



News Bulletin

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Recent fighting between newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hpa-an District, September 2016

This News Bulletin describes the fighting that broke out between the newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led to more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District.

- *On September 9th 2016, the fighting broke out between the newly-reformed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and allied Tatmadaw and Border Guard Force (BGF) soldiers in Meh Th'Waw area, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District.*
- *On September 10th 2016, the Myaing Gyi Ngu monk Sayadaw U Thuzana arranged more than 200 trucks in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area and picked up villagers from villages around Meh Th'Waw to leave and resettle in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town for their safety.*
- *Additionally, on September 25th 2016, there were two other groups of displaced villagers which totalled up to a thousand people who did not choose to flee to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town but fled instead to nearby villages C--- and D--- to evade the fighting.*
- *Villagers who were displaced to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town were provided with shelter, clothing, food, health care and education by local groups and Myanmar-based organisations; villagers who displaced in C--- and D--- villages received support from border-based groups and organisations.*
- *At least one village head was killed and one villager was injured when they stepped on landmines in two separate incidents in the area where there was fighting.¹*

On September 27th and October 7th 2016 respectively, two KHRG community members went to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town where villagers from the fighting areas had displaced to. They met and interviewed some displaced villagers and the community leader, and documented the situation and information of the displaced villagers as follows.

On September 9th 2016, the fighting broke out between the newly-reformed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)² and joint forces of Border Guard Force (BGF) soldiers from

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 local human rights conditions. It summarises information received by KHRG in September 2016. 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.

Cantonment Area #4 under Commander Maung Chit Thu³ and Tatmadaw soldiers from Military Operation Command (MOC) #12 in Meh Th'Waw area, Hlaingbwe (Lu Pleh) Township, Hpa-an District. Meh Th'Waw area is situated on the Thai-Burma border, divided by the Moei River. Therefore, when thousands of villagers fled their villages some villagers fled to Myaing Gyi Ngu (Kaw Taw) Town, some villagers fled to nearby safer villages and some villagers fled across the border to the Thai side.

On September 10th 2016, Myaing Gyi Ngu monk Sayadaw⁴ U Thuzana⁵ arranged more than 200 trucks in Myaing Gyi Ngu areas and picked up villagers from villages around Meh Th'Waw areas to escape and resettle in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town for the safety of villagers who were in the battle areas. According to the villagers, when the trucks went to pick up them they were at their workplaces; some villagers were working in their farms and some were working in their plantations. They were told by people who picked them up that Sayadaw U Thuzana had asked them to go and stay in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town because the fighting was happening in their area. Therefore, they got into the trucks without any preparation and did not bring any of their belongings. Villagers left all their properties, including: farms, plantations and livestock.

² The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) was re-formed on January 16th 2016 as a splinter group from the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (2010 – present). During fighting on the Asian Highway between the Tatmadaw and DKBA Benevolent throughout 2015, there was internal disagreement within the DKBA Benevolent which resulted in a number of commanders being dismissed in July 2015. These former commanders then issued a statement in January 2016 declaring the formation of a new splinter group. This organisation has phrased the formation of this group as the revival of the original Democratic Karen Buddhist Army which was formed in 1994 until it was broken up in 2010 into the BGF and the still-active DKBA Benevolent. The group is led by General Saw Kyaw Thet, Chief of Staff and General Saw Taing Shwe aka Bo Bi, Vice Chief of Staff. Other lower ranking commanders in the DKBA Buddhist splinter group are San Aung and late Kyaw Moh aka Na Ma Kya, who was reportedly killed on August 26th 2016. The group is currently based in Myaing Gyi Ngu area in Hlaing Bwe Township, Karen State. This DKBA Buddhist (2016 – present) should not be confused with the DKBA Benevolent (2010 – present) from which it broke away in January 2016, or with the original DKBA (1994 – 2010) which was broken up in 2010 into the BGF and the DKBA Benevolent. Importantly, the DKBA Buddhist has not signed the preliminary or nationwide ceasefire with the Myanmar government whereas the DKBA Benevolent has signed both agreements.

