



Karen Human Rights Group
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Thematic Report Chapter
June 15, 2014

Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire

The following chapter appears in a KHRG report entitled [Truce or Transition?](#), published on May 13th 2014. The report documents trends in human rights abuse and civilian responses in Southeast Myanmar since the signing of a preliminary ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar government and the Karen National Union (KNU) in January 2012. The chapter below describes the production, use and social impact of narcotics among civilians in Southeast Myanmar between January 2012 and November 2013. Since the ceasefire, KHRG has received an increasing number of reports concerning serious abuses related to the distribution of methamphetamine and its use. These reports have overwhelmingly come from the locally defined Hpa-an District and a smaller number of reports from Nyaunglebin and Hpapun districts. Villagers report the wide availability of methamphetamine pills trafficked by Tatmadaw-Border Guard Force (BGF) soldiers, which have caused increasing drug addiction and drug-related violence in the area. Villagers often feel reluctant to speak out or confront the issue, as they fear reprisal from armed traffickers. KHRG recommends that the Myanmar government take responsibility for the production and sale of drugs by Tatmadaw-BGF soldiers and enforce existing laws to hold those complicit accountable. In addition, local and international drug and rehabilitation experts should provide education on the short and long-term consequences of methamphetamine use on a person's health and their community.

Drug production, use and social impacts

Since the ceasefire, KHRG has received an increasing number of reports about serious abuses related to methamphetamine sale and use. For decades, Myanmar-based actors have been major players in the international drug trade. Beginning in the 1970s, the “Golden Triangle” region at the meeting of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand has been a world center for heroin distribution and trafficking. The areas of the Golden Triangle in Myanmar encompass parts of Shan State, which is located several hundred kilometers northeast of KHRG’s reporting areas. The Myanmar government has acknowledged that drug trafficking exists within the country, and committed domestically and internationally to work against drug trafficking. Myanmar acceded to the ‘United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances’ in June 1991, which committed the Government to enact and enforce laws against drug trafficking.¹ The Myanmar government has repeatedly cited “the elimination of narcotic drugs” as one of the aims of its transition to peace.² This is particularly notable because, in the past, ceasefires have provided

¹ See [United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances](#)

² See Adam Cooper, [Peacemaking in Myanmar: Progress to date and challenges ahead](#), Oslo Forum, 2012; [Increasing Drug Trade](#), Myanmar Peace Monitor.

opportunities for armed actors to develop their drug-trafficking business, as they no longer had to fear interference from state actors.³

In recent years, the drug distributors of the Golden Triangle have diversified into methamphetamine production and distribution.⁴ In 2008, Myanmar's combined methamphetamine and opium products were worth between one billion and two billion dollars annually.⁵ More recent estimates have put drug exports at 40% of Myanmar's total exports by value.⁶ As of 2009, areas along the Chinese-Myanmar border controlled by the United Wa State Party, the dominant narcotrafficking organisation in that region, were the primary locations of methamphetamine production in Myanmar. During the same time period, some international actors determined that the Myanmar armed forces were complicit in the drug trade.⁷ Further evidence that the Myanmar government had not succeeded in combatting the effects of drugs came when the United States government declared in September 2012, and again in September 2013, that, "*During the past 12 months the Government of Burma has failed demonstrably to make sufficient efforts to meet its international obligations under international counternarcotic agreements.*"⁸ It is in this context that KHRG began to receive reports of substantial social impacts of methamphetamine use in KHRG research areas.

At the same time, human rights advocates in Mon ethnic areas, some of which border KHRG research areas, began to report on the social impacts of rapidly increasing drug use in those areas.⁹ Use in these areas has reportedly increased because of an influx of very cheap, widely distributed methamphetamine, which has often been distributed by members of EAGs.¹⁰

There have also been allegations that EAGs in Karen areas have been involved in the drug trade. In April 2012, the Thai government placed the leader of the DKBA, General Na Khan Mway,¹¹ on its list of most wanted criminals, on the basis of an

³ Joshua Kurlantzick, [Myanmar's Drug Problem](#), Council on Foreign Relations, February 2012,

⁴ Phil Thornton, "[Myanmar's rising drug trade](#)", The Bangkok Post, February 12th 2012. In 2008, the US Congressional Record Service cited evidence that Myanmar had become the biggest methamphetamine producer in the world; see Liana Sun Wyler, [Burma and Transnational Crime](#), Congressional Record Service, p.10, August 2008.

