



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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IDPs in Lu Thaw Township urge Tatmadaw to withdraw army camps

This News Bulletin describes the details of a non-violent protest held by Internally Displaced People (IDPs) that urged the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District in 2017 so that villagers and IDPs can work freely and peacefully for their livelihood without fear of landmines or Tatmadaw abuses. The protest was held on May 15th 2017 at A--- place, Pla Hkoh village tract. 615 IDPs participated in this protest. After the protest, the Tatmadaw reinforced their troops and increased their amount of military activity.¹

Introduction and the history of IDPs in Lu Thaw Township

Thousands of Karen Internal Displaced Peoples (IDPs) were displaced from Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District during Tatmadaw offensives spanning from 1975 to 2008. During the military offensives, many of the villagers who were living in Lu Thaw Township fled their original villages and lived in make-shift, temporary housing in the jungle and mountainous areas in Lu Thaw Township and other areas in Hpapun District. Most villagers displaced to Naw Yoh Hta, Kaw Loh Der, Yeh Muh Plaw and other village tracts² in Lu Thaw Township but some villagers also displaced to refugee camps in Thailand. These IDPs and refugees fled due to heavy attacks on their original villages as well as in an effort to evade being forced to porter for the Tatmadaw and other forms of human rights abuses.

KHRG has consistently reported on the inability of IDPs in Lu Thaw Township to return to their original villages, even after the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed.³

¹ This News Bulletin was written by KHRG office staff and is based on information from a community member from Hpapun District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It summarises information from two incident reports and one situation update received by KHRG in June 2017. 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.

² A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

³ For additional KHRG reporting on IDPs in Lu Thaw Township see, "[Ongoing militarisation prevents Lu Thaw Township IDPs from returning home](#)," KHRG, February 2014 and, "[IDPs, land confiscation and forced recruitment in Papun District](#)," KHRG, July, 2009. 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

According to updated information received on July 31st 2017, there are currently 31,259 IDPs in Lu Thaw Township such as Saw⁴ E---, 69 years old. Saw E--- testified, “I was displaced from F--- village on October 10th 1975 because of Myanmar government military [Tatmadaw] attacks. I have not been able to return to my village since that time. I have to stay in other peoples’ villages every year. Even after the 2012 preliminary ceasefire and Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement⁵ were signed we do not feel that it would be safe to return home.”

IDP protest and village agency

On May 15th 2017, IDPs protested against the Tatmadaw, calling for the withdrawal of their army camps in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District. The IDPs want to return home because in their current IDP sites, the quality of the soil is not good enough to produce sufficient paddy rice and they also do not have adequate access to land so that they can earn their livings from their hill farms. As a result, the displaced villagers living in the IDP sites have faced serious food shortages as the paddy fields that they farmed could not produce enough paddy grains to collect. Moreover, there are no other job opportunities through which they could overcome their livelihood challenges. Due to this situation, many villagers wanted to go back to work on their former lands which they have not been able to cultivate since they left their original villages. Indeed, 50 year-old village tract leader Saw G--- said that 82 plain farms⁶ are unable to be cultivated and so they remain unused due to safety concerns caused by the high numbers of Tatmadaw camps are situated near their working areas. According to a KHRG researcher from Lu Thaw Township, 14 Tatmadaw camps are located within four village tracts in Lu Thaw Township. Due to the multiple livelihood challenges faced by IDPs, they held a protest urging the Tatmadaw to withdraw from their original working areas and villages in order to be able to cultivate their former land and work freely in their original working areas.

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.

⁴ Saw is a S’gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person’s name.

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.

⁶ It is unclear whether the 82 plain farms mentioned by Saw G--- are only located in the village tract he is a leader of or if these plain farms are also in other areas in Lu Thaw Township.



