



## News Bulletin

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### **Ongoing fighting, displacement, landmines, porter demands, and child recruitment in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District, October and November 2017**

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*This News Bulletin describes ongoing fighting, displacement, landmines, porter demands and child recruitment in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District between October and November 2017.*

- *In the second week of October 2017, fighting broke out between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA splinter group) and the joint forces of the Border Guard Force (BGF) and the Tatmadaw in Hlaingbwe Township. Skirmishes continued throughout October and November 2017.*
  - *Villagers had remained displaced from the area since initial fighting between BGF/Tatmadaw and DKBA splinter group in September and October 2016. When returning briefly to his village in Meh Th'Waw area in May and June 2017, an unnamed male teenager was arrested by the DKBA splinter group and forced to serve as a soldier despite being underage.*
  - *BGF Battalions #1013 and #1014 demanded villagers from Kwee Law Ploh, Meh Th'Moo, Kler Day, Yaw Poh, and Kloo Htaw village tracts, in Hlaingbwe Township to serve as porters and guards in October 2017. This was very dangerous for villagers due to the presence of landmines in the area and the risk of DKBA splinter group attack.<sup>1</sup>*
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#### **Introduction and context of ongoing fighting**

In December 2016, KHRG reported on how fighting between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army<sup>2</sup> (DKBA splinter group) and joint forces of the Tatmadaw and the Border Guard Force<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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), and is also referred to as Na Ma Kya ('Deaf Ear'). During fighting 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

(BGF) in Hpa-an District led to the displacement of more than six thousand villagers from Meh Th'Waw area to Myaing Gyi Ngu town and Htee Thay Khee village.<sup>4</sup> During the period in which fighting broke out in September and October 2016, some villagers and some of their buffalo stepped on landmines planted by the DKBA splinter group. In one case, Naw T---, 45 years old, reported that she did not believe that she would be able to escape the fighting as there were many landmines planted besides her home. Finally, she risked her life and was luckily able to avoid stepping on any landmines and escape. Displaced villagers in a temporary camp in Myaing Gyi Ngu face many challenges, including food shortages, a lack of healthcare services and a lack of humanitarian support.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, displaced villagers who remain in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town and Htee Thay Khee village do not feel safe to return.

KHRG community members report that fighting has regularly broken out since the second week of October 2017 in A---, P---, Q---, R--- villages and Kaw La Wah Hill. According to their most recent update, the October and November skirmishes can be attributed to the BGF's goal of clearing the DKBA (splinter group) from the area. Due to the threat of violence, some villagers from the aforementioned villages as well as nearby villages felt unsafe and were unwilling to remain in their villages. These villagers chose to displace from their homes to Myaing Gyi Ngu and Ya Ma Hta place, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract,<sup>6</sup> Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District.

### **Displacement, forced recruitment and child soldiers**

More than six thousand villagers around Meh Th'Waw area who displaced from their homes during the initial outbreak of fighting in the area in September and October 2016 do not feel that it would be safe to permanently return because of ongoing fighting, landmines and other additional obstacles. On November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017, KHRG community members reported that although many villagers have temporarily settled down in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town, some villagers briefly returned to their former villages during the rainy season between May and June in order to secure their belongings, (such as their livestock and plantation), and also to see whether or not the situation had improved.

An unnamed male villager is one of the villagers who briefly returned to A--- village. He is the oldest son in his family, is around 13 years old and briefly returned to A--- village between May and June 2017 because his family perceived the situation to have stabilised. However, the DKBA splinter group, led by Tactical Commander General, Bo San Aung<sup>7</sup> and Second

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Na Ma Kya (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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> This information was taken from [“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”](#), KHRG, December 2016.

<sup>5</sup> For further information please see [“Karen IDPs suffer food shortages as clashes rage nearby”](#) DVB, August 2017 and [“Myaing Gyi Ngu Displaced People Face Food Shortages, Lack of Medicine, as Support and Donations Stop...”](#) KIC, February 2017.

