



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District, January to May 2016

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District between January and May 2016, including Tatmadaw demanding villagers to transport rations, villagers' livelihoods, gold mining, water pollution, water shortages, education and healthcare.

- *On January 6th 2016, Tatmadaw ordered a Bamar village head in Dwe Lo Township to provide villagers to transport rations to Waw Mu army camp, Kit Kaw army camp, Suh Thuh Hta army camp and Meh Way army camp. The villagers were given food and they were paid money for transporting the rations.*
- *Since the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in 2015, military activities have reduced and villagers' livelihoods have improved a lot as they can now work and travel more freely.*
- *This year the summer season was extremely dry and, as a consequence, villagers faced serious water shortages. Therefore, they have to access water from far away as the river had dried up.*
- *Since January 2016, wealthy individuals and companies have conducted gold mining in Meh Thuh village tract and Meh Way village tract after they were given permission by the Karen National Union (KNU) leaders. The gold mining has damaged the villagers' land and polluted the Bu Loh River.*

Situation Update | Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District (January to May 2016)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in June 2016. 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.¹ This report was received along with other information from Hpapun District, including two complaint letters.²

Preface

¹ 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.

² 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 the area of Mutraw [Hpapun] District, civilians in Dwe Lo Township suffered [received] demands for labour from Tatmadaw and demands to transport items [rations and ammunition], and this happens once every year. On January 6th 2016, Tatmadaw demanded a Bamar village head [in Dwe Lo Township] to [provide villagers to] transport their rations and then the Bamar village head requested villagers who have boats to help with transporting rations to Waw Mu army camp, Kit Kaw army camp, Suh Thuh Hta army camp, and Meh Way army camp. Villagers went and transported [the rations to the army camps] and the transportation took three days. Tatmadaw paid the villagers for the three days of transportation and provided them with boat fuel, food, boat propellers and also provided each of them [villagers] with 10,000 kyat (US \$8.23).³

Regarding demands for forced labour, such as [villagers] having to carry and transport [items for armed actors], this does not happen much anymore but they [Tatmadaw] only demand villagers to transport the rations by boat to their army camps once every year [in return for compensation].

As for their livelihoods, villagers do farming, hill side plantation farming, selling at home and growing betel leaves.⁴ Since the NCA [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement]⁵ was signed, villagers' livelihoods have improved a lot and they can now work and travel more freely. But villagers [now] face damage to their land because of gold mining.

This year the summer season was extremely dry and villagers are facing serious water shortages. [For the] Villagers who obtain a water supply from the creeks, [the water] through the pipes [from] the creeks has dried up, so even if they wanted to drink and use the water from Bu Lo River, the water [in that river] was polluted with mud [from gold mining] so they cannot drink or use it. Moreover, animals such as cows and buffalo got ill and died after they drank the polluted water. In addition, because of this extremely dry summer the grass has also dried up and died so the cows and buffalo do not have any grass to eat.

In Lu Thaw Township, I do not know how the situation is going as I cannot access the area. Therefore, another field researcher who operates in that area will update about the situation in Lu Thaw Township when they write the reports. And also at the same time they will update about the difficulties that villagers in Lu Thaw Township are facing.

The situation of villagers facing difficulties in the region of Dwe Lo Township

³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the September 6th 2016 official market rate of 1,214.48 kyat to US \$1.

⁴ In Burmese, 'betel nut' and 'betel leaf' are referred to as *konywet* and *konthih*, respectively, as if they are from the same plant. The Burmese names are also commonly used by Karen language speakers. Betel nut is the seed from an areca palm tree, *Areca catechu*; "betel leaf" is the leaf of the piper betel vine, belonging to the *Piperaceae* family.

⁵ On October 15th 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 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 15th 2015. Despite the signing of the NCA prompting a positive response from the international community, see "[Myanmar: UN chief welcomes 'milestone' signing of ceasefire agreement](#)," *UN News Centre*, October 15th 2015, KNU Chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe's decision to sign has been met with strong opposition from other members of the Karen armed resistance and civil society groups alike, who believe the decision to be undemocratic and the NCA itself to be a superficial agreement that risks undermining a genuine peace process, see "[Without Real Political Roadmap, Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Leads Nowhere...](#)," *Karen News*, September 1st 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12th 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and 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.

