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# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## Situation Update

November 9<sup>th</sup> 2023 / KHRG # 22-433-S1

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## Taw Oo District Situation Update: SAC attacks against civilians, militarisation, development projects, displacement, and education, healthcare and livelihood challenges, July to November 2022

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) and Thaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Townships, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District during the period between July and November 2022. The State Administration Council (SAC) conducted attacks against civilians, including indiscriminate shelling and burning of houses in villages and towns. At least three villagers, including two children, were injured by these attacks. Villagers displaced in fear. The SAC also constructed roads to facilitate military transportation to their front-line army camps, which destroyed the lands of villagers who did not get any compensation. Self-funded schools had to be established as state schools closed. In other areas, the SAC forced parents to bring their children to SAC schools, which worried villagers. During this period, villagers also reported an increase in malaria and seasonal sickness. The villagers' livelihood was also endangered due to the increase in goods' prices, the SAC's indiscriminate shelling of villagers' plantations, as well as SAC travel restrictions and extortion at checkpoints.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Military activities in Taw Oo District from July to November 2022:

Military activities increased in Taw Oo District from July to November 2022. The State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> rotated their troops under the Military Operations Command (MOC)<sup>3</sup> #20 and #6 and the Southern Command to operate at the frontline [to continuously maintain their position] in Thandaung Township and Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. MOC #20 military activities took place in Htaw Ta Htoo Township and in some places in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The SAC MOC #6 from Naypyidaw Union Territory was given authority to conduct military activities [in the region].

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in November 2022. It was provided by a community member in Taw Oo 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 Burma/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.

<sup>3</sup> Military Operations Command (MOC) is comprised of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) made up of three battalions each.

Light Infantry Battalions (LIB)<sup>4</sup> #604 and LIB #603, under MOC #6 orders, and the Military Training School number 7, under the commandment of the regional army Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>5</sup> #19, conducted military activities in the Daw Hpa Hkoh Township's special area, targeting villagers. When they were in the villages, they conducted shelling of artillery weapons and burned villagers' houses. As a result, the number of displaced villagers increased. [On July 28<sup>th</sup> 2022,] SAC troops entered I--- village, Htee Day village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, and burned four villagers' houses. Since villagers had no home to return to, they found shelter in their close relatives' houses. During the SAC activities in the area, [SAC] soldiers treated villagers as enemies. This scared villagers.

The return journey [for troop rotation] of an (unknown) battalion under SAC MOC #20 from Baw Ga Lee Town, Htaaw Ta Htoo Township, to Taw Oo Town took three days. On July 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, around 8:00 in the morning, the SAC military patrol truck departed from A--- village, Si Pin Gyi village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. [As they were] on their way back to Taw Oo Town, the People Defence Forces (PDF)<sup>6</sup> attacked the SAC military truck by pulling a tripwire landmine. As a result, [the SAC] fired small guns indiscriminately from the military truck, [along the way] from Kyauk Taing village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, to Taw Oo Town, all along their way out of E--- village, Kyauk Taing village tract, and as they went through B--- village, Kyauk Taing village tract. Some bullets landed inside Taw Oo Town. As they fired guns along their route, there were houses, clinics, shops and farming huts along both sides of the road.

At that time, villagers were working in [their] farms and plantations. As the SAC soldiers patrolling had yet never fired towards their [villagers'] houses while they [villagers] were working in the fields, villagers were [peacefully] in the village as per usual. [During the shooting], the SAC soldiers hit Saw D---, a 40-year-old shopkeeper living in C--- village, Kyauk Taing village tract. His arm was injured. Two boys aged 12 and 7 years old [from E--- village] who were home watching television also got injured. The children were injured on their thighs and were sent to Taw Oo Town's hospital for treatment. Saw D--- was hospitalised in a hospital in Naypyidaw [capital of Burma]. For the treatment, Saw D--- had to cover his own medical expenses. Villagers [usually] take injured victims to Taw Oo's hospital under the management of a Taw Oo's charity group. However, since Saw D---'s bullet penetrated his upper arm bone, requiring surgery, he was sent from Taw Oo's hospital to Naypyidaw's 500-bed hospital. The SAC soldiers behaved recklessly and fired guns indiscriminately. However, the SAC did not give any compensation fee to those who were injured. Villagers were scared and worried about going to work on the fields and plantations because the SAC soldiers treated villagers as their enemies. Since villagers did not dare to work, they faced difficulties in securing food for their families.

