



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

August 18, 2014 / KHRG #13-120-S1

Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, August to November 2013

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District during the period between August and November 2013, including forced labour, land confiscation, arbitrary arrest and detention and explicit threats, as well as providing an update on education and healthcare.

- On October 23rd 2013, BGF [Border Guard Forces] Battalions #1013 and #1014 demanded that four villages in Meh Pree village tract porter rations. No compensation for their labour was provided.
 - On October 28th 2013, Saw B--- from C--- village was forced to serve as a messenger in the Meh Pree BGF camp. Saw B--- was also forced to cut and transport gee hkah doo [young rattan] for a soldier in the camp.
 - In August 2013, BGF Platoon Commander Hpah Tha Beh threatened a local regional leader, as well as a village leader, detaining them after fighting broke out between KNLA and BGF soldiers.
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Situation Update | Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (August to November 2013)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in November 2013. It was written by a community member in Hpapun District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This report was received along with other information from Hpapun District, including three incident reports, seven interviews and 31 photographs.²

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District from August to November 2013, including Tatmadaw, BGF [Border Guard Forces],³

¹ KHRG trains community members in eastern 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.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern 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.

³ 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 or light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion numbers. For

KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army], and KNU [Karen National Union] activities, as well as an update on human rights violations, healthcare and education.

Forced labour

In Bu Tho Township, during the four months from August to November [2013], there were only a few [incidents of] forced labour. We cannot remember [all of] the dates that forced labour occurred. [However, one of] the most recent [forced labour] incident dates which we can remember was on October 23rd 2013. Four villagers from A--- village, Meh Pree village tract, had to transport rations for the BGF. They portered from their village farms to B--- village which took 25 minutes without being given any money [as compensation]. The BGF military groups which the villagers transported rations for are BGF Battalions #1013 and #1014.⁴ The soldiers from these battalions are based in Meh Pree village, Meh Pree village tract, Bu Tho Township. The company commanders who led these activities were Ba Yoh, Hpah Yuh Hkay, Maung Htun Hla and their battalion commanders are Maung Hla Hkyaing from Battalion #1013 and Maung Chit from Battalion #1014. The things that villagers usually have to porter are rice, oil, salt and sometimes they also have to porter sugar and milk. While they porter rations, no soldiers accompany them. There are about 15 to 18 soldiers in Meh Pree BGF camp. Again, on October 28th 2013, a C--- villager named Saw B--- had to go and serve as *set tha*⁵ and go and live among the BGF. The Meh Pree BGF camp is commanded by Maung Htun Hla, Ba Yoh and Hpah Yuh Hkay. One of the soldiers under these commanders asked Saw B--- to go and cut *gee hkah doo* [young rattan] for him. There may have also been [other incidents of] forced labour demanded by armed actors which we have not been able to document.



The above photos were taken on October 28th 2013 in C--- village, Meh Pree village tract, Bu Tho Township. The photos show C--- villager, Saw B---, as he is preparing to transport *gee hkah doo* [young rattan] to BGF Battalions #1014 and #1013. Saw B--- had been forced to serve as *set tha* by the aforementioned BGF Battalions. [Photos: KHRG]

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.

⁴KHRG continues to receive reports discussing abuses involving BGF Battalions #1013 and #1014, including: [“Papun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, July to October 2012,”](#) KHRG, April 2013; [“Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, August to October 2013,”](#) KHRG, February 2014; [“Incident Report: Attack on villager in Bu Tho Township, January 2013,”](#) KHRG, June 2014; [“Hpapun Photo Set: BGF Battalion #1013 land confiscation for army base in Dwe Lo Township, June 2012 to November 2013,”](#) KHRG, June 2014. Further reports detailing abuses involving these battalions are also available on the KHRG website.

⁵*Set tha* is a Burmese term for a kind of forced labour, primarily involving acting as an intermediary for messages. This may include sending orders from army officers to village heads, or serving as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases but may also involve other menial tasks.

Killing

In Bu Tho Township there were no killings by armed actors as far as we know.

Landmine problems

In Bu Tho Township there were no landmine cases in the areas KHRG reached during these four months, from August to November [2013].

Arbitrary arrest and explicit threats

In August 2013, there was a conflict between two of the armed actors because a BGF soldier crossed into KNU territory and fighting broke out in D--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract. ABGF soldier from Battalion #1014, commanded by Hpah Tha Beh, broke the agreement [not to enter each other's territory], which he had ignored many times. After the fighting occurred, the BGF Platoon Commander Hpah Tha Beh demanded that both the E--- regional leader and leader of the lower part of F--- village, named Saw C---, accompany him for one day. Furthermore, he threatened the village leader and the regional leader that he would pour hot water on them, so that they would obey his order. As soon as the village leader from the lower part of F--- village, named Saw C---, was released by Platoon Commander Hpah Tha Beh, he refused to accompany him. [He] told him [Hpah Tha Beh] that the KNLA soldiers had not given him permission to meet with him. Thus, even though Hpah Tha Beh ordered [him to come again], he [Hpah Tha Beh] could not do anything [about it]. I do not know the regional leader's name so I will find out and will report back.⁶

Healthcare

Regarding healthcare in Bu Tho Township, as I have mentioned previously,⁷ civilians only received medicine from BPHWT [Back Pack Health Worker Team] and FBR [Free Burma Rangers]. For people who live close to KNU areas, they go to the KNU clinic for treatment. For areas where the KNU and the KNLA cannot reach, people have to go to the government hospital to receive treatment. They must also pay a higher price for treatment for their illness. Nearby, in F--- village, the Burma government entered and set up a clinic so that there was one in the village, but there is no medicine or medic. For people from areas which are not close to the clinic, or where the FBR or the BPHWT cannot reach, they are still using herbal medicine.

