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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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A Worrisome Escalation: Tatmadaw airstrikes kill at least 16 villagers, displace thousands in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts, March 2021



This photo was taken on April 9th 2021 in Day Bu Noh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township. It shows a local building that was destroyed in a Tatmadaw airstrike. *[Photo: Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development]*

Introduction

KHRG's documentation shows that fighting between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)¹ and the Tatmadaw² has escalated in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup.^{3,4} There has been a rise in both attacks and retaliatory activities throughout KHRG's operational area, notably in Kler Lwee Htoo [Nyaunglebin], Mu Traw [Hpapun] and Doo Tha Htoo districts [Thaton], in complete violation of section 5(a) of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA),⁵ which forbids the signatories from carrying out armed attacks in ceasefire areas.

On March 27th 2021, KNLA Brigade 5 attacked and scorched a Tatmadaw outpost along the Salween River manned by Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁶ #349 soldiers in Thee Mu Hta, near Meh Nuh Hta village, Pah Heh village tract,⁷ Bu Tho Township.⁸ Ten Tatmadaw soldiers were killed during the attack, and at least eight were taken captive by the KNLA. One KNLA soldier also died.⁹

In what seems to have been a direct response to this attack, the Tatmadaw carried out a series of airstrikes against both KNLA and civilian targets in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts from March 27th to March 30th, killing at least 16 people and injuring 25.¹⁰ Airstrikes were in most cases preceded by reconnaissance flyovers by Tatmadaw drones or helicopters. The bombings led to the displacement of at least 15,000 villagers, the majority of whom still remain in hiding and are in dire need of humanitarian support.

¹ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

² Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

³ 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.

⁴ For more information, see KHRG, "[An End to Peace Efforts: Recent fighting in Doo Tha Htoo District between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw following the 2021 Myanmar military coup \(March and April 2021\)](#)", May 2021.

⁵ 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 armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

⁶ A Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, 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 A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

⁸ "[KNU seizes control of Tatmadaw base in Kayin state](#)", *Myanmar Now*, March 2021.

⁹ "[Myanmar airstrikes cause thousands to flee across Thailand border](#)", *The Guardian*, March 2021.

¹⁰ The present document is based on information received in March and April 2021. It was provided by community members in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts who have 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.

A. Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District

Airstrikes

On the night of March 27th to 28th 2021, Tatmadaw jets bombed the Day Bu Noh area [Day Bu Noh is a village seven miles from the Thai border where the KNLA Brigade 5 headquarters are located], Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township. A few hours before the incident, between 3 pm and 4 pm, a local Karen relief worker saw five fighter jets flying over the area – presumably on a reconnaissance mission. However, he told KHRG that there might have been more jets patrolling the area: *“I think there were a lot of jets because we heard the loud noise of jets in-flight. The jets were flying over our heads.”*

The first airstrike was carried out by two jets. It started at around 7:45 pm and ended at around 9 pm on March 27th 2021. On March 28th, at around 12:45 am, two others jets came and bombed the area again. The airstrikes resulted in civilian casualties, including children; as well as in the destruction of several buildings in Pay Kay village tract, including the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)¹¹ No. 1 Day Bu Noh High school in Day Bu Noh village, as well as 12 villagers' houses in the area.



These photos were taken on April 10th 2021 in Day Bu Noh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District.

They show the KECD Day Bu Noh High School, which was destroyed by Tatmadaw airstrikes on March 28th 2021. A few houses near the school were also damaged.

This particular school was newly built. It opened in 2017.

[Photos: KHRG]

¹¹ 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.



