



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

July 15, 2016 / KHRG #15-111-S1

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## **Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township, June to November 2015**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Ler Doh Soh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District between June and November 2015. It also provides updates on the general situation, including education, livelihoods, development projects and military activities.*

- *The mining activities of Ba Wa Pin Maing, Wa Kon Maing, and Pa Ka Ri Maing companies have affected some of the waterways in the Htee Ler Klay large area.*
  - *Karen language and culture has been allowed to be taught in Burma/Myanmar government schools since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed. Since 2014/2015, primary education has been provided for free in Ler Doh Soh Township by the Burma/Myanmar government.*
  - *Some companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have carried out development projects in Ler Doh Soh Township, including building schools, libraries, churches, bridges, and have installed water pipes and electricity.*
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### **Situation Update | Ler Doh Soh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (June to November 2015)**

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in November 2015. It was written by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy 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>*

#### **Situation update**

I want to report some of the general events that occurred in 2015 in Ler Doh Soh [Township], Mergui-Tavoy District. This includes the situation for civilians; civilians' livelihoods; Tatmadaw activities; education; development [projects]; healthcare and the civilian situation; companies active in the township; the KNU [Karen National Union] situation; and the NGO [non-governmental organisation] situation. The information in this situation update was documented between June and November.

#### **Civilian situation**

There are three [large] areas<sup>2</sup> in Ler Doh Soh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. They are K'Moh Thway, D'Weh Hkee, and Htee Ler Klay [large] areas. Most of the villages in K'Moh Thway and

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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.

Htee Ler Klay [large areas] are [ethnic] Karen villages. There are fewer Karen villages in D'Veh Hkee [large] area; most villages there are [ethnic] Mon and Bamar villages. There are four ethnic groups in our township: Karen, Bamar, Mon, and Tavoyan people. Most of the Karen people earn their living from plantations and farms, while fewer villagers work with animal husbandry. [In 2015,] some Karen villagers from rural areas [in other townships] also came to earn their living in our township because of unfavourable weather and floods in their areas. They were not able to work on their own lands; therefore, they came to earn their living in our township. Some of the villagers are working for rich people and some of them are working with road construction. They get 5,000 kyats (US \$4.28<sup>3</sup>) per day, and 5,000 kyats is enough for their personal use such as food. But 5,000 kyats is not enough for the people who have families. Mon people earn their living from rubber plantations and some of them go to Thailand to work. After they come back from Thailand they start their own businesses in their villages. Four months ago, some robbers of Mon ethnicity came and demanded money [from people] in A--- and B--- villages. Because of that event, the villagers stay with worry [are worried] about the robbery event that occurred. There were five to six members in that group of robbers. I got to know about this event from a villager. Some villagers are working with the Maw Ti Ka, To Tel, and Peh T'Roh Nee companies. They get paid by the companies. Some villagers are working with U Paing Company Ltd.<sup>4</sup> The company was set up in 1997.<sup>5</sup> To Tel, Maw Ti Ka, and Pel Sa Go Ne companies supported the villagers [in terms of building] schools, churches, bridges, water pipes, electricity, and libraries for the villagers' needs.

### **Civilian livelihoods**

In terms of livelihoods, the villagers in Ler Doh Soh Township mostly earn their living from [rotational] cultivation, farming, logging, and agriculture. This year, the villagers suffered from unfavourable weather. Some villagers are also doing logging. In the past, the KNU prohibited logging but the [Burma/Myanmar] government allowed it, so the KNU later had to allow logging. Most villagers who live in T'Moh Thway and Htee Ler Klay large areas earn their living from betel nut plantations. In Dweh Hkee large area, most of them work on rubber and cashew nut plantations. [Many of the villagers from] Aee T'Rah Sa, Shway Pleh, and Kah Boh villages in Dweh Hkee large area, are working with the Gas Pipe Line Company.

