



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Hpa-an Situation Update: Nabu Township, May 2012

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District during March 2012, including lack of funding for development projects and forced recruitment.

- Villagers responded to a lack of development projects funded by the Burma government or the Karen National Union by putting their own time, money and energy into building roads, schools and a clinic.
- In March 2012, Border Guard Forces entered a village searching for deserters. They ordered villagers to report to them for military service, some of whom had previously been discharged after completing periods of military service, and demanded that the village head provide new recruits or payment in lieu if the deserters were not found.

This Situation Update was initially published in May 2014 in the Appendix of KHRG's in-depth report, [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#).

Situation Update | Nabu Township, Hpa-an District (May 2012)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in May 2013. It was written by a community member in Hpa-an 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

On March 21st 2012, I went to the T'Nay Hsah [Nabu] Township area, the place where I have responsibilities and I [also] went to places I had not been before. There are many armed actors, such as the BGF [Border Guard Force],² the KNLA/KNU-PC [Karen National Liberation Army/Karen National Union - Peace Council]³ and the DKBA

¹ KHRG trains community members in eastern Burma 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 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 Burmese 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 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.

³ The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (also called the Karen Peace Council or KPC), is an armed group based in Htoh Gkaw Ko, Hpa-an District, which split from the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2007 and subsequently refused to comply with orders from the then-SPDC government to transform its forces into

[Democratic Karen Benevolent Army],⁴ which are [active] in the places where I have been.

I have not seen any development activities in the villages, village tracts⁵ or in the township. I have seen some [new] roads and when I asked the villagers [about them], they told me that they had to put their energy, money and time [into building the roads]. They [the villagers] did it by themselves and the armed groups did not do it for them. Likewise, the [Burma] government did not build the schools. The villagers dedicated their time, money and energy and tried to build schools by themselves. Also, the Government did not build a clinic for the villages, but the villagers established one by themselves. I have seen some big houses in the village, but the Government did not build them for them [the villagers]. I have seen that the villagers are doing business, such as making charcoal; distilling alcohol [to sell]; cutting wood with machines; and selling two-digit [lottery tickets].⁶

The thing that has affected the villagers the most are the landmines beside the villages, forced recruitment, forced labour and taxation. The villagers have no rights. I told them that every human being has rights and showed them posters [the human rights education poster created by KHRG] that I brought with me. They asked me to give them posters and hung them on the wall of their houses and beside the roads. The [number of] posters that I brought with me were not enough for the whole village tract. I found that they desperately want rely on their human rights. They bravely hang the posters on the walls of their houses so people can understand their rights. These posters help the people, because they will understand the words [their human rights] when they look at the pictures. One of the female villagers told me that people [the armed actors] treated [abused] them like [similar to what] they saw in the pictures in the posters.

The villagers said that they have to be afraid of the DKBA, the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] and the Tatmadaw. When the Burma government transformed the DKBA into the BGF,⁷ both the DKBA and BGF [started to] fight each other again and they [the villagers] were very sad and weary. The people who were injured and died in

the Tatmadaw Border Guard. See: "[KPC to be outlawed if it rejects BGF](#)," *Burma News International*, August 30th 2010.

⁴ The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), formerly the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, was formed in December 1994 and was originally a breakaway group from the KNU/KNLA that signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burma government and directly cooperated at times with Tatmadaw forces. The formation of the DKBA was led by monk U Thuzana with the help and support of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the name of the military government in Burma at that time. For more information on the formation of the DKBA, see "Inside the DKBA," KHRG, 1996. The DKBA now refers to a splinter group from those DKBA forces reformed as Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, also remaining independent of the KNLA. As of April 2012, the DKBA changed its name from "Buddhist" to "Benevolent" to reflect its secularity.

⁵ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

⁶ An unofficial lottery system popular in Burma.

