



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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School closures and movement restrictions: conflict continues to impact civilians in Dooplaya District

Civilians in Dooplaya District continue to be impacted by conflict between the Tatmadaw and armed Karen groups, who have increased fighting in the area since November 7th 2010. In the large border town of Myawaddy, and surrounding villages, residents today reported the closure of schools and warnings of impending attacks. Villages to the south of Myawaddy, meanwhile, report movement restrictions that are complicating their ability to seek refuge in Thailand or tend to crops at a key juncture in the agricultural cycle.

Civilians in Dooplaya District continue to be impacted by conflict between Burma's state army, the Tatmadaw, and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), as well as other armed Karen groups. Clashes were most recently reported on November 19th 2010, near at least two villages near Myawaddy Town. Residents of Myawaddy Town, moreover, reported that today schools and shops were ordered closed, prompting worries that conflict would return to the large border town. Myawaddy saw fighting for the first time in decades following November 7th 2010, when DKBA troops commanded by Na Kha Mway entered the city, prompting at least 12,000 refugees to seek temporary shelter in nearby Mae Sot, in Thailand's Tak Province.¹

Saw A---, who spoke with KHRG this afternoon, described the following situation in Myawaddy:

I see students rushing home – many people are in the streets rushing to their homes. I asked them why and they just told me that they were warned to go home and the schools [were warned] to close. What will happen, they don't know. I heard that there was fighting near Gkwin Gk'Lay.

Residents of at least one village in the Myawaddy area, meanwhile, also reported that students had been sent home early. Saw B---, also interviewed by KHRG today, described the following situation in his village, which is near Myawaddy:

Some [children from my village] who finished school here and [now] continue to study in Myawaddy, came back to our village yesterday. [This was] because the schoolteacher told them, "We have to close school because they [government officials] are afraid that attacks will happen again." The schoolteachers did not give them more detailed information about the future attack.

Movement restrictions

¹ For more on these events, see "Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, November 2010.

South of Myawaddy, meanwhile, villagers report that Tatmadaw soldiers are enforcing stringent movements restrictions on villages near the former base of DKBA commander Na Kha Mway, in Waw Lay village, Kawkaik Township.

According to Naw C---, beginning on November 13th 2010 Tatmadaw soldiers near Z--- village had prohibited residents from going outside the village to tend to farms or purchase food. Z--- village is home to approximately 300 civilians. Naw C--- said that she thought the restrictions were designed to prevent villagers from fleeing the village, as residents are afraid of fighting between the Tatmadaw and soldiers from the DKBA or Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and would like to seek protection in Thailand. Naw C--- thought this was a deliberate attempt by the Tatmadaw to use the presence of civilians to deter the DKBA or KNLA from launching any attacks.

Limited permission is being granted to villagers who would like to leave Z--- village, she said, but only on condition of purchasing travel permits and registering departures with the Army. She and other residents of Z--- village confirmed that travel permission could be purchased for 20 baht (US \$0.67). Residents obtaining permission, for example to purchase food in the large nearby village of Waw Lay, must notify soldiers of their return; no more than five villagers are allowed to leave at a time.

Villagers that spoke with KHRG did not clarify what would happen if residents purchasing travel permits failed to return in good time. Given tensions in the area, however, it is likely that they would be accused of making contact with the DKBA and KNLA. Residents also told KHRG that they are also being checked carefully as they return to Z---village.

Travel restrictions risk complicating agriculture activities, with potentially devastating consequences as corn and bean crops reach maturity; crops left unattended are likely to be destroyed by wild pigs or, if left too long, overripen and rot. Villagers wishing to tend to or sleep at their fields may also purchase separate travel permission for 20 baht. According to the villagers, however, no such documents had been purchased yet, as obtaining them required travelling to a large army camp near Waw Lay village; villagers had thus far not been willing to enter the camp.

KHRG researchers in the area report that similar travel restrictions are being used in Waw Lay village, which saw fighting earlier this week.² These restrictions appear to be more flexible, however. According to Naw D---, two days ago travel permission had to be purchased for 20 baht; today, she said, soldiers were allowing individual villagers to decide how much they could pay. Residents of X--- village, in the Waw Lay area as well, also reported travel restrictions today, though without increased flexibility.

² "Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, November 2010; "Civilians at risk from continued SPDC-DKBA conflict in Dooplaya District," KHRG, November 2010.