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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Short Update

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Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: SAC indiscriminate shelling, killing, arrests, torture, house burning, and villagers' displacement in K'Ser Doh Township, June 2023

This Short Update describes events occurring in K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District in June 2023, including fighting between the State Administration Council (SAC) and People's Defence Force (PDF) on June 8th 2023 which resulted in the displacement of ten thousand local villagers in Kleh Muh Htee area. On this day, the SAC conducted indiscriminate shelling into villages, causing a female villager to suffer a severely injured leg. Moreover, two villagers from A--- village were arrested and forcibly disappeared by the SAC. Additionally, a villager from A--- village was arrested and brutally tortured by the SAC, accused of being affiliated with a local armed resistance group. The SAC burnt down and looted many of the displaced villagers' houses during the fighting in A--- village. The SAC also fatally shot a displaced villager in B--- village, Kleh Muh Htee area, on June 11th, 2023.¹

Indiscriminate shelling, displacement, house burning

On June 8th 2023, the State Administration Council (SAC)² entered A--- village, Kleh Muh Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. The battalion number of the SAC troops that entered A--- village is unknown, although according to local villagers, the SAC troops that most commonly operate in the area are Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)³ #403, #404 and #405. As they entered the village, fighting happened between the SAC troops and the combined armed forces of People's Defence Force (PDF)⁴, who were based in an adjacent village, D--- village, Kleh

¹ The present document is based on information received in July 2023. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy 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 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.

³ A Burma Army Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Burma Army 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.

⁴ 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

Muh Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township. They fired at each other with artillery and guns from a distance. These two villages [D--- and A--- villages] are attached to each other [like one village]. Due to the fighting, some mortar shells landed and exploded in the villages, causing local villagers to flee in fear. A woman named Daw⁵ M--- was also injured by the shelling during the fighting before she could flee. Daw M--- is currently undergoing treatment in Dawei Hospital to recover from her injuries. Her leg was broken and required metal plates to be implanted to fix the broken bone.

During this fighting, villagers from six villages fled for safety. They took refuge in other villages such as F---, G---, and C--- villages. Some of the villagers stayed in their relatives' houses and some stayed in the monastery. The displaced villagers are from A--- village, D--- village, Ka Neh Thi Ri village, Kyweh Min Kon village, Kyauk Hk'Mauk village and Pain Neh Kyun village, Kleh Muh Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. These villagers are facing many challenges, including livelihood challenges, and a lack of food and healthcare. One displaced villager said: *"We are so scared of the mortars and guns so we ran into the nipa palm trees when hearing the sounds of shelling. We had to crouch in the water so that the soldiers didn't see us. It was so devastating. We have seen people displaced on Facebook [posts] but we never thought this would come to us. We had to survive it horribly."*

The total number of households in the displaced villages is over 3,000, which is estimated to include 10,000 villagers. These villagers still dare not return to their villages [as of October 2023] because the SAC is still settled in A--- village at the monastery on E--- hill. These SAC soldiers have continued to fire rounds of mortar shells into the village and regularly patrol the village because of suspected PDF forces operating in the area.

Some villagers could not bring any extra clothes when fleeing from the village. When the shelling stopped, villagers sneaked into the village to collect some clothes and food. A villager in A--- village said: *"It only took 5 minutes to get to the village [from the hiding place]. When we reached our houses, the scene that we saw was saddening. Our houses were destroyed by shelling and were burnt down. All our property was looted."* [At least,] six villagers' houses in A-- village had been burnt down by the SAC.

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.

⁵ Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.