<sup>6</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

<sup>7</sup> San Aung (Bo San Aung) Tactical Commander General Saw San Aung is a low-ranking but widely known commander of the DKBA (Buddhist) splinter group which was formed from a breakaway group of DKBA (Benevolent) in January 2016 in Hpa-an District. Prior to the formation of the DKBA (Benevolent) splinter group,

Commander-in-Chief, Bo Bee, unexpectedly attempted to forcibly arrest many of the villagers who had temporarily returned to their own villages. Although some of these villagers were able to escape, the 13 year old unnamed male villager could not and he was forcibly arrested. After he was arrested, the DKBA forced the unnamed villager to serve as a child soldier against his will for several months.

After further reinforcement of DKBA troops, fighting broke out between DKBA (splinter group) and the joint forces of Tatmadaw and BGF in Meh Proo village tract, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District in the second week of October 2017. During one of these skirmishes, the unnamed villager was arrested by the BGF on the battlefield while he was serving as a DKBA splinter group soldier. The BGF confiscated all his belongings including his gun and then immediately released him after the arrest. On November 21<sup>st</sup> 2017, a KHRG community member reported that the unnamed young villager had returned to Myaing Gyi Ngu temporary camp and is now reunited with his family.

### **Porter demands**

KHRG community members in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District reported that the joint forces of the Tatmadaw and the BGF have demanded that villagers act as their porters and guards ever since fighting resumed in the second week of October 2017. On November 24<sup>th</sup> 2017, KHRG community members confirmed that the joint forces of the Tatmadaw and the BGF demanded porters and guards from October to November 2017. According to the Karen National Union (KNU) Hlaingbwe Township administrator and affected villagers, BGF Battalion #1013 and #1014<sup>8</sup> demanded porters from Kwee Law Ploh, Meh Th'Moo, Kler Day, Yaw Poh, and Kloo Htaw village tracts. The villagers from B---, C---, D---, E---, F---, H---, I---, J--- and other nearby villages in the aforementioned village tracts were forced to porter food, ammunition and other BGF soldiers' belongings. According to villagers who served as BGF porters, some villagers had to transport BGF soldiers from K--- area to L--- and M--- which are located at the front line of BGF's temporary camps in Htee Maw Hkee place and took them one and a half hours to travel by foot. The villagers from affected areas reported to KHRG that villagers who refused to serve as porters had to pay 15,000 kyat (US \$11.01).<sup>9</sup> Ordinary villagers who could not afford to pay were compelled to follow BGF demands despite the high risk to their lives.

Many villagers were forced to risk their lives for the BGF as porters. Villagers' risk was heightened due to the large number of planted landmines. Moreover, villagers' lives were not protected because of the risk that the DKBA splinter could attack the BGF group, including villagers serving as porters, at any time without prior warning. One porter reported that the villagers only walk on each other's footprints because of their fear of stepping on landmines.

According to affected community members, the joint forces of the Tatmadaw and the BGF compelled three to four villagers each to porter in three-day shifts. KHRG community members from Hlaingbwe Township also reported that villagers with money hired other people to replace

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Bo San Aung had been twice dismissed from DKBA (Benevolent) for his conduct. See, "DKBA sacks Brigadier General Saw Kyaw Thet and Colonel Saw San Aung," Mizzima, July 2015. DKBA (Benevolent) splinter group have been active in fighting in the Hpa-an District, see "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,"

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the December 7<sup>th</sup> 2017 official market rate of 1,362 kyat to US \$1.

them as porters for around 2,000 to 15,000 kyat (US \$1.47 to US \$11.01). Most 'replacement porters' are vulnerable villagers who are destitute and otherwise cannot support their livelihood needs. Therefore, those villagers risk their lives even though they are aware of the risks of being porters.