Villagers' livelihoods

In the region of Dwe Lo Township, villagers do farming, hillside cultivation, selling at home, selling betel leaves and betel nut and they do not have any other sources of income for their livelihoods. Villagers who live close to the gold mining area pan gold but villagers who pan gold have to get a permission letter from the village tract leader and they have to pay 10,000 kyat (US \$8.23) for one permission letter and if they do not pay that then they cannot pan the gold.

For the villagers who do farming and cultivation for a living, if they cannot produce enough food for the year through doing that [farming and cultivation], they try to earn an income in other ways. With the income that they earn from farming and cultivation, they use it for kitchen costs, such as cooking stuff like food, salt, fish paste and so on. And for the villagers who sell betel leaves and betel nut, they earn a good income for their living and they buy rice with the income that they earn from selling betel nut and betel leaves.

Tatmadaw activity and BGF [Border Guard Force]⁶ activity

After the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire agreement⁷ was signed, there have not been many Tatmadaw activities, such as [Tatmadaw soldiers] going to the hills or travelling from village to village. And when Tatmadaw travel around, they do so according to the rules that KNU [Karen National Union] and KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] set up [in the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement]. Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion (IB)⁸ #3 operates in Bu Law Traw area and Light Infantry Division (LID)⁹ #44 operates in Baw Kyoh Traw at the vehicle road.

The BGF [Border Guard Force] group that are active [in Dwe Lo Township] at the moment is BGF [Battalion] #2013 led by Commander Bah Yoh. This BGF Battalion Commander Bah Yoh and his fellow soldiers are doing logging for a type of teak wood in Taung Thone Lone [Three Mountains]. Although KNU do not permit them [BGF] to do logging, they do what they want.

Gold mining

From January 1st until May 5th 2016 [the time of writing], there has been gold mining in Meh Thuh village tract and Meh Way village tract, and local civilians have faced damage to their land and plantations. The local residents claimed that the gold mining occurred because the [KNU] Brigade 5 leaders from [Hpapun] District and [KNU Brigade 5] headquarters gave them

⁶ 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 Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and 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.

⁷ On January 12th 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. In March 2015, the seventh round of the negotiations for a national ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and various ethnic armed actors began in Yangon, see "[Seventh Round of Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations](#)," *Karen National Union Headquarters*, March 18th 2015. Following the negotiations, the KNU held a central standing committee emergency, see "[KNU: Emergency Meeting Called To Discuss Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement And Ethnic Leaders' Summit](#)," *Karen News*, April 22nd 2015.

⁸ An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

⁹ Light Infantry Division (LID) of the Tatmadaw is commanded by a brigadier general, each with ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, "search and destroy" operations against ethnic insurgents and narcotics-based armies. LIDs are organised under three Tactical Operations Commands, commanded by a colonel, three battalions each and one reserve, one field artillery battalion, one armoured squadron and other support units.

permission. The wealthy individuals and companies have the opportunity [to conduct gold mining] because the [KNU Brigade 5] leaders gave them permission. If they [KNU Brigade 5 leaders] had not [given them permission], then the wealthy individuals and companies would not have dared to [conduct the gold mining]. [KNU] Leaders [from Hpapun District and Brigade 5 headquarters] provided [the affected villagers with] compensation when the gold mining took place in the local villagers' land for three million kyat (US \$2,470.20) per acre. Some villagers did not want to sell their land [for the gold mining] but because of the orders from the [KNU Brigade 5] leaders they had to sell their land. Villagers whose land and plantations were destroyed lost their land and now they have to find new places for plantation farming. Therefore, this has caused difficulties for the villagers who now have to look for new places for plantations.

