



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

February 20, 2018 / KHRG #17-11-S1

Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, November 2016 to January 2017

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin Township, Thaton District during the period between November and January 2017, including military activity, development, healthcare, livelihoods, Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) situation and logging.

- *The Tatmadaw Light Infantry Division #44 and the Border Guard Force gathered and worked together to patrol around various villages in Bilin Township, Thaton District, starting from April 23rd to December 31st 2016.*
 - *The Japanese Nippon Foundation in Yo Klah (Kyat Thoung Seik) village tract distributed solar panels to villagers; however, villagers had to distribute solar panels among themselves by lottery because there were not enough panels for each household.*
 - *Wealthy individuals illegally conducted logging in K--- village, L--- village, M--- village and O--- village, Bilin Township, Thaton District.*
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Situation Update | Bilin Township, Thaton District (November to January 2017)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in January 2017. It was written by a community member in Thaton 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 Thaton District, including three interviews and 29 photographs.²

Introduction

This situation update took place between November 2016 and January 2017. The report includes information on Burma/Myanmar military activity, development, healthcare, livelihoods, KNU/KNLA (Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army) situation and logging.

Burma/Myanmar Military Activity

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 southeastern 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.

The Tatmadaw³ arranged for the Border Guard Force (BGF)⁴ to carry out responsibilities alongside the Light Infantry Division (LID) #44 in Bilin Township starting from April 23rd 2016 until December 31st 2016. BGF Battalion #1014,⁵ based in Ta Paw [village], was led by Bo⁶ Nay Phy, Battalion #1014, based in Lay Kay, was led by Bo Kyaw Hlaing, Battalion #1013, based in Yo Klah (Kyat Thoung Seik), was led by Bo Kyaw Hlaing, and Battalion #1011, based in Meh Pray Hkee, was led by Bo Henry. LID #44 Commander Brigadier General Thant Zin and his troops from the Tatmadaw were also present.

Since the BGF began to cooperate [with the Tatmadaw], Tatmadaw troops have started to stay in the villages, particularly in Lah Koe village, located in Maw Lay village tract, Bilin Township. In addition, Infantry Battalion (IB) #2, led by Commander Aung Than Zaw, patrolled in some villages in Bilin Township. Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #3, based in Pa Wa Hta village, Mel Naw Ther village tract, Bilin Township, and led by Commander Thet Htway, was sometimes active around Naw Mu Htaw, Htee Hsi Baw and Khaw Poe Pleh as well. IB #2, under the wing of LID #8, which is based in Htaw Klaw Hkee village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Bilin Township, and led by Major Chit Min Thein, also patrolled near Baw Kyo Lel and K'Ter Tay villages.

On December 15th 2016, Tatmadaw military trucks arrived and began to construct a road from P--- village to Q--- village. There were a lot of Tatmadaw troops that patrolled as security guards during the road construction. In addition, the monastery in R--- village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Bilin Township, which had been burnt down by Tatmadaw LID #8, Battalion #2 Major Chit Min Thein troops on August 23rd 2016,⁷ began to be rebuilt on December 10th 2016 by their own people [Chit Min Thein's troops]. They [Chit Min Thein's troops] have been sending cement, sand, nails and iron rods since January 15th 2017.

Development

Though the road from P--- village to R--- village needed to be reconstructed after the end of the rainy season, there has not been any action to repair the road yet. However, low-cost houses have started to be built.

³ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military throughout KHRG's 25 year reporting period. The Myanmar military were commonly referred to by villagers in KHRG research areas as SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) from 1988 to 1997 and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011, which were the Tatmadaw-proclaimed names of the military government of Burma. Villagers also refer to Tatmadaw in some cases as simply "Burmese" or "Burmese soldiers".

⁴ 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.

⁵ KHRG continues to receive reports discussing abuses involving BGF Battalion #1013 and #1014, including: "BGF Battalion #1014 demands forced labour, asserts heavily militarised presence in villages in Hpapun District, June 2015," KHRG, December 2015; Hpapun Incident Report: Villager killed by Border Guard Force (BGF) Battalion #1013 in Bu Tho Township, March 2015," KHRG, September 2015; "Human rights violations by Border Guard Force (BGF) Battalion #1014 in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, May 2012 to March 2014," KHRG, July 2015 and "Hpapun Field Report: Killing, violent abuse, landmine incident, military activity, forced labour, displacement, and poor health and education make villagers feel insecure, January to December 2015," KHRG, December 2016. Further reports detailing abuses involving these battalions are also available on the KHRG website.

⁶ Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer.'

⁷ On August 23rd 2016, Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion #8, controlled by Battalion Commander Chit Min Thain, burnt down a village monastery when a soldier played with a lighter near an oil tank. The incident was previously reported in '[Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, July to September 2016](#),' KHRG, 2017.

The Japan Nippon Organisation⁸ distributed solar panels to some villagers. According to some villagers, they had to participate in a lottery to receive solar panels because there were not enough solar panels. S--- villagers and Yo Klar village tract leaders said that it was very difficult for them to distribute [the solar panels] because there were not enough. After distributing solar panels, [a group of] people [from the organisation] came from Yangon and installed the solar panels on each house. [Representatives from the] Japanese company addressed the community by themselves and asked questions [to villagers] after the installation of solar panels.

