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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Taw Oo District Situation Update: SAC military activities, SAC attacks on CDM participants, travel restrictions, and livelihood, healthcare and education challenges, December 2021 to February 2022

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Htaw Ta'Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District during the period between December 2021 and February 2022, and includes State Administration Council (SAC) military activities, SAC attacks on Civil Disobedience (CDM) participants, travel restrictions, and livelihood, healthcare and education challenges. SAC soldiers continued their activities, including patrolling, questioning people whom they encountered, beating and arresting people, and conducting reconnaissance by air. People who participated in the CDM faced challenges as the SAC destroyed their property. The SAC increased their checkpoints, seized motorcycles, arrested people, and required approval to travel. Political instability and travel restrictions also made it difficult for villagers to find work and thus created livelihood challenges for the villagers. There have also been many challenges in the healthcare sector since the military coup, and the presence of SAC soldiers in public hospital compounds made villagers afraid to go for treatment and medical care. Some schools have reopened but only some students returned to school. Students who take online classes faced problems because the price of internet services has increased.¹

SAC military activities

On December 20th 2021, after State Administration Council (SAC)² soldiers entered into Lay Lon Pin area, Htaw Ta'Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District where Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)³ Battalion #6 operates, seven SAC soldiers died after stepping on a landmine planted by KNLA soldiers. The KNLA soldiers also confiscated some of the weapons from the SAC [the context is unclear]. Some SAC soldiers entered into the villages, but were not

¹ The present document is based on information received in February 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.

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 and leads the Military Cabinet of Burma (Myanmar), the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup.

³ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

wearing their military uniforms while they were patrolling and therefore villagers mistook them for the People's Defence Force (PDF)⁴.

Some [uniformed] SAC soldiers were also patrolling at the intersection of Kyi Daw and Aung Myin Yan during the night and if they saw anyone, they would ask them questions and would even beat up people who went out at night after 8:00 or 9:00 pm. SAC soldiers have also mistaken some of the villagers for PDF members. On January 16th 2022 [and possibly a second date], guns were fired at midnight in Kyi Daw village, Kyi Daw village tract⁵, Htaw Ta'Htoo Township. In hearing the sound of gunfire, local villagers were not sure whether it came from SAC soldiers or from the PDF.

When staff from Electric Power Corporation (EPC) came to collect [villagers'] electricity bill payments in January 2022 [exact date unknown], SAC soldiers came with them. The local villagers were afraid when they saw the soldiers. When they [EPC] came to collect the electricity bill payments in Nat Ywa village, Per Htee village tract, Htaw Ta'Htoo Township they only went to a few houses and left hurriedly because they were also worried that they would be harassed by the PDF [in order to scare them, some villagers had told them that PDF members might come to attack them if they came to the village].

SAC soldiers sometimes came to check the guest list in some of the Burmese [Bamar] villages as well, and if they saw anyone who seemed strange and unfamiliar to them, they would take him/her with them [arrest the person]. SAC military jets also started to come [fly over] and the local villagers always had to stay alert. Since fighting also took place in Kayah State, the local people from there came to seek refuge in several places in Htaw Ta'Htoo Township, Taw Oo District.

SAC soldiers have been checking motorcycle licenses at Htantabin Bridge and, on February 17th 2022, arrested one villager from Lay Ti village, Per Htee village tract, Htaw Ta'Htoo Township and one Bamar man [his village is unknown]. They [SAC] had never checked motorcycle licenses at this place before. After arresting these two people, they stopped checking other people who were travelling on that day because they said that they were only required to seize two motorcycles per day. The two people arrested were locked up in the detention centre and were not given any food to eat. They were arrested at around 9:00 am and were released at 9:00 pm that same day.

Attacks on Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)⁶ participants

In December 2021 [exact date(s) unknown] SAC soldiers [battalions unknown] came and burned down the buildings [houses] and food supplies of CDM participants who sought refuge in KNU-controlled A--- area in Htaw Ta'Htoo Township. These CDM participants are from other parts of Burma. Among the buildings that SAC soldiers burned down in A--- area were the farm

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

⁶ 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.

huts of some villagers from Zi Pyu Kon village, Per Htee village tract, Htaw Ta'Htoo Township who went to work in A--- area because their farmlands are there.

Some of the teachers who participated in the CDM went to work in Singapore and some were applying [for passports and visas] to go. They [CDM teachers] said that they didn't think there would be peace in Burma ever again.