Water pollution and dry summer

The entire Bu Loh River was polluted because of the gold mining and it caused difficulties for local villagers to get enough good water as they are facing water shortage problems. And also in this year there was a drought in the dry summer season, so villagers had to go far away to access good water. Villagers who access water from pipes connected through the creeks could not use the water anymore as the creeks had dried up. So villagers are facing big problems as they do not have water to drink, wash, cook or use for other things. If this gold mining had not happened then there would be enough water from Bu Loh River to use. As local villagers are facing water shortage problems they have to access water from very far away and some villagers have dug wells beside the Bu Loh River. When some educated people [environmental technicians] came and saw villagers drinking water from the well that they had dug beside the Bu Loh River, they told the villagers, *"it is not good to drink and use because the gold mining has polluted the water with chemicals so it can cause disease."* The villagers replied to them, *"if we do not drink the water from the well that we dug beside the Bu Loh River, we have to go and collect water from far away. Since it is difficult to access water, we have to drink the water from the well that we dug beside the Bu Loh River."* In addition, villagers told the educated people, *"if it is not good to use the water from the well that we dug beside the Bu Loh River, then please stop this gold mining for us. Even though we talk about [our concerns], no one values [cares about] our claims."*

Health

The common illnesses that local villagers in Dwe Lo area face are coughing and fever. Children have suffered for a long time from coughing and there are no healthcare workers to [provide] treatment for these kinds of illness. Some children whose parents have money go to the hospital for treatment in Bilin Township or Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township in Thaton District, and it costs them a lot of money. And children whose parents do not have money just treat [coughing] with traditional medicine [leaves]. If children or adults have illnesses such as fever, healthcare workers from the KNU provide healthcare services for free. The healthcare workers from the KNU tested the villagers' blood to check whether the villagers have malaria and fever, and if they do, then they give them medicine and take care of the sick people very well.

Education

From 2012 to 2016, education in Dwe Lo area has improved a lot. Now the Karen Education Department [KED]¹⁰ has provided one school for each village and every child who is eligible to attend school has to go to school. There is no high school in some places so children who pass middle school have to attend high school in Ka Taing Tee Town and some go to the refugee

¹⁰ 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 20th 2013 and the KRCEE website: "[About](#)," accessed July 21st 2015.

camps. In the past, before the 2012 ceasefire was signed, children who attended school had to pay a fee [for all stages of school] and even now everyone has to pay a fee for primary and middle school. Therefore, although education has improved after the 2012 preliminary ceasefire, students do not have access to free education and they still have to pay schools fees.

Karen Communication Co-operation and Supporting Community (KCCSC)

The Karen Communication Co-operation and Supporting Community [KCCSC] is led by Commander Aung Nyein who was a former commander [of the KNU] but who now lives in Beh K'Law [Mae La] refugee camp. Commander Aung Nyein, [also known as] Hpuh Thit Ghee Wah Ser, came to the area of Dwe Lo Township and organised a programme which requested villagers to save a handful of rice every day when cooking rice and then once a month they [villagers] would give one bowl of rice [that they had saved] to a committee [that Commander Aung Nyein] organised. So at the end of the year there will be a lot of rice that has been saved. Some villagers did not want to give rice [for this programme]. By doing this programme KCCSC aimed to donate some of the rice [that villagers had saved] to old people in the village who cannot work and people who do not have enough rice to eat and they [KCCSC] would also keep some and sell some. However, the programme was not run properly because KCCSC did not need to help the villagers as much [as they had planned for] by distributing rice [to villagers in need] and therefore the villagers [only] saved one bowl of rice each month [instead of a handful every day].

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

- “Two separate landmine incidents happened in Hpapun and Nyaunglebin districts, March and April 2016,” (August 2016)
- “Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar,” (August 2016)
- “The death of Saw Hpah Mee (November 13th 2015),” (July 2016)
- “Villagers displaced following rumours of KNLA forced recruitment, more flee following a clash with Tatmadaw in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, September to October 2015,” (June 2016)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, August to October 2015,” (March 2016)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)