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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

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Dooplaya District Interview: Fighting between SAC troops and other armed groups resulted in villagers' displacement, Kaw K'Reik Township, Dooplaya District, June 1st 2021

This interview describes events that occurred in Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District on June 1st 2021, where fighting between several armed groups [Border Guard Force (BGF), State Administration Council (SAC) military and DKBA splinter group] resulted in the displacement of villagers. The most affected village was U---, wherein over 400 people were forced to flee. In addition, more than ten villagers' houses were destroyed along with a school during the fighting and indiscriminate shelling. Fearing SAC troops, some villagers fled and took refuge at the Thai-Burma border, in forests, river banks and other villages. They spent four days fleeing from the fighting. On June 5th 2021, the displaced villagers were able to return home.¹

Interview | U--- village, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District (June 2021)

Name: Naw S---

Gender: Female

Age: 43

Religion: Christian

Ethnicity: Karen

Family Status: Married

Occupation: Plantation owner

What do you do for a living?

I am tending a plantation, helping or serving in church, helping people in need as much as I can and doing compassionate work.

Are you one of the displaced persons who fled when the fighting broke out?

No, if I flee then there will be no one to help the people here.

Do you know where the people have fled to since the fighting broke out?

As the fighting happened in U--- area, the villagers from U--- fled to Klaw K'Rer Place [in Waw Lay village in Thailand, but a part of the village where people keep their cows], some of them

¹ The present document is based on information received in June 2021. It was provided by a community member in Dooplaya 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 staff.

fled to H--- village, and hundreds of people fled to K--- village. The mortars fell on D--- village so the people from D--- village also fled out of fear. They fled to K--- village.

Other than the places you have mentioned, are there any other places they fled to?

As for other places, there are some men who fled to the jungle.

Do you know which day they fled to those places?

The fighting broke out on June 1st and it was around 1:00 pm in the afternoon so they fled as [soon as] the fighting happened.

Do you know why the fighting broke out?

No, we do not know the reason for the fighting. We did not know anything at first. We just heard the mortar sounds suddenly and that was when we knew the fighting was happening. We did not know why it was happening though.

Were there any military jets spying around the area there?

No, there was no such thing.

Who led the people who fled from fighting?

The village leaders and local authorities discussed amongst themselves. Since it was an emergency, the closest place in Thailand to flee is Klaw K'Rer, so they were sent there. The village leaders here contacted the local Thai authorities, who gave their permission for the people to come, so the people just fled there.

How many households or people fled from the fighting and went to the Thailand?

It was almost the entire U--- village who fled. The number of households would be around 80 and there would be more than 400, around 410 or 420 people.

You said U--- village was affected the most, right?

Yes, the people from U--- village were the most affected. I went to see it and I saw their houses' roofs were destroyed because of the mortar [shelling].

What about the school or religious places or the clinic? Were they destroyed as well?

The clinic was not destroyed. It was just the villagers' houses that were destroyed. The pieces of mortar [shell] hit the roof of the villagers' houses.

How many houses were hit by mortar [shell] pieces?

They were more than ten houses. We couldn't check some houses as the owners were not there.

How about the villagers' livestock? Were there any damages?

When I went to check, there was a villager who lives in front of the hospital whose three chickens and two pigs were killed. That's all I could confirm.

What about the villagers themselves? Were there any injuries or deaths?

No, none of the villagers got injured or died.

What about D--- village? Did they flee as well?

Some people who were afraid fled, but some still remained in the village. The elderly people who are sick were sent to Thailand.

When the fighting happened on June 1st, villagers from how many villages had to flee and were displaced? Do you know?

The villagers from D---, U--- and Y--- villages had to flee. The Y--- villagers fled to K--- village and Z--- place.

Only three villages [had to flee]?

Yes.

Do you also know how many households from D--- and Y--- villages have fled?

For Y--- village, almost the entire village fled. Only a few people have stayed back. They [the others] fled because their village is close to the Tatmadaw [State Administration Council (SAC) military²] army camp. For D--- village, only elderly people who are weak and sick and the children were sent to a safe place.

Are there villagers who had to flee [to areas] beside the river or into the jungle?

Those who have their cattle in their plantations, they could not run like other villagers. They have stayed with their cattle and sleep along the river's edge.