### **Tatmadaw activities**

There are seven battalions [operating] in Ler Doh Soh Township: [L]IB [Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs)]<sup>6</sup> #406, #407, #408, #409, #410, #282, and #273. The Tatmadaw activity has been decreasing ever since the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire<sup>7</sup> was signed. If their columns patrolled,

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<sup>2</sup> In Mergui-Tavoy District, 'small areas' are equivalent to village tracts, whereas 'large areas' are composed of several village tracts, yet are smaller than a township. There is no equivalent to a 'large area' in the other six KNU-demarcated districts.

<sup>3</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 28 April 2016 official market rate of 1,169.58 kyats to the US \$1.

<sup>4</sup> U Paing Company Limited is also known as Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (UMEHL). It is a large conglomerate controlled by the military through the Ministry of Defence.

<sup>5</sup> The researcher might be referring to when the company established itself in Ler Doh Soh Township. The founding year usually given for UMEHL is 1990.

<sup>6</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. They are primarily used for offensive operations but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

<sup>7</sup> The KHRG community member is referring to the preliminary ceasefire agreement that was signed on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012 between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014. On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government

they [usually] stayed in the villages. Most of the [above mentioned] battalions are based in Dweh Hkee large area. There are no Tatmadaw battalions based in K'Moh Thway and Htee Ler Klay [large] areas. Tatmadaw [Light Infantry] Battalion #207 is not based in K'Moh Thway large area; it is based on the [Thailand-Burma/Myanmar] border. In the past, the Tatmadaw used to go to the villages and ask for chickens and pigs, but those types of incidents do not occur anymore. At present time, the Tatmadaw [soldiers] have good relationships with villagers. There are no problems between the villagers and the Tatmadaw. The Mon military [Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA)]<sup>8</sup> is also based here, and they have their headquarters in Myaw Hkaw village on the township border. The Mon military [MNLA] surveyed lands and asked for money. Their headquarters [leaders] had decided to take 3,000 [kyats] (US \$2.57) per acre of land [that they surveyed] but they asked for 5,000 [kyats (US\$ 4.28) instead]. It caused problems between the villagers and the Mon military [MNLA].

## Education

All the schools in our township are built by the Burma/Myanmar government. There are 13 villages in K'Moh Thway [large] area and two middle schools are situated there. One middle school is situated in Hkaw Paw village and another school is situated in Hkler Hpoo village. There are primary schools in 11 other villages. Since the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire was signed, Karen language and culture have been allowed to be taught in the Burma/Myanmar government schools. In Dweh Hkee [large] area, most of the villages are [ethnic] Bamar [villages] and fewer [ethnic] Karen villages are located there. In the [ethnic] Karen villages in Dweh Hkee [large] area, Karen language, culture, and history can be taught in the schools. Each [ethnic] Karen village has their own school committee and they hold meetings every month. We are allowed to teach Karen language because our township administrators went to discuss [these issues] with the Karen ethnic ministers [of the Burma/Myanmar government]. The people who teach Karen language do not get paid by the Burma/Myanmar government; the KNU gives them pocket money. The Karen text books are provided by the *Kaw Thoo Lei*<sup>9</sup> [KNU] government. The level of education is getting higher because most Karen people pass Standard 10.<sup>10</sup> Some people continue with university studies and then work with NGOs and the Burma/Myanmar government. Some people can support their families even though they have not passed Standard 10, and some become female and male teachers. If we compare with previous years, education is improving. In the past our grandparents did not value education, and they also did not know the value of education. Thanks to development, the thinking of our parents has changed in terms of [how we look at] education nowadays. In the past, they used to say that you were able to eat rice whether you were educated or not. Nowadays, that idea does not exist anymore. The KNU do not have their own school in our township, but the Karen

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and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see [“Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups,”](#) Reuters, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) is the armed wing of the New Mon State Party (NMSP), which was established as a separatist group in 1958. The NMSP signed a ceasefire with the Burma/Myanmar government on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The term *Kaw Thoo Lei* refers to Karen State as demarcated by the Karen National Union (KNU), but the exact meaning and etymology is disputed; see: Jonathan Falla. *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border*, Cambridge University Press: 1991.

<sup>10</sup> A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Burma/Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school is Standards 6-9, and upper secondary school is Standards 10-11.

