



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

July 14, 2014 / KHRG #14-4-NB1

Negative impacts of dam building and drug use in Paingkyon and Nabu townships, Hpa-an District, May 2014

This News Bulletin describes concerns raised by villagers in Paingkyon and Nabu townships regarding the planned construction of a dam, logging activities, problems related to increased drug use in local communities and the lack of a complaints mechanism by which to raise these concerns with leaders of local armed actors. Villagers living near the site of a proposed hydroelectric dam on the Pa Ta River have raised serious concerns regarding the project's potentially huge environmental and other impacts, and say they have not been properly informed or consulted about the plans. They fear that if construction of the dam goes ahead, homes, land vital for livelihoods and religious sites will be destroyed, affecting approximately 40 villages. Villagers also reported that the wide spread sale and use of drugs has led to a number of problems, such as addiction and mental health issues, poverty and drug related violence. In response, thousands of villagers held consultation meetings and launched a petition calling on the leaders of local armed actors to work together to address their concerns¹.

The Pa Ta Dam project and its potentially huge negative impact

Local villagers have reported that a Japanese company plans to construct a dam on the Pa Ta River between Kyet Oo Taung Mountain and the Kwee T'Ma Mountains in Hpa-an District. In 2007, several unknown people from "the city" came to the area to measure the proposed construction site and placed some concrete measurement markers there without prior notice or consultation with local people.

¹ This News Bulletin was written by KHRG office staff and is based on information from a community member from Hpa-an District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It was received by KHRG in June 2014. 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.



These photos were taken by a KHRG community member on May 31st 2014 in Htoh Kaw Koh village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. They show one of the concrete measurement markers that were placed by unknown people at the bottom of Kyet Oo Taung Mountain in 2007. The words on the marker are; **IRRIGATION DEPARTMENT, YANGON, BM NO 1, PA TA DAM PROJECT, and AL 130 471 FT.** [Photos: KHRG]

The proposed dam would pass through the current site of a pagoda on Kyet Oo Taung Mountain, W--- Monastery, Waw Lay village and Htee Hseh Hker village. The resultant flooding could impact a far wider area. Local villagers fear that if the project is implemented as intended, it will have numerous negative effects on approximately 40 villages in Nabu and Paingkyon townships. Serious environmental and social impacts, such as displacement, migration and destruction of livelihoods will almost certainly result if villagers' paddy fields and plantations, houses, schools, pagodas and monasteries are flooded. The upcoming implementation of the project has caused thousands of villagers to feel that they are under imminent threat, particularly since they became aware of visits by a manager of a Japanese company to the proposed construction site in August and again in October 2013. Villagers also fear that Tatmadaw troops will probably come to the area to provide security for the project.



This photo was taken by a KHRG community member on May 31st 2014 near Waw Lay village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. It shows Saw M---, head monk of W--- Monastery, which is under threat from the proposed Pa Ta Dam construction site. [Photo: KHRG]

Saw M---, head monk of W--- Monastery, told KHRG: *"I hope the implementation of the Pa Ta Dam project will not be carried out anymore. If we have empathy for one another, will they [people involved in the dam project] agree to construct this kind of dam on their land? Because it will not only wipe out monasteries, but it will also wipe out many other places."*



These photos were taken by a KHRG community member on May 31st 2014 in Htoh Kaw Koh village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. The photo on the left shows the Pa Ta River, near the proposed site of the Pa Ta Dam project. The photo on the right shows Kyet Oo Taung Mountain, which the proposed dam would be built on. [Photos: KHRG]

Problems caused by the widespread sale and use of *yaba*;² local armed actors meet with villagers on the issue

In Paingkyon and Nabu townships, Hpa-an District, the widespread sale and use of drugs has become a big problem in local communities over the past two years, leading to addiction, mental health problems, poverty, and drug related abuses including rape and killings. Villagers dare not complain about drug issues openly due to fear of those involved in the drug trade, as some of them are affiliated with Karen ethnic armed groups, the Border Guard Force (BGF)³ or the Tatmadaw. Therefore, villagers do not know where to lodge complaints regarding drugs.

² *Yaba*, which means “crazy medicine” in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine. First developed in East Asia during World War II to enhance soldiers' performance, methamphetamine has become increasingly popular in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Vietnam, and in Burma where it is typically manufactured. See, "[Yaba, the 'crazy medicine of East Asia](#)," UNODC, May 2008 and "[Woman raped and killed in Pa'an District, October 2012](#)," KHRG, December 2012.

