



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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**A month after the New Mon State Party joins the NCA:
Skirmishes occur between the Mon National Liberation
Army and the Karen National Liberation Army in Win Yay
Township, Dooplaya District**

*This News Bulletin analyses the skirmishes that broke out between the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) on the border between Mergui-Tavoy District and Dooplaya District in February and March 2018.*¹

- *Although both the New Mon State Party and the Karen National Union are signatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), skirmishes broke out several times between the MNLA and the KNLA between February and March 2018.*
 - *Tensions between the armed groups increased because of a dispute about logging, in an area contested by both armed groups in Dooplaya District.*
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Recent Skirmishes between the KNLA and MNLA

Skirmishes between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) occurred in March 2018 near Mann Aung village, Kone Mile village tract, Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District. This happened after an escalation of tension in the area since January 2018.²

Because the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) does not clearly delimit areas of control, there is potential for renewed violence between ethnic armed groups.

According to KHRG reports from the field, the MNLA ambushed the KNLA three times between February and March 2018. The incidents took place on the border between Dooplaya District and Mergui-Tavoy District.

On February 24th 2018, twenty MNLA soldiers ambushed KNLA soldiers near Mann Aung village, Kone Mile village tract, Win Yay Township. No one was injured in this skirmish, but the KNLA lost two guns in their retreat.

On February 28th 2018, an army officer from MNLA shot at a KNLA warrant officer Htoo Yout as he was driving a motorbike from his army camp to Mann Aung village. A bullet grazed his head. His injury has not yet completely healed.

¹ This News Bulletin was written by KHRG office staff and is based on information received from a community member from Dooplaya District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It summarises information from one situation update and four interviews received by KHRG in April 2018.

² This information is taken from "[Two ethnic armed groups agree to defuse territorial dispute at upcoming talks](#)".

On March 4th 2018 at 8:35 AM, MNLA soldiers attacked a KNLA border security force in Paya Kone area, Ler Doh Soh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. At the time, KNLA soldiers were relaxing in their army camp. There were no casualties or injuries in this attack.

Following these three incidents, a skirmish occurred on March 9th 2018. 50 MNLA soldiers were patrolling in the area around Alel Sakhan village, Yay Phyu Township, Tanintharyi Division. When they came across KNLA soldiers, a clash occurred between the two armies. According to the KNLA Deputy Company Commander Dar Ku Htoo, the fighting started at 9:29 AM in a rubber plantation near the MNLA camp of Alel Sakhan.

How a logging dispute sparked the recent tensions

Disputes between the KNLA and MNLA relating to land in Tanintharyi Region date back to 1988. After the ethnic armed groups participated in negotiations mediated by the National Democratic Front, a coalition of ethnic groups, they agreed to stop fighting. After more than 20 years of stability, skirmishes between the MNLA and KNLA resumed in December 2016,³ when clashes occurred near Mann Aung because of disputes over natural resources and territory.⁴



MNLA soldiers arrested villagers transporting logs in their truck when a logging dispute led to skirmishes between the MNLA and KNLA. [Photo: KHRG]

At the time, Padoh⁵ Saw Maung Shwe, chairman of the KNU Win Ye Township, reported in the news that it would be better to solve this issue through negotiation: *“Maybe they want to regain control over the territory. We should resolve the issue by diplomatic means, not military.”*⁶

The NMSP has since banned logging in its controlled areas to prevent deforestation. Naing Win Hla, the head of Interior Department of NMSP reported to Karen News that: *“We banned logging activities in the area to the east of Mann Aung, our troops were on patrol as we heard there was logging taking place.”*⁷

The recent escalation in violence between the KNLA and MNLA around Mann Aung village is related to this ongoing dispute over logging in a contested territory.⁸ According to information received by KHRG, KNLA soldiers from Battalion #16 had given permission to local villagers to log trees in the area around Mann Aung village without

³ This information is taken from “[မွန်ပြည်သစ်ပါတီနှင့် KNU ဖက်ဒရယ် ထပ်ဖြစ်](#)”.

⁴ This information is taken from “[Territory, Natural Resources Dispute Fuels Fighting Between Karen and Mon Armies in Burma’s Southern Township of Yephyu](#)”.

⁵ Padoh is a title meaning „governor“ or „minister,“ within the government or military.

⁶ This information is taken from “[Territory, Natural Resources Dispute Fuels Fighting Between Karen and Mon Armies in Burma’s Southern Township of Yephyu](#)”.