The above photos were taken on May 15th 2017, in Pla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District. The photos show young girls, women, men and children on their way to A---place in order to participate in the IDP protest against the Tatmadaw. The photo on the right includes a man holding up two sticks to set up a small sign while protesting. [Photos: KHRG]



The above photos were taken on May 15th 2017, in Pla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District. The photos show IDPs waiting for others to arrive at the gathering place for the protest. [Photos: KHRG]

On May 15th 2017, 615 IDPs from Pla Hkoh, Saw Muh Plaw and Yeh Muh Plaw village tracts in Lu Thaw Township participated in a protest urging the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps from their original working areas and villages and in order to enable local community members to travel freely and safely to their local areas and to their fields. The protest was organised by Saw H---, who is 45 years old and lives in I--- village. The protest took place in A--- place, which is just 25 minutes by foot from Keh Deh Kyoh army camp. Protestors held up four signs expressing their main protest objectives: 1) *We don't want to be forcibly ruled by other ethnic [groups]* 2) *Tatmadaw camps based in our areas [original working areas and villages] have to withdraw within 2017* 3) *We want to work freely and peacefully for our livelihood* 4) *We want to be ruled by our own ethnic leaders [Karen National Union].*

Similar protest objectives were also raised in a protest by IDPs in Ei Tu Hta Camp,⁷ according to a recent Karen News' article. The article states that on May 24th 2017, IDPs' in

⁷ Ei Tu Hta IDP camp was set up in 2006 in Hpapun district, on the banks of the Salween River next to Thailand. As of early 2017, the camp housed 475 households, totaling 3352 people. The IDPs largely originally fled from Toungoo and Nyaunglebin districts due to the Myanmar government military (Tatmadaw) launching offensives in Karen National Union-controlled areas. The Border Consortium (TBC) is the main donor that provides rations to

Ei Tu Hta Camp and local villagers who live around that camp held a protest calling for the withdrawal of Tatmadaw troops based in their original areas in order for IDPs to return to their original villages safely. Other protestor demands include the removal of landmines from displaced villagers' villages, farms, orchards and roads that they use, a properly monitored code of conduct for the Tatmadaw and KNLA to uphold, and the inclusion of a comprehensive and clear plan in any peace agreement for the reintegration of IDPs and refugees.⁸

Unfortunately, the Lu Thaw Township IDPs' main protest objectives were not immediately achieved. According to the latest update received on July 31st 2017 from a KHRG researcher in Lu Thaw Township, even though villagers held a protest urging the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps within 2017, the Tatmadaw has not decreased their military presence. Indeed, the Tatmadaw have actually increased their activity and are now patrolling in local areas near villages beside the vehicle road and have also reinforced their military presence. IDPs reported that, "Before we held a protest they only patrolled once a month but these days they patrol every week." Due to the Tatmadaw's actions, IDPs' trust in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) has significantly decreased.



IDPs in Ei Tu Hta camp. TBC has announced it is only able to secure budget to provide basic supplies until September 2017. After this the camp will be closed. Since December 2015, discussion and surveys have been taking place by funders and Karen CBOs about the return and resettlement of the IDP community, and a focal preparatory committee on the return was formed with representatives from Karen CBOs and local KNU officials. Some IDPs have expressed great concern about the resettlement and return process as there are Tatmadaw and other armed actors present in the area where they were originally from. See, "[End Of Funding Will Force Ei Tu Hta Karen Displaced Peoples' Camp To Close](#)," Karen News, February 16th 2016.

⁸ For more detailed information regarding Ei Tu Hta IDP protests see "[Thousands of Displaced Karen Villagers Call for Burma Army to Get Off Their Land](#)" Karen News, May 2017.



The above photos were taken on May 15th 2017, in Pla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District. The photos show IDPs in Lu Thaw Township holding a protest urging the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps in order to enable IDPs to return to their original villages and work on their plain and hill farms safely and securely. The top two photos show IDPs holding a short worship service before the protest. The two photos below show the main objectives of holding the protest written in S'Gaw Karen language: "Villagers in Pla Hkoh village tract are holding a protest to urge the Tatmadaw to withdraw from our original villages and working areas." They also have listed their four main protest objectives: 1) *We don't want to be forcibly ruled by other ethnic [groups]* 2) *Tatmadaw who base in our areas [working areas and original villages] have to withdraw within 2017* 3) *We want to work freely and peacefully for our livelihood* 4) *We want to be ruled by our own ethnic leaders [KNU]*. 615 IDPs participated in this protest. [Photos: KHRG]

