored for security reasons. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG.

² Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

³ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

stomachache, diarrhea, joint pain and age-related sight issues. Furthermore, medicine and food supplies are running out because of the travel restrictions.

Education

Many students were not able to attend school due to the COVID-19 pandemic [government schools were closed]. It was not easy for the students to move from [government] schools to [Karen Education and Culture Department - KECD]⁴ schools [some parents decided to enroll their children in KECD schools as they generally remained open throughout the pandemic]. There were not enough school materials and teachers in [KECD] schools [to accommodate these additional students]. It has also been difficult to hold meetings and communicate since the military coup⁵ [because the junta has disrupted telecommunications].

Tatmadaw activities

On January 1st 2021, a group of Tatmadaw soldiers based in Lu Thaw Township, fired mortar rounds at villages and farming areas [KHRG was not able to establish the exact location]. Local villagers were concerned and afraid, which prompted them to flee from their villages. They thought this situation was unfair, as it made them understand that genuine peace had yet to be achieved. This shows that the political situation in our area is not clear [stable], and that nothing is guaranteed. These kinds of incidents threaten our security. Local villagers in Lu Thaw Township do not want this kind of situations to happen. They want the [Karen National Union - KNU]⁶ leaders to prevent any further conflict.

There are more and more Tatmadaw soldiers in their army camps in Lu Thaw Township, and they patrol with their mortars. That makes life difficult for local villagers and threatens their security. It is really necessary that the leaders pressure the Tatmadaw soldiers to withdraw from their bases in Lu Thaw Township.

The Tatmadaw is operating drones in Lu Thaw Township and spying on the localities there. They must put an end to these activities. Villagers need assistance from the leaders to prevent such things from happening.

Living conditions

After the ceasefire agreements [preliminary ceasefire⁷ and Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement],⁸ fighting decreased and the security situation improved. However, local villagers want the

⁴ The Karen Education and Culture Department is the education department of the Karen National Union. Its main goals are to provide mother tongue education services to rural Karen populations in Southeast Myanmar, as well as to preserve the Karen language, culture and history. Despite being an important education provider in the region, it is not officially recognised by the Myanmar government.

⁵ On February 1st 2021, the Burma Army deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Tatmadaw invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. The coup d'état occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected during the 2020 election. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

⁶ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the Burma/Myanmar government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, relations with the government remain tense.

⁷ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way.

Tatmadaw soldiers to withdraw so that they can work on their farms freely and free from danger. Villagers insist that they would have no problem if there were only KNU [Karen National Liberation Army – KNLA⁹ soldiers] in their area.

In December 2020, Tatmadaw soldiers started firing mortar rounds indiscriminately, and they continued to do so in January 2021. This made local villagers very worried and afraid. The villagers would like the [KNU] leaders and international news agencies to pressure the Tatmadaw soldiers to withdraw so they can live in peace. These are the demands of the villagers who live in the Salween Peace Park.

Indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw

On January 31st 2021, at 11:25 am, Tatmadaw's Infantry Battalion (IB)¹⁰ # 60 from Wa Klay Too army camp fired four mortar rounds at K--- village, Hplah Hkoh village tract and at local villagers' farms in the eastern part of Nyah Peh Day Place.¹¹

On February 1st 2021, at 5:30 pm, Tatmadaw soldiers [KHRG was not able to identify the exact unit] fired four mortar shells at local villagers' farm in Ghay Hkee, Paw Weh Loh and Eh Aaw Hkee places, Hplah Hkoh village tract.

On February 2nd 2021, at 7:30 am, IB #39 from Paw Khay Hkoh and Keh Deh Kyoh army camps fired seven mortar rounds at D--- and H--- villages, Hplah Hkoh village tract; and into Paw Htoh Loh [Ler Muh Plaw village tract], Paw Hkaw Hkee [Ler Muh Plaw village tract] and Dwe Ghoh Thee Loh [Saw Muh Plaw village tract] places.

On February 2nd 2021, at 12:42 am, IB #39 fired eight mortar rounds [at an unidentified location].

On February 2nd 2021 at 11:35 am, IB #39 fired 15 mortar rounds at the eastern part of Nyah Hpah Plaw [Saw Muh Plaw village tract], T'Hkaw Kyoh [Saw Muh Plaw village tract] and Htee Thoo Hta [Yeh Muh Plaw village tract] places. At 3:30 PM, IB #39 from Kheh Deh Kyoh army camp fired one more mortar round at H--- village [Hplah Hkoh village tract]. The mortar landed next to Haw Hta Plaw farms [Saw Muh Plaw village tract]. At 6:30 pm, a Tatmadaw excavator from Kheh Deh Kyoh army camp arrived at Paw Khay Hkoh army camp [KHRG was not able to establish why this excavator was sent].

On February 3rd 2021, at 9:25 am, IB #39 from Paw Khay Hkoh and Keh Deh Kyoh army camps fired 14 mortar rounds at local villagers' farms in Ta Koo Deh area.

On February 7th 2021 at 1:39 pm, IB #124 from Loh Kaw Kyoh army camp fired three mortar rounds at K--- village, Hplah Hkoh village tract.