In addition to compelling villagers to porter, KHRG community members also reported that the joint forces of the Tatmadaw and the BGF compelled villagers to serve as navigators that would be able to guide and direct the joint forces of the Tatmadaw and the BGF. For example, Saw N--, who lives in O--- village, was forced to be a BGF navigator by BGF Officers Maung Na and Neh Wah. Since he was forced to be a BGF navigator, he did not feel safe traveling alone. Therefore, the O--- village head was assigned to accompany him. Since the second week of October 2017, the BGF demanded four villagers to act as guards, including Saw N--- and the O-- village head. They were forced to walk ahead of other BGF soldiers because there were landmines along the route they were taking. Furthermore, according to KHRG community members, a rumour spread amongst the guards that the DKBA had ordered their soldiers to shoot the BGF guards first if they encountered the BGF. After he heard this rumour, Saw N--- tried to reduce his risk by confronting the BGF and telling them,

*"If I die, who will take the responsibility to take care my wife and children? My wife is currently very sick and no one is taking care of her. I also cannot provide for them because I am very poor and I have run out of rice to feed my family! Why are you treating me like this?"*

After he spoke to the BGF soldiers Saw N--- was given permission to not walk in front of the BGF but he was nonetheless not freed from being a BGF guide. When he was interviewed by a KHRG community member on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017, Saw N--- emphasised that he did not have any time to secure his livelihood because he was not paid for the time when he was compelled to serve as a BGF guard. In addition, Saw N--- had to rush his testimony and quickly leave his interview with the KHRG community member because he had been called upon to serve the BGF again and was afraid that the BGF soldiers would abuse to him if he were to arrive late.



The photo was taken on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017 in S--- place, close to S--- Town in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows Saw N---, who is the villager who served as a BFG navigator along with other BGF guards such as the O--- village head. During his interview with KHRG on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017, he discussed his experience of being forced by BGF Officers Maung Na and Neh Wah to serve as a navigator for almost for two months. [Photo: KHRG]

## Conclusion

Even though the two-year anniversary of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)<sup>10</sup> has already passed between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government, fighting between the joint forces of BGF and the Tatmadaw against the DKBA splinter group (which has not signed the NCA) has not ceased. Only eight armed groups have signed the NCA; therefore, this peace process currently only includes the BGF and the Tatmadaw but not the DKBA splinter group. Nonetheless, if the armed groups who signed the NCA strictly followed and respected the NCA code of conduct, human rights abuses including causing risk to civilians, forced recruitment, and child recruitment should not have happened.

As was the case before the NCA was signed, ongoing fighting between armed groups is the root cause of many human rights violations in Burma/Myanmar. Due to the ongoing fighting, the local civilians in Hlaingbwe Township continue to displace from their homes and leave behind their livestock and their land. Furthermore, many villagers' lives are continuously at risk due to landmines and the arbitrary demand of porters and guards from local villages by the joint forces of the Tatmadaw and BGF. Yet even in these difficult situations, villagers continue to use different agency strategies to protect themselves such as negotiating with the BGF for better porter conditions, and monitoring the situation to choose for themselves the safest time to return. Nevertheless, peace, the cessation of fighting and the clearance or clear marking of contaminated landmine sites are necessary in order to improve the human rights situation for villagers in Burma/Myanmar.

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

- "Hpapun and Hpa-an Situation Update: Bu Tho, Dwe Lo and Hlaingbwe Townships, Hpapun and Hpa-An Districts, March to May 2015" (October 2017)
- "Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe Township, Paingkyon Township and Nabu Township, March to May 2017" (August 2017)
- "Three separate killing incidents based on witchcraft suspicion in Hpa-an District," (July 2017)
- "Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, September 25, 2016" (July 2017)
- "Hpa-an Short Update: Hlaingbwe Township, March to October 2016," (April 2017)

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<sup>10</sup> 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 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. 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12<sup>th</sup> 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.

# Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)