⁷ This information is taken from “[Territory, Natural Resources Dispute Fuels Fighting Between Karen and Mon Armies in Burma’s Southern Township of Yephyu](#)”.

⁸ This information is taken from “[Concerns Grow Over Conflict Between KNU and Mon Armies in Ye Township](#)”.

having to pay taxes.⁹ A group of villagers led by a local business owner, Daw B---, cut down trees in the forest.

To the MNLA Battalion #7, in control of the area, this logging was done illegally because they had not approved it.

On January 13th 2018 at 4 PM, the MNLA arrested 48 workers,¹⁰ including two mahouts.¹¹ They also confiscated two elephants¹² and 15 chainsaws. The mahouts were put under house arrest. The rest of the workers were detained and taken to Alel Shaken army camp, the MNLA Battalion #7 in Yay Phyu town [Tanintharyi Region].

According to Saw B---, one of the arrested workers, “at first, the [MNLA] asked for 100,000,000 kyat (US \$ 64,310) but the local KNU [authorities] asked the MNLA to reduce this amount of money.¹³ Then, they decided to set the amount to 50,000,000 kyat (US \$ 32,155). The MNLA said that this is the final decision. If you don’t come to pick your people, we can kill them, and do whatever we want and nobody will care about it.”

The MNLA Battalion #7 Commander Sanon Htaw demanded 50,000,000 kyat (US \$ 32,155) as bail from Daw B--- to release the arrested workers. He said that the MNLA would not release the workers until their demand was met. The former head of Mann Aung village U C---, Daw B--- and other villagers gave 50,000,000 kyat (US \$ 32,155) to Major Pan Khine from the MNLA to release the arrested workers. As agreed, the MNLA released the workers.

The MNLA Major Pan Khine gave them permission to log trees in the remaining areas of the forest. However, despite this decision, twenty MNLA soldiers attacked KNLA soldiers from Battalion #16 on February 24th 2018. They also arrested civilians who were logging trees on two separate occasions.

Tensions continued to escalate between the KNLA and the MNLA, leading to an outbreak in fighting.



This photo was taken on April 12th 2018. It shows a mahout from Man Aung village. He was one of the civilians arrested by the MNLA for illegal logging in January 2018.
[Photo: KHRG]

⁹ This information was taken from an unpublished KHRG report.

¹⁰ This information might be uncertain based on different villagers’ testimonies. Some villagers say 38 villagers, some says 40 villagers and some says 46 villagers.

¹¹ A mahout is a person who works with, rides and tends an elephant.

¹² Elephants are commonly used for transporting logs in Southeast Asia.

¹³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the September 13 2018 official market rate of 1554 kyat to US \$1.

Negotiations between the KNU and NMSP



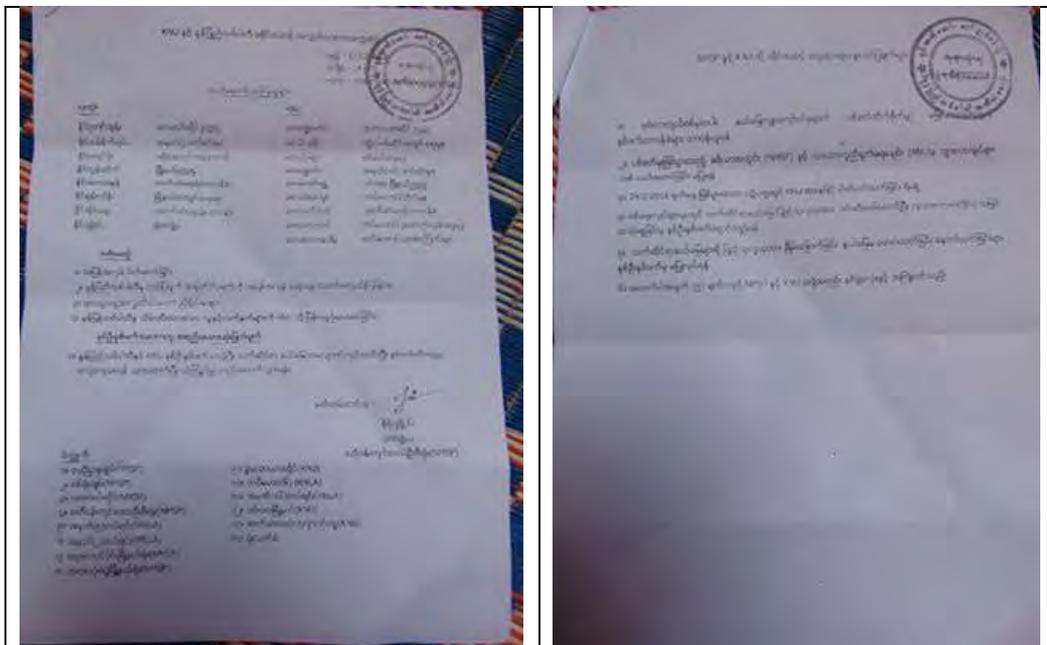
This photo shows the negotiations that took place between the MNLA Battalion #5 Commander and the KNLA Battalion #16 Commander. The Win Yay [KNU] Office Joint-Secretary Si Thu Htun and the [township] organiser also participated.
[Photo: KHRG]

