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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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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)



This photo was taken on March 7th 2021 in Thuwanna Waddy Town, Thaton Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. More than 1,000 people from Kyaik Kaw village tract, Th' Htoo (Thaton) Township marched through the streets protesting against the military coup. *[Photo: KNU Thoo Lei News]*

Introduction

In March and April 2021, KHRG documented nine incidents of fighting between the Tatmadaw¹ and Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA)² Brigade 1 on eight different days, with fighting occurring in each of the five townships (Th' Htoo [Thaton], Hpa-an, Paw [Paung], Kyeh Htoh [Kyaikto] and Bilin townships) in Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District.^{3,4} KHRG researchers have also noted that other fighting and shelling in civilian areas has been taking place in Doo Tha Htoo District over the past few weeks, but they have been unable to document all of these cases. The fighting that was reported resulted in injuries and deaths among both KNLA and Tatmadaw soldiers, as well as injury to one villager. This fighting has also led to temporary displacements and restricted freedom of movement in local communities. Up until recently, there had been few reported cases of fighting in Doo Tha Htoo District since the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)⁵ in 2015, despite Tatmadaw military activities and repeated violations of the NCA, particularly concerning trespass into restricted areas.⁶ Thus, these multiple outbreaks are particularly disconcerting, signalling a shift in commitment to upholding ceasefire agreements. Although the exact cause of the different incidents may vary, it is likely that the recent military coup has at least in part triggered these recent outbreaks.

Since February 1st 2021, when the Tatmadaw seized control of the government⁷ and detained many high-level political leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, anti-coup protests and a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)⁸ have been taking place on a wide scale, even in rural villages. These anti-coup activities have led to major crackdowns and arrests, provoking many protestors to flee to Karen National Union (KNU)⁹-controlled areas seeking refuge. As a result, the KNU

¹ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

² The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

³ For clarity, the Burmese terms used for these districts are provided in brackets but do not correspond with the Myanmar government administrative divisions.

⁴ The present document is based on information received in March and April 2021. It was provided by a community member in Doo Tha Htoo 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.

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

⁶ As per the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw are only allowed to operate and travel up to 50 yards from either side of roads that connect their army camps through KNLA territory, and only within a 150 yard radius around their own army camp.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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

leaders in Doo Tha Htoo District welcomed into their villages over 50 Myanmar government staff who had joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and were in need of refuge.¹⁰ Because of that some local communities commented that the Tatmadaw might target and attack the KLNLA in Doo Tha Htoo District.

Local villagers from Doo Tha Htoo have also been active in protesting against the military coup. During the anti-coup protests, local people, including students, have been arrested and shot by the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar Police Force (MPF).¹¹ Despite warnings by the KLNLA not to disturb or harm protestors, the Tatmadaw has not abided.

The military coup has led to concerns that the already fragile 2015 NCA is unravelling, even no longer in force.¹² This alone can have a significant impact on efforts of signatories to resist fighting and maintain the peace. The heavily violent response of the Tatmadaw and MPF toward civilian opposition to the coup has only reinforced the sense that any promises regarding the peace process on the part of the military junta are not to be trusted.

The State Administration Council (SAC),¹³ the interim government chaired by Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief and coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, expressed from the outset its commitment to achieving “eternal peace” and claimed that the NCA was still in effect. And yet, the actions of the Tatmadaw since the military takeover have shown otherwise – fighting as well as attacks on villages and civilians have been increasing. In response to the escalation of fighting in multiple areas throughout the country, the SAC announced on March 31st a month-long unilateral ceasefire beginning April 1st 2021. The SAC noted however that it would continue to respond to “actions that disrupt government security and administration”, thus authorising its own military offensives while insisting all other armed actors “keep the peace”.¹⁴

The fighting described in this news bulletin has all taken place since the coup, with some incidents taking place since the SAC’s March 31st unilateral ceasefire announcement, pointing to the unlikelihood that calls for ceasefire on their own, without other actions to resolve the larger political concerns, will bring about an end to the fighting any time soon.