⁵ Liana Sun Wyler, [Burma and Transnational Crime](#), Congressional Record Service, p. 10 August 2008.

⁶ Phil Thornton, "[Myanmar's rising drug trade.](#)" The Bangkok Post, February 12th 2012.

⁷ Tom Kramer, [Neither war nor peace: the future of the ceasefire agreements in Burma](#), Transnational Institute, July 2009, p. 29.

⁸ For Fiscal Year 2013, see [Memorandum of justification for major illicit drug transit or illicit drug producing countries](#). For Fiscal Year 2014, see [Presidential Determination -- Major Drug Transit and Drug Producing Countries](#). In each of these instances, US President Obama used his discretionary authority to exempt Myanmar from the sanctions that are meant to accompany this determination. Though the US does not publish detailed findings to support these determinations, the decision not to apply sanctions indicates that the determination to criticise Myanmar's record on drugs likely was not made out of a political desire to punish Myanmar.

⁹ [Bitter pills: Breaking the silence surrounding drug problems in the Mon community](#), Human Rights Foundation of Monland-Burma, June 2013.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 22.

¹¹ Na Khan Mway, whose real name is Saw Lah Pwe, is the leader of the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA). He left the KNU/KNLA in 1997 and became the commander of DKBA Battalion #907. In 2007 he was promoted to head four DKBA battalions (#s 901, 906, 907 and a security battalion) as the commander of the Klo Htoo Baw (Golden Drum) Tactical Command. In May 2009 this unit was reconfigured as DKBA Brigade #5, with Na Kha Mway commanding battalions #s 901, 905, 906, 907 and 909; Brigade #5 was active in the Kyainseikgyi, Kawkareik and Myawaddy areas of Dooplaya and Hpa-an districts. Na Khan Mway is wanted in Thailand on drug trafficking allegations.

incident that occurred in 2003¹² and offered a 2,000,000 baht (US \$62,500)¹³ reward for his capture.¹⁴ It is unclear whether this designation was primarily the result of an impartial drug investigation, or whether it was politically motivated.¹⁵ Shortly after this announcement, the DKBA's political wing began a high-profile campaign against drugs in the areas they control, including declaring a section of Myawaddy Township, Hpa-an District a "drug-free zone".¹⁶

Drug production, use and social impacts since January 2012

Since January 2012, reports regarding drug sales, drug use, and the consequences of both overwhelmingly came from Nabu and Paingkyon townships in Hpa-an District,¹⁷ with a small number of reports from locally defined Nyaunglebin¹⁸ and Hpapun¹⁹ districts. During the reporting period, BGF commanders and soldiers²⁰ were the most commonly reported perpetrators of drug-related abuse, with abuses also committed by Tatmadaw,²¹ DKBA,²² KPF,²³ the KNU/KNLA²⁴ and the KNU/KNLA-PC.²⁵ KHRG also received one report of a combined Myanmar Police and KNU anti-drug action in Mergui-Tavoy District, where they burned a large amount of the narcotic leaf kratom,²⁶ and in Kyaikto Township, Thaton District, where the KNU reportedly shut down a gambling parlour to combat the impact of substance abuse.²⁷

¹² Francis Wade, "[The curious case of Thailand's 'Most Wanted'](#)," Asian Correspondent, May 11th 2012.

¹³ As of March 18th 2014, all conversion estimates for the Baht in this report are based on the official market rate of 32 baht to US \$1.

¹⁴ Saw Yan Naing, "[DKBA leader on Thailand's most-wanted list](#)," Irrawaddy, April 25th 2012.

¹⁵ Francis Wade, "[The curious case of Thailand's 'Most Wanted'](#)," Asian Correspondent, May 11th 2012.