Travel restrictions

There has been an increase in travel restrictions. According to villagers, SAC security forces increased their checkpoints and thus there was more checking of the villagers when they travelled. Since mid-December [2021], SAC security forces started seizing some of the villagers' motorcycles, and since the beginning of February [2022], they have seized many [there has been an increase]. SAC security forces not only seized the motorcycles but also arrested the owners of the motorcycles. Even if the motorcycle owners had a license, they would seize them [the motorcycles] anyway, if they wanted to. They also started to check people's phones, took people's bags and checked everything inside the bags. When villagers travelled before [the coup], they did not need to show anything, but now they are asked to show their identification card and travel recommendation letter when they travel these days. As a result, it's no longer safe for villagers to travel like before, and they have to travel in fear. Another issue is that the local administrator was not always available to write travel recommendation letters and that also created a problem for the villagers. [Some areas in Htaw Ta'Htoo Township are under mixed control. Therefore, there is both a KNU-appointed village head and an SAC-appointed local administrator in those areas. However, only travel recommendation letters from SAC-appointed local administrators are accepted at the SAC checkpoints.]

Livelihood challenges

Villagers faced many livelihood challenges because it was not easy for them to look for jobs like before [the coup] because of the SAC's military activities. Shopkeepers faced difficulties because they could not buy and sell things freely. There was a lack of security in trading as well, and therefore prices have been increasing dramatically in the local area [in every village of Htaw Ta'Htoo Township], which resulted in ordinary families facing financial issues and challenges in buying food. Moreover, local villagers did not have the opportunity to seek jobs in other places due to political instability in the country and travel restrictions. This has created problems such as shortage of food for families, which has led to many more family-related problems.

Healthcare

There have been many weaknesses in the healthcare sector since the Burma military took over power through a coup. There has been a shortage of healthcare workers in Mo Kaung and Tan Taung village tracts, Htaw Ta'Htoo Township. In addition, SAC soldiers were also present inside [occupied] public hospital compounds and that made people afraid to go to hospitals. People mostly went to private hospitals when they became sick and this has become an issue for ordinary people, especially for children and pregnant women. They could no longer get [routine] vaccinations. There have also been challenges for patients requiring emergency care because they sometimes needed to be taken to hospital at night, and they were disturbed by SAC soldiers who were at the checkpoints. There was no freedom of movement for villagers to get medical treatment.

COVID-19 cases have been decreasing and no cases have been reported recently in the local area. Some people have already received their COVID-19 vaccination but others were afraid to get it. Some elderly people faced transportation issues as they had to go and get their vaccination in Htantabin city. However, some went anyway because they wanted a COVID-19 vaccination certificate.

Education

Regarding the situation of education, students could no longer study because schools [what were government-run schools] were closed after the military coup. However, some of the schools in the local area have already reopened, but not all students returned to school. In Karen villages, although some of the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)⁷ schools reopened, none of the SAC-run schools [formerly government schools] did. Due to the school closures, young people planned to go and work in Thailand and some of them already went. To go and work in Thailand, they didn't need any documents but they were asked by a broker to pay 170,000 kyats [USD 91.82]⁸ each. Some of them were arrested by Thai police for illegal entry.

There were also SAC soldiers in front of some of the [SAC-run] school compounds, and some of the students were taken to [SAC-run] schools by military car. Students did not get to go to school like before. They were scared and worried to go to school. Female teachers were afraid to wear their school uniform when they were on their way to school, so they had to put it on once they reached their school. School hours were not the same as before as well. The students only got to study for a few hours per day, they did not get to study properly, and they did not get good or quality education. Due to the SAC's military activities, students who took online classes also faced many problems. Internet fees have increased and internet connections have not been strong like before. As a result of these issues, students are lagging behind in education.

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

- [*"Taw Oo District Short Update: Killing, shelling, displacement, and the destruction of a COVID-19 screening checkpoint and villagers' belongings by SAC soldiers, March 2022"*](#), March 2022.
- [*"Taw Oo District Incident Report: A villager's house was damaged by indiscriminate gunfire from a drunk SAC military officer in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, August 2021"*](#), December 2021.
- [*"Taw Oo District Incident Report: Killing case in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, July 2021"*](#), December 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 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.khrg.org.

⁷ 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 Burma (Myanmar) government.

⁸ All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the April 29th 2022 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.54 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District

