



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Situation Update

September 8, 2015 / KHRG #15-22-S1

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## Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Shwegyin Township, October 2014 to January 2015

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*This Situation Update describes events and issues occurring in Shwegyin Township, Nyaunglebin District between October 2014 and January 2015, including gold mining, environmental damage, logging, militarisation, arbitrary taxation, and restrictions on villagers' freedom of movement. It also describes the changing human rights situation during the ceasefire period. According to the report, the overall human rights situation is improving in Shwegyin Township compared to before the signing of the January 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma/Myanmar government. However, villagers report still being concerned regarding ongoing human rights abuses, Tatmadaw presence in the area, and the stability of the current preliminary ceasefire.*

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## Situation Update | Shwegyin Township, Nyaunglebin District (October 2014 to January 2015)

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in March 2015. It was written by a community member in Nyaunglebin 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 Nyaunglebin District, including one other situation update.<sup>2</sup>*

### Introduction

[The information in] this situation update was collected from Kler Lwee Htoo [Nyaunglebin] District, Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township from October 29<sup>th</sup> 2014 to January 8<sup>th</sup> 2015. Since the [2012] preliminary ceasefire took place,<sup>3</sup> human rights violations have decreased because

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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.

<sup>3</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.

NGOs are operating [in the country].<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the villagers are now getting to know their rights. Therefore the human rights situation is getting much better. If we talk about our area during the war period up until the preliminary ceasefire period, the villagers had not gotten out from [were not free from] the human rights abuses yet. In Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township, human rights violations and the treatment of villagers will be revealed below:

## **KNU [Karen National Union] government and KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] situation in Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township:**

### **KNU government situation**

In this area, the civilians are controlled by the KNU government [the area is under KNU administration]. The KNU government are the people who [are] active in [work to advance] civilian development. They also have been active in freeing the civilians from the [Tatmadaw's] oppression. Following the preliminary ceasefire [some of] the KNU's activities have impacted the civilians' rights and livelihoods because they [KNU] are working together with rich people. The activities that have impacted the villagers are:

#### **1. Mining metal from natural resources**

Natural resource extraction, such as gold mining, has brought a kind of [some] benefit [for villagers], but if we mention [the entire impact] among villagers, it has also brought problems for the villagers. The gold mining destroyed [polluted] the river causing issues with water for the villagers. Water is the [most important] thing for a villager's life. Fresh water means good health for [the] villagers, but [now] there is dirty water [due to the water pollution] which has brought problems and it causes sicknesses for [the] villagers. They [the KNU] did not [take any] concerns for [the] villagers [into account] and moreover they collaborated with the rich [business] people [with regard to the mining]. [They] therefore abused the villagers' rights [to a safe environment] in their area and [also] abused villagers' [right to] health.

#### **2. Businesses**

There is logging in our area which is controlled by [the] KNU government. The logging affects the civilians' rights because the rich [business] people gave money to the [KNU leaders] and [so] they [KNU leaders] allowed them to do the logging. The villagers also want to do logging so they can build houses and other things, but they [the KNU] do not allow them. The villagers should have the chance but they do not because of this.

### **KNLA military situation**

[With regard to the] KNLA military [soldiers] from Shwegyin Township, some of them try to follow the military's rules, but some are not strong enough [they do not try hard enough to follow every rule]. Some KNLA soldiers cooperate with rich [business] people [on part of the] gold mining [project], moreover they [do] not respect the villagers. Their relationship between the villagers and themselves [the KNLA soldiers] is very open [unregulated and unprofessional]. The villagers [are] worried for their security. Some soldiers have an open [unprofessional] relationship with villagers so it seems like they [are not following the rules of the military]. If something [an incident] happens and [it] causes conflict, it will impact the villagers because it could [work] against the villagers' rights, which are [including the rights] to be able to live and work freely.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In recent years the Burma/Myanmar government has increased access for NGOs to carry out activities and support communities in Burma/Myanmar. Before the ceasefire in 2012, there were less NGOs granted access and therefore able to operate in the country.

<sup>5</sup> The villagers are feeling insecure as a result of the KNLA presence in Shwegyin Township, as some of the KNLA soldiers do not closely follow military protocol at all times; they come and go from the villages as they please. This is causing concern for the villagers, for if an altercation were to arise between the KNLA and Tatmadaw, the villagers feel they are at greater risk of repercussions from the Tatmadaw due to the blurring of boundaries between themselves and the KNLA soldiers.

### **Tatmadaw situation**

The [Burma/Myanmar] government military [soldiers], which are based in Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] area [Township], always travel [move around the area] and [are] active. The army camps which might [have] been withdrawn [from the area following the ceasefire] were not withdrawn. Moreover, they repaired their camps and always rotate their soldiers. Even though the preliminary ceasefire took place they are still operating. They travel in the villages and always bring their weapons with them. They go to the villages both [during] night time and day time in the village. [Tatmadaw officers and soldiers based at] the army camps recruited more military personnel and repaired their camps. They always send [new] ammunition and rations [to the camps]. The villagers have issues [with] travelling freely because of this [their freedom of movement is restricted]. The military come to demand [arbitrary] taxes in the villages and it does not match [is not in line] to [with] military rules. The villagers are worried and concerned for their livelihoods.

### **Villagers' situation:**

#### **Some villagers are scared**

In Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township the villagers struggle to earn their living as well as they can [and they are] still afraid of travelling [outside of their village because of the Tatmadaw presence]. KNU organisations entered the villages and gave information [to the villagers] about the political situation, including the current situation concerning the preliminary ceasefire. They [KNU organisations] gave information to the villagers about the [preliminary] ceasefire that they [KNU] signed with [the] Burma government. Even though [they gave information to the villagers] they have also experienced the oppression, even though they are conducting training. They also have suffered and faced oppression by the Tatmadaw in their own villages. Some villagers also are worried. They do not want to face the same thing that they faced in the past, moreover some of them [have begun to] prepare themselves to protect against contradictions [the chance that the ceasefire may dissolve, contrary to the current agreements].

### **Conclusion**

In Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township, if we mention the [difference in the] situation between [the] war period and the preliminary ceasefire period we can say that the human rights violations take place [to a] lesser [extent now] than in [the] war period. This does not mean the local people [are] satisfied with this. There are many areas to improve [regarding] human rights. There have been many human rights violations and abuses on individuals' rights and on [the villagers'] collective rights.

Further background reading on the situation in Nyaunglebin 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*, (July 2015)
- "On-going militarisation of southeastern Burma/Myanmar, since the January 2012 ceasefire agreement between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma/Myanmar government," (February 2015)
- "Nyaunglebin situation update: Shwegyin Township, March to June 2014," (January 2015)
- "Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Kyaukkyi Township, July 2014," (October 2014)
- "Nyaunglebin Field Report: Human rights conditions during the ceasefire, January to December 2013," (September 2014)

# Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)