



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Situation Update**

July 1, 2014 / KHRG #13-19-S1

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**Hpapun District Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township,  
January to February 2013**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District during January and February 2013, including forced labour, arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, negative impacts of gold mining and an overall update on access to healthcare, education and livelihoods.*

- *Tatmadaw IB #96 soldiers continue to force villagers to work; four villagers are required to carry materials for the soldiers each month.*
- *Villagers were coerced, including by a member of the Federal Trade Union of Kawthoolei (FTUK), to sell their land to be used in gold mining projects. Villagers reported environmental destruction and health concerns related to the impacts of gold mining.*
- *Increasing presence of KNLA checkpoints around gold mining sites has led to an increase in taxes for area villagers, but also to a decrease in presence of Tatmadaw forces.*
- *Fewer human rights violations and a general improvement in access to land and freedom of movement were reported.*

*This Situation Update was initially published in May 2014 in the Appendix of KHRG's in-depth report, [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire.](#)*

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**Situation Update | Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District (January to February 2013)**

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in February 2013. It was written by a community member in Hpapun District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor 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 Hpapun District, including three interviews, 320 photographs and 47 video clips.<sup>2</sup>

This Situation Update covers the period from January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 to February 8<sup>th</sup> 2013. Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>3</sup> #96 was led by Company Commander Sai Ko Ko and was based in a small Tatmadaw camp beside Waw Muh village, Waw Muh village tract. The soldiers were rotated on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 in Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw [Hpapun] District, but the villagers do not know the new commander yet. Sometimes the Tatmadaw army requests KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] permission to use the public road to travel back and forth during the rotation of soldiers, but this time they were not allowed by the KNLA. The KNLA also do not disturb the Tatmadaw when they [the Tatmadaw] travel on the road on the other side of the Bilin River [controlled by the Tatmadaw]. KNLA Battalion #102 and one of the KNLA checkpoints are located just behind Waw Muh village. Most of the KNLA soldiers guard the goldmines. There are no BGF [Border Guard Force]<sup>4</sup> or DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army]<sup>5</sup> battalions in Dwe Lo Township. The IB #96 soldiers sometimes just come into the village to buy some food. A villager said, "They just ask villagers to carry things for them." The A--- village head said that there is still forced labour in his village tract that is ordered by the Burma army [Tatmadaw]. They order villagers [who are labouring for them] to change [rotate] every four months, and they [the Tatmadaw] have to use [operate] on the other side of Bu Loh K/lo [River] (Bilin River) [from the KNLA], because the KNLA only allows them to use that vehicle road and they [Tatmadaw soldiers] also cannot travel on the public road (main road). In that area, the Tatmadaw is quiet and unpopular [does not have a big

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains community members in eastern Burma 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, 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> Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers.

<sup>4</sup> 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 or 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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 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 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.

impact on villagers] because the villagers only see the KNLA around, especially because the KNLA's checkpoints are around nearly every goldmine site. Goldmines in Dwe Lo Township areas are controlled by the KNLA; it means they ask for taxes from every goldmine. They [the KNLA] told the villagers that they raised the taxes to be able to buy weapons and ammunition.

### **Villagers' situation**

Most of the villagers said that the situation is a bit better than in the past, because they have not faced many violations of human rights like before. They are free to go and travel around the area and they can even cross the road on which the Tatmadaw usually travels. But some villagers are still afraid to cross the road when they hear the Tatmadaw passing by. One villager said, *"I am not strong enough to trust Burma [army] soldiers."* As he explained, in the past the Tatmadaw had interrogated him.

Nowadays, the villagers can overcome any condition because they have access to many things related to livelihood or occupation. The remaining problem is that they need to get their clean water from a distant place, because the Bilin River is muddy and unclean due to pollution from the goldmines. There is a concern for some villagers who live near the river, since they still use that muddy water and in most of the goldmines, mercury is used [in the extraction of] gold.

Most of the domestic food prices have increased, especially the price of meat. People cannot easily find meat around the area, so they have to order it from Bilin town. On the one hand, they [the villagers] are tolerant of the situation because they have more than enough vegetables since they own large vegetable [farm] lands. One villager from Kwee T'Mah said, *"In the past, when we wanted to eat fish, we could find [them] in the Bilin River, but now we can't find them anymore because the river is very muddy."* Moreover, one of villagers said, *"Now, the wild animals have become scarce."* Most of the villages near the goldmine sites are peaceful and under the control [of the KNLA]. The villagers do not dare to complain too much about goldmine projects, because they could face reprisals from many sides [different armed groups]. One of the villagers in Mah Lay Ler village tract<sup>6</sup> said, *"In the past, we could find gold with a handmade bowl of wood, especially during the years that we didn't have enough rice, but now we can't do that anymore."* This happened because every place where the villagers used to find gold has become a goldmine site. In those areas, most of the villagers travel by car and motorbike because the public road is quite good. The dusty road ends at Nat Kyi in Bilin Township, Thaton District, and most of the shopkeepers in Mah Lay Ler, Kwee T'Mah and Waw Muh village tracts use this road and go to buy goods in Bilin Township as that only takes one hour of travelling.

