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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Short Update

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Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC forced recruitment and extortion of villagers, and resultant displacement in Htaw Ta Htoo Township (January to February 2024)

This Short Update describes events that occurred in Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District, during January and February 2024. In January 2024, State Administration Council (SAC) authorities from the Ministry of Home Affairs called a meeting with SAC-appointed village heads and village authorities in Day Loh Mu Nu village tract and other village tracts in Htaw Ta Htoo Township. The village heads and authorities were ordered to recruit villagers in their villages as soldiers for the SAC and to collect money from villagers who did not join as soldiers. Villagers were forced to draw lots which would determine their fate. At least 6 villagers from A--- village, in Day Loh Mu Nu village tract, were forcibly recruited in January 2024 and 40 villagers from A--- village in February. Local villagers fear that the SAC will forcibly recruit them or arrest them to be their soldiers and so this has led many villagers in the area to flee to avoid being forcibly recruited.¹

SAC forced recruitment and extortion

In January 2024, SAC authorities from the Burma government's Ministry of Home Affairs held a meeting with SAC-appointed village heads and other village authorities from Day Loh Mu Nu village tract² and other village tracts in Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. These SAC authorities are from the Burma government's Ministry of Home Affairs, in the General Administration Department at the district level in Taw Oo. In the meeting, held at the General Administration Office in Toungoo Town, the SAC authorities ordered the village heads and village authorities to recruit new soldiers from their villages for the SAC military. SAC soldiers also went directly to some villages [such as A--- village, B--- village and C--- village in Day Loh Mu Nu village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township] to instruct village heads to forcibly recruit villagers. If a village were to have 100 households, for example, they would have to recruit one soldier from ten households, recruiting ten soldiers in total. For the remaining 90 households from which a family member does not join the army, each household would have to pay 50,000 kyat [23.76 USD³].

¹ The present document is based on information received in January and February 2024. 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 A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

³ All conversion estimates for Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate of 1 USD = 2104.96 MMK as of February 26th, 2024 <www.xe.com/currency/mmk-burmese-kyat>

There are around 300 households in D--- village, Day Loh Mu Nu village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. In January 2024, the SAC authorities ordered Maung⁴ E---, the village head of D--- village to forcibly recruit a total of 30 villagers from 30 households to become SAC soldiers. The remaining 270 households were each forced to pay 50,000 kyat [23.76 USD].

At the meeting in Toungoo Town, Maung E---, the village head of D--- village, told the SAC authorities from the Ministry of Home Affairs that he could not take responsibility for what they had ordered. He also told the SAC authorities that they would themselves have to extort money or arrest villagers as new soldiers. When he returned to the village from the meeting held by the SAC authorities, he called a meeting with local villagers. He explained to them what the SAC authorities had ordered him to do and that he had refused to do it. He reported to them that he had told the SAC authorities: *"If you [the SAC] want to collect villagers [as new soldiers] or money [in extortion], you can do it [yourselves]."* He warned the villagers that they should be careful when they are in the village or when they are travelling.

Since this order was given in January 2024, the adult male villagers from D--- village have worried and feared that the SAC would arrest them and force them to be soldiers. Local villagers who are parents also feared that the SAC would arrest their children and hold them hostage to force family members to join as soldiers in exchange for the return of the children.

The SAC has strong administrative control in neighbouring villages to D--- village, including A--- village, B--- village, C--- village and F--- village, also in Day Loh Mu Nu village tract. Therefore, after the meeting, it was certain that local villagers from these villages would soon have to draw lots to determine whether they would be forcibly recruited as soldiers or not. The same quota of ten percent would also be enacted here: if a village has 100 households, the SAC would forcibly recruit 10 villagers as soldiers. From 100 households, one person from each household draws lots from which 10 cards picked indicate recruitment and 90 indicate an order to make payment in lieu of recruitment. The 90 villagers who are not forcibly recruited would have to pay 50,000 kyat [23.76 USD] per household.

On January 24th 2024, the SAC forced villagers from A--- village, B--- village, C--- village and F--- village to draw lots to determine which villagers would be forcibly recruited as soldiers. According to a local villager from Day Loh Mu Nu village tract, six villagers from A--- village were selected to become SAC soldiers after they drew lots. Some villagers who did not draw cards indicating forced recruitment, had to give money to the SAC as it had been ordered. There are 400 households in A--- village, around 300 households in B--- village, around 400 or 500 households in C--- village and more than 100 households in F--- village. As of 26th February 2024, 40 [more] villagers who picked a card indicating recruitment during this lot drawing process from A--- village have been forcibly recruited by the SAC as soldiers. Other households in these villages had to give money to the SAC. U⁵ Z---, a Tho Thoung village tract⁶ administrator, has been the main person organising the forced recruitment in these villages. He is an SAC-appointed village tract administrator. In each village, the drawing of lots took place in each village's monastery. During the events, SAC soldiers stood guard with guns in the place where villagers drew lots. After villagers had picked cards indicating recruitment, they were instructed to go directly and sit in SAC military trucks nearby.

It was also reported to KHRG that some villagers from A--- village, B--- village and C--- village did not want to draw lots and so they fled from their villages to escape the forced recruitment. In

⁴ 'Maung' is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

⁵ 'U' is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

⁶ A--- village, B--- village, C--- village and F--- village are in Day Lo Mu Nu village tract, under Karen National Union (KNU) demarcation, and also in Tho Thoung village tract, under Burma government demarcation. This area is a mixed-controlled area.

addition, many male villagers who are over the age of eighteen from H--- village, Seik Pu Taung village tract, in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, also fled from their village because they did not want to draw lots to be recruited as soldiers.

On February 10th 2024, the SAC declared mandatory military service for all men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 [to begin after the 2024 April festival, which marks the country's traditional New Year]. Local villagers from Day Loh Mu Nu village tract were deeply concerned by this declaration. According to a local villager from I--- village, Day Loh Mu Nu village tract, SAC soldiers told some villagers in the village tract after the declaration had been made: *"If you do not give us villagers [to recruit] for soldiers, we will arrest villagers. If we cannot arrest villagers, we will shoot villagers if we see them."* The local villagers also told KHRG that the SAC had informed them that they would begin arresting villagers to recruit them as soldiers after the schools close for the summer break, in March 2024.

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

- ["Taw Oo District Situation Update: Killing, arbitrary arrest, SAC military activities, and education, healthcare, and livelihood challenges, from March to June 2022"](#), July 2023
- ["Why would they target us?": Exploring patterns of the Burma Army's retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma](#), June 2023
- ["Taw Oo District Short Update: Indiscriminate shelling, restrictions on movement and SAC military activity in Htaw Ta Htoo Township, February 2023"](#), March 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.

