



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Situation Update

July 31, 2015 / KHRG #15-13-S1

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## Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, November 2014 to February 2015

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, Toungoo District during the period from November 2014 to February 2015, including military activity, civilians' situation, healthcare, education, land confiscation and landmines.*

- *In Toungoo District, the Tatmadaw are as active as they were in the past. They send their rations to the camps once every three months. On February 12<sup>th</sup> 2015, Military Operations Command (MOC) #20 was replaced by MOC #5, bringing approximately 80 military transport vehicles with them.*
  - *The villagers in Toungoo District usually treat their diseases and illnesses in Karen National Union (KNU) clinics when they are ill. Sometimes, it causes problems for the KNU clinic workers as they do not have enough medicine in their clinic. The villagers do not tend to go to the government clinics as they are expensive.*
  - *In A--- village, Seik Pu Taw village tract, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District, Kaung Myanmar Aung Group of Companies confiscated villagers' land to set up a teak plantation. A villager named Saw B---, whose land was included in the confiscation, went and complained to the company, after which the company sued him and six of his friends for Criminal Trespass under Article 447 of the Myanmar Penal Code.*
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## Situation Update | Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, Toungoo District (November 2014 to February 2015)

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in March 2015. It was written by a community member in Toungoo 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 Toungoo District, 275 photographs and eight video clips.<sup>2</sup>*

### Introduction

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

In this situation update from Toungoo District, [the information] starts from November 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 to February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015. The situations that I would like to mention are: the military situation, the situation of the civilians, healthcare, education, the problem of the land and landmines.

### **The situation of the Tatmadaw**

In Toungoo District, the Tatmadaw are as active as they were in the past. They send their rations [to the camps] once every three months. Their soldiers are asked to take responsibility for road side security when sending their rations. When they came to buy things in the village, some of them brought their guns [with them]. The Tatmadaw camp which was active and based in Toungoo District in 2014 was Military Operations Command (MOC)<sup>3</sup> #20. There were ten battalions under the control of MOC #20. On February 12<sup>th</sup> 2015, MOC #5 replaced MOC #20. They came with a total of around 80 military trucks. The battalions which are under the control of MOC #5 are Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>4</sup> #371, LIB #372, LIB #373, LIB #374, LIB #375, LIB #376, LIB #377, LIB #378 and LIB #379. In Thandaunggyi Town, Bu Yin Naung camp #124 is based there permanently. Southern Operation Command (SOC) Battalion #603 is based in Leik Tho town and there is military training school based in Bu Yin Naung camp.



The photo on the left was taken on the road between Kler Lah village and Toungoo Town during a Tatmadaw rotation. The soldiers are from Military Operations Command (MOC) #20. They have to rotate once every three or four months. These soldiers are based in Buh Hsah Hkee village, Tha Ay Hta village and Naw Soh village. Some villagers stated that they do not want the Tatmadaw soldiers to stay in the military camps that they have built. If possible, they want all the military camps to be withdrawn and dismantled. The photo on the right was taken on December 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 in Kaw Thay Der village, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District. It shows the Tatmadaw sending rations to a frontline camp in Buh Hsah Hkee village. [Photos: KHRG]

### **The situation of the civilians**

In Toungoo District, since the ceasefire<sup>5</sup> between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burmese government, it is easier for the civilians to travel. They also have more opportunities to work. They can work for their livelihoods peacefully since they do not

<sup>3</sup> Military Operations Command. Comprised of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

<sup>4</sup> Light Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Primarily for offensive operations but sometimes used for garrison duties.

<sup>5</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 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.

face any disturbances. The civilians therefore do not want the fighting happen [as it did prior to the ceasefire]. The villagers want the ceasefire to be permanent. The civilians want peace. Therefore, they want the Tatmadaw camps which are based in [rural] Toungoo District to go back to the towns in Toungoo District. Since the military camps are based near the villages in Toungoo District, the villagers were afraid of them. However, some of the villagers said, *"We cannot trust the Tatmadaw because they always bring their guns when they travel."* In Toungoo District, the civilians are now facing land problems. Since the ceasefire, there are more businessmen, rich men and companies entering into the area; there are also more problems occurring.<sup>6</sup>

### Healthcare

In Toungoo District, in terms of healthcare, the diseases around are malaria, diarrhoea, and other diseases. In some areas, if the civilians suffer with disease, they treat them with herbal medicines. For the diseases that they cannot treat with herbal medicines, they treat with modern medicines.<sup>7</sup> As the civilians in Toungoo District live in the forest, they [usually] go to the KNU clinic to treat their diseases. It sometimes causes problems for the KNU clinic workers since they do not have enough medicine in their clinic. The civilians do not go to the government clinic as it costs a lot of money.