Education Department [KED]<sup>11</sup> of the KNU arranges with Karen teachers who teach Karen language in [Burma/Myanmar government schools]. The KNU provides school materials each year. Before the KNU signed the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire, almost all the teachers who taught in the Karen area [villages] were Bamar teachers. We also had to pay for note books and brooms when we enrolled the students. But since 2014 or 2015, the Burma/Myanmar government provides free education for primary students, and students do not have to pay school fees or pay for school materials.

### **Healthcare**

The healthcare situation has also improved a little bit because one more hospital and a clinic were built [in Ler Doh Soh Township]. The hospital is located in K'Moh Thway large area, in Htoh Kee Hphoh Noh village, and it is run by KDM.<sup>12</sup> A clinic is situated in Hkaw Paw village. There is also a hospital in D'Weh Hkee large area and it was built by the Burma/Myanmar government. A medical administration office has been built by the KNU in Ler Ther village but the construction is not yet complete. There are no serious illnesses facing the villagers in our township. They only face common illnesses that they can treat with herbal medicine. If they get serious illnesses they go for medical treatment at Dawei Hospital [in Dawei Town].

### **Company location [situation]**

There are a few companies [operating] in our township. *Ba Wa Pin Maing*, *Wa Kon Maing*, and *Pa Ka Ri Maing* [companies] operate in Htee Ler Klay large area. Those *maing* [mining] companies conduct mineral mining, and the rivers have been affected because of the mineral mining. There are two huge companies [operating] in D'Weh Hkee [large area], the Gas Pipeline Company and U Paing Company Ltd. There are fewer companies [operating] in our township because the CSLD [Community Sustainable Livelihood and Development Committee], headed by Zaw P'Laing Baw, is active there. ITD [Italian-Thai Development Public Company Ltd.] has already stopped constructing this road [without finishing it].

### **KNU situation**

Our [Ler Doh Soh] Township office is situated in K'Moh Thway large area in Kler Hpoo village. Few people work there. In terms of the military, Battalion #10 led by Commander Doo Na [is based in Ler Doh Soh Township] and three companies [are under the control of Battalion #10]. Company #1 and #3 take responsibility [are active] in D'Weh Hkee large area and near the border with Thailand. Company #2 takes responsibility [are active] in K'Moh Thway large area. The Karen National Defence Organisation [KNDO]<sup>13</sup> is also based in our township with 20 members.

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<sup>11</sup> The Karen National Union's Education Department. The main goals of the KED are to provide education, as well as to preserve Karen language and culture. During the civil war in Burma/Myanmar the KED became the main organisation providing educational services in the KNU controlled areas in southeast Burma/Myanmar. The KED also previously oversaw the educational system in the seven refugee camps along the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border, however in 2009 these activities were restructured under the Karen Refugee Committee – Education Entity (KRCEE). See "[Conflict Erupts over Govt teachers deployed to KNU areas](#)," Karen News, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 and the KRCEE website: "[About](#)," accessed July 21<sup>st</sup> 2015.

<sup>12</sup> It is not clear which organisation the community member is referring to here.

<sup>13</sup> The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local

## NGO situation

A few NGOs are operating in our township, for example the NRC [Norwegian Refugee Council], Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project, and CSLD. The NRC educates villagers regarding agriculture systems and holds car repair shop trainings. The Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project does research about the wild animals and orchids, and they organise villagers and have formed a CF<sup>14</sup> forest. CSLD was formed by the KNU and their activities are related to the nature.

The information above covers events that happened during the whole year.<sup>15</sup>

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

- “Mergui-Tavoy Short Update: K’Ser Doh Township, June 2015,” (July 2016)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: K’Ser Doh Township, August to October 2015,” (May 2016)
- *The 2015 Elections and Beyond: Perspectives from villagers in rural southeast Burma/Myanmar*, (February 2016)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: K’Ser Doh Township, January to March 2015,” (February 2015)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township, January to June 2015,” (January 2016)

