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# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Situation Update

January 28<sup>th</sup> 2022 / KHRG # 21-294-S3

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### **Mu Traw District Situation Update: Human rights violations including looting, killing, arbitrary arrest and torture, and the burning of houses and villages, April to July 2021**

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo townships, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District, during the period from April to July 2021, including looting, killing, arbitrary arrest and torture, and the burning of homes by State Administration Council (SAC) troops. SAC troops in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo townships, Mu Traw District engaged in looting of villagers' property, deliberately killed one villager, arrested and tortured another villager and made threats against other villagers. They also fired mortars toward villages, and purposefully burnt down villagers' houses. Because of these human rights violations committed by SAC troops, some villagers are too scared to remain in their villages and have fled to other places.<sup>1</sup>*

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Following the military coup on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> has not respected human rights norms and thus has committed many kinds of human rights violations.

This Situation Update covers events occurring during the period from April to July 2021 in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo townships, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District. During this period, soldiers from SAC<sup>3</sup> Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>4</sup> #407 committed human rights violations against the civilians of Bu

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in October 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. 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.

Tho and Dwe Lo townships. The human rights violations that occurred were: looting, making threats against villagers, arbitrary arrest and torture, arbitrary killing, firing mortars at villages, and the burning of houses and villages.

### **Looting**

A human rights violation occurred on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2021, in A--- village, Lay Hpoh Hta village tract<sup>5</sup>, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. It was a case of looting.

Soldiers from SAC LIB #407, who were coming to clear the landmines along the road from Hpapun to Kamarmaung, were not able to proceed past A--- village [due to the likelihood of being ambushed or attacked by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>6</sup>]. Due to a KNLA blockage of the road, the SAC troops were not receiving their rations, and so they stole rice and various other goods they wanted from A---villagers. That looting occurred on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

Soldiers from SAC LIB #407 stole the following items from victims [villagers]: from Saw<sup>7</sup> B---, one basket [32 kilogrammes] of rice; from Saw C---, one basket of rice and two rice cookers; from Naw<sup>8</sup> D---, two square containers [each one equal to 18 litres] of cooking oil and a VIVO smartphone that cost 250,000 kyats [USD 140.61]<sup>9</sup>; and from Saw E---, two large rice cookers, three fuel tanks, and a refrigerator. Soldiers from SAC LIB #407 forcefully took all these belongings.

### **Killing**

On April 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, soldiers from SAC LIB #407 were ambushed by the KNLA [where they were patrolling], roughly 30 minutes by foot to the south of G--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. After the ambush, as the SAC soldiers returned from patrol, they saw Saw H---, a 35-year-old G--- villager, who was in his own house, shouting and talking randomly because he was drunk. The SAC soldiers shot at Saw H--- several times. [Some] shots hit Saw H---'s head, killing him at the scene [instantaneously].

On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, following Saw H---'s death, all G--- villagers abandoned their village and fled to J--- village in Myaing Gyi Ngu special area because they did not dare remain in their village [due to fear of the SAC and fear that fighting might break out]. On July 24<sup>th</sup> 2021, KHRG received an update that approximately ten households [out of approximately 70 households] had returned to G--- village.

### **Arbitrary arrest, torture, and threats against villagers**

A human rights violation case happened on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2021 in K--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. That human rights violation was a case of arbitrary arrest and torture.

On April 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, soldiers from SAC LIB #407 arrested 47-year-old Saw L--- without evidence of any misdeed [and no explanation for why he was being arrested]. The soldiers were stationed in K--- village monastery to clear the road between Hpapun and Kamarmaung, which had been blocked by trees cut down by the KNLA. They [the SAC soldiers] [arrested Saw L--- in K---

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<sup>5</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

<sup>6</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>7</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>8</sup> Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>9</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the January 27<sup>th</sup> 2022 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.56 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate?>)

village] then sent Saw L--- to M--- village, which is located five miles south of Hpapun Town. They confined him [Saw L---] in M--- village elementary school. While Saw L--- was held in confinement by troops from SAC LIB #407, the soldiers tortured him, crushing [bashing in] his shin with a metal pipe and stabbing his chest with a knife. He escaped [on his own] 20 days after his arrest and fled to hide in the forest two miles away from K---. [Although KHRG was able to speak with Saw L--- to get this information, no further details about his situation were provided.]

Soldiers from SAC LIB #407 also threatened the villagers of K--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township. Later in the evening on the day that Saw L--- was arrested, one of the commanding officers of SAC LIB #407 gathered the villagers in the monastery and threatened them, saying that they [the SAC] would fire mortars at K--- or burn the village if any villagers tried to help Saw L--- escape, or if he escaped [on his own]. Because of this, the villagers did not dare remain in the village and so some fled from the village to hide in the forests and valleys.

### **Firing of mortars at villages**

From April 30<sup>th</sup> to May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021, Military Tactical Operations headquarters (1) based in Hpapun Town shot 120 mm mortars and 81 mm mortars, which fell and exploded in the surrounding villages [N--- and G---]. Because of the shelling and the flying of military aircraft [undertaking surveillance], the villagers abandoned their village and fled.

Some villagers fled to the forest, some fled to Q--- village and some fled to Myaing Gyi Ngu special area, starting from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021. As of yet [the end of the reporting period], the villagers that fled have not dared to return to their village.

### **Burning of houses**

On May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021, soldiers from SAC LIB #407 burnt down houses in N--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township. On July 12<sup>th</sup> 2021, they burnt down houses in G--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township.

In N--- village, the SAC soldiers burned houses belonging to 56-year-old Daw<sup>10</sup> P--- and to 52-year-old Saw R---. In G--- village, they burned houses belonging to 43-year-old U<sup>11</sup> S---, 40-year-old U T---, 49-year-old U W---, and 43-year-old U Y---.

The villagers whose houses were burnt down do not dare return to their villages and find it difficult to build new houses elsewhere because it is the rainy season. Therefore, some of them are now living in the forest, while others are living in poor conditions in the buildings of various monasteries in Myaing Gyi Ngu special area.

Villagers from Dwe Lo and Bu Tho townships, Mu Traw District, where SAC LIB #407 troops have committed various kinds of human rights violations, have abandoned their villages and fled to other places such as Q--- village and Myaing Gyi Ngu special area.

Further background reading about recent human rights violations and the security situation in Mu Traw District in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

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<sup>10</sup> Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>11</sup> U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

- ["Mu Traw District Incident Report: Torture of three villagers in Dwe Lo Township by an SAC officer, August 2021,"](#) January 2022.
- ["Mu Traw District Short Update: Torture, fighting, indiscriminate shelling, and threats by SAC soldiers have resulted in fear and displacement of villagers in Dwe Lo Township, August 2021,"](#) December 2021.
- ["Mu Traw District Situation Update: Airstrikes, fighting, indiscriminate shelling and landmine contamination resulted in the displacement of villagers, one injury and one death in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, March to May 2021,"](#) December 2021.
- ["Mu Traw District Situation Update: Landmine contamination, indiscriminate shelling, arbitrary taxation, movement of troops, and livelihood, education and healthcare situation, May to June 2021,"](#) September 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](http://www.khrq.org).

**Mutraw (Hpapun) District**