These photos were taken on April 8th 2021 in Day Bu Noh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township. They show the damages caused by the March 27th 2021 airstrikes. [Photos: KHRG]



These photos were taken on April 9th 2021 in Day Bu Noh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township. They show fragments of bombs that were dropped by Tatmadaw jets. [Photos: Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development]

Below is the list of civilian casualties caused by the first airstrikes on the Day Bu Noh area (night of March 27th to 28th 2021):¹²

Adults

1. Naw¹³ A---, 58 years old, injured (Day Bu Noh village)
2. Naw B---, 25 years old, injured (Day Bu Noh village)
3. Saw¹⁴ D---, 47 years old, injured (Day Bu Noh village)
4. Saw E---, 37 years old, seriously injured (Day Bu Noh village)
5. Saw F, 18 years old, injured (Day Bu Noh village)
6. Naw G---, 18 years old, injured (Day Bu Noh village)
7. Saw Gee Doh, 52 years old, deceased (Kloh Baw Hta village)
8. Saw H---, 35 years old, injured (O--- village)

¹² Free Burma Rangers, "[THREE DEAD AND EIGHT WOUNDED AS BURMA ARMY EXPANDS AIR ATTACK TO NORTHERN KAREN STATE](#)", March 2021.

¹³ Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

¹⁴ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

Children

9. Naw C---, 12 years old, injured (Day Bu Noh village)
10. Saw Ta Blut Soe, 8 years old, deceased (Lah Goh village)
11. Name unknown, 2 years old, deceased (Ywa Ray Per Hkoh village)

Tatmadaw jets continued to drop bombs on the Day Bu Noh area on the night of March 28th to March 29th. Local villagers in Hkay Poo, Tay Muh Der, and Pah Heh village tracts also witnessed Tatmadaw jets flying over their villages during the night. According to a KHRG researcher: *“Tatmadaw soldiers also attacked using small guns [the jets fired their cannons]. Four houses [in the Day Bu Noh area] were destroyed by the small gun fire, but I cannot specify the name of the house owners.”*

On March 28th 2021, at 11:45 pm, Tatmadaw jets bombed several villages in the Day Bu Noh area again, injuring three villagers: Saw I---, 65 years old (Day Bu Noh village); Saw J---, 58 years old (Ywa Ray Per Hkoh village); and one child (name, age and village unknown). Moreover, two houses were destroyed in the airstrikes. One was owned by Saw K--- in Htee Kyweh Nee village. The other was owned by Saw L--- in Thay Kha Hta village. Saw L---’s belongings were also damaged, including his household items, farming tractor, rice milling machine and sewing machine.



KHRG received these photos on April 19th 2021. They were taken in Thay Kha Hta village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township. These photos show the villagers’ houses and belongings that were destroyed as a result of Tatmadaw airstrikes. [Photos: KHRG]

On March 29th, at 1 am, two Tatmadaw jets dropped two bombs on the KECD Ser Thweh Thaw School, Hto Htee Per Hkoh village, Pay Kay village tract. No casualties were reported.

Displacement

A total of 2,490 villagers from 15 villages in Pay Kay village tract fled their village because of the airstrikes and settled temporarily in nearby forests. They could not take any belongings or food with them, but some villagers managed to retrieve rice from their villages in the morning. According to a KHRG researcher, every villager in Pay Kay village tract eventually fled to the forest. The villagers who were injured in the airstrikes on Day Bu Noh area could not access proper healthcare services at the displacement site. Some of them were eventually sent to Thailand for treatment on March 30th 2021 [KHRG was not able to establish how many].



KHRG received these photos on April 19th 2021. They show villagers who were injured in the airstrike on Day Bu Noh village area hiding in the forest without access to treatment or proper shelter. They also face food shortages as they had to leave their food supplies behind when they fled. [Photos: KHRG]

A KHRG researcher reported that, as of March 31st 2021, there were over 7,000 IDPs in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. They need food, medicine and tarpaulin for their shelters. These IDPs call on the international community to pressure the Myanmar military into stopping its airstrikes. They are living in constant fear of a Tatmadaw attack. At the time of drafting, the displaced villagers were still hiding in fear because they worried that Tatmadaw troops would come to their village. In nearby Kheh Pa village tract, hundreds of villagers also fled their homes because of the airstrikes on the Day Bu Noh area. Some settled in the forest while others fled to Thailand.