⁷ While Tatmadaw and DKBA units had operated together for years, this operational hierarchy became formalised with the DKBA's transformation into a 'Border Guard Force' under control of the Tatmadaw and containing a fixed number quota of Tatmadaw officers. This transformation dates to at least May 2009, when commanding officers stated in high-level meeting of DKBA officers that the DKBA would transform itself into a 'Border Guard Force;' unpublished leaked minutes from the May 2009 meeting are on file with KHRG. Ceremonies attended by Tatmadaw commanders officially announced the transformation of large portions of the DKBA into Border Guard Forces in September 2010; see, for example: "[Border Guard Forces of South-East Command formed in Paingkyon of Kayin State](#)," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 22nd 2010; and "[Border Guard Force formed at At Winkwinkalay Region, Myawaddy Township, Kayin State](#)," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25th 2010.

the battle are people from their villages, who were hired to be the soldiers of the BGF for one year and six months. [One villager from Nabu Township reported to a KHRG community member that] on March 29th 2012, BGF soldiers entered their village and tried to find deserters. They called people who had already served in the military for one year and six months [ordered them to report to them for further military service], and went to the deserters' homes [to search for them].⁸ They ordered the village heads to arrest the deserters for them. When the village head went to the deserters and told them that the BGF had ordered them to go back to the military camp, one deserter replied that he did not want to be a soldier of the BGF anymore, that he had already served the military for one year and six months and that he was very happy to be back home. According to the village head, the deserter said: *"You [the village head] are a spy of the BGF because you told me to go back to the military camp. Give me 5,000,000 kyat (US \$5,123)⁹ if you want me to serve in the military again. At first you told me that I had to serve one year and six months, and I already did it. You must [now] pay [me] the amount of money I ask if you want me to be a soldier again."*

I met the village head and asked him for information. He told me that the problems he is facing are too difficult and that it is not easy to be the village head. *"The BGF ordered me to find the deserters and told me to hire new people [soldiers] if I could not find the deserters. Or [instead] we had to pay them [the BGF] money and they would hire the soldiers if we could not hire new soldiers by ourselves."* And I [the village head] replied, *"When you were DKBA, we hired soldiers for you for seven years, for three years or for one year and six months, as much as we could. We also tried to help you as much as we could when you became the BGF. You [BGF] said that [you would hire the soldiers for] seven years and [then] you did not discharge them after seven years of serving in the military. You said that [you would hire the soldiers for] three years and you did not discharge them after they had served for three years in the military. And you said that you would discharge the villagers after serving one year and six months, but you did not discharge the villagers after one year and six months. So that causes problems. Actually, no one wants to be a soldier and they just fulfil their duty. Some of them died in battle, some of them lost their legs or hands and it causes so many hardships for their parents, and you [BGF] do not take care of them and you don't help them. You ask for money from villagers when the soldiers run away from the camp and you ask money in lieu of portering. In the beginning, we hired the soldiers for you, but now that you have transformed to a Border Guard Force, and the Burma army feeds you and gives you salary. So, it is wrong to come back and do such a thing to the villagers."*

After telling me this story, the village head told me that they [the villagers] did not dare to speak to the BGF soldiers like that in the past. However, they have dared to talk to them like that since the KNU [Karen National Union] agreed the ceasefire with the Burma army, and because they [BGF soldiers] come to the villages very often [so villagers are less afraid of them]. The village head also told me not to leave, and asked me to live with them and said that they [the villagers] feel more supported when I am with them. The village head also said, *"You have to make suggestions to the villagers on how to respond to their concerns."* I replied to him that I could not help them by myself, but [that I could if the villagers] note down the hardships that they encounter with accurate dates, places, the names of the victims and the perpetrators. Maybe I could help them in some way if I know these things. If other people write about our history and our suffering, and if

⁸ Some of the villagers in question had been allowed to return to civilian life after serving 18 months in the BGF, while others had not been released after completing their 18 months service, and therefore chose to desert.

⁹ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the July 7th 2014 official market rate of 976 kyat to the US \$1.

we do not write it by ourselves, it may be [recorded] wrongly. It [our history] cannot be [recorded] wrongly if we write it by ourselves.

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

- “Negative impacts of dam building and drug use in Paingkyon and Nabu townships, Hpa-an District,” (May 2014)
- “Chapter: The impact of anti-personnel and other mines in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire,” (July 2014)
- “Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire,” (June 2014)
- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Paingkyon Township, June to November 2013,” (June 2014)
- “Hpapun and Hpa-an Situation Update: Bu Tho and Hlaingbwe townships, April to May 2013,” (June 2014)

Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)