On October 29<sup>th</sup> 2022, [SAC] Military Training School groups from Ba Yit Naung camp, Daw Hpa Hkoh Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, conducted shelling of both artillery weapons and small weapons to practice, without warning the villagers. The shelling was conducted from October 29<sup>th</sup> to November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023. Due to the shelling, local communities feared being hit by shrapnel, and were afraid to go outside their houses. Similarly, on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022 an [SAC]

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> An Infantry Battalion (IB) 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, particularly following the signing of the NCA. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

<sup>6</sup> The People's Defence Force (PDF) is an armed resistance established independently as local civilian militias operating across the country. Following the February 1st 2021 military coup and the ongoing brutal violence enacted by the junta, the majority of these groups began working with the National Unity Government (NUG), a body claiming to be the legitimate government of Burma/Myanmar, which then formalized the PDF on May 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

Artillery Unit from the Southern Command Headquarters marched with two military trucks [transporting weapons] and eight military trucks [transporting soldiers] to G--- village, Doe Thaug village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, to conduct shelling.

H--- village head, from Thandaung Township, Taw Oo District, warned the H--- villagers to avoid going out [of their houses] with a motorbike or by foot. As soon as the village head finished his announcement, two aircraft from the Southern Command Headquarters conducted reconnaissance above the villages from both Daw Hpa Hkoh Township and Htaw Ta Htoo Township. Villagers were afraid and hesitated about whether to stay or flee [as both options entailed risk to their lives].

[Shortly after], SAC soldiers shelled artillery weapons and fired machine guns, which made a loud noise and shook the ground. Since the SAC soldiers were also hiding in bushes around the village, villagers were afraid that the hidden SAC would arrest them. Therefore, they stopped going to work in their fields, farms, and plantations.

The SAC frequently shelled artillery weapons and did [air] reconnaissance [with drones] into the village, for this reason, villagers did not feel safe, according to a villager from J--- village, Shan Leh Pyin Gyi village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. The SAC armed their front-line soldiers with bullets and artillery weapons.

### **Education situation in Taw Oo District:**

In Taw Oo District, there are two Townships: Daw Hpa Hkoh Township and Htaw Ta Htoo Township. Each township in Taw Oo has schools. However, after the coup 2021, teachers from government schools became members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)<sup>7</sup> and stopped teaching to show that they did not support the SAC. [Many] schools closed. To continue the education [of their children], parents established self-funded schools. Some students studied in [schools] supported by [the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>8</sup> through its] Karen Education Cultural Department's (KECD)<sup>9</sup>, and villages that were not receiving KECD's support sought help from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to continue their children's education [type of support unspecified]. Middle school and high school students were studying at Htoh Lwee Wah high school, Thantabin [KECD] middle school, and KECD high schools in Taw Oo District.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the Burma government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Burma 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.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the departments include the Karen Education Department (KED) and the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHV), which often collaborate with other local and international non-governmental actors and humanitarian aid actors. The KNU also have a Karen Justice Department (KJD) with its own judiciary, a Karen National Police Force (KNPF) which operates under the Karen Interior & Religious Department (KID), a Karen Finance and Revenue Department (KFRD) which collects taxes, a Karen Agricultural Department (KAD) which registers and provides land titles, although these are not recognised by the Myanmar government, a Karen Forestry Department (KFD) which manages the forests and its natural resources, and more such as the Karen Fisheries Department (KFID) and Karen Mining Department (KMD).

Villagers employed teachers [in self-funded schools]. In government [SAC-controlled] schools, students were ordered [by the SAC] to attend [state] school. [The SAC had to force the students to come to government schools because villagers do not want to support the SAC: so, villagers unwillingly registered their children in the SAC-controlled schools.] In addition, the SAC kept record of the students' household registration for enrolment. Parents were dissatisfied [about this] because they believe that the SAC would use this registration for the election that will be conducted by the SAC.