Although some incidents, namely those in and around towns, were directly tied to anti-coup protests, in other areas, the fighting seems more fully related to tensions that had already been building regarding military activity and violations of the NCA, but that may have now been enflamed by the coup.

Since the 2015 NCA, and prior to the coup, KHRG had only reported two incidents of fighting in Doo Tha Htoo District: a series of skirmishes in June 2019, in Hpa-an Township between the Tatmadaw/Border Guard Force (BGF)¹⁵ and a splinter faction of the Democratic Karen

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.⁹

¹⁰ “[KNU တပ်မဟာ သန့်စင်တပ်တို့ကြား တိုက်ပွဲဖြစ်ပွားနေ](#)”, *Karen Information Center*, March 2021.

¹¹ “[‘MYANMAR PROTESTS LIVE: Hundreds of thousands continue to defy ban on gatherings, threats of ‘action’](#)”, *Frontier Myanmar*, February 2021.

¹² Panu Wongcha-um, “[‘Myanmar coup threatens ceasefire, ethnic rebel leader says](#)”, *Reuters*, February 2021.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ “[‘Myanmar junta offers ceasefire to some, as UN envoy warns of ‘bloodbath’](#)”, *CNN*, April 2021.

¹⁵ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised

Benevolent Army (DKBA splinter group)^{16,17} and a skirmish in January 2021, in Bilin Township between the BGF and the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO),¹⁸ followed by the arrival of about 100 fully armed BGF soldiers to the area.¹⁹ In both cases, villagers had to flee their homes as a result of the fighting. Despite these few incidents of fighting, the Tatmadaw have maintained a strong presence in and near rural villages in areas under KNU control most likely because of road construction and development projects. Local villagers in multiple parts of the district have thus continued to confront problems with the Tatmadaw, and fear the renewal of on-going fighting, as in nearby Mu Traw District, where KNU control is particularly strong.

In late January 2021, subsequent to that first outbreak of fighting in the township since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement,²⁰ villagers from Bilin Township held two demonstrations that united over 2,000 villagers total in the Yoh Klah area, calling for the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps from the area. They made the following demands:

1. Implement the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
2. Armed actors must respect the NCA Code of Conduct
3. Villagers do not want armed conflict
4. The Tatmadaw must withdraw their bases located inside the villages
5. The Myanmar government must solve the conflicts that are happening on the ground
6. Political problems must be solved by political means

Since that time, through the beginning of March, however, no other incidents of fighting in the area had been reported to KHRG.

An outbreak of new skirmishes

Since March 2021, fighting has ignited in different areas of Doo Tha Htoo District. Some fighting did take place in Bilin Township near the Yoh Klah area where the fighting and demonstrations took place in January. However, most of the activity since March has taken place in Hpa-an Township and in the area where Hpa-an, Bilin, and Th'Htoo townships converge. This area holds special interest for the Tatmadaw because it occupies a space where a road from towns to the west could potentially connect to the central road that runs from Hpa-an to Hpapun. The Tatmadaw has thus maintained an active presence in the region, and has often encroached into areas of restricted access. Despite local communities' disapproval of the Tatmadaw's presence and activities in the area, the Tatmadaw has continued sending soldiers into KNU-controlled areas and also, at times, trespassed into KNU restricted areas without informing the local KNLA in advance, in violation of section 10(B) of the NCA Code of Conduct.

ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

¹⁶ In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) split from the KNLA over religious considerations. In 2010, the majority of DKBA troops transformed into BGFs, but one faction refused and changed its name to Democratic Karen Benevolent Army in 2012. In 2015, the DKBA Splinter Group split from this faction. It is active in Hpapun and Hpa-an districts, and it has not signed the NCA.

¹⁷ KHRG, [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Growing concerns about militarisation, land tenure security, development projects and human rights abuses, January to June 2019”](#), September 2019; and KHRG, [“Thaton Interviews: Skirmishes between the Tatmadaw/BGF and the DKBA Splinter Group resulting in displacement in Kye Hto \(Kyaikto\) Township, June 2019”](#), December 2019.

¹⁸ The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

¹⁹ KHRG [““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.

²⁰ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way.

