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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: SAC militia shoots teenage villager, CDM and protester protection, SAC troop movement, arbitrary taxation and livelihood, healthcare and education challenges, March 2021

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in T'Naw Th'Ree (Tanintharyi) Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, including the problems that local villagers are facing. Anti-coup protests and a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have taken place since the State Administration Council (SAC) seized power. There has been a lack of security for the participants who joined the protests and CDM, and some have fled to areas within Mergui-Tavoy District where they have received protection from the Karen National Union (KNU). The SAC military has increased troop rotation in the area, and have set up local militias, one of which shot a teenage boy who was out at night after curfew. Villagers have faced increasing arbitrary taxation, and are experiencing greater livelihood, education and healthcare challenges.¹

Political situation and the SAC military

Since the State Administration Council (SAC)² took power, villagers fear that fighting will happen again [like in the past]. The price of food has been rising so villagers are concerned that they won't be able to have enough food in the future. Travel has also been restricted. The SAC military³ are often searching for and arresting civilians who participate in the anti-coup protests. Some civilians who participate in the protests are afraid to sleep in their house at night so they

¹ The present document is based on information received in March 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy 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 The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Myanmar and leads the Military Cabinet of Myanmar, the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup.

³ The term most commonly used in referring to Myanmar's armed forces is Tatmadaw. The term has been used by KHRG throughout its reporting history, and most consistently during periods of civilian government. Since the February 1st 2021 coup and the military's establishment of the State Administration Council (SAC) as the executive governing body of Myanmar, Myanmar's armed forces have also come to be referred to as the SAC military. KHRG uses the term SAC military in specific reference to the Myanmar military since the February 1st 2021 coup. During previous periods of military rule, KHRG also used the names adopted by the military government in referring to the Tatmadaw (i.e. SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council] between 1988 to 1997, and SPDC [State Peace and Development Council] from 1998 to 2011), because these were the terms commonly used by villagers in KHRG research areas.

have to find a safe place to sleep. Government staff [participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)⁴] in T'Naw Th'Ree (Tanintharyi) Township, Mergui-Tavoy District have felt and experienced this as well. These civilians are in need of a temporary safe place to protect [shelter] themselves [from arrest or violence by the SAC]. The Karen National Union (KNU)⁵ leaders from T'Naw Th'Ree Township already have a plan to protect the civilians who participate in the protests (including the government staff [who join the CDM]), and to support them in fleeing to [other locations within] T'Naw Th'Ree Township.

There are over 40 SAC battalions in Mergui-Tavoy District. The SAC usually rotate their troops every two or three months. Some of the battalions based in T'Naw Th'Ree Township are: Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁶ #561 in Nyaung Kwin A'Nauk Kan Hton Taw village, LIB #558 in Kan M'Laing village, LIB #559 and #560 in Lay Nya [village], LIB #557 in Kin village, A'Ma Ta [artillery camp] #306 in Maw Ton village, and Yay Phyu (Yebyu) operation command in Yay Phyu village. Most of those SAC troops also operate in T'Naw Th'Ree Township, including the areas near the river banks. The SAC troops increased their military movement and reinforced their army camps after the military coup. (They also did so after the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)⁷ in 2015). Since the coup, they [the SAC] have been secretly surveilling the movement and situation of Karen revolutionaries and civilians. Moreover, they have a plan to form a militia in every area [the SAC military junta would like to form a militia in every village]. Civilians in Dawei Town have also been prohibited from watching the news on television.

On March 16th 2021 at 7:45 pm, Htoh Htoh, a soldier in the SAC militia [*pyithusit* (People's Militia)] based in A--- village, shot dead a student named Maung⁸ B---, aged 17 years old, Grade 8, of Buddhist-Bamar ethnicity and living in A--- village, T'Naw Th'Ree Township. His father is U⁹ C--- and his mother is Daw¹⁰ D---. There are people of both Karen and Bamar ethnicity living in that village. The reason why the militia shot him [Maung B---] is because he went out at night [after curfew]. [KHRG received this information from the KNU in T'Naw Th'Ree Township.] [According to KHRG's researcher,] we [the local villagers] do not know how the Myanmar government will take action [to resolve this case and punish the perpetrator]. The village [A--- village] is under mixed control. The militia was first established in the village before the [2015] NCA was signed. Since the NCA, there had been no more militia in that village, but after the Tatmadaw seized power, they re-formed the militia in most of the villages.

