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Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Mu Traw District Situation Update: Anti-Tatmadaw demonstrations and skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, December 2019 to January 2020

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw [Hpapun] District from December 2019 to January 2020. Fighting between the Karen National Liberation Army [KNLA]¹ and the Tatmadaw² broke out on January 3rd in Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract, resulting in several Tatmadaw casualties according to the KNLA. On January 15th, local villagers held several demonstrations against the Tatmadaw road construction activities and called on the military to withdraw from the area, to no avail. Villagers in the Township are also facing livelihood difficulties because bad weather and rodent invasions led to bad harvests in 2019.³

1) Demonstrations against Tatmadaw road construction activities

On January 15th 2020, villagers from Mu Traw district held several demonstrations against the Tatmadaw road construction activities in the area. The protests took place in A---, B---, C--- and D--- [Bu Tho Township]; E--- and F--- [Dwe Lo Township]; as well as in Lu Thaw Township.

The demonstrators held signs with their two main demands:

- 1) We do not want the Tatmadaw soldiers to build a vehicle road in our local areas; not at all!
- 2) The Tatmadaw must withdraw all their army camps from our local areas!

They also used these three slogans:

- 1) Tatmadaw soldiers building the vehicle road - we don't want! (x2)
- 2) Building roads in our local areas - it's just us! (x2)
- 3) Building roads in times of conflict - we don't allow! (x2)

The demonstrations were led by the local village leaders and elders. Some of the expenses were supported by organisations affiliated with the Karen National Union [KNU].⁴

¹ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

² Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

³ The present document is based on information received in February 2020. 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.

⁴ 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.



This photo was taken on January 15th 2020 in E--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District.

It shows local villagers demonstrating against the Tatmadaw road construction activities.

The protesters also called on the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the area.

[Photo: KHRG]

2) Tatmadaw and BGF [Border Guard Force]⁵ activity

The Tatmadaw soldiers from Tactical Operations Command [TOC] #1, Military Operations Command [MOC] #8 that were based in G--- village relocated near H--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract, Bu Tho township in 2019. Their presence beside the road raised concerns among the local villagers, who do not feel free and confident to travel around anymore. Sometimes, they [Tatmadaw soldiers] also check and threaten the local villagers travelling by motorbikes, or the villagers travelling by foot and carrying many things with them.

On January 3rd 2020, fighting broke out between the Karen National Liberation Army [KNLA] and the Tatmadaw near I--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract. According to a KNLA source in J---, one Tatmadaw soldier died and three were injured in the skirmish. There were no KNLA casualties. The skirmish occurred in an area under the control of KNLA Brigade 5, Battalion #102, Company #4. Company #4 is led by Company Commander Saw Hsah Yu Moo.

The fighting broke out after Tatmadaw soldiers from TOC #1 [MOC #8] under the authority of Commander Aung Aung trespassed into delimited areas [50 yards into KNU-controlled territory]. The Tatmadaw soldiers patrolled from H--- to K--- and trespassed into delimited areas on several occasions, causing concerns among the local villagers. After the skirmish, the local villagers said that it would be a relief if the Tatmadaw soldiers stopped operating in the area.

On January 19th 2020, Deputy Company Commander Saw Hsah Tu Gaw and his soldiers from BGF Battalion #1014 went from L--- village to I--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract, Bu Tho Township. He fired his gun many times between the two villages without any reasons. This raised concerns among the local villagers in both locations. Saw Hsah Tu Gaw aimed to threaten and frighten the local villagers. Battalion #1014 is under the authority of Battalion Commander Saw Maung Chit.

On January 19th 2020, Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalions [LIB] #340, #341, #434 and Infantry Battalion #19 destroyed some of their old ammunition, landmines and gunpowder on a farm owned by Saw M---, a 31-year-old villager from N--- village, O--- village tract, Bu Tho Township. These troops are under the authority of Operations Commander Aung Khaing Cho. The farm is located near LIB #434's camp.

⁵ 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.

The soldiers initially dug the holes without prior permission on January 18th. Then, they marked the holes and told the farm owner not to go there. On the next day, they detonated charges, causing 10 explosions in total. The explosions damaged the farms, but they did not let the farm owner know about the damage. Saw M--- is now worried that animals such as cows and buffaloes might die or get injured because of the holes, or that ponds might form on his land during the rainy season.



These photos were taken on January 31st 2020 in a farm owned by a community member from N--- village, O--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. The photo on the right shows one of the holes created by the destruction of old ammunition by the Tatmadaw. The photo on the left shows a fragment of ordnance that was not totally destroyed. [Photo: KHRG]

3) KNU and KNLA activities

There were no special activities conducted by the KNLA in Bu Tho Township over these two months. The KNU collected demographic information, such as death rate, birth rate, etc. In January 2020, the KNU started collecting the farm and hill farm taxes. However, villagers who got less than 20 baskets of paddy from their lands will be exempted from these taxes [see section 4].

The KNU's Department of Agriculture also started measuring the farms and plantations to give land titles to the local people in Bu Tho Township.