Hpa-an Township

Multiple incidents of fighting took place in Hpa-an Township. Most of this fighting lies between two major roads, making the area of critical importance to the Tatmadaw and its ability to move about within this region (and/or simply cross through).

March 9th 2021

On March 9th 2021, fighting between KNLA Battalion #1, Company #1 and Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)²¹ #204 broke out in K'Ser Law K'Tee Place, Kler Kheh [Nyaung Kone] village, Boo Prer village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, where the KNLA Battalion #1 Company #1's army camp is located. The fighting started at 11:15 am and lasted until 1 pm. According to a local villager from Wah K'Reh village, Kyaw T'Loo village tract, Hpa-an Township, two KNLA soldiers were injured during the fighting. According to Karen Information Center (KIC), the KNU reported that five Tatmadaw soldiers died in the fighting.²²

Shortly before the fighting broke out, Tatmadaw soldiers entered Kler Kheh village without informing the local KNLA in advance. Due to this violation of the NCA Code of Conduct, the KNLA attacked the Tatmadaw as they left the village. A villager from Kler Kheh village told KHRG about the incident: *"On that morning, Tatmadaw soldiers entered our village. They [the soldiers] were told [by villagers] not to come to our village because it is not good for villagers. A moment later, just after they left the village, the fighting happened [between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA] as the KNLA base is near our village."*

At 10:30 am, in response to the KNLA attack, more than 30 Tatmadaw soldiers led by Captain Thi Hah Zaw Win from LIB #409, Company #3 under Military Operations Command (MOC)²³ #2, along with BGF soldiers from Battalion #1013, went to attack the KNLA Battalion #1, Company #1 army camp in K'Ser Law K'Tee Place. Saw²⁴ A---, a villager from nearby Wah T'Reh village, Kyaw T'Loo village tract told KHRG: *"I heard that they [the Tatmadaw] were dissatisfied after they [the KNLA] attacked them so they [the Tatmadaw] attacked their [the KNLA] army camp."* He added that the Tatmadaw and BGF soldiers largely outnumbered the KNLA battalion. As a result, the KNLA were forced to withdraw from their army camp.²⁵ A local authority described the fighting as *"furious [intense]"*. The Tatmadaw burned one car and four motorbikes owned by the KNLA. Currently, the BGF soldiers are occupying the KNLA army camp, and the KNLA have moved elsewhere in the area. Saw A--- also seemed to suggest that the KNLA has not since retaliated out of concern for the safety of local villagers: *"They [the KNLA] also could not attack the Tatmadaw because if they did, it would impact the civilians, so they listened to [considered the safety of] the civilians."*

As a result of the fighting, villagers from Kler Kheh village fled to neighboring villages for their safety [KHRG was not able to identify how many villagers fled their village]. According to an update from a KHRG researcher on March 19th 2021, some villagers have already returned to their village, but others are still afraid to come back. In addition, the increase in Tatmadaw soldiers in the area has caused restrictions of movement for local villagers. Villagers are now

²¹ 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.

²² [“ညောင်ကုန်းရွာသစ်ပစ်ခတ်မှုအတွင်း စစ်တပ်ဘက် ရှဦးသေဆုံးဟု KNU ပြော”](#), Karen Information Center, March 2021.

²³ A Military Operations Command is composed of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

²⁴ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

²⁵ [“ညောင်ကုန်းရွာသစ်ပစ်ခတ်မှုအတွင်း စစ်တပ်ဘက် ရှဦးသေဆုံးဟု KNU ပြော”](#), Karen Information Center, March 2021.

only allowed to travel from 6 am to 8 pm. According to Saw A--- from Wah K'Reh village: "We are in fear. Villagers [in the area] do not feel secure to travel so we do not travel much [even during the authorised hours]." A villager from Kler Kheh village adds: "At this time, we have to band together. We have to travel with many people. We face difficulties travelling to buy and sell stuff." The fighting has thus also created livelihood challenges for local communities.

Saw A--- provided his perspective on the current movement of Tatmadaw in the area: "It would be good if they were not present in Karen territory because this is Karen area. However, the Tatmadaw do not retreat; instead, they continue moving forward [to extend their operation area] and send more soldiers."