These photos were taken on April 9th 2021, in the Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. They show displaced villagers from Pay Kay village tract hiding in the jungle. [Photos: KHRG]

B. Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District

On March 29th 2021, at around 1 pm, two Tatmadaw jets dropped five bombs on the KECD No. 3 Daw Koo Hta High School in Ler Htoo Poe Village, Mae Thu Village Tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. Five children were injured in the bombing, and two of them sustained serious injuries. The school was completely destroyed.¹⁵

Local sources also reported that Tatmadaw jets dropped two bombs on Meh K'law and Khaw Hpoh Kyi villages, Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District on March 30th 2021.¹⁶ The bombs destroyed or damaged six houses, two rice barns, 175 baskets of rice, one motorbike and one tractor in Meh K'law village. They also killed two villagers (63 year-old Saw Lo Boe and 55-year-old Thein Win), injured four others (50-year-old Naw M---, 62-year-old Naw N---, 17-year-old Saw O--- and 30 year-old Saw P---) and damaged three houses in Khaw Hpoh

¹⁵ Free Burma Rangers, "[CHILDREN KILLED AND WOUNDED BY DAILY AIRSTRIKES FROM BURMA MILITARY, 12,000 PEOPLE NOW DISPLACED IN KAREN STATE](#)", March 2021.

¹⁶ This information was taken from the [Facebook page of the KNU Department of Organising and Information](#) (accessed on May 12th 2021).

Kyi village. Free Burma Rangers¹⁷ also reported that Saw Hpa Loh Hpoh, a 76-year-old villager from Meh K'law died as a result of the airstrike.¹⁸

According to a KHRG researcher, as of early April, the airstrikes had led nearly 5,000 villagers from Dwe Lo Township to flee their village.

C. Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District

Airstrikes

A KHRG researcher reported that the Tatmadaw also carried out two airstrikes in Pah Heh village tract on March 28th 2021, killing one villager and injuring three others. The bombs damaged the KECD Thee Kaw Hta school and a clinic in Thee Kaw Hta Place, Paw Kah Der village; as well as some villagers' houses in Lay Ther Hkoh village.

On the same day, at around 3:30 pm, the Tatmadaw carried out two airstrikes on Khoh Kay village, Pah Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township. There were no casualties because local villagers had already fled to a safe location at around mid-day.

Displacement

The Ei Tu Hta IDP camp is located 21.5 kilometres from Khoh Kay village, Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township, against which an airstrike was carried out on March 28th 2021. People in Ei Tu Hta heard rumours about a Tatmadaw plan to carry out airstrikes against the camp.¹⁹ Therefore, over 3,000 persons living in Ei Tu Hta and surrounding villages, including women, children, elders and persons with disabilities, fled the area and crossed the Salween River [which marks the border between Thailand and Myanmar] by boat later that day.²⁰ Some of the IDPs could bring their belongings with them, but others could not bring anything.

A few hours after reaching Thailand, they were forced to return to Myanmar by the Royal Thai Army. Some elder IDPs did not return right away and stayed in Thailand for 2-3 days, after which they were deported. According to an IDP who fled to Thailand but was forced to return to Ei Tu Hta, the Royal Thai Army told them that they had asked the Tatmadaw not to carry out airstrikes against the Ei Tu Hta IDP camp. Although Thailand is not party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the actions of the Royal Thai Army amount to refoulement. Thus, they fail to meet the country's legal obligations under customary international law.

D. Kler Lwee Htoo District

On March 30th 2021, two Tatmadaw jets bombed the Moe Aung gold mining site located in Meh Theh Hkee place near Htee Hpa Doh village, Meh Yeh Hkee village tract, Hsaw Htee Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. A local source reported that nine people were killed [eight mine workers and a KNLA radio operator] and two others were injured [four mine workers and a member of

¹⁷ Founded in 1997 in response to Tatmadaw 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 (sometimes jointly with KHRG), documents human rights violations and advocates regularly on the situation in Burma/Myanmar.

¹⁸ Free Burma Rangers, "[CIVILIANS KILLED IN THEIR HOMES IN BURMA ARMY ATTACKS](#)", April 2021.

¹⁹ "စစ်ကောင်စီတပ်မှ KNU တပ်မဟာ (၅) နယ်မြေတွင်း လေယာဉ်ဖြင့် ထပ်မံပစ်ခတ်", Karen Information Center, March 2021.