⁴ On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers at state-run hospitals and medical facilities across Myanmar spearheaded what is being referred to as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) consisting of labour strikes in protest against the February 1st 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to include civil servants from all sectors of the government who are walking off their jobs as a way of non-recognition and non-participation in the military regime. Because of the popularity of the movement, and its seminal role in wider protests across the country, some people have begun using it as a catch-all phrase to include other protest forms like boycotts and pot-banging.

⁵ 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.

⁶ A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. 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, particularly following the signing of the NCA. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

⁷ 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 ethnic armed groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

⁸ Maung is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

⁹ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

¹⁰ Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

Civilians' livelihood situation

There are 62 Karen villages in T'Naw Th'Ree Township. The Karen villagers live in three types of locations: islands, rural areas and areas close to the [Thai] border. Most of the Karen civilians who live in rural areas work in the following: plantation farming (in plains areas and hill farms), other plantation work such as on rubber plantations, casual day labour, and buying/selling livestock. The Karen villagers who live on the local islands work in fishing or make charcoal [to sell]. But their work has been disrupted by the Myanmar Military Intelligence [especially for those who work on the islands]. The Myanmar Military Intelligence required them to pay fines [fees] and they have had to buy petrol for the Myanmar Navy. The civilians who buy/sell livestock in the rural areas have also had to pay arbitrary taxes to the Myanmar Military Intelligence, Myanmar Forestry Department, Myanmar Police Force and Myanmar military troops who are based along the border of T'Naw Th'Ree Township.

Health situation

There is one Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)¹¹ clinic in E--- village, T'Naw Th'Ree Township. There are also Karen health workers in that clinic to treat the patients. The majority of illnesses that the villagers are facing are: malaria, diarrhoea, arthritis, anaemia and stroke. Villagers in some of the areas have access to Myanmar government healthcare services, such as midwives and nurses who can test for malaria. However, not all of the illnesses that the villagers are facing can be treated [at the local clinics] so they have to go to [the hospital] in Dawei Town in order to receive treatment.

Education situation

There are three Karen schools in T'Naw Th'Ree Township: Thoo Lei Plaw Middle School, Ba Hkwa Primary School, and P'Naw Thaw Primary School. All of the schools are managed by the KNU in T'Naw Th'Ree Township. The school curriculum comes directly from the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)¹² education system. The school teachers are of Karen ethnicity. They do not have enough support or enough food [for the students] in their school. Therefore, they are seeking more support. According to P'Doh Saw Seh Hkay, head of the KECD in T'Naw Th'Ree Township, they need support from NGOs for the three schools in order to run the school administration for the education of the next [younger] generation. Additionally, all three schools are still open and continue their teaching as planned despite the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup, which shows their strength [resilience].

Conclusion

After the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), civilians were able to travel freely and work freely for their livelihood. But since February 1st 2021, when the Tatmadaw seized power, civilians have been concerned that fighting will resume in KNU-controlled areas of Mergui-Tavoy District. Currently, the civilians flee into the jungle. The local villagers are afraid of the SAC troop rotations and there are many problems for the participants in the CDM.

¹¹ The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Myanmar. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.

¹² 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.

Further background reading on the security situation in Mergui-Tavoy District in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Attendance at KECD schools, the Civil Disobedience Movement, COVID-19 and the movement of SAC troops \(March to June 2021\)”](#), September 2021.
- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Impact of the military coup on villagers in K’Ser Doh, Ler Muh Lah and Ler Doh Soh townships, February 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.khrg.org.

Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