³ 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.

Most of the drug users are young people. A local Buddhist monk told KHRG that: “*Out of 100 percent of the people, about 75 percent of them use drugs.*” Villagers said that some male school students are also using drugs. A school teacher named Saw T--- told KHRG that, “*Especially, middle school students have started to practice the use of drugs. Three percent of students use drugs.*⁴ *They have no obedience to older people, can’t follow lessons from the school and don’t want to do social work. I don’t want them to use drugs because good, young generations are a strength for the country.*”



A KHRG community member took this photo of school teacher Saw T--- giving a speech on May 31st 2014, during a meeting of local villagers in Htoh Kaw Koh village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. Villagers and Buddhist monks called the meeting to enable local people to express their opinions on a range of problems facing their communities. [Photo: KHRG]

After leaders of local armed actors became aware of the problem of increasingly wide spread drug use in local communities, leaders from the Karen National Union (KNU), BGF, KNU/KNLA-Peace Council⁵ and Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)⁶ gathered together and held a meeting with villagers at Htoh Kaw Koh Monastery in Htoh Kaw Koh village, Nabu Township on May 21st 2014 in order to discuss solutions to the problem. It was the first meeting that leaders of local armed actors have held with villagers focusing mainly on drug issues.⁷

During the meeting, villagers highlighted four main difficulties in Paingkyon and Nabu townships:

- 1) Widespread sale and use of drugs;
- 2) The loss of forest due to logging;
- 3) The lack of a clear complaint mechanism to report problems for villagers living in areas under mixed control of different armed actors;
- 4) Huge concerns regarding the upcoming Pa Ta Dam development project, which is feared will have serious negative consequences for thousands of villagers living in approximately 40 villages.

⁴ Although many more young people are locally reported to use drugs, many of those young people do not attend school.

⁵ The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (also called the Karen Peace Council or KPC), is an armed group based in Htoh Gkaw Ko, Hpa-an District, which split from the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2007 and subsequently refused to comply with orders from the then-SPDC government to transform its forces into the Tatmadaw Border Guard. See: “[KPC to be outlawed if it rejects BGF](#),” *Burma News International*, August 30th 2010.

⁶ 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.

⁷ For KHRG documentation and detailed analysis of drug-related issues occurring between 2012 and 2013, see “[Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#),” KHRG, June 2014.

Feeling overwhelmed by these problems, local villagers responded by demanding action from local authorities. In May 2014, Buddhist monks cooperated with villagers in a grassroots collective action, launching a signature petition aimed at leaders of local armed actors.



A KHRG community member took these photos on May 31st 2014 in Htoh Kaw Koh village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. They show two banners prepared for a meeting organised by local villagers and Buddhist monks to enable local people to express their opinions on a range of problems facing their communities. The banner on the left reads: “Ban the drugs.” The banner on the right reads: “Ban the construction of the [Pa Ta] dam.” [Photos: KHRG]

The five main actions demanded by villagers are:

- 1) Leaders of local armed actors to form a common judicial complaints mechanism;
- 2) Prohibit companies from entering the area and doing logging;
- 3) Reconciliation of Karen ethnic armed groups;
- 4) Ban drugs;
- 5) Ban the construction of the Pa Ta Dam.

3,933 villagers took the initiative to sign the petition because they want to see these problems solved. Additionally, they held a consultation meeting to enable local people to express their opinions on a range of problems facing their communities at Htoh Kaw Koh Monastery and the surrounding area on May 31st 2014. 1,407 villagers attended the meeting, holding up placards with slogans calling for action on their concerns.





These photos were taken by a KHRG community member during a meeting on May 31st 2014, in Htoh Kaw Koh village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. They show vilagers taking collective action to demand that leaders of local armed actors work together to address their most pressing concerns, which include the widespread use of narcotics, loss of forestland due to logging, negative consequences of dam building and the lack of a complaints mechanism to voice their grievances. *[Photos: KHRG]*

Further background reading on the situation in Hpa-an District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Chapter: The impact of anti-personnel and other mines in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire,” (July 2014)
- “Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire,” (June 2014)
- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Paingkyon Township, June to November 2013,” (June 2014)
- “Hpapun and Hpa-an Situation Update: Bu Tho and Hlaingbwe townships, April to May 2013,” (June 2014)
- “Hpa-an Interview: Saw B---, July 2012,” (June 2014)

Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)