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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Doo Tha Htoo Situation Update: Fighting and indiscriminate shelling by SAC forces, April to May 2021

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bilin and Thaton Townships, Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District between April and May 2021, including skirmishes between the KNLA and the SAC military, as well as several instances of indiscriminate shelling by SAC forces. In late April, the BGF sent 200 soldiers to Doo Tha Htoo District to relieve their troops based in Ta Paw and Lay Kay army camps. During the troop rotation, the BGF indiscriminately fired mortar rounds at the villages surrounding their camps and forced civilians to transport BGF soldiers on their trucks. On April 23rd 2021, a villager from Kyeik Kaw Thein Seik town was forced to give a ride to SAC soldiers. He was killed in the crossfire after his truck was ambushed by KNLA soldiers.¹

1. Indiscriminate shelling by SAC forces in Bilin Township

On April 4th 2021, Border Guard Force (BGF)² [and State Administration Council - SAC] soldiers³ [from Lay Kay SAC army camp] indiscriminately fired mortar rounds at Lay Kay village, Lay Kay village, P'Ya Raw village tract,⁴ Bilin Township, destroying one farm hut belonging to a local villager. Fortunately, the owner was not inside the hut on the night of the incident. [Another civilian building was also damaged.]

¹ The present document is based on information received on May 14th 2021. It was provided by a community member in Doo Tha Htoo 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 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 ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

³ SAC military is the term used by KHRG to refer to the Myanmar armed forces, also known as the Tatmadaw. The term has been adopted by KHRG in specific reference to the Myanmar military since the February 1st 2021 coup and the establishment of the State Administration Council (SAC) as the executive governing body headed by the military.

⁴ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.



These photos were taken on April 4th 2021 in Lay Kay Village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. This house's roof was damaged by mortar shrapnel as a result of the indiscriminate shelling by the BGF and SAC military. [Photos: Villager]



These photos were taken on April 4th 2021 in Lay Kay village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. The photo on the left shows a piece of mortar shrapnel. The photo on the right shows a spot where a mortar round landed. [Photos: Villager]

2. Fighting breaks out during a protest in support of the NUG in Thaton Township

On April 23rd 2021, at around 8 am, fighting broke out between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁵ and an unknown SAC unit from Thaton army camp. The incident happened on the highway between Thaton town and Yangon town, beside Kaung Kyet shop, Thaton Town, Thaton Township. On that day, local civilians were holding a protest in support of the National Unity Government (NUG)⁶ under the protection of KNLA soldiers. However, fighting broke out after SAC soldiers arrived at the protest location.

⁵ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁶ The National Unity Government (NUG) was formed by the acting cabinet of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on April 16th 2021, following the February 1st military coup. U Min Wyint was retained as President, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor, both still under detention by the SAC military. The NUG claims to be the legitimate government of Myanmar, and has sought international recognition as such. The NUG cabinet is composed primarily of lawmakers elected in the 2020 election, along with other key ethnic figures. As the military junta has declared the NUG illegal, it is operating as a government-in-exile. On May 5th 2021, the NUG announced the formation of a "People's Defence Force" to serve as its armed wing.

3. Indiscriminate shelling by SAC forces in Bilin Township

On April 23rd 2021, the SAC Artillery Unit #314 based in Htee Hpoe Nya Lee Hkee army camp, near Kyaw T'Raw village, Shway Yaw Pya village tract, Bilin Township indiscriminately fired mortar rounds at nearby villages such as Ma Yan Gone, Mi Chyaung Aaing and Htee Nya Paw, among others. Since April 23rd 2021, Artillery Unit #314 has been regularly firing artillery rounds at local communities, especially those located in areas controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU).⁷ These rounds are bigger and have a longer range than 120mm mortar rounds. The platform they are fired from must be moved by truck. The SAC artillery rounds landed in villages such as T'Rer Hkee, T'Rer Wah, Yo Poe and Htee Poo Wah [among others], T'Rer Hkee village tract.

As a result of the SAC indiscriminate shelling, one Ma Yan Gone villager, Saw⁸ T---, sustained a shrapnel injury to his leg. Many plantations local villagers rely on for their livelihoods have also been damaged, and no compensation was provided to their owners. Moreover, about 3,000 villagers from the areas affected have been fleeing their villages since April 27th. The only villagers who still remain in the area [hiding in the forest near their villages] are the villagers who do not have relatives in towns or in other places.

4. Villager killed in crossfire after being forced to transport SAC soldiers

On April 23rd 2021, an unidentified villager from Myaink Teh Su section, Kyeik Kaw Thein Seik town, died during a skirmish between the KNLA and SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁹ #406, Military Operations Command (MOC)¹⁰ #8 [under the authority of Battalion Commander Kyaw Yaw Hla] beside the vehicle road near Chaw Bee Na and Kaw Ler villages, Kaw Ler village tract, Thaton Township. Before the incident, the victim was delivering bricks to Noh Htoe Day village, Maw Lay village tract.

He encountered SAC LIB #406 soldiers from T'La Aww Poe Klah army camp on his way back from Noh Htoe Day village. The soldiers forced him to stop and to take them on his truck to an unknown location, so he could not refuse this order. Unfortunately, [the truck was ambushed by] KNLA [soldiers] along the way. The driver was killed during the ensuing skirmish. Some SAC soldiers were also killed, and others got injured. Local villagers think that these LIB #406 soldiers were on their way to help the SAC troops involved in the fighting in Thaton town [see Section 2].

⁷ 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.

⁸ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

⁹ 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. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

¹⁰ 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.



This photo was taken on April 23th 2021 beside the vehicle road near Chaw Bee Na and Kaw Ler villages, Kaw Ler village tract, Thaton Township, Doo Tha Htoo District.