¹⁶ "[DKBA \(KKO\) declares Myawaddy Township a drug free zone](#)," Democracy for Burma, May 24th 2012.

¹⁷ For an example in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, villagers describe the negative impact of the widespread sale and use of drugs on the health and lives of their children, see Sources #164, #241, #155 and #159.

¹⁸ For example, in 2013, the Tatmadaw ordered villagers from Nyaunglebin District to traffic marijuana from Hpapun District back to Nyaunglebin District. The Tatmadaw also asked villagers to grow marijuana in Hpapun and Nyaunglebin districts; see Source #275.

¹⁹ For example, in 2013, the Tatmadaw asked villagers to grow marijuana in Hpapun and Nyaunglebin districts. They also imported methamphetamine through Ta Kaw Hta area and continued to promote widespread drug use in Hpapun District; see Source #275.

²⁰ KHRG received multiple reports of abuses by BGFs responsible for producing and selling methamphetamine in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District; see, for example, Source #199.

²¹ For example Tatmadaw soldiers ordered villager to grow and transport marijuana in Nyaunglebin and Hpapun Districts; see Source #275.

²² For example in February 2013, a DKBA soldier randomly fired his gun while high on drugs in A--- village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District; see Source #155.

²³ For an example in B--- village, Noh Hta Baw village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, villagers reported that members of KPF families sometimes sell methamphetamine; see Source #241.

²⁴ See Source #164.

²⁵ For example the KNU/KNLA-PC is reportedly involved in the methamphetamine trade in Yaw Kuh village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District; see Source #164.

²⁶ Kratom, also referred to as *beh htee* in Karen, produces a mildly narcotic sensation in users when its leaves are chewed. Kratom is outlawed in Myanmar and Thailand. In Tanintharyi Township, Mergui-Tavoy, the Myanmar government police officers and KNU leaders started to implement a plan to destroy a large harvest of the drug kratom, known locally as *beh htee* on January 20th 2013; see Source #272.

²⁷ For example, the KNU reportedly shut down a gambling parlour in Kyaikto Township, Thaton District, to combat the social impact of substance abuse; see Source #203.

Since the ceasefire, KHRG has seen an increase in reports of abuses related to drugs.²⁸ These reported abuses likely represent a small percentage of the abuses related to drugs to which villagers in Southeast Myanmar have been subjected. KHRG has heard repeatedly from researchers that villagers are more reluctant to speak about abuses related to drugs than they are about other abuses. In addition to the information referenced below, researchers have had many conversations with villagers who insisted that none of the details of the conversations be publicly reported.

One researcher reported that even a villager who was willing to talk to him was very nervous, and said that, *“If people know that I told you this, they will kill me.”*²⁹

Villagers reported the following three trends which contributed to drug related negative impacts on villagers in 2012 and 2013: drug use;³⁰ drug production;³¹ and drug sale by or with the permission of armed actors.³² Negative impacts have included killings related to drugs;³³ and impacts on youth or the community, including addiction and mental health problems.³⁴ KHRG also received one report each of a drug-related rape,³⁵ and threats to villagers’ safety from armed actors on drugs.³⁶ In addition, KHRG received one report of the destruction of drugs.³⁷



These two photos were taken on December 4th 2012 by a KHRG researcher in D--- village, Yaw Kuh village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. The photo on the left shows a small shop where the

²⁸ KHRG did not publish a single report regarding drugs in the five years before the ceasefire, but has received dozens of reports since the ceasefire.

²⁹ See Source #164.

³⁰ For a report of widespread drug use and its negative consequences in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, see Source #155.

³¹ For example local drug production led to increased drug use, with negative social impacts in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, see Source #155.

³² For a report of widespread drug sales in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District throughout 2012-2013, see Source #155.

³³ Two killings were reported to KHRG, both in March 2013, in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, see Source #164.

³⁴ For example, in C--- village, Noh Kay village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, widespread use of methamphetamines by young people has led to at least one drug-fueled rampage, during which a young man destroyed a substantial amount of property belonging to villagers; see Source #155.