According to another villager, the BGF plan to stay as long as there is fighting between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA. They are currently occupying the land of a local villager, although have told villagers that they do not plan to confiscate anyone's land.

Regarding the recent fighting in Kler Kheh village, the BGF claim that the KNLA shot at the Tatmadaw first, but P'doh²⁶ Saw Soe Mying, KNU Doo Tha Htoo District Secretary told KIC on March 10th 2021 that the skirmish between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw occurred in Kler Kheh village because the Tatmadaw had shot at the KNLA soldiers first.²⁷ The information received by KHRG does indicate that the KNLA attacked the Tatmadaw soldiers who had trespassed into the village earlier in the day, but no specific details of that attack were provided, other than it being motivated by a violation of the NCA Code of Conduct, section 10(B). Who shot first later that day, at 11:15 am when the fighting broke out, is unclear. Nevertheless, this fighting amounts to a violation of section 5(a) of the NCA, which forbids the signatories from carrying out armed attacks in ceasefire areas.

According to a KHRG researcher from Doo Tha Htoo District, another skirmish broke out further south in Myaing K'lay between the soldiers of KNLA Brigade 1 and the Tatmadaw LIB #204 on March 9th 2021. No further information was obtained about this incident.

March 19th 2021

On March 19th 2021 at 11:00 am fighting broke out between KNLA Battalion #1 and Tatmadaw LIB #409 in Guh Bee Htwee Place between Meh Leh Hkee area and Noh M'Kwee area, Hpa-an Township. A Tatmadaw truck mirror was damaged but nobody died or got injured in the fighting. The fighting happened because the Tatmadaw transported rations to a KNU restricted area without informing the KNLA, thus in violation of the NCA Code of Conduct.

April 3rd 2021

On April 3rd 2021 at around 11 pm, more fighting took place in the lower part of K'Ser Law K'Tee army camp, Kler Kheh village, Hpa-an Township, in this case between KNLA Brigade 1, Battalion #1 and Tatmadaw LIB #409, supported by BGF Battalion #1014. Two soldiers from BGF #1014, led by Commander Tin Win, died in the fighting. During the skirmish, the Tatmadaw indiscriminately fired mortars at areas around their army camp. At the same time, Tatmadaw in nearby P'Nweh Klah army camp (MOC #8), Th'Htoo Township, also indiscriminately fired mortars toward the K'Ser Law K'Tee army camp. As a result, another 10 households from Kler Keh village have now fled to other villages. Some villagers returned to their village despite the high risk to their own safety. KHRG did not receive information about what caused the fighting.

²⁶ P'doh is a title meaning 'governor' or 'minister' within the government or military.

²⁷ [“ညောင်ကုန်းရွာသစ်ခတ်မှအတွင်း စစ်တပ်ဘက် ရှဦးသေဆုံးဟု KNU ဖြေ”](#), Karen Information Center, March 2021.

April 7th 2021

Fighting also happened in Meh Leh Hkee village, T’Kaw Boe village tract, Hpa-an Township on April 7th at 6:30 am between the KNLA and Tatmadaw LIB #208 under Light Infantry Division (LID)²⁸ #22. The platoon commander from LIB #208 died in the fighting. KHRG received no further information about this incident.

Kyeh Htoh Township

March 9th 2021

According to a KHRG researcher, skirmishes between the soldiers of KNLA Brigade 1 and the Tatmadaw took place in multiple areas in Doo Tha Htoo District on March 9th 2021. Aside from the previously mentioned two skirmishes in Hpa-an Township on that day, a skirmish between the soldiers of KNLA Brigade 1 and the Tatmadaw LID #44 also took place in Kyaikto Kin Mon Sa Ken area, Kyeh Htoh Township on March 9th 2021. KHRG was not able to obtain further information about this incident.