IDPs' concerns

The residents in the IDP sites do not feel that it is safe to return home for many reasons. Firstly, they have many bad memories about the life risks they experienced during the military offensive period before the 2012 preliminary ceasefire was signed. In addition, the Tatmadaw planted landmines around their army camps which are located near the IDPs' original working areas and villages. The IDPs in Lu Thaw Township fear for their safety as they mainly work on hill and plain farms near to where the Tatmadaw has planted landmines. Additionally, due to past experiences, they are also worried that the Tatmadaw will kill, arrest, torture and force them to serve as porters if they unexpectedly encounter them. Furthermore, after a recent incident where the Tatmadaw burnt down seven hill farms, villagers are very concerned that the Tatmadaw will set more hill farms on fire again in the coming years. Saw J---, who is 65 years old, reported that on March 26th 2017, Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion⁹ (LIB) #351, based in Kuh Hkoh, Pla Hkoh village tract and Infantry Battalion¹⁰ (IB) #72, based in Pwa Gaw, Yeh Muh Plaw village tract burnt down seven hill farms. This had especially negative consequences as the trees were burnt in the year in which the trees on the hill farms were supposed to be cut down, according to the traditional cycle of forestry management which is practiced by local villagers. The seven hill farms were owned by villagers in K--- village in Pla Hkoh village tract and Yeh Muh Plaw village tract. The Tatmadaw interrupted the cycle of cultivating hill farms and many villagers were unable to continue their cultivating. The villagers believe that the destruction of their hill farms was a deliberate attempt to harm villagers' livelihoods. After this incident, only a few of the owners were able to cultivate some parts of their hill farms. Saw J--- reported, "The Tatmadaw troops saw that we had put up a sign on which we wrote, "Do not burn the

⁹ A Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

¹⁰ An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

forest,” but they did not respect the sign. Therefore, seven hill farms were burnt when they set fire to the forest.”



The above photos were taken on March 28th 2017 in Pla Hkoh and Yeh Muh Plaw village tracts. The photos show several hill farms that were burnt on March 26th 2017 by Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #351, based in Kuh Hkoh, Pla Hkoh village tract and Infantry Battalion (IB) #72, based in Pwa Gaw, Yeh Muh Plaw village tracts. These hill farms were owned by villagers who live in Pla Hkoh and Yeh Muh Plaw village tracts. The first and second photos show the hill farms which villagers were unable to continue cultivating due to the Tatmadaw interrupting the traditional cycle of forestry management by prematurely burning the hill farms. The third and fourth photos show the hill farms that a few villagers were able to cultivate. However, it was very hard for the villagers to plant new paddy seeds because it was difficult for them to clear the tree branches and small logs that were not fully burnt. [Photos: KHRG]

Conclusion

Militarisation in Lu Thaw Township is one of the main barriers preventing the safe return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees to their original working areas and villages. Not only has the presence of landmines and a high number of Tatmadaw camps increased local community members' safety and security concerns but they also face significant livelihood challenges due to Tatmadaw actions such as the burning of villagers' hill farms. An additional challenge for potentially repatriated refugees regarding militarisation is that they may lack up to date information in their original villages such as the location of landmines and the presence of the Tatmadaw.

Nevertheless, IDPs and villagers in Lu Thaw Township actively use both formal and informal strategies to claim their rights and resist militarisation on their land. Formal strategies include non-violent protests urging the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps from

villagers' original work places and homes. These strategies are not used regularly for many potential reasons, such as the risk for protestors. Due to these challenges, IDPs also use informal strategies such as putting up signs in the hill forest, warning the Tatmadaw to not burn the forest and respect their livelihoods. Although this is not organised, these informal strategies are one of the many types of agency local communities regularly use to contest the Tatmadaw and the militarisation of their working areas and villages.

But visibly, even though the IDPs in Lu Thaw Township actively use both formal and informal strategies to claim their rights and resist militarisation on their land, they have not been able immediately achieve their objectives, as the Tatmadaw have increased their activity in Lu Thaw Township and have reinforced their presence. This negative reaction from the Tatmadaw is deeply concerning because it may indicate to IDPs that the Tatmadaw do not recognise the legitimacy of their safety and livelihood concerns and therefore significantly decreases IDPs' trust in the NCA.

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

- "Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, 2016 to February 2017" (August 2017)
- "Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, September to November 2016" (June 2017)
- "Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, July 2015," (April 2017)
- "Hpapun Interview: Saw B---, October 2016," (March 2017)
- "Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, March 2016," (January 2017)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)