Were the villagers able to bring food and clothes with them when they fled?

Some of them were not able to bring anything with them but some were able to bring a blanket and one or two items of clothing with them. For those who have little children, they could not bring anything with them, especially the people from U--- [because they had to carry their children]. People were not aware of the [impending] fighting. They just suddenly heard the sound [of shelling] and when it was a little bit calm, they fled then.

Where exactly was the fighting happening?

It happened on the U--- road. We can just say it happened right inside the village [because it was so close to the village].

Do you know between which armed groups?

I cannot even tell which armed groups fought against which armed groups. It was mixed between them. They were mixed between the BGF [Border Guard Force]³, Burma Army [SAC military] and the DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army Splinter Group]⁴. We do not know exactly about that.

Do you also know the battalion number of the armed groups?

No, I do not know.

² 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.

³ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

⁴ On January 16th 2016, this splinter faction of the DKBA established itself as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army led by chief of staff General Saw Kyaw Thet, vice chief of staff General Saw Taing Shwe (aka Bo Bi) and commander Bo San Aung. Therefore, confusingly, there are now two groups using the acronym DKBA: the main 'Benevolent' DKBA (Democratic Karen Benevolent Army) and the splinter faction 'Buddhist' DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army). The new splinter 'Buddhist' DKBA should not be confused with the original Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which existed from 1994-2010. The 'Benevolent' DKBA has signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement but the new 'Buddhist' DKBA splinter faction has not. The latter are still actively engaged in armed clashes with the Tatmadaw in multiple areas in Karen State.

Do you know who started the fighting?

I do not know.

For how many hours do you think the fighting lasted? How long did the fighting take?

The fighting started at 1:00 pm but we could still hear the sound [of fighting] through to the next morning [June 2nd]. They just took a rest but the sound continued after the break.

Do you also know which kind of weapons they used during the fighting?

They used both mortars and guns.

So the mortar shells fell in the village?

Yes, we could say the entire U--- village was affected by this fighting.

As the villagers left their village, did the armed groups enter the village?

No.

How far is the place they have fled to from their village?

The U--- villagers who fled to Klaw K'Rer Place, it is not so far. They can see the village from there. For those who went to K--- village, it is a little bit far.

If they go to those places on foot then how many hours do you think it would take them?

If the U--- villagers went to [crossed into] Thailand then it would take them around 20 to 30 minutes. [For] some houses [households] that are closer to the border, it would take them less than 20 minutes. There is only a river in between.

Do you know how they are getting by [in their new location] and where they are now?

They are now staying in Klaw K'Rer [Thai authorities (Thai soldiers) put them in a cowshed (a place where cows are kept before they are put to slaughter)].

How is the weather there?

Fortunately, it was not raining there while they were fleeing.

As they could not bring much stuff with them, have they been provided with basic needs and support?

When I followed up with them, they said there are people who have made donations and support them with those basic needs.

You said that some people brought food with them, so what food did they bring with them?

People who were able to bring food with them were from D--- village. For U--- village, they could not bring anything with them. The D--- villagers just took a few clothes and rice with them, and also brought along the sick people and children. Then, they fled to K--- village.

Did the mortar shells hit and destroy any schools?

It hit the Myanmar government school. The roof got damaged and the mirrors of the school were broken. The school ceiling was also broken.

Is there a KECD school as well [in the area]?

No, there is only a Myanmar government school.

Is it a high school?

In the past, this school had up to Fourth Standard [primary grades] but this year they extended it to Sixth Standard [first half of middle school]. The school is new and they did not even do the opening ceremony yet.

Do the villagers who fled to the Thai side [Thailand] receive enough food?

Yes, they are receiving enough food. The people [villagers in Thailand] who support them with food take turns and cook for them, then send it to them. They check the number of the villagers and pack food for them.

Are there villagers who go back to the village and retrieve food?

No, they do not come back to get food because the Thai authorities do not allow them to come back yet as the sound of fighting is on-going [can still be heard]. But yesterday, the sound was a little bit calm so the villagers who wanted and dared to come back could come back.

After the villagers left the village, did the fighting continue to happen?

Yes, it continued to happen the whole night.