March 25th 2021

As a result of violence against anti-coup protestors, on March 25th 2021 at 8:00 pm, a skirmish broke out between KNLA Brigade 1 and Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion (IB)²⁹ #96 at the headquarters of IB #96 in Kyeh Htoh Town, Kyeh Htoh Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. The KNLA fired around 10 mortar shells at IB #96 army camp in Kyeh Htoh Town. In response to the KNLA attack, Tatmadaw indiscriminately fired small and heavy arms around their own army camp. The fighting lasted several minutes. KHRG was not able to determine if there were any casualties. After the skirmish, both the Tatmadaw and MPF began checking and questioning people who travel on the road in Kyeh Htoh Town for security purposes. They stopped cars to check for the presence of explosive devices or any item that they believed to be dangerous.

The KNLA-led attack on the Tatmadaw in Kyeh Htoh Town was due to the Tatmadaw’s actions regarding villagers who participated in protests against the coup. According to a KHRG researcher, *“The Tatmadaw requested the KNLA not to attack urban areas but [KNLA] Brigade 1 leaders also requested the Tatmadaw not to harm, impede or kill civilian people involved in the protests [against the coup] but they are still doing that. That is why they [the KNLA] had no choice but to fight back [in defence of civilian protesters].”* The attacks on protestors have continued nevertheless. On March 29th 2021, a 27-year-old protester from Kyeh Htoh Town was shot dead by the Burma military.³⁰

Bilin Township

Multiple incidents of fighting broke out in Tar Paw and Lay Kay villages. Lay Kay had been one of the areas involved in the January 2021 demonstrations calling for the withdrawal of Tatmadaw army camps. Given the lack of information, it is difficult to determine whether there is

²⁸ Like a Military Operations Command, a Light Infantry Division has ten (Light Infantry) battalions divided into three Tactical Operations Commands and is used for offensive operations. However, LIDs take their orders from the Ministry of Defence rather than the Regional Command.

²⁹ An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most 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. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

³⁰ A private social media source accessed in March 2021.

any connection between the current fighting and the earlier incidents in January between the KNDO and BGF. It is clear from KHRG's previous report that tensions in the area were high, and that in both cases, the incidents have left villagers in fear for their own safety.

April 3rd – 4th 2021

Skirmishes occurred between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in two different places in Bilin Township, the second skirmish taking place not far from the previous fighting in January 2021. The first incident took place in Tar Paw village, Tar Paw village tract on April 3rd around 8 or 9 pm in the evening. The second incident took place in Lay Kay village, P'yah Raw village tract at 2 am on April 4th between Tatmadaw LIB #406 and the KNLA. There is no further information about the fighting in Tar Paw, but in Lay Kay village, the Tatmadaw fired mortars into the central compound of the village and monastery, leaving some houses damaged.

According to a local villager, Lay Kay villagers displaced to towns where they think it is safe. Some villagers fled to Lay Kay Mountain to hide in the caves because they were worried that Tatmadaw aircraft would drop bombs on their community. They had heard that these types of airstrikes were taking place in Mu Traw District. Because of the fear of additional mortar attacks, the villagers have dug hiding holes and built makeshift bunkers for self-protection. Local villagers near the fighting have also sent their children to towns and other safe places, in case the fighting renews. Another concern that arose for many villagers was that the Tatmadaw would impose forced labour upon them, as in the past, so they fled in hiding. A local villager reported that there were no casualties on either side.

April 7th 2021

Fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw broke out again in Tar Paw village, Tar Paw village tract, Bilin Township at 11 am on April 7th 2021.

Th'Htoo Township

Multiple incidents of fighting occurred in Th'Htoo Township. One incident occurred close to the fighting in Hpa-an Township, and involved some of the same Tatmadaw battalions as the fighting that occurred in Hpa-an Township on April 3rd and in Bilin Township on April 4th.

March 9th 2021

According to a KHRG researcher from Doo Tha Htoo District, skirmishes took place between the soldiers of KNLA Brigade 1 and the Tatmadaw in multiple places in Th'Htoo District on March 9th 2021: Alan Tayar area, involving Tatmadaw Military Training Battalion #9; and Thaton Taing Tayar area, involving Tatmadaw LIB #118. KHRG received no further information about these incidents.

