



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Situation Update**

January 29, 2015 / KHRG #14-45-S1

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**Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, April 2014**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Thaton Township, Thaton District during April 2014, including updates on gravel mining projects, community education and healthcare.*

- *Villagers report a lack of nurses and medics in Thaton Township. Furthermore, Burma/Myanmar government-built clinics have fallen into disrepair due to neglect and a lack of staff.*
  - *The Max Myanmar company operates a rubber plantation in Shwe Yaung Pya village, Shwe Yaung Pya village tract, Thaton Township, that has negatively affected villagers by confiscating land that villagers use for grazing their livestock and limiting villagers' access to firewood.*
  - *On April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014, villagers reported that Pru Min Tun company, a private domestic company, came to Maw Lay village, Maw Lay village tract in Thaton Township, and coerced the community into granting them mining rights in the area. However, local villagers concerned with the project managed to halt its development.*
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**Situation Update | Thaton Township, Thaton District (April 2014)**

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in July 2014. It was written by a community member in Thaton District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup> This report was received along with other information from Thaton District, including two interviews and 50 photographs.<sup>2</sup>*

**Location description**

There are 13 village tracts in Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township. Thaton Township is bordered by Yangon [Region],<sup>3</sup> Hpa-an main road [highway] and the Bilin River. Ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains community members in eastern 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.

<sup>2</sup> In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern 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.

<sup>3</sup> Yangon Region is an administrative unit of Burma/Myanmar that covers parts of lower Burma/Myanmar, including Yangon.

peoples live together in this township. The ethnic groups who live in Thaton Township are S'gaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Taw Thoo,<sup>4</sup> and Burmese, as well as other ethnic groups.

### **Civilian livelihoods**

The people who live here [Thaton Township] earn their living working in the farms, hill fields, rubber plantations and other plantations and some of them own their own businesses. If I was to analyse the 13 village tracts in these areas, I would say that the villagers are mainly farming to earn their living. Some people [also] left the country to find a job in Thailand or Malaysia.

### **Education**

We [the villagers] can say that the education in Thaton Township is getting better. [Now], almost all of the [villages in each] village tract in [Thaton Township] have schools. There are some Burmese schools [in Thaton Township]. There are [also] some Karen schools there [Thaton Township] because the villagers built [Karen] schools independently. [Some of] the children have to go to Burmese schools. Burmese schools are very far to walk to by foot. They [students] also encounter floods on their way [to these schools] in the rainy season. The flooding creates problems for children, therefore villagers are building schools in small villages. The schools that were built by villagers, they work jointly with Burmese schools [to allow students to continue their education at Burmese schools]. Teachers are also being transferred by the Burma government [to the schools]. [However, the school year began] but they [government teachers] did not arrive. They [government teachers] arrived to teach very late [in the school year] and because of this it became difficult for students [to fulfil their studies], as well as for parents [caring for the children]. When the school principals go back [to town] to withdraw their salary, they spend one or two weeks [per month in town instead of at the school]. There are two kinds of teachers: teachers from government offices and [teachers from villages]. The villagers give them [teachers from villages] a monthly salary according to [the amount of days they] teach. If they do not come to teach for a day their salary is reduced. They [government teachers] give free textbooks from KG [kindergarten] to grade six but the students have to buy their notebooks.

### **Healthcare**

We [the community] need more healthcare [professionals] in this area [Thaton Township]. The Burma government built clinics in many places but there are no nurses or medics. There are no people who look after these buildings so some of the buildings were destroyed and some became goat pens. The *Kaw Thoo Lei* [Karen National Union (KNU)]<sup>5</sup> also cannot build a clinic yet because there is not enough human capital [nurses or medics]. The Backpack [Back Pack Health Workers Team] is the only group visiting each village tract. If the villagers become ill they are treated by nurses in the village, but if they encounter a serious sickness they have to go into Thaton or Bilin town. We [the local community] can say that we need more healthcare in our township.

### **Tatmadaw activity**

This area [Thaton Township] is located on the main road [Hpa-an highway] where many [Tatmadaw] army camps are based, especially in central Thaton Township, [where there are] two army camps. They are P'Nwen Kyah army camp and Wee Raw army camp. From the ceasefire<sup>6</sup> until now, the two army camps have not changed anything, including their activity. They are active like they were before, but there is no fighting.

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<sup>4</sup> The Taw Thoo in Karen, or Pa'O in Burmese, are an ethnic group found throughout parts of eastern Burma/Myanmar.

<sup>5</sup> The term *Kaw Thoo Lei* refers to Karen State as demarcated by the Karen National Union (KNU), but the exact meaning and etymology is disputed; see: Jonathan Falla. *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border*, Cambridge University Press: 1991.

<sup>6</sup> On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For

## Business situation

Many rich men [private company owners] came to assess the situation [for development projects] in this area [Thaton Township], but they have not been given permission [for such projects] by the villagers. Therefore, most of the companies had to leave. The Max Myanmar company<sup>7</sup> is the only group that is based here. They [Max Myanmar company] came to start rubber plantations in Shwe Yaung Pya village, Shwe Yaung Pya village tract in Thaton Township, Thaton District. The project was started many years [ago]. This project has created a lot of problems for villagers because some villagers have cows and buffalos and the animals have less pasture [land for grazing]. Moreover, there are no pastures for [some] animals. The villagers also have to go very far to get firewood. Now they [Max Myanmar company] have a new policy: in the summer season they make a fire protection line [fire perimeter to protect rubber plantations], and in the rainy season they plant small rubber trees in the fire perimeter. They can plant two rows of rubber [trees] in the fire perimeter. They confiscate some of the villagers' land and community forest each year to make a new fire perimeter.

On April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014, Pru Min Tun company and some people who work together with the company came with Thaton Township administrator U Tun Tun Naing to Maw Lay village, Maw Lay village tract, Thaton Township. They came to ask [permission from the villagers] to start a gravel mining project at Maw Lay cliff. They came here [Maw Lay village] [to get] civilians [approval]. They won the vote [received approval] so they decided to begin gravel mining. In reality, before they came seeking the civilians' authorisation they forced the village tract administrator to organize the villagers to [vote] for them in order to [ensure approval]. If they won the vote, the company [agreed to] give each village tract water pipes and electricity and each house 100,000 kyat (US \$97.30).<sup>8</sup> When they held the vote, the people who [voted for the company] were people who have no land and also live very far from [Maw Lay] cliff. Maw Lay village, Noh Htoh Day village and Nen Paw Hta village are the villages which are close to the cliff. The villagers who live very close to the cliff tried as hard as they could to stop the gravel mining project and gathered together to protect the cliff. Therefore, in April 2014, the stone mining project was stopped, but we [the community] are not sure if it will [remain] halted or not [in the future].

## Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

During 2014, NGOs such as UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] and UNCHR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] entered this [Thaton] township. As a part of education [assistance], UNICEF distributed ten notebooks, a pencil and a pen for [each] primary school [student]. A partner of UNHCR, BAJ [Bridge Asia Japan], came to distribute water pumps.

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

- "Field Report: Thaton District, September 2012 to December 2013," (December 2014)

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updates on the peace process, see the KNU Stakeholder webpage on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For further information on Max Myanmar see for example: "[Land confiscation and the business of human rights abuse in Thaton District](#)," KHRG, 2009; and [Singapore Stymies Myanmar Mogul Zaw Zaw's Bid for Listing](#), Wall Street Journal, April 29<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>8</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the January 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 official market rate of 1027.50 kyat to the US \$1.

- “Thaton Situation Update: Hpa-an and Bilin Townships, July to September 2013,” (November 2014)
- “Thaton Situation Update: Hpa-an Township, January to June 2014,” (October 2014)
- “Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, May 2014,” (October 2014)
- “Land confiscation due to a road repair and expansion project in Bilin Township, Thaton District, January 2014,” (September 2014)

# Doo Tha Htoo ( Karen)



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