On March 13th 2018, a meeting was held by the NMSP and the KNU in the NMSP liaison office, in Three Pagodas Pass. They discussed national reconciliation in order to resolve the territorial conflicts and to prevent clashes from recurring.¹⁴

The Deputy Company Commander Dar Ku Htoo from KNLA Battalion #16 said that while the meeting was taking place, the MNLA released the chainsaw worked that they arrested and the guns that they seized in the clashes.

According to information received by KHRG, local villagers and KNLA soldiers under Battalion # 16 would like to know whether a boundary line has been set up between KNU and NMSP during this

meeting. They want the KNU headquarters to ensure that both the KNLA and MNLA are aware of the delimitations of their area of control. Without a mutually recognised boundary line, delimiting the areas controlled by the two ethnic armed groups, clashes surrounding territory and natural resources could resurge.



These photos were taken on March 25th 2018 in Three Pagoda Pass Town, Win Yay Township. It shows a letter of an agreement between the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Karen National Union (KNU) after the fighting that happened in January 2018. [Photos: KHRG]

¹⁴ This information is taken from [“NMSP, KNU sit for talks following clashes over territory”](#)

Impact on the local community



A group of soldiers from the border security force from KNLA are seen patrolling the border between Doooplaya District and Mergui-Tavoy District in April 2018. [Photo: KHRG]



Two Mon villagers stop on their way to work. They are afraid of soldiers patrolling near their village. The MNLA told Mon villagers to sit down when they see soldiers, to keep a low profile. [Photo: KHRG]

Local villagers reported to KHRG that they were worried the skirmishes between the MNLA and the KNLA would cause tension between Karen and Mon villagers in Mann Aung. Karen and Mon families have been living together in harmony for years. They are worried that the relations between the two ethnic groups will be strained because of the fighting.

Local people in Mann Aung village were also concerned for their safety because of the recent fighting. They are worried when they travel to work on their lands:

*“We are afraid of living in our village. Not only Karen villagers but also Mon villagers are afraid to go to their farms and plantations [out of the village]. We just have to wait and live here. We are also afraid that our farms and plantations will be burned [due to the fighting]”.*¹⁵

According to the Myanmar Times, over 100 villagers fled to escape the fighting.

Conclusion

Despite the New Mon State Party becoming a signatory of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), skirmishes occurred between the KNLA and the MNLA in 2018.¹⁶ Without a clear demarcation of territory, disputes over land and natural resources are likely to continue. For the local community to feel safe, the KNLA and the MNLA must abide by the code of conduct of NCA and cease fighting. Although meetings were held between the

¹⁵ This information is taken from an unpublished interview.

¹⁶ This information is taken from [“NMSP and KNU clash again in Tanintharyi Region”](#).

KNU and MNSP, the systemic causes of the conflict between the two armed groups remain unresolved.¹⁷

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

- “Hpapun Incident Report: Tatmadaw road construction results in the indiscriminate firing of mortars and displacement in Lu Thaw Township, March 2018”, (June 2018)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township and Dwe Lo Township, September 2017 and February 2018”, (June 2018)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Lu Thaw Township, February to March 2018”, (May 2018)
- “Attacks on villagers, ongoing fighting and displacement in Hpapun and Toungoo districts from January to April 2018”, (May 2018)

¹⁷ This information is taken from [“KNU and NMSP reach 2-point agreement at meeting with Tanintharyi Gov’t”](#)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)