[In addition,] students who attended state [SAC] schools felt at risk because the schools located near the SAC military camps were guarded by SAC soldiers, [who could become a danger for the students at any moment, according to villagers]. Having SAC soldiers as school guards caused a lot of danger for students. For this reason, parents had to drop and pick up their kids from school [instead of letting them walk to school as usual].

### **Healthcare situation in Taw Oo District:**

In Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, there are two areas: the hill area and the valley area. The hill area from Daw Hpa Hkoh Township is close to the town area, but people who live in the hills have difficulties getting healthcare when they get sick. When a villager got sick, other villagers would take care of the sick villager. [For instance,] villagers who know basic health care would treat sick patients. Some villages from the hill area [can also] receive treatment in Taw Oo Town from the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) in Htaw Ta Htoo under the KNU. Villagers also receive treatment in the Free Burma Rangers' (FBR)<sup>10</sup> district clinics. District hospitals and FBR collaborated to give treatment up to surgery procedures. Villagers no longer receive treatment from government hospitals [under the SAC], instead, they depend for treatment on hospitals that were established under the KNU. Those hospitals and clinics provide free healthcare treatment. Therefore, villagers only go and receive treatment in hospitals located in KNU-controlled areas.

[Hospitals established under KNU] also provide COVID-19 vaccination to villagers. Transportation to the SAC hospitals is also another difficulty faced by villagers because the SAC has placed checkpoints on the road and questions travelling villagers. The transportation fees are [also] unaffordable for villagers. Therefore, [as explained by a villager], villagers did not go to the SAC's hospitals to receive their COVID-19 vaccines, instead, they went to KDHW hospitals.

Seasonal malaria was the main health issue for villagers [during the reporting period]. [In addition], during the season change, villagers caught colds and [experienced] coughs. [The] villagers who experienced serious illnesses were sent to Thee Hkoh's hospital and Kay Tu's hospital, [which are located within] Taw Oo District. These hospitals are private hospitals and can be trusted [do not pose a risk for villagers], according to villagers.

### **Development projects in Taw Oo District from July to November 2022:**

SAC's former Majors, former Major Generals, and current officers allowed companies to build transportation infrastructures in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. However, the SAC and the companies did not consult with the villagers whose lands were expected to be destroyed by the road construction projects. The villagers were afraid to oppose these transportation construction projects of the SAC and its companies, so there was no objection from the villagers.

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<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1997 in response to Burma Army offenses, Free Burma Ranger (FBR) is a multi-ethnic humanitarian relief organisation that specialises in providing emergency health care, shelter, food and clothing to civilians in war zones and prioritises assisting IDPs. In addition to their relief activities the FBR also conducts capacity building trainings, documents human rights violations and advocates regularly on the situation in Burma/Myanmar.

The Tun Tauk La Won Company [a road construction company led by the SAC] from the northern part of Leik Tho Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, is owned by [SAC] Major Myat Kyaw. Equipment used for construction projects was guarded by [SAC] military personnel, who stayed in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, with guns. [SAC] Major Myat Kyaw is a chief minister in Sagaing Division, and his son is leading his company. Employees of his company are SAC military officers and [members of the] Thandaung Peace Group<sup>11</sup>, who strictly obey [the SAC's] demands. During the road construction, villagers' plantations and fields were destroyed. Nonetheless, villagers did not receive [any] compensation for their loss of lands and plantations.

Transportation infrastructure such as roads and bridges were constructed only near the area where the SAC troops' front-line army camps [are located, thus serving mainly the military's interests. This was done despite promises of development for the area].

### **Livelihood hardships in Taw Oo District from July to November 2022:**

People from the plains [mainly] farm and grow rice. Those farmers dealt with various problems in farming, such as financial difficulties, caused by rising food prices, that hindered them from ploughing and fertilising [the fields] and [growing] seeds.