### The problem of the land

There is the problem of land [confiscation] in Toungoo District.<sup>8</sup> The land problems will occur in C--- village, Wet Kaw Khaw Sein village tract, Toungoo Town. U Khin Maung [who] leads Aye Roya Kay Tu company and Si Pin Bank company are going to construct an industrial area and they are going to confiscate the villagers' land which they [the villagers] are working on for their livelihoods. For this reason, it causes problems for the civilians. The land that the companies have marked for setting up the industrial area is a total of 4,100 acres in one area and 4,100 acres in another area.

On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, villagers from many villages came and demonstrated in Toungoo Town, Yangon, Mandalay Road [Mandalay District] and Pan Chan Field because they do not want their lands to be confiscated. Some of the lands already have the land grant.<sup>9</sup> In terms of the land issue, the villagers submitted a letter to Naypyidaw. However, they have not received any reply yet. It therefore causes worry for the villagers. In the second area, Kaung Myanmar Aung [Group of] Companies (KMA) came and set up a teak plantation in A--- village, Seik Pu Taw village tract, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District. A villager named Saw B--- went and complained to them [the company] and they [KMA] sued him and six [of his] friends. They sued Saw B--- until now [his case is ongoing].<sup>10</sup> When he goes for an appointment [for his case], it causes problems for him as he has appointments often and he has his own family. He has [to take time] to take care of them [as well as fitting in his appointments]. Since he has to go to court once a week,

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on land confiscation in Kayin State, see [\*'With Only Our Voices, What Can We Do?': Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar\*](#), KHRG, June 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Herbal medicine uses a plant in its entirety to produce a medicine whereas a drug is a copy of a chemical component. This chemical component may be found in a herb.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on land confiscation in Kayin State, see [\*'With Only Our Voices, What Can We Do?': Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar\*](#), KHRG, June 2015.

<sup>9</sup> A land grant provides the holder with permission to work on their land, however all land in Burma/Myanmar is ultimately owned by the Burma/Myanmar government

<sup>10</sup> According to follow-up information provided by the KHRG researcher, Saw B--- had continued to work on his land after it had been sold to Kaung Myanmar Aung Group of Companies, as he was unaware his land had been confiscated and sold by the Burma/Myanmar government. Therefore, subsequent to his later complaint, Kaung Myanmar Aung Group of Companies is suing Saw B--- for Criminal Trespass under Article 447 of the Myanmar Penal Code.

it causes problems for his family. Kaung Myanmar [Group of] Companies started confiscating the villagers land on December 14<sup>th</sup> 2013.

## Education

In Toungoo District, there is nothing special in regards to education. After the ceasefire the government allowed [students from kindergarten] to fourth standard<sup>11</sup> to be taught for free. In some areas, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) came and repaired schools so they would be better. [The villagers] receive no special support from the Burma government. The government should change the education [system] so it is better. It needs to be changed a lot because education is one of the most important things for the people. In regards to education, the KNU leaders in Toungoo District are also going to set up a high school. It will be opened in 2015. The reason why the leaders [will] open this school is for the Karen children to know the history of the Karen people and to be able to know [read and write] the Karen language. In Toungoo District, there are two middle schools; one is in Htantabin Township and the other is in Thandaunggyi Township. They are led by the KNU.



## Landmines

In terms of landmines, the landmines have not been removed yet in Toungoo District. However, not only does the KNU [no longer plant landmines] but neither does the government.<sup>12</sup> There are only the old landmines. It causes worry for the villagers since there are landmines planted on their lands so they dare not to work on this land. The place where the landmines are planted the most is in Buh Hsah Hkee area. The KNU recently said that they cannot remove the land mines yet because the situation is not yet stable.

## Conclusion

The incidents which I mentioned above happened in Toungoo District. These incidents happened after the ceasefire between the KNU and the [Burma/Myanmar] government

<sup>11</sup> Children in fourth standard are generally around nine years old.

<sup>12</sup> According to the KHRG researcher, the KNU had a meeting with villagers and they, the KNU, stated that no new landmines had been planted by them. The researcher cannot however speak for landmines which may or may not have been planted by the Tatmadaw.

and they happened because the companies and the rich people are entering into the area more [frequently]. Before the ceasefire, the civilians mainly suffered from forced labour.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the civilians in Myanmar are encountering land problems so demonstrations happened in some places since they depend on their land for their livelihoods. The civilians want the ceasefire with the KNU and Burmese government to last forever. The civilians have not got any benefits on the topics mentioned above since and as they are not given compensation they do not completely believe<sup>14</sup> the current ceasefire.

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

- *'With only our voices, what can we do?': Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- Press Release: *'With only our voices, what can we do?': Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, July to November 2014," (April 2015)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin Townships, November 2014," (February 2015)
- "Ongoing militarisation of southeastern Burma/Myanmar, since the January 2012 ceasefire agreement between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma/Myanmar government," (February 2015)

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on the prevalence of forced labour prior to the ceasefire in 2012 please see ["Forced Labour, Movement and Trade Restrictions in Toungoo District," KHRG, March 2010;](#) and ["Patrols, movement restriction and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, September 2009.](#)

<sup>14</sup> By 'believe' the researcher means that the villagers do not trust that the ceasefire will last.



## Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)