



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

September 24, 2018 / KHRG #18-28-S1

Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, January to March 2018

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin Township, Thaton District during the period between January and March 2018. It includes information on arbitrary tax collection by the Tatmadaw, KNU responses to drug use and drug trafficking, as well as a logging dispute.

- *Tatmadaw Battalion commander Bo Than Zin from Light Infantry Battalion #210 under Light Infantry Division #22 arbitrarily collected taxes from villagers who own wood processing machines in Lay Kay and Ler Hklaw villages.*
 - *Because the KNU does not have the means to test for drugs, they fined drug users and drug traffickers based on information provided in the community. The KNU is trying to respond to an increase in drug use and trafficking.*
 - *The KNU Township and District authorities gave permission to local people to log for wood in Bilin Township. This permission was revoked once wood was sent to Bilin Town, instead of being used by the local community.*
-

Situation Update | Bilin Township, Thaton District (January to March 2018)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in March 2018. It was written by a community member in Thaton District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This report was received along with other information from Thaton District, including six other interviews and 102 photographs.²

Military activity

On March 3rd 2018, the Tatmadaw collected taxes from villagers in Lay Kay village, Ler Hklaw village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Thaton District.

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeast Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When writing situation updates, community members are encouraged to summarise recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important, and present their opinions or perspective on abuse and other local dynamics in their area.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeastern Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's website.

Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #210 under Light Infantry Division (LID) #22 arbitrarily collected taxes from the local community. LIB # 210 is led by Battalion Commander *Bo*³ Than Zin, and based in Lay Kay military camp.

Local villagers received permission from the Karen National Union (KNU) to chop down wood to build their houses. Local villagers started cutting down wood with the help of their wood chopping machines. One man explained:

“We do not chop wood for commercial purposes but only for the needs of community members. When villagers need timber to build their house, they asked us to chop it because we have wood cutting machines. We do not ask for a large payment but only for fuel costs.”

The Tatmadaw collected taxes from anyone who owned a wood chopping machine in Lay Kay and Ler Hklaw villages. In each of these villages, there are five wood chopping machines. The owner of each machine was arbitrarily taxed 100,000 kyat [USD 64.28]⁴ by the Tatmadaw. It was difficult for them to pay this amount. They begged the Tatmadaw to reduce the amount of the tax because it was beyond their means.

A villager from Lay Kay told the Tatmadaw that *“the KNU (Karen National Union) gave us permission to operate wood processing machine for one month. We also have to pay tax 50,000 kyat [USD 32.14] to the KNU to operate these machines. Our investment will be in vain if we stop operating now.”*

The villager then negotiated with the Tatmadaw to reduce the taxes they required. The Tatmadaw ultimately ceded to this request. They collected 50,000 kyat [USD 32.14] for each wood cutting machine.

On March 7th 2018, the Tatmadaw five trucks worth of rations and weapon to Yo Klah army camp. They transported one truck of supplies to Lay Kay army camp. Despite this, most local community members are content with the current situation because of the reduction in violence, threats, and land confiscations.

The Tatmadaw continues to operate checkpoints between the P’Nweh Klah and Lay Kay army camps. They stop civilians, question them, and register their names. Communities remain worried about the possibility of tension between the two groups, because the Tatmadaw does not have a good relationship with the KNU and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). However, they doubt that fighting will break out again.

³ *Bo* is a Burmese title meaning ‘officer.’

⁴ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 12/09/2018 official market rate of 1554.38 kyats to US \$1.



These photos were taken on March 7th 2018 in Lay Kay village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township. They show local villagers chopping wood to build houses. These are the machines that were taxed by the Tatmadaw LIB #210, under LID # 22, led by the Battalion Commander Bo Than Zin. Each owner had to pay 50,000 Kyat [USD 32.14] to the Tatmadaw. [Photo: KHRG]

Drug use

In 2018, drug users in Bilin Township, Thaton District were arrested by the KNU. The KNU does not have the means to test for drugs. Therefore, the KNU relies on information provided by the community. [This is considered sufficient to prove guilt for drug use and drug trafficking.] The KNU gathered drug users and traffickers to tell them about the danger of drugs, and to fine them. They then released the drug users and continued to monitor their actions.

Logging

In early 2018, KNU Township and District leaders opened up opportunities for local villagers in Bilin Township to cut trees in order to build their houses. Many people did not have the equipment necessary to log trees, and asked wealthy businessmen for help to rent wood cutting machines. In return, wood was delivered to Bilin town. When the KNU government learnt that a large amount of wood was being transported to Bilin town on March 9th 2018, they revoked the logging permit for the entire township.

Conclusion

The information received from the field suggests that rural communities believe their access to education and healthcare has improved. They are more confident in their ability to earn their livelihood, and think that political stability has increased. Rural communities benefited from development projects that supported their community.

However, as this report outlines, rural communities continue to face human rights abuses. Tatmadaw checkpoints and arbitrary taxation continue to threaten their livelihoods and limit their fundamental freedoms. Villagers also worried because the tensions between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups remain in other Districts.

Further background reading on the situation in Thaton District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Thaton Field Report: A transition to peace? Villagers' concerns about ongoing militarisation from January 2016 to December 2017", (May 2018)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, March to May 2017", (December 2017)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, July to September", (April 2017)
- "Thaton Interview: Ma N---, July 2015", (February 2017)

Doo Tha Htoo (Karen)



KHRG Karen Human Rights Group
 Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma