



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Thaton Situation Update: Bilin, Thaton, Kyaikto and Hpa-an townships, September to November 2014

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin, Thaton, Kyaikto and Hpa-an townships, Thaton District during the period between September to November 2014, including armed groups' activities, forced labour, restrictions on the freedom of movement, development activities and access to education.

- *On October 7th 2014, Border Guard Force (BGF) Battalion #1014 Company Commander Tin Win from Htee Soo Kaw Village ordered A---, B---, C--- and D--- villagers to work for one day. Ten villagers had to cut wood, bamboo and weave baskets to repair the BGF army camp in C--- village, Hpa-an Township.*
 - *In Hpa-an Township, two highways were constructed at the beginning of 2013 and one highway was constructed in 2014. Due to the construction of the road, villagers who lived nearby had their land confiscated and their plants and crops were destroyed. They received no compensation, despite reporting the problem to Hpa-an Township authorities.*
 - *In the academic year of 2013-2014 more Burmese government teachers were sent to teach in Karen villages. Villagers are concerned as they are not allowed to teach the Karen language in the schools.*
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Situation Update | Bilin, Thaton, Kyaikto and Hpa-an townships, Thaton District (September to November 2014)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in December 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.¹ This report was received along with other information from Thaton District, including one incident report.²

This report concerns the situation in the region, the villagers' feelings, armed groups' activities, forced labour, development activities, support to villagers and education problems occurring between the beginning of September and November 2014. There

¹ 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.

² 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.

are four townships focused on: Bilin Township, Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township, Kyeh Htoh [Kyaikto] Township and Hpa-an Township in Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District. The KNU [Karen National Union] is unable to control Maws'ko [Paung] Township. Hpa-an Township is located west of the Salween river and at the lower part of eastern Baw Naw River. Bilin Township is located along the Baw Naw River Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township is located nearby a highway and there are only flat fields surrounding it. Kyeh Htoh [Kyaikto] Township shares a joint boundary with Brigade 3 [Nyaunglebin District] down to the Salween River.³

Forced labour

Border Guard Force (BGF)⁴ Battalion #1014 Company Commander Tin Win from Htee Soo Kaw village, forced villagers from A---, B---, C--- and D--- to work hard labour. For one day, ten villagers had to cut wood, bamboo and weave baskets [repair them] in the BGF army camp in C--- village, [Hpa-an Township].

In Bilin Township, in Tah Paw camp and Lay Kay camp, one person a day was forced [by the Tatmadaw] to work as a sentry. We know through the villagers that "*The Lay Kay camp government military would cut the bamboo and sell it.*" Per day, more than ten soldiers from the Tatmadaw cut the bamboo in the forest. Due to the ceasefire⁵ they are daring to go and cut the bamboo [as they do not fear KNLA attack]. Villagers have complained that their village is big and they have to build fences around their houses. If the amount of bamboo is decreasing [because the soldiers are cutting and selling it] there will not be enough for the villagers as well.

Road construction

There are two highways that were constructed at the beginning of 2013, and one in 2014 in Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District. In an agreement between the Burma government and the [Thaton] District leader, one highway has been constructed from P'nweh Klah to Lay Kay; one highway in Wa Bon Taw road in Hpa-an Township from Kyeh Htoh to Tha Waw Thaw village west of Yoh Thee Yoo, Kyeh Htoh [Kyaikto] Township and one highway in Nah Kyi was constructed in the summer of 2014. U Ye Htun, Maung Hla Win, Zun Nyi Naung constructed the Lay Kay highway; U Kin Mi Kauk constructed the Tha Waw Thaw village and Nah Kyi highway. The identity of the person who constructed the Wa Bon Taw highway is not known. Villagers who live nearby the construction of the roads have had their land confiscated and their crops and plants destroyed. Villagers were not compensated for their losses. They reported to the person in the township responsible

³ Although in the original translation the researcher states that Kyaikto Township borders the Salween River, according to KHRG maps, the Salween River borders Thaton District, separating it from Hpapun District to the east.

⁴ 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 Burmese government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion numbers. For more information, see "[DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force](#)" *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 2010, and, "[Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District](#)," KHRG, June 2009.

⁵ On January 12th 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 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.

[for dealing with these kinds of issues] about their suffering. Even though the reports have been submitted nothing has been solved yet.

Support

In September [2014] a programme of rice distribution to the villagers began across Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District. An organisation called the Nippon Foundation distributed the rice. It distributed eight bowls [16 kg. / 35.2 lb.]⁶ of rice per individual and also provided solar panels. They provided 438 solar panels for each township. The manager of this project is KNU Commander Aee Thah. Commander Aee Thah's assistant in transport is the trader Saw Ah Nge Lay. This programme has been operating for two months.

Building a clinic

We know that a hospital is going to be built in Lay Kay village since 2010, but it still has not been built. A villager reported that the construction of the hospital was confirmed in September 2014. The location of the hospital is on land confiscated by the government which belongs to villagers in the local community. The original owners of the land did not receive any payment for the land, as it has been confiscated since the era of government military dictatorship.

Malaria Project

This project has been formed in rural villages. Representatives of the villages are selected to attend the training at Kyeh Kaw town and then implement this training back in their own village. The healthcare department also conducts training in a village tract as well. In Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District there are two clinics: Khaw Htee Hkee and Tah Meh Htah which were founded by the KNU Healthcare Department. A clinic was established in the brigade [Thaton District] named Tah Meh Hkee clinic. In September [2014] we found out that villagers in virtually all townships of Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton District] were suffering with eye pain [an eye disease]. Some seriously suffered and are yet to get better.

Residence construction for IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons] in 2015

The buildings that are going to be constructed are nearby Lah Hkoe village in Bilin Township. We have known that a register will be taken in October 2015 for those who are going to stay there. Some villagers said that a house is going to be provided and they [those living there] will get support for three years. This project is supported by the Burma government and the [Thaton] District leader. A stone crusher [cement] factory will be constructed in Hpa-an Township. We know that the [Thaton] District leader and [Tatmadaw] military leader would operate this project in the summer. One of the district leaders said that "*We should do this for our district income.*" Villagers who live nearby the project area are worried. If this project is actually going to go ahead, their plantation fields will definitely be damaged. The location of the project is at Kyaw Pyee K'Sah village tract nearby Meh K'Yay village tract in Hpa-an Township. The Burma government and So Naing Pyo company will operate the project.

Armed groups' activity

We know that following the ceasefire the Tatmadaw [began to] inform the KNU before they would go in to KNU areas. When the KNU approves of their presence they [Tatmadaw] launch their activities in the area. When the fighting occurred⁷ between the

⁶ A bowl is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One bowl is equivalent to 1.28 kg. or 2.88 lb. of paddy, and 2 kg. or 4.4 lb. of milled rice.

⁷ In October 2014, fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw and DKBA forces in Dooplaya and Hpa-an Districts. For more information see: "[Dooplaya Situation Update: Kawkaik, Kyainseikgyi and Kyonedoe townships, May to October 2014](#)," KHRG, February 2015 and "[More fighting in Karen State forces villagers to flee](#)," The Irrawaddy, October 2014.

Tatmadaw and DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army]⁸ we knew that their movements [around the area] had grown and more people who travel around the area were being questioned. They would record the names of the people who captain the boat that travels in Yoh Klah area. In Lay Kay we know that they would not allow people to wear their military uniforms when they go inside the village. They do not complain however when the KNU soldiers travel with uniforms and guns. The BGF have also increased the harassment and questioning of villagers when villagers travel around [the area]. Because of the current situation, villagers worry that the fighting between the DKBA, KNU and Tatmadaw will happen again and they worry they will be forced to labour and will not be able to work freely for a living like before. At the moment villagers can work well and freely for their living unless it is raining. Villagers in the village are happy that they can go to work and can stay overnight in the field and farm freely.

When the situation became stable, we found out that villagers faced the problem of drugs. In Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District, Baw Kyoh Leh, K'mah Moe and Sway Koe (Shwe Gone) are the areas that drugs enter the most frequently and when you need them you can easily buy them in these places. Therefore, the amount of youths who use drugs has increased. There is no community awareness and no action has been taken yet. District leaders have discussed how to handle the problem and how to deal with it together. Villagers are worrying that the drugs will cause negative effects on their children and the youths in the village. Some are expecting that this will be solved as soon as possible because most of the drugs that are entering are from areas where the BGF live.

In the education sector, we know that in the academic year of 2013-2014 there were more [Burma/Myanmar] government teachers coming to teach in Karen villages. As a consequence, villagers faced more problems. Previously, villagers recruited teachers from their own villages and they would share a common ethnicity. When the government teachers arrive, whatever they request the villagers must produce. Villagers do not dare to complain about having to do this. For example in the past the principal of Htee Hpah Doh Htah middle school is from Htee Hpah Doh Htah village so we [principle and students' parents] have a mutual understanding. This year the principal is a teacher from the Burmese government and she launched a school competition – a football match with schools from the surrounding villages - Kwee Lay, Klaw Htah, Noh Ber Baw and Yoh Klah. The competition is a week-long. One of the teachers told me they have to bring their own food, their own belongings and they have to pay for all of the expense so it is causes problems for them. As far as we know, if there is a school competition, the [Burma/Myanmar] government will pay for the cost but Htee Hpah Doh Htah school's principal said that the government will only pay for his school. Therefore the competition is likely to become a burden for the villagers and the students' parents.

One of the school committees said that *"Another problem has occurred in Tah Paw school since a Burmese teacher has become principle. She does not allow us to teach the Karen language and she complains that it is just making everyone busier and if we*

⁸ The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), formerly the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, was formed in December 1994 and was originally a breakaway group from the KNU/KNLA that signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burma/Myanmar government and directly cooperated at times with Tatmadaw forces. The formation of the DKBA was led by monk U Thuzana with the help and support of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the name of the military government in Burma/Myanmar at that time. For more information on the formation of the DKBA, see ["Inside the DKBA,"](#) KHRG, 1996. The DKBA now refers to a splinter group from those DKBA forces reformed as Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, also remaining independent of the KNLA. As of April 2012, the DKBA changed its name from "Buddhist" to "Benevolent" to reflect its secularity.

want to teach Karen language, we have to teach it after school." This has happened in another school as well. Our village leader has said that this kind of issue is not good for the village.

Another issue is the Burmese government teachers have to go back to the city for the training once or twice per month. When they go back they disappear for around ten days. Students' parents have to pay for the transportation cost of the teacher which is a burden for them. One of the students' parents said that it [paying for their transportation] costs more than a teacher that we could hire on our own. We have to take care of the [Burma/Myanmar] government teachers, for example in terms of food and candle costs.

As for my personal opinion, in the summer, the development project, logging, construction and land confiscation will increase because the roads are accessible and people from the urban cities will get permission from the KNU to come and conduct business here. The local villagers will suffer because whatever they come to do here will only benefit a small amount of people.

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)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Hpa-an and Bilin Townships, July to September 2014," (November 2014)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township," (October 2014)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Hpa-an Township, January to June 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)