Concerning health, most of the houses in the three village tracts mentioned above do not have toilets, so most of the children get diarrhoea and they are sent to Bilin Public Hospital since not every village tract has expert nurses and medics. Also, most of the nurses or medics have private businesses in their village, which means that they own a pharmacy or shop to earn money. They also go around treating patients in their respective village tracts. There are not many clinics in those three village tracts, so villagers cannot get free medication.

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<sup>6</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

As for education, most of the children are sent to school, but there is no high school or a proper middle school. They only have two schools that have grades one to seven. Most of the children are eager to go to school, and some of them are sent to villages near their own town to continue their studies [because some families cannot afford to send their children to school in the town]. Most of the families consider education a first priority, so the children have to give up time for school and their parents have to pay fees. One of the parents said, *“They always have to go to school”*, because they worry that their child will fail an exam if they do not go, especially during the higher grades. The schools do not receive enough support and the teachers’ salaries are very low.

### **Villagers’ livelihood**

Most of the time, the villagers harvest sesame seeds, soybeans and bake sugarcane juice into sugar bars. They grind the sesame seeds to make oil and they cook soybeans to make bean paste. They also sell fresh soybeans for 8,000 kyat (US \$8.15)<sup>7</sup> a tin. After that, they wait for the traders or people who [place] orders and [then] sell goods [to them]. Some villagers make ale and the price for one pack of sugar bars is 1,000 kyat (US \$1.01). One pack of sugar bars can produce three bottles of ale (white Karen whisky). Selling ale in the village is one of the main businesses for the income of a household and the price for one bottle of ale is 1,000 kyat (US \$1.01). Most of the villagers in these areas drink ale all the time and most of the men get drunk, especially in the evening. People who live near the river bank make cement blocks, while some Burmese families make wooden boats and some families have vegetable gardens on the fertilised sand of the river bank. Most of the home shops in those village tracts are selling little things such as snacks, juice and other household items. There are a lot of villagers who buy three-digit lottery<sup>8</sup> tickets. Almost all the villagers seem to be addicted to the three-digit lottery. They buy tickets, hope to win the lottery and spend more money on the lottery than on other, more important, things.

### **Development project in three village tracts (Waw Muh, Kwee T’Mah, Mah Lay Ler)**

In these three village tracts, the most popular work is at the goldmines, where this has been happening for six years and is permitted by the Dwe Lo Township leader in cooperation with KNLA Battalion #102.

However, there is a problem of using too many (40-50) backhoes that first started in the Dwe Lo Township goldmine projects this year. It happened because the agents [land-brokers] divided one piece of land into many smaller parts. The township leader allowed them to use three backhoes for each piece of land. Only villagers can [were allowed to] do gold mining in 2012. However, most of the villagers did not mine, because they did not have sufficient money to run a project. Only some people can do [mining], but those people cannot mine alone. There are seven main people, who are called A--- (Mah Lay Ler village), B--- (Poh Gheh Hta village), Naw C--- (Kwee T’Mah village), Naw D---, Saw E--- (Poh Gheh Hta), F--- (Meh The) and Naw G--- (Waw Muh). They became agents who are in contact and cooperate with business people who have money and companies

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<sup>7</sup> All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the June 19<sup>th</sup> 2014 official market rate of 982 kyat to the US \$1.

<sup>8</sup> An unofficial lottery system popular in Burma.

who want to do gold mining. They [the business people] paid 7,000,000 [kyat] (US \$7,128.31) for each piece of farmland and they also persuaded the villagers to sell their land.

One FTUK [Federal Trade Union of Kawthoolei] leader called *p'doh* [governor] Win Maw was responsible for the Dwe Lo Township area. He said, "*Now you [villagers who own land] have a chance [to sell land]; you don't know what will happen in the future.*" Then the villagers became worried about the future and they were afraid of the threat, so they sold it [the land]. The FTUK [leader] Win Maw received a commission from doing [business with] an agency and for selling the land. One villager said that he received more than 10,000,000 kyat (US \$10,183). One villager from T--- village in Mah Lay Ler village tract said, "*We are not satisfied with the project, because now there is no place [land] for us. In the past, we could do it [use the land] whenever we wanted to, but now there are no benefits for us.*" Most villagers do not complain about the project, but they stay quiet with their heads full of worries and threats. During interviews, they do not dare to speak too much about the project.