April 2nd 2021

On April 2nd 2021 at 7:30 pm, a skirmish broke out between KNLA Brigade 1, Battalion #2 and Tatmadaw LIB #406 in T'La Aaw Hpoh Klah village, Neh Hpaw Hta village tract, Thaton Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, where LIB #406 is based. The fighting lasted approximately 30 minutes.

At 8 pm, however, Tatmadaw soldiers from P'Nweh Klah army camp (located near T'La Aaw Hpoh Klah village) indiscriminately fired 120 mm mortars in the vicinity in order to support their fellow soldiers in T'La Aaw Hpoh Klah army camp. Because the LIB #406 commander is based in P'Nweh Klah army camp (MOC #8), which is the main camp in the area, local villagers

assume that he is the person who ordered Tatmadaw soldiers to fire mortar shells in the area. KHRG did not receive information about the reason for the fighting but, like the fighting at K'Ser Law K'Tee, Hpa-an Township on March 9th and April 3rd, it could be tied to tensions over road construction and issues of trespass by the Tatmadaw.

Due to the shelling, one villager was injured. In addition, many buildings were destroyed or damaged. One villager's house in Lay Gher Kler village, T'Maw Daw village tract was completely destroyed after catching fire due to the shelling. Many other houses were damaged by the shrapnel. The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)³¹ clinic in Lay Gher Kler was also hit by shrapnel, with people still inside. At that time, a hospitalised woman from Hpah Paw village, Neh Hpaw Hta village tract got hit in the back while she was breastfeeding her baby during the shelling. Currently, health workers from the clinic have to sleep outside of the village at night and they can only come back to the clinic during the day in order to treat the people who are ill. Villagers near the Tatmadaw army camps have also fled to other places to escape the shelling.

Some villagers were able to return to their village after the incident but male villagers continue to sleep elsewhere because they fear that the Tatmadaw will arrest them and force them to do portering. In the past, male villagers were the first people Tatmadaw exploited as porters for military purposes. With the men in hiding, women and children have been left alone in the villages to look after their property, living and sleeping in fear. They also are afraid that the Tatmadaw soldiers will come into their villages.

Paw Township

April 6th 2021

Fighting also happened in the far southern area of Doo Tha Hta District near Mote Ta Ma Town, Paw Township at 6 am on April 6th 2021 between Tatmadaw LIB #102 under LID #44 and KNLA Brigade 1, Battalion #1. No information has been reported about possible casualties.

Conclusion

The fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw has escalated not just in Doo Tha Htoo District, but other parts of Southeast Myanmar, despite the Tatmadaw's statement on March 31st 2021 announcing a unilateral ceasefire from April 1st to April 30th 2021. The recent fighting is not only a direct violation of section 5(a) of the 2015 NCA, which forbids the signatories from carrying out armed attacks in ceasefire areas, but is proof that the recent post-coup ceasefire agreement carries no weight. According to a statement released by the SAC on April 30th, the April ceasefire has now been extended to the end of May 2021, while fighting and heavy airstrikes by the Tatmadaw continue to take place, only furthering distrust of the SAC and the Tatmadaw by Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), thus making the possibility for successful peace negotiations in the near future even more tenuous.

While the low incidence of fighting in Doo Tha Htoo District since 2015 had been a promising sign of a desire to maintain the peace, even in the face of military activity and NCA violations, that time has passed and we are clearly seeing a rise in both attacks and retaliatory activities not just in Doo Tha Htoo, but throughout KHRG's operational area. Ultimately it is the villagers

³¹ The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Myanmar. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.

who pay the price. Although physical injuries to civilians have remained low thus far in Doo Tha Htoo, as one villager expressed, the psychological and emotional toll can already be felt: *“At the moment, no villagers have been injured, but we are afraid and always have to be cautious -- nobody dares even to make a noise [because the soldiers are nearby].”* Villagers are having once again to use their makeshift bunkers to hide, and past fears of being taken for forced labor have been reignited.

Further background reading on fighting between armed actors in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“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.
- [“Dooplaya District Short Update: Skirmish between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in Kaw T’Ree Township, February 2021”](#), March 2021.
- [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, killings and sexual violence, July to December 2020”](#), February 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.

Fighting in Doo Tha Htoo District