³ Maung Chit Thu, commonly referred to as Chit Thu, was the operations commander of Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Battalion #999 prior to the DKBA transformation into the Tatmadaw Border Guard Force, which began in September 2010. His role has grown considerably since the transformation: he was second in command of Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, overseeing BGF battalions #1017, #1018, #1019 and #1012, and is now a senior advisor and general secretary of the Karen State BGF central command based in Ko Ko, Hpa-an District. Abuses committed by Maung Chit Thu have been cited in previous KHRG reports, including ordering the forcible relocation of villagers from eight villages in Lu Pleh Township in July 2011, while acting as a Border Guard commander, see, "[Pa'an Situation Update: June to August 2011](#)," KHRG, October 2011. For more information on the DKBA/Border Guard transformation, see, for example: "[Border Guard Forces of Southeast Command formed in Paingkyon of Kayin State](#)," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 22nd 2010; and "[Border Guard Force formed at Atwinkwinkalay region, Myawaddy Township, Kayin State](#)," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25th 2010.

⁴ Sayadaw is Burmese term for a high monk.

⁵ U Thuzana is an influential ethnic Karen Buddhist monk based in Myaing Gyi Ngu who was instrumental in the formation of the DKBA in 1994; see "[Inside the DKBA](#)," KHRG, March 1996. In 1995, KHRG reported that U Thuzana had collaborated with the Tatmadaw, and met with then-Southeastern Commander Major General Maung Hla to obtain weapons and supplies for 4,000 soldiers in his monastery. As a result of the agreement, U Thuzana's headquarters and main monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu, in northern Hpa-an District, reportedly developed a reputation as a mystical safe haven for villagers avoiding Tatmadaw abuses. See "[Karen Human Rights Group commentary](#)," KHRG, February 1995. More recently monk U Thuzana has been implicated in forced labour demands and of stoking religious conflict by confiscating land to build Buddhist stupas. See "[Hpapun Field Report, January to December 2013](#)," March 2016, and "[Myanmar Religious Officials Decry Buddhist Monk's Pagoda-Building Spree](#)," Radio Free Asia, May 2016.

Villagers reported to a KHRG community member that they were worried that animals would destroy their paddy fields and that their properties would get stolen but they dare not go back to their village yet. According to the responsible leader, as of September 27th 2016, villagers from four villages went back and stayed in their village on the third week of September but among these four villages, villagers from one village came back to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town again.



These photos were taken by a KHRG community member on October 7th 2016 at a camp for displaced villagers in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. The photos show temporary shelters that have been built for villagers who fled from Meh Th'Waw area from the fighting. [Photos: KHRG]

According to one responsible person who has been involved in the settlement for the displaced villagers, as of October 1st 2016, there were 5905 from 35 villages displaced in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town and these villagers are from Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. These villagers separated into four different places such as at monasteries and at the Karen new year' celebration ground in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town area. These displaced villagers have received support and donations from local Myaing Gyi Ngu residents, villagers from other areas, Community-based Organisations/Civil Society Organisations (CBOs/CSOs), Burma/Myanmar government, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The support and donations they have received include food, vegetables, drinking water, clothing, money, furniture and shelter. They also have received health care treatment and for children they are accessing education from the local Burma/Myanmar government in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town. However, not all displaced students could attend school because as of September 27th 2016, there are only four schools that are continuing teaching for the students at displaced sites. These four schools are only primary schools and they are Burma/Myanmar government schools.

The displaced villagers told the KHRG community member that they would go back and stay in their village if the fighting is over. Villagers also say that they have faced with some difficulties while staying in Myaing Gyi Ngu area because Myaing Gyi Ngu area is a vegetarian (strictly Buddhist) zone and people are not allow to eat meat.



These photos were taken by a KHRG community member on September 27th 2016 at a monastery compound in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. The first photo shows food and vegetables that monks and villagers from Kawkareik Township, Dooplaya District donated to the villagers who had fled from Meh Th'Waw area to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town to avoid the fighting between DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers that occurred in early September 2016. The second photo shows food that is stored for the displaced villagers in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town. [Photos: KHRG]

In addition, there are also two other locations where villagers around the Meh Th'Waw area displaced to aside from Myaing Gyi Ngu Town. The first location is in D--- village, Meh Proo village tract, Hlaingbwe Township, where 504 family members from 90 households arrived. The second location is in C--- village, Meh Proo village tract, Hlaingbwe Township, where 392 family members from 72 households have displaced to. This additional information was received as of October 7th 2016, when a KHRG community member went to both locations and conducted interviews with villagers who displaced to these two village locations. According to the villagers, when the fighting broke out between DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers, they were told by Monk U Thuzana that villagers who live far from Meh Th'Waw area should temporarily displace to D--- village or other villages for their safety and that the monk would arrange to pick up them if the fighting become heavier. They fled from their village starting from October 25th 2016 at night time and they arrived at the displaced site by the next morning, October 26th 2016. Those villagers left behind their livestock and belongings as they could not bring anything with them when they were fleeing from the fighting. They reported that before they fled, some of their buffalos stepped on the DKBA's landmines but they do not know if these animals are dead or injured because they dared not go to check due to their own fear of landmines. These villagers also reported to a KHRG member that prior to the fighting they were ordered by the DKBA soldiers to carry (porter) the DKBA's food.