Before the SAC seized power, [Burma's] government had given loans to farmers for farming. Now the SAC does not loan money [anymore] to farmers. Therefore, farmers face financial difficulties to start farming. Moreover, when farmers go to their farms, they are suspected of being PDF members [by the SAC]. Farmers are often questioned by the SAC. In addition, SAC restricted movement [in the area]. As a result, villagers were afraid to go farming.

Due to the high prices, farmers had to take loans that the banks rarely granted. [The current] price of meat is one viss [1.6 kg or 3.52 lb] of pork for 13,000 kyat [6.19 USD]<sup>12</sup>, and other food prices increased to extremely high levels. Farmers experience challenges to their livelihood.

The farmers were not able to sell a sufficient amount of production [goods at the markets]. [Their] income and costs were out of balance; [they didn't generate a profit]. Farmers faced difficulties. Since SAC soldiers threatened villagers, villagers did not dare to go farming.

People from the hills area mainly farm on plantations for their livelihood. They plant betel nuts, durians, cardamom and coffee. After the SAC seized power, the goods of villagers could not be sold for a fair price [in the market]. Before the SAC gained power, one viss of cardamom did not cost less than 10,000 kyat [4.76 USD]. But after the 2021 coup, one viss of cardamom only

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<sup>11</sup> Thandaung Special Region Peace Group' is also known as Htanay Phyithu Sitt A'pweh, or 'Thandaung Peace Group', is a local militia located in Toungoo District. The group split from the Karen National Union in 1997 and was initially led by Khe R'Mun. Reports from the field claim that they are currently led by General Bo Than Myit, have around 300 troops stationed at Leik Tho Base (Battalion Commander Bo Kyaw Win), in Leik Tho Township, and an additional 40 soldiers at Pya Sa Khan Base (Battalion Commander Khin Maung Lwin), near Thandaung town. It has been reported that they control a number of different illicit operations, including gambling and black market car licencing. They are also allegedly employed as security personnel by local companies and wealthy individuals involved in logging and mineral resource extraction, in addition to having direct involvement in the lumber and mineral business. Htanay Phyithu Sitt A'pweh should not be confused with Nyein Chan Yay A'pweh, which is occasionally translated as Peace Group but refers to the Karen Peace Army (KPA), aka the Karen Peace Force (KPF). Nor should it be conflated with Aye Chan Yay, another small militia group also operating in Toungoo District that the Thandaung Peace Group has come into conflict with. It is also distinct from the KNU/KNLA-Peace Council, which is also sometimes translated as 'Peace Group'.

<sup>12</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.48 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate> ).

costs 6,000-7,000 kyat [2.86-3.33 USD]. Villagers dealt with difficulties in their livelihood. Before the SAC seized power, prices were under control.

Villagers experienced difficulties picking up fruits from their plantations because the SAC threatened them by shelling artillery weapons and conducted reconnaissance with aircraft, which made loud noises. SAC soldiers also hid among the bushes, making villagers afraid to go to the plantations.

When fighting happened between the SAC and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>13</sup> or the PDF, the SAC would [still] primarily target villagers by conducting shelling as a threat to [civilian] areas. [They would shell] where villagers are dwelling, and the areas near villages. As a result, villagers faced difficulties to travel. [In addition,] the SAC set checkpoints on the way to the plantations and asked for money from villagers as they were passing on the road to [go to] their plantations. Because of this, villagers faced difficulties in transporting their production to the market.

When they were selling seasonal fruits in town, villagers were afraid that they would be questioned, asked for money, or threatened by the SAC [on the road, on their way to town from the hills]. Villagers faced difficulties on their way to selling seasonal fruits in the town market. People from the hills area could [only] carry a limited amount of food when they purchased it from Toungoo (Taw Oo) Town. They were allowed to carry only 15 sacks of rice [in addition to] other foodstuff per car. Villagers were limited to [the amount of] rice they could carry per car, [which caused them to] pay higher car [rental] fees. [This was one of the reasons why] food was sold for a [much] higher price. [Therefore,] villagers faced difficulties in purchasing food.

