

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	318
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	Radio Free Asia
Titel:	Renewed Clashes as Karen Chafe at Stepped-Up Myanmar Military Presence in Kayin State.
Udgivet:	31. december 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	29. april 2021



Renewed Clashes as Karen Chafe at Stepped-Up Myanmar Military Presence in Kayin State

2020-12-31



Thousands of ethnic Karen locals stage a protest demanding the closure of a Myanmar Army base and the suspension of military construction work in Hpapun district, southeastern Myanmar's Kayin state, Dec. 30, 2020.

The Myanmar military's increased encroachment into territory inhabited by ethnic Karen people in southeastern Myanmar's Kayin state has caused fresh armed clashes that have forced more than 3,000 villagers to flee their homes, a Karen activist group said Wednesday.

Fighting between the Myanmar military and the Karen National Union (KNU), the country's oldest ethnic rebel army, resumed in southeastern Kayin state in early December, despite a nationwide cease-fire agreement (NCA) the ethnic army signed in 2015.

A statement issued by the Karen Youth Network said that the ruling civilian-led National League for Democracy and the government military were responsible for this instance of backsliding on the country's peace process.

"If these activities cannot be stopped, it will only hurt the local civilians, mainly ethnic Karen people," said Saw Kyaw Linn Oo, a member of the KYN secretariat.

"Karen people have endured the affects of civil war for nearly 80 years since the time of Myanmar's independence," he said. "Karen people don't want these armed conflicts anymore, so we are going to take a step-by-step approach to resolve the issue." Saw Kyaw Linn Oo did not elaborate on what this process would entail.

Decades of warfare in Kayin have resulted in about 140,000 of Myanmar's roughly six million ethnic Karen people living in refugee camps in nearby Thailand, according to aid groups.

Armed engagements have occurred in the Mae Wai area of Hpapun district, part of the territory controlled by the KNU's Division No. 5, because the Myanmar military has refused to withdraw troops from the area as required by NCA.

On Wednesday, more than 10,000 ethnic Karens staged a protest in the district's Lu Thaw area demanding that the military withdraw soldiers, close a local army base, and suspend military construction work.

Meanwhile, thousands of area residents have left their homes, fearing full-blown hostilities in the restive area where sporadic clashes have occurred between Myanmar soldiers and the KNU since early December, said a local who declined to be named out of concern for his safety.

“More than 100 soldiers from nearby Taiti village have been ordered to reinforce existing troops,” he told RFA. “Now, most of the men in the village have left, and only women and children remain at home.”

‘Everyone is afraid’

Tensions between the ethnic army and Myanmar forces are also growing in territory controlled by the KNU’s Division No. 1 in Thaton district of neighboring Mon state, because of a buildup of local soldiers backing up the government army and its affiliated Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), locals said.

Villagers are maintaining low profiles to avoid attracting attention from soldiers in the area, said a woman who requested anonymity for safety reasons.

“Local villagers are now trying to keep quiet more than before,” she said. “Some villagers have already fled, including some people from the Kyaik Kaw area. Some have gone to places very far away, while others are staying close to the village.”

“Villagers are now sleeping under their houses, so they can get to bomb shelters in case of an emergency,” she added. “No one dares to sleep inside their home. Everyone is afraid.”

KNU officials told RFA that leaders from both sides are negotiating, but that they have put their troops on alert.

“If the negotiations with Division No. 1 are not successful, there will be more fighting,” the first local said.

Colonel Saw Kyaw Myint from the KNU’s Division No. 1, told RFA that both sides are closely watching the other’s movements while top leaders continue their talks.

“The military should have withdrawn its troops,” he said. “If it doesn’t, then the situation could get worse. We will have to wait and see. We are now taking orders from the central leadership.”

Colonel Saw Ae Do Htoo, external relations officer of the KNU’s Division No. 5, said that the current sporadic clashes in the region cannot be resolved through low-level negotiations.

“Many local civilians from the Mae Wai area are now fleeing their homes,” he said. “We are hoping that we can resolve these tensions through meetings and negotiations between top [Myanmar] military officers and our top leaders.”

Formal peace process

Myanmar military spokesman Major General Zaw Min Tun told reporters at a news conference Wednesday in Naypyidaw that leaders from both sides need to negotiate through Myanmar's formal peace negotiation process.

"The military has informed the KNU's head office to supervise its soldiers more carefully as these armed engagements could derail the ongoing peace process that both the military and the KNU are working on," he said. "I believe that this issue can be resolved through the negotiations."

Nang Say Awa, a civilian member of the state-level Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC), which monitors the implementation of the NCA, expressed concern over the situation, but stressed that the two sides must resolve their differences.

"We are all concerned about the situation, [and] we empathize with both sides," he said. "But as a civilian organization, the JMC has only limited power. It is the troops from both sides who need to negotiate and compromise."

Min Zaw Oo, executive director of the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, who has been involved in the ongoing peace process in Myanmar since its inception, agreed that the new clashes in Hpapun are affecting the country's peace process.

"The weakening trust of each side will lead to armed engagements, casualties on both sides, and local civilians fleeing homes," he said. "The local people will distrust the entire peace process. All in all, these armed engagements severely affect the peace process."

The KNU is one of 10 ethnic armies that have signed the NCA, a pact intended to end decades of conflict that have stymied Myanmar's political and economic development.

Though the KNU is an NCA signatory, it has been involved in skirmishes this year, triggered by government soldiers entering KNU-controlled territory for road construction work.

In July, thousands of ethnic Karens rallied outside army outposts demanding justice for a villager shot dead by two drunk Myanmar Army privates during a scuffle and called on the government to withdraw its troops from the district.

Reported by Saw Nyunt Thaung for RFA's Myanmar Service. Translated by Ye Kaung Myint Maung. Written in English by Roseanne Gerin.

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