These photos were taken on July 20th 2023 in C--- village, Kleh Muh Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township. They show a house damaged and looted by the SAC on June 8th 2023. [Photos: Local villagers]

Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance

When the fighting happened on June 8th 2023, five villagers, including two women and three men from A--- village, were arrested. The parents of the two female villagers and one male villager paid 500,000 kyat [238 USD]⁶ so they could have their children released. However, the two other male villagers were taken [by the SAC soldiers] and no one knows where they were taken to nor their current condition [under detention]. These two villagers are U O---, 50 years old and U P---, 48 years old. Their families were not able to search for them because they are also having to flee for their lives after the attacks on their village. A villager in A--- village said: *"We have over 1,500 households in our village. When we fled, we could not care for each other. We heard from the PDF soldiers that the village is full of corpses. We don't know who are these corpses."* The villagers who fled the fighting are ordinary villagers who work on farming and casual daily work. Some of them do not even have a house to return to because the SAC burnt it. Villagers dare not go back to the village to identify the dead bodies because the SAC is still conducting shelling in the village.

When the fighting occurred in A--- village on June 8th 2023, the SAC also arrested another local villager, Maung⁷ N---, who is 29 years old and of Dawei ethnicity. He was detained for two days and brutally tortured during the detention. As he expressed: *"When they [SAC] arrested me, they questioned me a lot about whether PDF [are] present in the area, and accused me of being a PDF. They hit me with the butt of the gun on my head and my hands. When I suffered pain on my body, I held my hands, and they continued to torture me. Four soldiers were torturing me there. I was detained for two days. During the detention, some soldiers were a bit kind and they*

⁶ All conversion estimates for Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate as of October 17th 2023 at 1 USD = 2,097 MMK, conversion rate available at <<https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/>>.

⁷ Maung is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name

gave me rice to eat. During the detention, the SAC soldiers told me ‘How would you compare yourself to the Tatmadaw [Burma Army]? The Tatmadaw has good weapons, enough manpower, enough military power, how would you compare [them to local resistance groups]?’ I felt like falling into hell during the two days of detention. They burned me with a cigarette, they punched me, hit me, kicked me all over. After two days of detention, the fighting happened between that SAC troop and the PDF, and the SAC shelled three mortars. After that, they took a break. They just tied me loosely when taking a break. Therefore, I could untie myself and escape. I did not have any shoes as I fled to the forest. I fled and reached this displacement site.”

About two weeks before the incident, the SAC also arrested around 40 local villagers in A---, Kleh Muh Htee area, including Maung N---. These villagers were also tortured during their detention. They were all later released by the SAC. According to Maung N---, the torture from his second arrest left him with more serious injuries on his head, face, arm and legs. When he was released, his face around the eyes was cut and his whole face was covered in bruises. His wrists and ankles were wounded because of the metal chains that the SAC used to restrain him during the arrest. According to him, the SAC soldiers mostly used the butt of the gun and their boots in torturing him as they felt more pain to punch him with their fists.



Regardless of the threat to life, some displaced villagers continued to try to sneak into the village for emergency needs. On June 11th 2023, a villager named L---, who is 19 years old, from B--- village, Kleh Muh Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township, was shot and killed by the SAC soldiers when he returned to the village to collect medicine for his mother. His mother has a chronic illness and she could not bring her medicine with her when fleeing.

Currently, the Karen National Union (KNU)⁸, local community support groups and organisations such as Ta K’Paw, P’Neh Ta K’Paw, as well as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and local religious groups, are providing support in the aftermath of these attacks. These organisations provide some food and healthcare support to the displaced villagers.

Further background reading on the situation on indiscriminate shelling, killing, arrest, torture, house burning, displacement and enforced disappearance in Southeast Burma can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [Doo Tha Htoo District Situation Update: Two villagers were killed and 17 villagers were injured by SAC’s indiscriminate shelling in Kyeh Htoh Township \(December 2022 to February 2023\)](#), August 2023
- [Mu Traw District Short Update: SAC indiscriminate shelling resulting in injured and killed, April 2023, July 2023](#)
- [Briefing Paper: Deadly Encounters: Killings of civilians by armed actors in Southeast Burma \(October 2022 - April 2023\)](#), 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.khr.org.

⁸ 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.

Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