### **Displacement of villagers in Taw Oo:**

Many villagers did not dare to live inside nor outside of the village, so they moved to a place far from their hometown. After the SAC threatened the villagers' lives and security, they felt unsafe about their livelihood, education, health care and social life, so they fled. Local villagers brought food and necessary items for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in secrecy. If the SAC was to find out that IDPs were receiving help, they would stop the transportation and would arrest the villagers. [The SAC had arrested villagers and stopped similar actions before]. Local villagers struggled while they were trying to extend their support to IDPs. After villagers stored food and essential needs, the distribution process started. Villagers secretly met with individual IDPs and distributed food and essential items. These villagers were not international organisations but local villagers who empathise with and support IDPs.

After the SAC burned down four villagers' houses from I--- village, Kyoh Chaung Thar (Htee Day) village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo district, the villagers whose houses were burned by the SAC no longer have a house in the village. Villagers were afraid that the SAC would shoot them to death and burn their houses. Therefore, they did not dare to return to their hometown but stayed at their relatives' and friends' houses. [These displaced villagers] did any job that they were able to find to support their family financially.

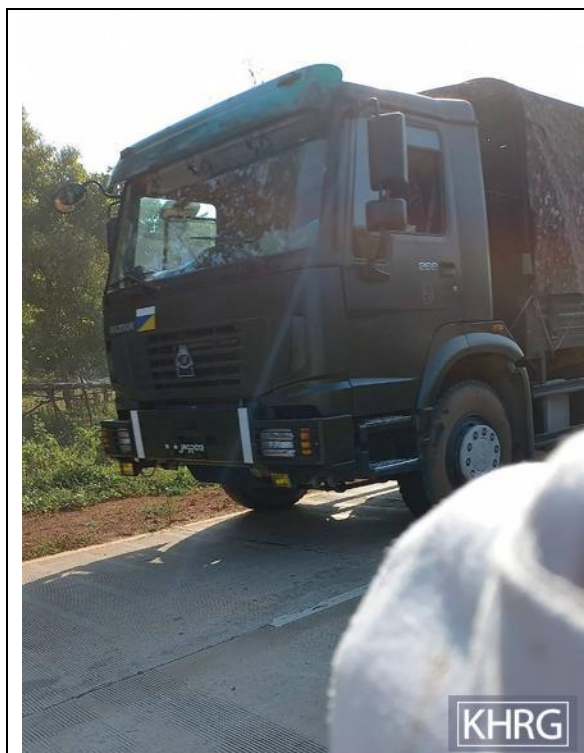
### **Community member's perspective:**

The SAC did not try to gain the trust of villagers [by treating villagers well]. Instead, they treated villagers as their enemies, which means villagers have no guarantee for their security. The SAC has the obligation [under international humanitarian law] to protect villagers and ensure their basic needs are fulfilled. But due to their illegitimate seizing of power [and abuse of human

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<sup>13</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

rights], villagers must face these difficulties as described [above]. SAC authorities must hand over the power to the candidates elected by the civilians. Only then the country will be at peace, and everything will be in a better place.



This photo was taken on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, six miles away from Taw Oo Town, Day Loh Mu Nu Village Tract, Taw Oo District, showing a convoy of military trucks transporting goods (rations, ammunition and other goods) along its supply line to Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District from the SAC's Southern Headquarters. More than ten military trucks were transporting the goods. Villagers reported being intimidated by this SAC military operation. [Photo: KHRG].

Further background reading on the situation on human rights violations in the Taw Oo District of Southeast Burma can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [\*“Taw Oo District Situation Update: SAC military activities and livelihood, education, and healthcare challenges”\*](#), September to December 2022
- [\*“Taw Oo District Short Update: Air strikes, displacement and property damage in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township”\*](#), July 2023
- [\*“Taw Oo District Situation Update: Killing, arbitrary arrest, SAC military activities, and education, healthcare, and livelihood challenges”\*](#), from March to June 2022
- [\*“Taw Oo District Incident Report: A male villager was severely injured and a female villager died from SAC indiscriminate shelling in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township”\*](#), June 2023

### About KHRG

Founded in 1992, Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Burma. 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](http://www.khrq.org).

## Taw Oo (Toungoo) District