³⁵ In October 2012, a 21-year-old woman named Naw A---, who was from A--- village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, was raped and killed by a 23-year-old man named Saw Pah Thoo Lay who was known to use methamphetamine; see Source #144.

³⁶ In February 2013, a DKBA soldier randomly fired his gun while high on drugs in A---village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District; see Source #155.

³⁷ In Tanintharyi Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, the Myanmar government police officers and KNU leaders destroyed crops of the drug *beh htee* in January 2013; see Source #272.

shopkeeper sells watermelons, some snacks and methamphetamine pills as well. In the photo on the right, you can see a school near the shop, whose students reportedly buy drugs at the shop.³⁸ [Photos: KHRG]

The most serious reported drug-related problems took place in the neighbouring Nabu and Paingkyon townships, Hpa-an District. In these townships, villagers complain that methamphetamine pills are widely available at many small shops, causing addiction and related social problems.³⁹ BGF soldiers were primarily responsible for the production and sale of drugs, and for drug related violence in this area,⁴⁰ though the KNU/KNLA, KNU/KNLA-PC, Tatmadaw,⁴¹ KPF⁴² and villagers affiliated with BGFs also sold and used drugs.⁴³

“A 16-year-old student who used [methamphetamines] spent all of his money on the drug and then pawned his motorbike [to trade it for methamphetamine pills sold by BGF soldiers]. His parents asked him, ‘Where are you keeping your motorbike?’ His father asked him this continuously, so he told him. His father said, ‘My son, I bought this motorbike for you with 38,000 baht (US \$1,187.50)⁴⁴ and you traded it for 30 k’thee k’thay [methamphetamine pills]. So, here is the money, go and redeem your motorbike’. ... Then, the boy ... went to the place where he pawned his motorbike. He met the seller of the drug [BGF soldier] and asked for his motorbike; they were worried that the news would go public after he’d given the money to them. So, they arrested the boy, and then beat and killed him with a piece of brick.”

Situation Update written by a KHRG researcher, E--- village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District/Central Kayin State (March to May 2013)⁴⁵

In a separate incident in Nabu Township, a 62-year-old woman who publicly confronted BGF Battalion #1016 soldiers about their drug trafficking activities was reportedly killed by soldiers from that battalion to prevent her from reporting on their activities.⁴⁶ Villagers in this township have also reported that they have been subjected to threats from government-affiliated and ethnic armed actors if they complain of the negative impact of drugs on their community. These frighten the villagers, make them feel insecure, and decrease their ability to complain to NGOs, CBOs, the Myanmar government and EAGs about the impact of drugs.⁴⁷

“We dare not speak carelessly. If we were to say so, we are afraid that people would come and kill us. We do not want it [drug dealing and use], but we cannot do [anything].”

³⁸ See Source #360.

³⁹ For the widespread availability of drugs in local stores, and how that availability results in addiction and negative consequences, see Source #360.

⁴⁰ For example, one villager reported that the biggest issue is methamphetamine, which is manufactured by the BGF Battalion #1016’s commander, Mya Khaing, packaged similarly to candy, and then is sold everywhere in the area in Nabu and Paingkyon townships; see Source #336

⁴¹ For references to Tatmadaw, KNLA, and KNU-PC involvement in drug related abuses, see Source #164.

⁴² See Source #241.

⁴³ In Yaw Kuh village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District villagers reported in May 2013 that some villagers were selling methamphetamine on behalf of the BGF; see Source #164.

⁴⁴ As of March 18th 2014, all conversion estimates for the Baht in this report are based on the official market rate of 32 baht to US \$1.

⁴⁵ See Source #164.

⁴⁶ See Source #164.

⁴⁷ See Source #155.