When the backhoes were banned, some agents complained that they had debts of more than 10,000,000 kyat (US \$10,183). Actually, the agents do not have debts because they run the project. Instead, the business people [both local and from the towns or cities] who do the gold mining in those three village tracts have debts and they cannot mine without backhoes, because some areas have huge rocks. Especially the business people who do not have their own backhoes could no longer afford food, daily wages, and [the cost of] hiring backhoes. Over 20 to 30 labourers are needed for every single goldmine site and their wage is 3,000 kyat (US \$3.05) per day plus food. Some businessmen earn a salary of 100,000 [kyat] (US \$101.83) per month.

Most of the workers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade [Nyaunglebin District] are experts and have experience in finding gold. Some goldmines are already closed, but some [goldmine owners] are still waiting in hope while some backhoes are already heading back to the towns. As a result, the agents are worried. The three female agents, Naw C---, Naw B--- and Naw G--- from Waw Muh village tract, went to the township offices and tried to request that the [township] leader allow gold mining using backhoes again. The township leader refused the request and gave the option that they would be allowed to mine with pumping machines only. He asked them to get a request [permission] from the KNU [Karen National Union] headquarters. However, there is no answer yet. One of the agents said that, "*If the headquarters close the projects then they should not only close them in 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade [Hpapun District], but they should also close them in the other brigades. After that, there will be no more complaints and misunderstandings, and the villagers will also be happy.*"

Most of the villagers seem to dislike the goldmines, because it affects their livelihoods and brings other difficulties, as most of the workers come from other areas and have different languages and customs. The main problem is the pollution that affects the water in the river. The water is all muddy and polluted, so there are no fish. As a result, one villager said, "*We had more food before these goldmine projects. But now the fish are gone.*" This could be true because how can fish survive in muddy water? The villager also said, "*We haven't had stream fish curry for a long time.*" Most of the streams are damaged and the streams have also become smaller as people mine on both sides of the stream.

The main goldmine site is Shwe Nyaung Bin. The land is destroyed and you cannot even see where the stream runs. It looks like a new community because there is a school for the children and a big market full of goods, shops, bars, restaurants and a billiard hall. There are many motorbikes and trucks. It seems like a new town. The most dangerous development is that goldmines are using mercury, which can badly affect the human body. The workers do not have much knowledge about mercury and do not use gloves but their bare hands when they are using mercury. Maybe the gloves are too expensive or they do not know how to do it (find gold) with just bamboo or wood. The agents, businessmen and companies do not provide any education and they never talk about the disadvantages or effects of the project, such as polluted water and the dangers of using mercury.

Moreover, the agents only cooperate with local leaders and powerful people in the area where they are planning to mine. They do not care about the villagers. In this case, the villagers do not have knowledge about FPIC [Free, Prior and Informed Consent] and developers also do not follow this norm. One of the developers, Saw Kyaw Kyaw, who is currently cooperating with Japanese people [a company], seemed to not know much about FPIC during a land rights workshop [conducted by a KHRG community member] and he asked for a VCD to watch it [a video with information about FPIC] again. The Japanese [company] came to request permission to do gold mining in Dwe Lo Township, but the leaders [from Dwe Lo Township] did not give permission yet.

The Burma movie star Way Lu Kyaw (known to be a military intelligence man), who most of the time cooperates with *Bo* [Officer] Play ([KNLA] Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade), came to a Dwe Lo Township meeting at an unknown place on January 24<sup>th</sup> 2013 [to discuss] the goldmine development. One village tract secretary said that Way Lu Kyaw wants to develop the road from the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade/Thaton District to Hpapun town (Hpapun District). He is not allowed to do that project yet. A knowledgeable [person] said, "*The Burmese co-operators [Tatmadaw representatives] want to say that they cooperate [with the KNLA] and that they are able to talk with the other [KNLA] brigade military commanders, but the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade is difficult to cooperate with.*" He said this because most of the soldiers and commanders from Hpapun District [5<sup>th</sup> Brigade] do not want to cooperate with Burmese people when they are invited for a meeting with Burma governors [government representatives] or Tatmadaw commanders. However, there is no tension between those two groups [KNLA and Tatmadaw soldiers in Hpapun District].

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

- "Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho, Lu Thaw and Dwe Lo townships, January 2013," (June 2014)
- "Hatgyi Dam update and consultation concerns, December 2011 to May 2013," (June 2014)
- "Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, November 2012," (June 2014)
- "Hpapun Incident Report: Restriction of movement in Dwe Lo Township, December 2013," (June 2014)
- "Hpapun Photo Set: BGF Battalion #1013 land confiscation for army base in Dwe Lo Township, June 2012 to November 2013," (June 2014)