This truck owned by an unidentified villager from Kyeik Kaw Thein Seik town was destroyed during a skirmish between KNLA and SAC soldiers. The owner of the truck was killed in the crossfire.

[Photo: Villager]

5. BGF activities in Bilin Township

Most of the SAC military operations between Ta Paw army camp, Ta Paw village tract and Lay Kay army camps, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township are conducted by the BGF. [According to information received by KHRG, BGF soldiers make up around 90% of the SAC forces in the area.]

Between April 27th and May 3rd 2021, BGF Battalion #1014 led by Bo¹¹ Tin Way and Battalion Commander Bo Maung Chit sent about 200 soldiers to Doo Tha Htoo District. Local villagers do not know where these soldiers are from and they claim that they were sent to relieve the troops based in Ta Paw and Lay Kay army camps.

On April 29th 2021, fighting between the KNLA and BGF broke out when these BGF soldiers arrived at Baw Ta Pro village. The soldiers then crossed the Baw Naw Kloe River at Ha Ta Reh Place¹² and headed towards Ta Paw army camp, Ta Paw village tract, Bilin Township. They reached the camp on May 1st 2021. While staying at the camp, the BGF indiscriminately fired mortar rounds at nearby villages, destroying one farm hut belonging to a Ta Paw villager on May 1st 2021.

The BGF troops spent the night at the camp before continuing their journey towards Lay Kay army camp on May 2nd. They always fired mortar rounds indiscriminately when arriving and leaving their camps to clear the road [and surrounding areas of KNLA soldiers].

On May 3rd and 4th 2021, the BGF in Lay Kay army camp fired mortar rounds at nearby villages. At least five of these rounds did not explode. One house was damaged and one villager sustained injuries as a result of the shelling. In addition, Saw Z---, a Lay Kay villager, also sustained a shrapnel injury on May 3rd and his car's windows were damaged.

¹¹ Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer'.

¹² Place refers to the name given by local communities to a specific location. It is smaller than what local communities refer to as an area



This photo was taken on May 3rd 2021 in Lay Kay village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District.

It shows an unexploded mortar round fired by the BGF.

[Photos: Villager]

In the afternoon of May 3rd 2021, BGF soldiers ordered Lay Kay villagers to provide four trucks for their soldiers' return to Ta Paw army camp, but the villagers could only provide three trucks. [The truck owners had to drive the BGF soldiers back to Ta Paw army camp.] KHRG does not know whether these villagers received payment. Even though the truck owners were afraid and did not feel safe, they had to take the soldiers back to their camp nonetheless. Local civilians do not know where the BGF troops went after that. Some BGF soldiers who used to be based in Lay Kay army camp remained there after the new troops arrived, so villagers assume that the BGF sent reinforcements instead of just relieving their troops this time.

According to a KHRG researcher, several skirmishes broke out while the BGF was sending more soldiers to relieve its troops based in the area because local villagers could hear gunfire every day. However, the KHRG researcher and local villagers could not tell whether it was the sound of fighting or indiscriminate shelling. The fighting paused after the BGF troops [that were relieved] returned to their area of origin in early May 2021. However, fighting is still on-going along the border between District 5 [Mu Traw] and District 1 [Doo Tha Htoo].

Moreover, from April 27th to May 18th 2021, SAC helicopters also conducted a couple of reconnaissance missions over Bilin and Thaton townships.

6. Fighting

On May 16th 2021, fighting broke out on the road between Bilin and Na Gyi towns between KNLA Battalion #3 and SAC soldiers who were sending rations to Meh Pray Hkee army camp, Meh Pray Hkee village, Meh Pray Hkee village tract, Bilin Township. The SAC troops then headed towards their army camps in Mu Traw District with the rations.

According to an update provided by a KHRG researcher on May 18th 2021, fighting and indiscriminate shelling happen regularly along the vehicle roads used by SAC and BGF troops. This is notably the case along the road between Ka Ma Moe Town and Wan Bo Taw Place and the road between Bilin Town and Nan Gyi village.

7. The KNLA and BGF restrict the transportation of food

In response to the BGF sending more troops, the KNLA banned villagers from transporting large amounts of rice without obtaining a permission letter from the village tract authorities starting on May 1st 2021. The KNLA took this decision because they were worried rice supplies might be sent to the Tatmadaw in Mu Traw District.

On May 17th, one villager [who was transporting food or household items] was stopped by the BGF in front of Ta Paw army camp so he/she showed his permission letter to the BGF. After learning that the KNLA had restricted the transportation of rations [rice], the BGF forbade villagers from transporting rice [even with a permission letter]. The new restriction took effect on that same day. [This seems to be a retaliatory measure against the KNLA].

8. Education

Local teachers, KHRG researchers and villagers think that most of the students from government schools will go to Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)¹³ schools this year [many teachers have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM),¹⁴ which resulted in the closure of government schools]. However, KECD schools will not have enough classroom/dormitory space, teachers and funding to accommodate all these students.

9. Healthcare

Government hospitals are closed as most doctors and health workers became members of the CDM. Only private clinics remain open. Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)¹⁵ clinics remain open, but they do not have sufficient medical supplies or the ability to treat major illnesses.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

Further background reading on the deterioration of the security situation in Southeast Myanmar following the February 2021 military coup can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["A Worrisome Escalation: Tatmadaw airstrikes kill at least 16 villagers, displace thousands in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts, March 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.
- ["Kler Lwee Htoo District Short Update: Increased militarisation and fighting between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA prevent IDPs from returning home in Ler Doh Township, March to May 2021"](#), May 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.

Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District