The fighting started on June 1st so what about June 2nd? Did it continue until June 2nd?

Yes, the fighting happened the whole night and it continued until the morning. I think it continued until the morning of June 3rd.

What about today [June 4th]?

No, the fighting is not happening anymore today. It stopped since yesterday afternoon.

What about the healthcare situation?

About the healthcare situation, I have not heard any special issues. I think they are all fine.

In the current situation, has the school opened already [the school year normally begins in May]?

No, the schools in other places have opened already but the U--- school has not opened yet. We do not accept the Myanmar government school in our U--- area because this is KNU [Karen National Union]⁵ area.

But the school is a Myanmar government school right?

Yes, but as we are in KNU-controlled area, the students' parents are not sending their children to the school anymore now [because of the coup]. As there are no students, the school cannot open.

As the students are also fleeing, what do they do for their education?

We cannot do anything for their education at the moment.

Is the place they are staying now safe for them?

Yes, so far they are safe.

Who is taking care of their safety?

Since they fled to Thailand, the Thai authorities take care of their safety.

What about the villagers who fled to other villages and not to Thailand?

For them, the villagers organised it amongst themselves and take care of the security.

Do you know about the Burma Army [SAC military] activities now?

We do not see their military activities anymore. They have moved to another place now.

In the past, did the villagers have to flee like this?

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.

It was in 2010.

For how long did they have to flee?

We had to stay in other villages for two to three months.

Do you know which organisations help and support the people who fled to the Thai side [Thailand] now?

I cannot list all the organisations' names. NGOs are coming to help them. The organisations based in Mae Sot [Thailand] also came to help them. I do not know the exact names of the organisations.

When do you think the villagers will be able to go back to their village?

Yesterday, they were told that if they would like to come back, they can come back. The villagers are still scared so they have not come back yet. Maybe they will come back today. For those who fled to K--- village, almost all of them came back already.

Related to this fighting, what do you want to say? What is your perspective?

I do not know what to say because they are mixed armed groups. There are many armed groups in this area so I do not know what to say. Personally, I am with our KNU/KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army]⁶.

Would you like to say anything to any decision-makers or to the authorities?

No, I do not want to say anything.

This is all the questions [that I have]. Do you want to say anything more?

No, I do not have much to say but for those who had to flee from fighting, it would be great if they receive enough support. We do not want to flee like this again and again. So we would like our Karen armed groups to be united. If they are united, we would not have to flee like this and would be able to work in peace.

What do the villagers there do for their living?

We just have corn and bean plantations and farm.

What about landmines? Are there any landmines planted there?

We have not heard about that. If we look at the situation that happened recently, they might not have had time to plant landmines. They just fought each other directly, like that.

[As of June 5th 2021, the over 400 displaced villagers from U--- village have all returned to their village, as have the villagers from other affected villages.⁷ Some of the houses that were destroyed due to the shelling will need to be repaired. Landmine contamination is one of the dangers that villagers face and presents challenges for them to work in their farms freely. Even though villagers could return home, they still fear the on-going fighting in other parts of Dooplaya District.]

⁶ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁷ “မြဝတီနယ်စပ် ဖလူးတိုက်ပွဲ ဂယက်ကြောင့် ထိုင်းဘက်သို့ စစ်ရှောင်နေသူများ နေရပ်ပြန်လာ”, *Karen Information Center News*, June 2021.



These photos were taken on June 3rd 2021, in U--- village, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. They show the damage to villagers' houses that was caused by the firing of mortars and bullets. [Photos: local villager]

Further background reading on the situation of fighting in Southeast Myanmar since the February 2021 military coup⁸ can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Dooplaya District Interview: Recent fighting and displacement in Kaw T'Ree Township, June 2021"](#), July 2021.
- ["Doo Tha Htoo Situation Update: Fighting and indiscriminate shelling by SAC forces, April to May 2021"](#), April 2021.
- ["Dooplaya District Incident Report: Two villagers injured in the explosion of a mortar shell in Kaw T'Ree Township, March 2021"](#), April 2021.
- ["Dooplaya District Short Update: Skirmish between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in Kaw T'Ree Township, February 2021"](#), February 2021.

⁸ 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.

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.

Dooplaya (Southeastern Karen State) District

