

KHRG

Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

International Day of Peace

21 September 2017

Today marks the 36th Anniversary of the International Day of Peace, a day devoted to “commemorating and strengthening the ideals of peace both within and among all nations and peoples.” This year’s theme is “Together for Peace: Respect, Safety and Dignity for All”, set by the United Nations (UN) to raise awareness and promote respect, safety, and dignity for the millions of people around the world who have been forced to flee their homes in search of a better life.

Myanmar is a country which has produced and is still producing a lot of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) because of a lack of peace, security and human rights protection. According to 2017 estimates from the UNHCR and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there are around 546,265 refugees from and 644,000 IDPs in Myanmar. Even though the elected civilian government has made peace between the military and ethnic armed groups (EAGs) a top priority, reports collected by KHRG researchers show case how volatile the situation in Myanmar truly is and how peace is still a distant objective.

For the past 25 years, KHRG has been documenting the villagers’ perspectives as they have lived through conflict, displacement and, most recently, a fragile peace. While many villagers are willing and hopeful when considering the current peace process, several still report to KHRG their concern that the peace process could easily breakdown with a return to fighting. According to one villager from Hpapun District:

“The ceasefire between the Myanmar government and KNU, I hope it will be true. We may have to face more problems than in the past if it is not true. This is what we are concerned [about]. [...] In the past, we fled into the jungle and left our families in the villages. If they saw our wives and children they arrested them. This is our worry. If the ceasefire is not stable the situation will be the same as before. Forced labour, rape and killings are the main concerns for us.”

Saw A---, (male, 42), B--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District/ northeastern Kayin State (interview published in August 2015)

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This concern is also held by IDPs and refugees, who are hesitant to return to their home villages. Displaced villagers feel that their long-term security is not yet guaranteed in south-east Myanmar. For example, Naw Hf---, in an interview with KHRG in January 2017, emphasises that although she fled her village in 1997, she still will not return 20 years later due to the presence of a Tatmadaw army camp:

"We do not dare to think [expect/believe] that the Tatmadaw will stop the fighting and then we will get freedom [peace] because we do not know what risks they have [put] on us. Therefore, we are worried and concerned that we will not access freedom, and the Tatmadaw will start the fighting again."

Naw Hf--- (female, 45) Hg--- village, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District/northeastern Kayin State (interview received in January 2017)

After the preliminary and nationwide ceasefires were signed there was the expectation among many villagers that Tatmadaw would withdraw their troops from areas near villages and livelihood areas in southeast Myanmar. However, Tatmadaw and Border Guard Force (BGF) army bases continue to be reinforced; troop patrols, rotations and military exercises take place; and rations, munitions and military equipment are transported to army bases. These numerous activities by the military have led villagers to directly question the intention of the Tatmadaw and BGF in their local areas, and perceive that the Myanmar government and Tatmadaw are preparing for long-term conflict in southeast Myanmar.

For Myanmar to fully transition to a state of stable, long-term peace, the Myanmar government and Tatmadaw need to build villagers' trust in order for them to have faith in the peace process, including taking steps towards addressing the abuses of the past. While the current fragile peace is preferable to the violent conflict of the past, serious risks and concerns remain for villagers throughout the country, especially ethnic areas.

Despite an overall hesitancy to pledge their complete faith in the peace process, villagers' acknowledge some benefits of the peace process in southeast Myanmar. In recent KHRG interviews, villagers give praise to their observance of less fighting, greater freedom of movement, new schools, clinics and NGOs coming to be active in the area, and a reduction in extortion and arbitrary taxation by the Tatmadaw, its BGF and EAGs.

Therefore, KHRG calls on the Myanmar government, Tatmadaw, Border Guard Forces, and EAGs to fully respect, protect, and fulfill human rights and fundamental freedoms. In order to achieve a genuine and sustainable peace, all of these actors must cease military activities as well as withdraw troops from civilian areas, honour existing peace agreements, include non-ceasefire signatories in the dialogue, and create opportunities for meaningful and gender-inclusive participation throughout the peace process.

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