When they fled, these villagers received support such as: food, clothing, shelter and healthcare from border-based community organisations.



These photos were taken by a community member on October 10th 2016 at D--- village, Meh Proo village tract, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. The first row of two photos show villagers who had fled from the fighting collecting donations provided by two border-based CBOs, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and Partner. The CBOs donated mats, clothes, longyis, machetes, toilet bowls, stoves and food to the newly displaced people. The bottom two photos show temporary huts and shelters that are built for villagers who had displaced from the fighting from the Meh Th'Waw area. [Photos: KHRG]

Forced Labour

Villagers reported to KHRG that in A--- village, when the fighting occurred in the nearby areas, DKBA's soldiers ordered two to three villagers from A--- village to porter for the soldiers. They were ordered to porter the soldiers' food and ammunitions and stayed with soldiers for three days in shift rotation, without any payment.

Perilous landmines

According to the displaced villagers, many landmines have been newly planted by the DKBA soldiers in the areas where there has been fighting.⁶ Most of these landmines are reported to be hand-made. Villagers are afraid of the landmines because these landmines are also planted in their village areas and work places. The responsible leader told a KHRG community member that on October 1st 2016, an E--- villager name Saw K---, who is over 20 years old, stepped on a landmine and sustained injuries.

⁶ According to the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), Section 5a, all signatories to the NCA agree to immediately stop laying mines. The NCA has been signed by the Tatmadaw and eight ethnic armed groups but the newly-reformed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army has not signed.

Another landmine incident happened on September 16th 2016, when A--- village head U⁷ T-- stepped on a landmine and died beside A--- village. When he stepped on the landmine, his wife and children were not with him; they had already fled to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town. According to U T---'s wife, Naw L---, U T--- did not die immediately but villagers were fearful carry him back to the village because when he stepped on the landmine, the BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers who were based in the village opened fire at the location where the landmine had exploded. Instead of carrying him back to the village, the villagers therefore brought him back to their hiding place in the valley. Then they sent some villagers to inform the BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers about the incident and to bring their village head back to the village for treatment. U T--- died on the way when villagers carried him back to the village because of the injuries that he had sustained from the landmine explosion. Naw L--- stated that the reason her husband stayed back in village was because he was a village head and there were some villagers who remained in village area rather than displacing away from the fighting. As village head he remained with villagers to help and protect them from any form of harm. U T--- left his wife and his five children. His wife and children are currently staying in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town. After the landmine incident, the villagers who had stayed in A--- village area were also told by the BGF that they should not stay in their hiding place and should leave for Myaing Gyi Ngu Town as they might be mistaken and shot at if they stayed in their hiding area near their village.

Naw L--- also reported to a KHRG community member that, before her and other villagers from A--- village fled to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town, fighting had occurred in her village because DKBA soldiers stayed in A--- village. According to Naw L---, BGF and the allied Tatmadaw soldiers entered into areas near to A--- village and they exchanged fire. Because of this fighting a lot of artillery that had been shelled by BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers fell and exploded in A--- village but they did not hit any A--- villagers. Therefore, A--- villagers were afraid and they wanted to flee from the village but DKBA soldiers told them that they do not need to be afraid and flee. Instead, DKBA soldiers suggested to the villagers to dig bomb shelters under their houses and stay in the village. Later, villagers heard that Monk U Thuzana had arranged cars to pick up villagers from fighting areas so many of them decided to flee to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town instead of staying in A--- village.

According to the villagers, they have been further impacted by the fighting in Meh Th'Waw area because the BGF and their allied Tatmadaw soldiers took control of the main vehicle road from Meh Th'Waw village to Myaing Gyi Ngu Town; they also captured the DKBA's army camps along the vehicle road. The fighting became calm as of mid-October 2016. As of the end of October 2016, some villagers returned to their villages to work on their farms and plantations however they could not work effectively because they continue to be afraid of landmines.

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

- "Hpa-an Interview: Saw A---, August 2015," (October 2016)
- "Hpa-an Field Report: Continued difficulties under ceasefire, January to December 2015," (September 2016)
- "Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar" (August 2016)
- "Hpa-an Interview: Saw H---, February 2016" (August 2016)
- "Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---," (June 2015)

⁷ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)