²⁰ "ဒီတုန်းတာ ကျေးရွာမှ ရွာသား ၃,၀၀၀ ထက်မနည်း ထိုင်းဘက်ခြမ်းသို့ ထွက်ပြေးတိမ်းရှောင်", Karen Information Center, March 2021.

the Karen National Union (KNU)²¹ Forestry Department]. Two backhoes and three trucks were also damaged in the explosion. The injured civilians were taken to the Way Htoo hospital for treatment. According to local people, the jet came from Toungoo Town [where a Myanmar Air Force base is located].

Local people in Hsaw Htee Township have heard about the shelling and armed attacks. A Karen relief worker told KHRG that, after the airstrike, the Tatmadaw had withdrawn from the area to reinforce their troops at the main army base in Way Htoo (Shwegyin) Town. Local people are now concerned that the Tatmadaw might have plans to carry out more airstrikes in their area.

Table: Tatmadaw airstrikes in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts, March 2021

Date (time)	Location	District	Deaths	Injuries
Night of March 27 th to 28 th 2021 (7:45 pm to 12:45 am)	Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township	Mu Traw District	3	8
March 28 th 2021 (11:45 pm)	Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township	Mu Traw District	0	3
March 28 th 2021 (3:30 pm)	Khoh Kay village, Pah Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township	Mu Traw District	0	0
March 28 th 2021 (time unknown)	Thee Kaw Hta place, Paw Kah Der village, Pah Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township	Mu Traw District	1	3
March 29 th 2021 (1 am)	Hto Htee Per Hkoh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township	Mu Traw District	0	0
March 29 th 2021 (around 1 pm)	Ler Htoo Poe village, Mae Thu village tract, Dwe Lo Township	Mu Traw District	0	5
March 30 th 2021 (time unknown)	Meh K'law and Khaw Hpoh Kyi villages, Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township	Mu Traw District	3	4
March 30 th 2021 (time unknown)	Meh Theh Hkee place near Htee Hpa Doh village, Meh Yeh Hkee village tract, Hsaw Htee Township	Kler Lwee Htoo District	9	2

Conclusion

The increase in fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw following the February 1st military coup has led to concerns that the NCA might, in practice, no longer be in force. In this context, the airstrikes mark a worrisome escalation of the conflict between the two armed actors, as the Tatmadaw had not used air assets to carry out attacks against the KNU since 1995. Although the State Administration Council (SAC)²² announced a unilateral ceasefire from April 1st to April

²¹ 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.

²² 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

30th – later extended to the end of May –, fighting and airstrikes have continued to take place, prompting thousands of villagers to flee their homes.

Direct attacks against the civilian population and local Karen education systems have been a long-standing feature of the Tatmadaw's counter insurgency strategy, and the recent developments suggest that this has not changed. The bombing of three schools, houses and a gold mine suggests that the Tatmadaw is either targeting civilian infrastructure on purpose or incapable of distinguishing it from legitimate military targets – the latter meaning that its airstrikes are indiscriminate in nature. In both cases, these attacks are a direct violation of international humanitarian law.

Villagers living in KNU-controlled areas now worry that fighting might eventually break out in all KNU districts; and KHRG researchers have reported that the Tatmadaw was bringing in more troops and ammunition in certain areas – presumably in preparation for further fighting. If both parties do not fully recommit to the NCA, the situation could evolve into an all-out conflict between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA. Such an outcome would likely trigger a humanitarian crisis of massive proportions and put local civilians at great risk of human rights abuses.

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.

Further background reading on the consequences of fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District Short Update: Skirmishes, indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw and landmine contamination in Dwe Lo and Bu Tho townships, March and April 2021”](#), May 2021.
- [“An End to Peace Efforts: Recent fighting in Doo Tha Htoo District between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw following the 2021 Myanmar military coup \(March and April 2021\)”](#), May 2021
- [“Where should I flee next?: Fighting and displacement in Doo Tha Htoo, Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts, December 2020 to January 2021”](#), April 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.khrq.org.

Tatmadaw airstrikes in Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts March 2021