Education

In Bu Tho Township, there are no extracurricular activities for children. There are only schools which the KNU can reach. They get some financial support for teachers' salaries and school supplies from the KED [Karen Education Department]. The KED administers the education sector and the students are learning Karen, Burmese and English. For the schools which the KED cannot reach, the students are only learning Burmese and English; the S'gaw Karen language is not taught. These schools are under the control of the Burma government. In Bu Tho [Township], the Burma government wants to build more government schools with brick, but some villagers do not want to allow it and told them that the KNU does not permit it. In some places, the Burma government comes and builds schools, but they do not build them with bricks as they desire [as they are not permitted by the KNU].

⁶ As of the publication date of this report, KHRG had not received any further information.

⁷ See "[Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, March to May 2013](#)," KHRG, December 2013.

Land confiscation

In Bu Tho Township, there is a case of land confiscation from villager Saw A--- in G--- village, Meh Klaw village tract by MOC [Military Operation Command]⁸ #642's Commander Khin Zaw Htun. Without permission, he measured and parcelled out Saw A---'s farm and still has not given any compensation for it yet. The other issue is that villagers have mostly confiscated each other's land, especially rich people confiscating land from ordinary people. They confiscated it in order to plant rubber. Land for ordinary people to farm has decreased. Regarding the Tatmadaw confiscating land, the villagers dare not report it to the Burma government. So instead, they report these cases to the KNU or KNLA. Moreover, they also send information to KHRG and other organisations. Although the land confiscation problem has decreased, they [villagers] still have not gotten their land back yet.

Civilians' situation

In Bu Tho Township, some civilians live in KNU controlled areas, some live in Tatmadaw or BGF controlled areas, and some live in an area which is controlled by both the Tatmadaw and the BGF. Even though there is a ceasefire⁹ agreement, the villagers' situation is still the same as it was in the past. The only thing which has changed is that civilians who do not live under the control of the Tatmadaw can currently travel more freely. Now, both civilians who live in KNU controlled areas and Tatmadaw or BGF areas rely on each other and the Tatmadaw also do not check and question villagers as much [as before].

Military situation

In Bu Tho Township, from August to November [2013], during these four months the Tatmadaw mostly just travelled [in their own territory] as the KNU and KNLA have defined their area [where the Tatmadaw are not permitted to go]. Even though they [Tatmadaw] rotate, they only travel according to the [territorial] limitations [agreed to with the KNU/KNLA]. [However,] there is no reduction of their army camps and they remain as [they were] before. They repair their army camps which are set up far away from villages and they continuously reinforce their locations. They send their BGF troops to operate in four¹⁰ village tracts including Kyaw Pah village tract, Meh Pree village tract and Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract, but because of the ceasefire between the KNU and the Burma government, the BGF troops are only active in Meh Pree village tract and Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract. The BGF groups which are active are BGF Battalions #1013 and #1014. There are no special military activities, just travelling from one village to another. The KNLA commander and the BGF commander met with each other and agreed that they could only travel [into each other's territory] after they had informed each other, but because the BGF did not follow [the agreement], fighting happened in August 2013 in D--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract area. After the fighting, the BGF had to retreat and could not fight against their enemy [KNLA], so they became angry and they frightened the villagers with verbal and physical threats instead. They threatened the villagers so that the leader of E--- village in G--- region was afraid and migrated to Thailand in order to avoid BGF Platoon Commander Hpah Tha Beh. Lower F--- village

⁸Military Operations Command; made up of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

⁹On 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.

¹⁰Although the community member mentions four village tracts in which BGF troops are active, only three are named.

leader, Saw C--- [who was asked to accompany Commander Hpah Tha Beh], remained in the area, but he still dares not meet with [Commander] Hpah Tha Beh [again]. For the KNLA, whether there is fighting or not, they have a responsibility to protect the civilians. The villagers are afraid of the BGF. They [BGF] have to fight against their enemy [KNU]. The civilians rely on the KNU and the KNU fulfils its responsibility [to civilians] as much as possible.

Civilians' livelihood

In Bu Tho Township, during these four months, there is no business opportunities for the civilians. The civilians only farm, but because of the unstable weather conditions, the civilians are facing food [shortage] problems. Now, even though the villagers' livelihoods were impaired by armed actors [in the past], there are still many other ways that could destroy the civilians' livelihood in the future, such as rats and insects destroying the paddy, high temperatures and unstable weather conditions.

Conclusion

The cases that I have mentioned [contain] information from the places I went, [the things] I saw with my [own] eyes, and what the civilians told me. We do not know what [problems] the civilians might face with food, healthcare and education in the future. In the future, after I find out about the dates of the incident which have happened, I will write up the information and send it again.¹¹

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

- "Hpapun Interview: Naw S--, September," (August 2014)
- "Hpapun Incident Report: Destruction of paddy nursery field in Dwe Lo Township, November 2012," (July 2014)
- "Tatmadaw mortar shelling and other military activities in Hpapun and Toungoo Districts, December 2013," (July 2014)
- "Hpapun Interview: Saw A--, February 2013," (July 2014)
- "Hpapun Short Update: Ongoing militarisation and displacement in Lu Thaw Township, December 2013," (July 2014)

¹¹ If additional information is received from the researcher on the incidents reported, it will be published on the KHRG website.

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)