4) The concerns of the local villagers and their livelihood situation

Some local villagers are concerned that the situation in Myanmar will become worse than it was before the ceasefire. Even though the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement [NCA]⁶ was signed, fighting and skirmishes broke out in different parts of Myanmar. Therefore, the local villagers hope that the KNU leaders will try their best for the Karen people [when it comes to negotiating peace with the government]. Some local villagers have heard rumours about the fact that the peace process is not going well. They are concerned that the security situation will deteriorate if the NCA does not hold. Therefore, the KNU Township and District leaders organised a meeting with the local people to update them about the current political situation and address their concerns [KHRG was not able to establish the exact location and date of this meeting].

⁶ 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 armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

There are 11 village tracts in Bu Tho Township. Most of the local villagers are working on farms or hill farms. Only some villagers living in towns or near cities such as Hpapun and Ka Ma Moh are doing business such as selling goods, trading, etc. Villagers in the rural areas just work on farms. Since 2019, the farmers have been struggling to grow their paddy crops because of rodent invasions and bad weather. Most of the [plain] farmers who usually harvest 300 baskets of paddy only got 90 baskets in 2019.

Some of the hill farmers who planted six baskets of paddy only harvested six baskets. Some of them did not even manage to harvest anything from their hill farms. This happened in every village tract. It created livelihood problems for the local people in 2020. Some of the local villagers said that [because of the bad harvest] they will have to work daily jobs to earn money to be able to buy and store enough food in 2020. Therefore, the local people won't be able to pay the KNU taxes. The KNU Tax Department must understand them [take into account their situation].

5) Landmine incident

There is landmine contamination in some areas near Tatmadaw army camps in Bu Tho Township. On January 13th 2020, Saw P---, a 43-year-old villager from G--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract stepped on a landmine. He had previously fled to Hkaw Taw Poo [Myaing Gyi Ngu] because of the fighting between the KNLA, the DKBA Splinter group,⁷ the BGF and the Tatmadaw. These armed actors have planted landmines to prevent enemy attacks against their troops and army camps. The KNLA always notifies and warns the local villagers whenever they plant landmines [but KHRG's documentation shows that it does not prevent incidents].⁸ We [the villagers] do not know about the [location of the landmines planted by] other armed groups. Saw P--- stepped on a landmine in an area where the DKBA [Splinter group] used to be based, but they have now relocated to another place.

[The incident happened while Saw P--- was hunting and cutting bamboo in the forest near his village in order to secure his family's livelihood. His left toe was blown off and his left ankle was broken in the blast. He also sustained burn injuries on his legs, and was ultimately sent to the Hpa-an general hospital. Although Saw P--- and his family are now facing livelihood difficulties, they did not receive financial support to help them overcome these challenges.]

6) Education

There are many kinds of schools in the Bu Tho Township area, including public schools, self-funded schools, religious schools [supported by religious authorities], KNU schools and Myanmar government schools.

Karen language is now being taught during school hours by the Myanmar government schools in Meh Klaw village tract. This happened after the Karen Education and Culture Department [KECD] held a consultation meeting with the local Myanmar government education administrators and teachers from Meh Klaw and Htee Ber Hka Hta village tracts [KHRG was not able to establish the exact date of this meeting]. However, the teachers who teach Karen language are not recognised as full-fledged teachers. They are only paid 3,000 kyats per workday [just like day labourers].

⁷ 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 Mu Traw and Hpa-an districts. It has not signed the NCA.

⁸ KHRG, "[Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, landmines and sexual violence, January to June 2020](#)", September 2020.

7) Healthcare

There are KNU clinics, a Back Pack Health Worker Team [BPHWT] clinic and many Myanmar government hospitals along the vehicle road in Bu Tho Township. The local villagers do not need to pay for the medicine they get from KNU or BPHWT clinics, and they only have to cover the food costs when they are hospitalised in those clinics. Local people who go to Myanmar government hospitals have to pay for the medicine, treatment and hospitalisation, but they are aware of this situation.

8) Development projects

There are no on-going major development projects in Bu Tho Township. The Chief Minister of [government-defined] Karen State, Nang Khin Htwe Myint, came to Hpapun on January 18th 2020 to launch the project of concreting the Hpapun, Mah Ka Heh and Kaw Lah Klah docks. She plans to conduct this project in 2020. She held a short meeting and went back to Hpa-an on the same evening. We do not know when the project will start and how much it will cost.

Another thing is that the local people levelled the ground and repaired the roads in almost every village tract in Bu Tho Township, with the help of the KNU leaders. Local villagers usually have to do it every year, as the roads get damaged during the rainy season.

Further background reading on the situation on Mu Traw District in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [*"Mu Traw District Incident Report: A villager and his daughter injured by a Tatmadaw mortar shell in Dwe Lo Township, June 2020"*](#), July 2020
- [*"Mu Traw District Incident Report: Child rape by a BGF soldier in Dwe Lo Township, June 2020"*](#), July 2020
- [*"Mu Traw District Incident Report: Tatmadaw soldiers killed a female villager and then stole her jewellery in Dwe Lo Township"*](#), July 2020

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.

Mutraw (Hpapun) District