⁸ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/ Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the Karen National Union. It was followed by the adoption of a Code of Conduct by the signatories in November 2015. In February 2018, two additional armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

⁹ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

¹⁰ An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

¹¹ Place refers to the name given by local communities to a specific location. It is smaller than what local communities refer to as an area.

On February 10th 2021 at 8:30 am, IB #440 from Maw Poo and Kyoo Loo army camps fired eight mortar rounds at B--- village, Thay Thah Muh Der area, Tay Muh Deh village tract, Lu Thaw Township. As a result, B--- and M--- villagers fled to A---, P---, and O--- places, Kaw Loo Deh village tract. They did not receive humanitarian assistance from any organisation despite being in need of food, shelter, tarpaulin and hammocks. [They eventually returned to their village a few days later.]

On February 10th 2021, at 2:15 pm, Tatmadaw's Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)¹² #705 from Khaw Daw Hkoh army camp fired five mortar rounds at S--- village, Hkay Poo village tract and 25 mortar rounds at L--- village, Hkay Poo village tract. These Tatmadaw soldiers are guarding the area from K'Mah Moh to Hpapun town. The Tatmadaw sent about 120 soldiers to Hkay Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township [KHRG was not able to establish the exact date].

On February 11th 2021, LIB #703 from Hsa Law Kyoh army camp trespassed into the restricted areas.¹³ As a result, villagers from Kaw Hteh Deh and Kleh Hta areas, Hkay Poo village tract fled their village and the local schools had to close.

On February 12th 2021, at 5 pm, IB #440 from Maw Poo and Kyoo Loo army camps fired one mortar round at B--- village, E--- area, Tay Muh Deh village tract. At 6 pm, they fired one more mortar round at the same area. At 7:30 pm, IB #440 soldiers from Maw Poo army camp fired two mortar rounds at Thay Thah Muh Deh village, Tay Muh Deh village tract, and Blah Poo Hta area, Saw Muh Plaw village tract.

On February 13th 2021, at 8 am, LIB #402 and LIB #409 [Military Operations Command (MOC)¹⁴ #8] from Hkoo Thoo Hta army camp indiscriminately fired mortar rounds and small arms. They were led by Battalion commander Way Lin Htun. Because of the shelling, two buffaloes were killed and three more were injured in Kah Hta place, Hkay Poo village tract.

On February 13th 2021, at 3:30 pm, villagers from S--- village, Kah Hta place, Hkay Poo village tract fled from their village and local schools had to close because LIB #705 soldiers from Khaw Daw Hkoh army camp patrolled and trespassed into restricted areas. Villagers are always afraid when Tatmadaw soldiers trespass [into KNU territory, as it could result in fighting with the KNLA]. At 4:20 pm, Tatmadaw soldiers from Hkoo Thoo Hta army camp fired two mortar rounds at Kah Hta place.

On February 14th 2021, from 12:24 to 12:50 am, Tatmadaw soldiers fired three more mortar rounds at B--- village, Tay Muh Deh village tract. On February 15th 2021 at 6 am, LIB #402 and LIB #409 shelled B--- village again, prompting 202 local community members [91 women and 111 men] from 25 households to flee. The local school also had to close. There were two teachers, 12 female students, and 28 male students. They were all displaced.

¹² A Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

¹³ As per the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw are only allowed to operate and travel up to 50 yards from either side of roads that connect their army camps through KNLA territory, and only within a 150 yard radius around their own army camp.

¹⁴ A Military Operations Command is composed of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.



These photos were taken on February 15th 2021 in B--- village, Tay Muh Deh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. They show local villagers packing their belongings before fleeing to A---, P--- and O--- places. The local school was temporarily closed as a result of the indiscriminate shelling, leaving local children unable to attend classes. [Photos: KHRG]

On February 17th 2021, 514 villagers from 74 households in K---, L--- and W--- villages, Hkay Poo village tract had to flee from their villages because Tatmadaw soldiers from Hsa Law Kyoh and Khaw Daw Hkoh army camps patrolled in KNU-controlled areas. After they fled, villagers were afraid to return to their village due to the presence of Tatmadaw soldiers. The schools in all three villages had to close temporarily. There were 21 students in W--- and H--- schools; and 30 students in K--- school.

Further background reading on the situation in Mu Traw District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: Villagers protest against the military coup in Hpapun and K'Ma Maung towns, Lu Thaw Township, February to March 2021”](#), June 2021.
- [“A Worrisome Escalation: Tatmadaw airstrikes kill at least 16 villagers, displace thousands in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts, March 2021”](#), May 2021.
- [“Mu Traw District Short Update: Skirmishes, indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw and landmine contamination in Dwe Lo and Bu Tho townships, March and April 2021”](#), May 2021.

About KHRG

Founded in 1992, the Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Myanmar. KHRG trains local people to document and gather evidence of human rights abuses, and publishes this information to project the voices, experiences and perspectives of local communities. More examples of our work can be seen online at www.khrq.org.

Mutraw (Hpapun) District

