



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, March to May 2017

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin Township, Thaton District during the period between March and May 2017, including healthcare, education, development projects and armed group activities.

- *Non-governmental organisations, the Burma/Myanmar government and the Karen National Union (KNU) provided healthcare services such as clinics in Kwee Lay village, Ta Au Ni village and Hpaw Gee Hkee village for the prevention of malaria, vaccination, TB testing and prenatal care.*
 - *Educational challenges in Bilin Township include inappropriate and extended absences by Burma/Myanmar government teachers and the Burma/Myanmar government school's refusal to recognise the legitimacy of KNU schools, religious schools, and self-funded schools.*
 - *A low-cost housing project for refugee returnees was planned in A--- village and B--- village, Bilin Township, Thaton District; consequently, additional illegal logging happened in Toe Teh Hkee and Ta Au Hkee forests when the KNU government allowed for some logging in order for building these houses.*
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Situation Update | Bilin Township, Thaton District (March to May 2017)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in June 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

Situation Update

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin Township, Thaton District during the period between March and May 2017, including healthcare, education, development projects and armed group activities.

Healthcare

[Between March and May], local people in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District suffered from headache, neck pain, dizziness, fever, diarrhoea, runny nose, and mild malaria. Karen National Union [KNU] health workers tried to deliver healthcare services to as many civilians as they could. Healthcare services provided by non-governmental organisations [NGOs], the Burma/Myanmar government and the KNU health department include vaccination programmes, anti-malaria programmes, Tuberculosis (TB) testing and prenatal care. The KNU has built clinics in several different areas such as Kwee Lay village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Ta Au Ni village, Ta Au Hkee village tract, Bilin Township and Hpaw Gee Hkee village, Meh

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.

Naw Ther village tract, Bilin Township. A KNU hospital was established in Toe Teh Hkee village, Htee Maw Hkee village tract, Bilin Township. Although construction for Burma/Myanmar government hospitals has been completed, no health workers have started working there yet.

Education

There are various types of schools in Bilin Township: Burma/Myanmar government schools, KNU government schools, religious schools, and local [self-funded] schools. There is one high school named Kwee Lay High School located in Kwee Lay village, Noh Ber Baw village tract and one post-ten school² located in Htee Lay Hkaw village, Lay Kay village tract. The majority of schools [in Bilin Township] are Burma/Myanmar government schools; however, there are also several religious schools and self-funded schools. Several organisations are building and improving school infrastructures including the Nippon Foundation, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and several Community Based Organisations (CBOs). Schools [in Bilin Township] mostly follow the Burma/Myanmar government curriculum and teach the Karen language during school hours. However, Burma/Myanmar government teachers were often inappropriately absent from class. For example, when some teachers said that they had to leave and attend trainings, they did not return for several months. Karen students also faced discrimination in education as well. Students who attended KNU schools, religious schools, and local [self-funded] schools [in the past] had difficulty applying for Burma/Myanmar government schools because those schools [KNU schools, religious schools, and self-funded schools] were not recognised [considered illegitimate] by the Burma/Myanmar government education institutions.

Development

Although there was no noteworthy road construction between P'Nweh Kla and Lay Kay, the bridges along that route were repaired [between March and May]. In addition, the road from Nat Gyi to P'Yah Raw was widened [between March and May] and there are plans to pave the road with stones next summer. Travelling has become easier [than before] because a few roads have been rebuilt and the quality of those roads has improved. However, safe driving behaviour is not always practiced so car and motorcycle accidents still frequently occur.

Two places were identified as suitable areas to host repatriated refugees: A--- village, Lay Kay village tract and B--- village, Khaw Hpoeh Pleh village tract. However, construction of these houses for refugees has not yet finished. To support this low-cost housing project, the KNU provided wood and timber [by allowing logging to be conducted] from the Toe Teh Hkee and Ta Au Hkee forests. During this period in which logging was permitted in these forests, wealthy individuals seized the opportunity to also conduct logging in these areas [Toe The Hkee and Ta Au Hkee forests]. Although the KNU only permitted the logging of up to a maximum of 1,500 tonnes of wood, over 3,000 tonnes of wood were actually logged [by the KNU and by wealthy individuals]. Local villagers did not get an opportunity to log any wood and moreover, did not benefit from the logging that took place. Local villagers were also concerned about their accommodations for the upcoming raining season. District authorities and district leader P'Doh Ko Lay Sein initially banned everyone from selling wood to nearby towns and cities. However, some loggers wanted and attempted to sell the wood that was logged outside the village. Therefore, on April 28th 2017, the ban was revoked and wood was allowed to be brought outside [to be sold]. However, on May 15th 2017, it started raining heavily and the vehicle road was damaged so the transportation of the wood was stopped.

Armed Groups Activities

Karen National Liberation Army [KNLA] Battalion #3, commanded by Saw Dah Nay Htoo, patrolled around Bilin Township. In accordance with the decision of the [Bilin] Township Standing Committee Meeting on April 27th 2017, Battalion #3 relocated to Kyaikto Township.

² A post-ten school is an unofficial school for Karen students who have passed the Standard 10 exam. Most post-ten students will transition to universities or work with the KNU/KNLA.

Then, the Karen National Defence Organisation³ [KNDO] Battalion #2, commanded by Saw Sa Thay, relocated to Bilin Township. In Bilin Township, Border Guard Force⁴ [BGF] Battalion #1013 and #1014⁵ and Tatmadaw Light Infantry Division⁶ [LID] #44 were also active. In addition, on May 1st 2017, LID #22 rotated with LID #44.

C--- Monastery Situation

After LID #44 burnt down a monastery, reconstruction of the monastery has begun but has not yet been completed. However, LID #44 has already rotated [with LID #22] and relocated to another place. LID #22 has stated that they will not provide any financial aid or material support [to the monastery] but that they would help by providing additional manpower [to rebuild the burnt monastery].

Conclusion

According to the opinion of this KHRG community member, a significant concern for the local civilians is food because the rainy season is imminent and the price of rice is increasing. Positively, villagers are not worried about potential conflict because the relationship between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government remains stable. One new problem for local civilians is that there have been more car and motorcycle accidents occurring recently because the quality of the roads has improved [and this has caused an increase in the risk of accidents because the speed of the vehicles on the roads has increased]. Therefore, KNU authorities need to establish and enforce laws for safely driving vehicles. Drug use is another problem because neither the KNU, nor the Burma/Myanmar government nor other armed groups have taken any [substantial] action to resolve this [drug] issue.

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

- "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)
- "Ongoing militarisation in southeast Myanmar," (October 2016)

³ The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

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. Further reports detailing abuses involving these battalions are also available on the KHRG website.

⁶ Light Infantry Division (LID) of the Tatmadaw is commanded by a brigadier general, and consists of ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, search and destroy operations against ethnic insurgents. They were first incorporated into the Tatmadaw in 1966. 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. Each division is directly under the command of the Chief of Staff (Army).

Doo Tha Htoo (Karen)



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