Situation Update in Karen State

Karen State, Burma
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Forced Labor in Doo Tha Htoo and Doo Pla Ya Districts

In 2010, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) units in Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District changed into a Border Guard Force (BGF). All officers over the age of 50 were required to retire, and some of them started the Karen National Development Party (KNNDP), which remains linked to the BGF.

The KNNDP and BGF in Hpa-an Township of Doo Tha Htoo District have been partnering with the Shwe Than Lwin company to run a rubber plantation, financed by Shwe Than Lwin. General Ba Thein and Han Soe of the KNNDP, Maung Kyi, Tun Lai, and BGF Battalion 1014 commanders Tin Win and Thaw Ma Na manage the plantation.

Beginning in March 2012, one person from each home in eight villages of Doo Tha Htoo was forced to work on the plantation, clearing land and planting rubber trees. The plantation starts at Mae Si hillside and extends to the Mae Ka Na Hkee area, encompassing a total of 500-acres. If the villagers did not come to work then they were put in prison. The eight villages forced to work were:

1. Htee Kyaw Hkee
2. Mae Ka Na Hkee
3. Htee Kru
4. Pah Paw
5. Mae Si Hta
6. Plaw Poe Taw
7. Htee Nya Sun
8. Law Pu

Though the villagers were told they would be given daily wages for their work, they did not receive payment. Since they had to regularly go and work, they did not have time to work their own farms and businesses.

Han Soe, of the KNNDP, partnered with Shwe Than Lwin Company to request permission from the Burmese government to use vacant Karen land for the plantation. However, this land is not vacant.

Farmers in the area, like many across Southeast Asia, clear and plant a different area every year to provide land time to recover, rotating back to the same plot of land every 6 to 10 years. While land may remain unused for years, individual land ownership boundaries are clearly understood by the local
people, even though there are no official documents of ownership. Asserting land ownership rights can be difficult because of a lack of documentation, but seizure of land by companies causes local farmers to shorten the rotational cycle and plant on land that has not had time to recover, leading to a lower crop yield and insufficient food for dependent communities.

The company has also requested land for plantation in the Klu Si Forest, which is designated as protected forestland by the KNU. The villagers have appealed to the KNU to stop the rubber plantation.

Additionally, forced labor continued in Dooplaya District. On 12 July 2012, in Taung Zon Village, Waw Rah Township, troops from Second Strategic Command, Southwest Command, under the command of Aung Naing Lin, have been ordering villagers to carry oxcarts full of wood to Anankwin Camp.

**Burma Army Builds Up Roads and Camps in Toungoo, Kler Lwee Htoo and Mutraw Districts**

Since the signing of a ceasefire in Karen State on 12 January 2012, the Burma Army has been building up and improving its roads and military camps.

The Burma Army is repairing the road from Kler La to Bu Sa Hkee in Toungoo District. Work on the road began in October 2012, and once finished, will be used for resupplying Burma Army camps in the area. In addition to improving roads in the area, the Burma Army has also been building helicopters pads at all of their camps in the district.

Burma Army camps and roads in Mutraw District have also been renovated this year. Some residents are still fearful of crossing roads. There have been some post-ceasefire instances of Burma Army troops shooting at people as they cross the road, so local people avoid crossing roads, and only do so under the protection of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

Just as in Toungoo District, all Mutraw District Burma Army camps have built helicopter pads. Additionally, zinc roofs were built and solar panels installed.

Troops from Division 66 are stationed in Toungoo District, and troops under the command of MOC 4 and TOC 2 are in Mu Traw District.

In Moo township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, Burma Army troops under LIB 590 built a new camp.

**Villages Flooded After Construction of Dam in Toungoo District**

In September 2012, villagers in the flood plain of the Toe Bo Dam in Toungoo district protested against its construction. Villagers were protesting because the completion of the project, which started in 2005, would result in the flooding of their villages.
Karen protesting the construction of the Toe Bo Dam

The dam comprises an area of 600 acres, and the flood plain for the dam is 2000 acres. Some of the villages affected by the construction of this dam are:

- Toe Bo*
- Mi La Kee See* (Roughly 32 km from Toungoo)
- Swa Lo
- Kla Mi Der
- Ko So Koâ€™TM
- Mo Paâ€™TM Der

*villages at highest risk for continued flooding

During the rainy season of 2012, many of these villages became flooded, with various crops being destroyed. Crops grown in the area include mangosteen, coffee, lemon trees, and rice. On 7 October 2012, the bridge from Kler La to Toungoo Township was submerged in floodwaters – a direct result of the construction of the Toe Bo Dam. This bridge served as an important transportation line between Kler La, Toungoo and Bu Sa Hkee Townships. Floodwaters blocked access between these townships.

Residents of all villages except for Swa Lo have remained in the area despite the floodwaters; Swa Lo villagers abandoned their village in 2006 after Burma Army troops attacked their homes. However, some villagers from Swa Lo still worked the fields in their old village until their fields flooded.

Villagers have enlisted the help of the Karen National Union (KNU) to seek compensation for their destroyed lands.
Flooding in Kler Lwee Htoo, Mu Traw and Doo Pla Ya Districts

In the latter half of 2012, several districts in Karen State suffered from food shortages due to severe flooding during the 2012 rainy season. Kler Lwee Htoo, Mu Traw and Doo Pla Ya districts have all reported extensive damage to their crops. This has lead to villagers having to travel longer distances in order to find and purchase food for their families.

Improved Relations After Ceasefire for Doo Pla Ya District

Many Karen residents have reported that the Burma Army is honoring the ceasefire in their areas. Doo Pla Ya District has seen improved relations between the Burma Army and KNLA troops in the area this past year. The Burma Army has not been patrolling there, remaining exclusively within their camps. Troops in the area are Military Operations Command (MOC) 12, Border Guard Force (BGF) 2021 and Infantry Battalion (IB) 230.

May God bless you,
Karen Free Burma Rangers