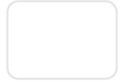


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More than 4,000 people flee into Thailand after fighting in Kayin state intensifies

Intense fighting in southeastern Myanmar's Kayin state has prompted more than 4,000 people to flee across the Thai border, where many have crowded together in makeshift camps on goat and cattle farms, aid workers said.

Citizen video obtained by Radio Free Asia showed several dozen people wading chest-deep across the Thaung Yin River into Thailand. Some carried a bag or wore a backpack while others appeared to be crossing without any personal possessions.

The refugees staying on goat and cattle farms around Mae Sot don't have enough access to toilets and are dealing with hot weather, aid worker Myo Myint Aung told RFA. April is the hottest time of year.

"There is no toilet for them at the goat farm," he said. "We will have to relocate them to the cattle farm but since there are too many refugees there and transportation is difficult, they are still kept at the goat farm."

A person helping the displaced war refugees said there are currently 3,000 war refugees in Thailand's Mae Sot district and over 1,000 in Mae Yama district.

The refugees have fled intensifying fighting in Kayin state between forces for and against the military junta, which took over the government in a 2021 coup.

On Wednesday, the anti-junta Karen National Liberation Army, or KNLA, raided two outposts of the military junta and the Karen Border Guard Force – an ethnic Karen force aligned with the Myanmar military – near Shwe Kokko in Myawaddy township.

Shwe Kokko is the site of a Chinese-backed U.S \$15 billion real estate and casino mega-project that has gained notoriety as a bastion of illegal activity, including drug trafficking. Fierce fighting also broke out at a casino residence and at the village's Kayin New Year celebration grounds.

'We left everything at home'

People only had time to grab a few clothing items before leaving their homes, said Min Thant, a Myawaddy township resident who fled to one of the new camps in Thailand.

“Shwe Kokko residents said earlier that they were going to flee as the sound of heavy artillery shelling was too close to our village,” he said. “The artillery shelling got even closer to the village around 8 a.m. and everyone fled here... We couldn’t bring much with us except some necessary clothes and ran. We left everything at home.”

Thai authorities are helping displaced people flee from Myanmar to Thailand, and are helping them find shelter in five locations, said Ye Min of the Aid Alliance Committee, a Thailand-based migrant worker rights organization.

“Thai authorities have designated some places in Thai villages, schools and some locations on the opposite side of the border from where battles broke out,” he said. “Thai residents from nearby villages cook food and send it to them. The Thai military is also providing them with water and health care.”

Worries of possible forced return

A staff member at Friends without Borders, a Thai NGO that works on the Thai-Myanmar border, told BenarNews that she is still worried that the refugees may be deported prematurely even though they are currently being treated with leniency by Thai authorities.

“I praise the authorities for not barring them,” Pornsuk Kedsawang said. “But what worries me is that they may send them back too soon, so I beg the authorities to keep them until the situation is calm.”

A Mae Sot resident said residents are planning to provide food to refugees with physical and mental injuries.

“When a war breaks out, people develop anxiety and fear,” he said. “They are scared of bullets or injuries. They are worried that their homes and belongings would burn. They cry with such worries and anxieties.”

Saw Khin Maung Myint, the junta’s Karen state spokesman, said to RFA that he has reported the refugee situation to government officials in Nay Pyi Taw.

“Our government (state administration) can’t reach out to the refugees who are in Mae Sot,” he said. “If I may say, I think that the Union government is responsible for such cases. That’s why we report the issues to the Union government.”

Saw Khin Maung Myint did not answer RFA’s inquiry about the situation of the fighting. Junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun also did not respond to a request for comment from RFA.

A Myawaddy resident said fighting had calmed down by Thursday morning.

The Karen Border Guard Force has not yet released any information about the casualties on both sides as a result of the fighting. RFA contacted the KNLA joint forces by telephone, but was unable to contact them.

Translated by Myo Min Aung. Edited by Matt Reed and Malcolm Foster. BenarNews is an RFA-affiliated news organization.

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