The clinic that was built in T--- village, Ta Au Hkee village tract, Bilin Township, was transferred to the KDHW (Karen Department of Health and Welfare) to administer. U--- village, Kyoe Wine village tract, Bilin Township, and western S--- village, Yo Klar village tract, Bilin Township, were not provided with anything, such as with any health workers or nurses by the government. Villagers have been waiting a long time for the local authorities to open [the clinic]. In T--- village, health workers have been provided and assigned. The construction of a clinic in V--- village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Bilin Township is still on going.

Healthcare

In regards to the healthcare situation in Thaton District, villagers mostly suffered from malaria, cough, allergies/itchiness, joint ache, inflammation, influenza, and mouth ulcers. Some villagers went to town in order to get treatment while some went to KNU/KNLA clinics for treatment. Since the KNU/KNLA opened a clinic in their Brigade #1 [Thaton District] headquarters, as well as clinics in each of their regiments, nearby villagers have been able to go and receive treatment there. Despite the fact that the KNU/KNLA has opened these clinics, however, they are incomplete and do not have adequate medicine and health workers. People who went to KNU/KNLA clinics said that they didn't have medicine to give, so they [the villagers] had to purchase medication themselves and then return to the KNU/KNLA clinic to get treatment. Besides this, in regards to health, malaria [prevention] and vaccinations were provided by the Myanmar/Burma government in some villages.

Livelihoods

Local people in Bilin Township make their living by farming, cultivating crops, and trading. Villagers had to buy rice from traders who came to town to sell their rice because the harvest did not produce enough rice this year. The prices for supplies are getting higher since roads to local lands have emerged and traders from Bilin Town, Thaton Town, and Kyaik Kaw Town, can now come and sell their products in villages. Meat prices rose sharply. Therefore, poor villagers, especially farmers, were incapable of consuming enough food, making donations [for religious events], and arranging weddings for their sons or daughters. According to farmers, their rice was destroyed by rats, a decrease in rainfall, or a poor harvest. Therefore, the price of rice from town is more expensive and now costs 12500 kyat (\$9.34 USD)⁹ per big tin (15 kilograms). Some villagers said that they worried about the rice price in the rainy season because the price was already high in the hot season [when the price is usually lower].

KNU/KNLA Situation

[KNU/KNLA] troops and the KNU administration at the township level are both based within Thaton District, but the district office and brigade offices are not located in the same place.

⁸ The Nippon Foundation is a Japanese NGO currently implementing social innovation and development projects in Burma/Myanmar. KHRG commonly receives updates from community members on The Nippon Foundation's recent activities in Karen State, see more at "[Nyaunglebin Field Report: Militarisation, land confiscation, violent abuse, 're-relocated' IDPs, landmines, and development projects, December 2015 to December 2016](#)," October 2017, KHRG, and "[Hpa-an Field Report: Continued difficulties under ceasefire, January to December 2015](#)," October 2016, KHRG.

⁹ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the January 26, 2018 official market rate of 1,319 kyats to US \$1.

KNLA soldiers and respective department branch staff have been less-motivated in their jobs since the NCA (Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement)¹⁰ was signed in 2015. The problem is that they do not have enough time to work for their families [to help with family farms or businesses]. KNU also cannot afford to offer enough [financial] support, and some [staff] were struggling with health problems. Even though the KNU/KNLA's situation has improved, their families still face insufficient support. The soldiers are given [pocket money] 2000 kyats a year (\$1.49 USD) and their families are paid 80,000 kyats a year (\$59.79 USD). Thus, they are facing livelihood difficulties due to low annual income.

Logging/Business

There are many areas that are being logged in Thaton District. Logging took place in K--- village, Aye Kru Hkee village tract, Bilin Township, L--- village, Ta Au Hkee village tract, M--- village, Htee Maw Hkee village tract, Bilin Township, and O--- village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Bilin Township. The wood [that was logged] was supposed to be sold to the towns but the KNU Forestry Department has not approved this yet. There were trucks [that were meant to carry wood] that secretly reached logging sites at night time. Logging was not conducted by any companies but by a group of wealthy villagers.

Conclusion

The information mentioned in this report regarding military activities, logging, and livelihood, truly happened during the reporting period. Even though the KNU and Tatmadaw military signed the NCA, the local villagers still encountered difficulties and were still concerned about their situation. Villagers are trying to raise their voices in various ways to get their suffering seen.

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

- "Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, March to May 2017," (November 2017)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, July to September," (April 2017)
- "Thaton Interview: Ma N---, July 2015," (February 2017)
- "Thaton Interview: U A---, 2016," (November 2016)
- "Thaton Interview: Naw C—, June 2015," (October 2016)

¹⁰ 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. 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, "[Ongoing militarisation in southeast Myanmar](#)," KHRG, October 2016 and "[Dooplaya Field Report: A quasi-ceasefire? Developments after the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, from January to December 2016](#)," KHRG, September 2017.

Doo Tha Htoo (Karen)



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