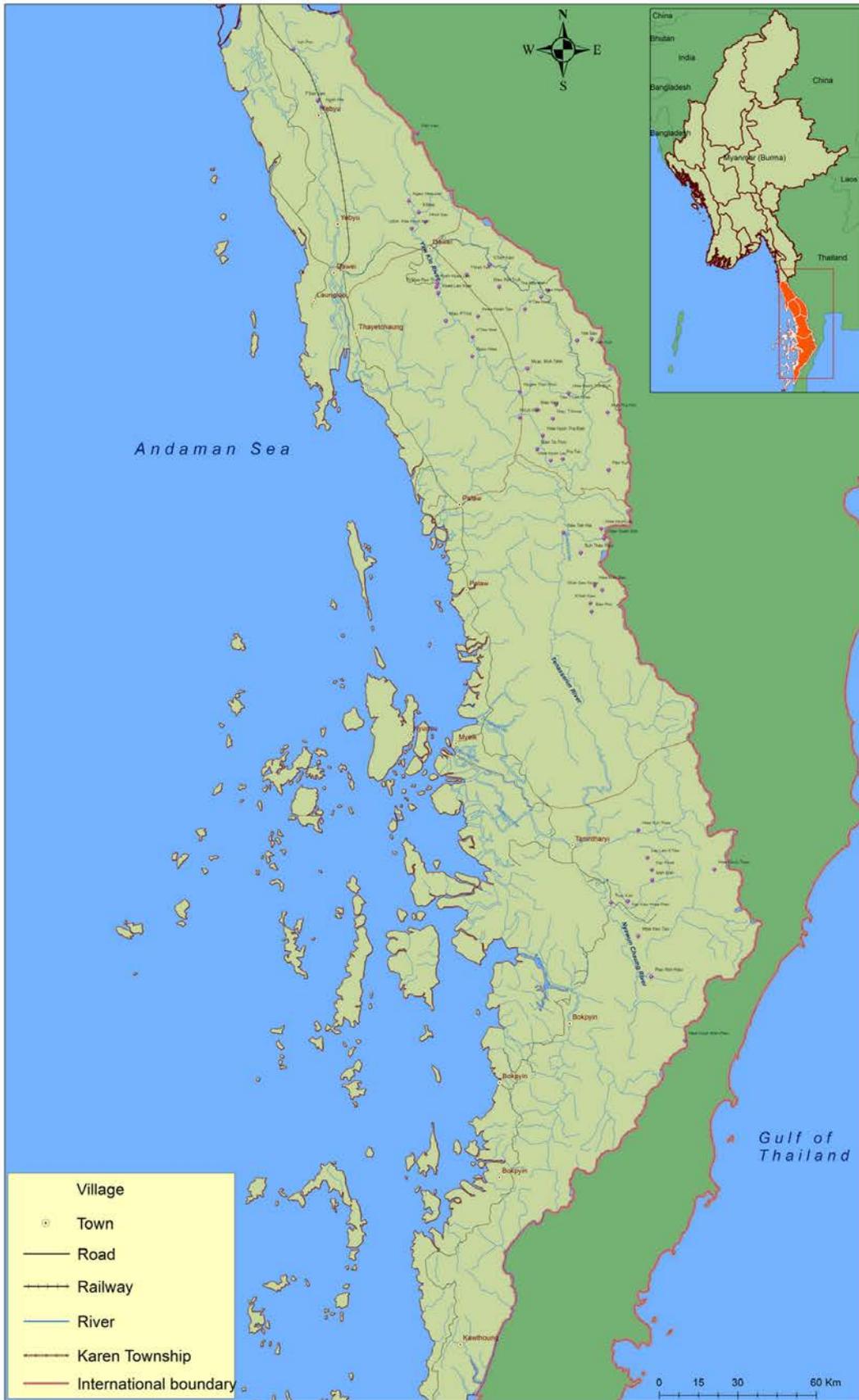
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volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

<sup>14</sup> The KHRG community member did not specify what CF stands for. Based on the context it is likely to refer to community forestry, a form of forestry in which local communities play a significant role.

<sup>15</sup> At this point, the KHRG community member mentions that the report covers events during the entire year, despite having written June-November in the title of the report. It is not clear why this was done.

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)