Situation Update written by a KHRG researcher, Yaw Kuh village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District/Central Kayin State (March to May 2013)⁴⁸



These two photos were taken on June 27th 2012 in F--- village, Mya Pa Taing Nee village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District by a KHRG researcher. The photos depict methamphetamine tablets, which are manufactured by soldiers under the supervision of the BGF Battalion #1016's commander, Mya Khaing. According to the KHRG researcher, it is packaged similarly to candy and then sold everywhere in the area in Nabu and Paingkyon townships.⁴⁹ [Photos: KHRG]

In one instance, a BGF soldier who sells the drug publicly announced explicit threats to deter villagers in Nabu Township from reporting about the issue.

“We will not give any punishment or imprisonment to those who are using, selling and producing drugs, but we will give serious punishment to those who are telling or reporting.”

Situation Update written by a KHRG researcher, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District/Central Kayin State (September 2013)⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See Source #164.

⁴⁹ See Source #336.

⁵⁰ See Source #170.



This photo was taken on December 5th 2012 by a KHRG researcher in A--- village, Noh T’Pweh village tract, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows two houses built of brick with tin roofs. Drugs are sold from these houses, which belong to a BGF #1016 Commander Saw Toh Noh. BGF Battalion #1016 is based in Kyeh Paw K’Lah Koh under the command of Mya Hkaing.⁵¹ [Photo: KHRG]



This photo was taken on April 24th 2013 in A-- village, Noh Kay village tract, Nabu Township by a KHRG researcher. It depicts methamphetamines in pill form after being packaged for individual sale. According to the researcher who spoke with villagers affected by the sale of this drug, members of the BGF manufacture and sell the drug to many villages throughout Nabu and Paingkyon townships. The pills are manufactured on the Nabu and Noh Hta Baw cliffs. In July 2012, a different villager from G--- village reported that the drug is distributed and sold widely by family members of BGF soldiers and, as a result, other villagers have become afraid to sell the drug.⁵² [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers in Nabu Township also report that they are unable to stop the widespread use of drugs,⁵³ and that many villagers have become poorer because of their drug use, or drug use by a family member.⁵⁴ Even soldiers have limited ability to intervene. One member of the KNLA told a KHRG researcher that his unit did not wish to provoke conflict between armed actors by confronting drug traffickers.⁵⁵ In other areas, however, authorities are willing to act against drugs, as when the Myanmar Police and local KNU leaders burned a large amount of the narcotic leaf kratom in Mergui-Tavoy District.⁵⁶

⁵¹ See Source #360.

⁵² See Source #235.

⁵³ Villagers in H--- and G--- villages, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, do not like the impact of drugs on their towns, but cannot act because drug dealers are armed. See Source #159.

⁵⁴ Villagers in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, complained that many villagers had become poorer because of drugs; see Sources #199 and #144.

⁵⁵ In Nabu Township, Hpa-an District; see Source #159. It is not clear to what extent these statements reflect a genuine desire to combat drug trafficking, and to what extent the ceasefire offers an excuse not to deal with the problem. For a similar account of a KNLA officer who declared that his group was opposed to drugs, but could not act for fear of upsetting the ceasefire, see also [Bitter pills: Breaking the silence surrounding drug problems in the Mon community](#), Human Rights Foundation of Monland-Burma, June 2013, p. 54.

⁵⁶ In Tanintharyi Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, the Myanmar government police officers and KNU leaders destroyed a large harvest of the drug kratom, known locally as *beh htee* on January 20th 2013; see Source #272.

Recommendations

The Government must take responsibility for the production and sale of drugs by Tatmadaw-BGF soldiers and enforce existing laws to hold commanders accountable. Because drugs are often produced by local armed authorities, international organisations can play an important role in hearing and publicising complaints. Additionally, local and international drug addiction and rehabilitation experts should provide information about the short and long-term consequences of using methamphetamines on a person's health and on the community, as well as by provide rehabilitation services for those individuals already affected. Religious leaders should play a role in combatting the negative impacts of drugs, because they are less vulnerable to the explicit threats of violence for reporting drug issues made by Tatmadaw-BGF soldiers.

**Locally-defined northern and southern Karen districts
(Kayin and Mon states; eastern Bago region)**



Locally-defined Mergui-Tavoy District (Tanintharyi Region)



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)