



Situation Update

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Toungoo Situation Update: Than Daung and Tantabin townships, February to July 2013

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Tantabin and Than Daung townships, Toungoo District between February and July 2013, including ongoing Tatmadaw militarisation, movement restrictions, land confiscation, information about the education and healthcare situation, landmine issues and details of an incident of violent abuse.

- *Villagers voiced their concerns about ongoing army presence in their area surrounding the construction of a new Tatmadaw army camp in the Klaw Mee Der area.*
 - *Villagers are restricted from trading freely in Toungoo town, as they are required to get a recommendation letter from Tatmadaw soldiers to travel.*
 - *Current disputes over land ownership have arisen related to land that was confiscated and deemed military land by the Tatmadaw in 2005. Since then, the Tatmadaw abandoned the land and Burmese villagers have started working there. Since the ceasefire, the original landowners want their land returned. Both the Burmese villagers and the original owners have submitted complaint letters to the Government Township Administrator and the KNU Agriculture Department, respectively.*
 - *Two new high schools were established by the KNU; one in Than Daung Township and one in Tantabin Township. However, they have difficulty finding teachers and school materials. The KNU also plans to build a hospital in Tantabin Township with help from the Free Burma Rangers (FBR).*
 - *On June 26th 2013, Saw P--- was violently abused by Tatmadaw Major Hsan Htun and his comrades from Infantry Battalion #30. Saw P--- was sent to Leik Tho General Hospital by villagers to receive medical care under the order of a Tatmadaw commander.*
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Situation Update | Tantabin and Than Daung townships, Toungoo District (February to July 2013)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in August 2013. It was written by a community member in Toungoo 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 This report was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including one short update, one interview, 141 photographs and 16 video clips.²

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 In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern Burma, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security

Introduction

This is the situation update of Toungoo District from February to July [2013] after the ceasefire agreement between the Burma government and KNU [Karen National Union]. There are no changes in the Tatmadaw's activities. [This report] documents villagers' concerns about land confiscation; provides an update on the education and health situation of the villagers; discusses the local activity of the Tatmadaw; and addresses the civilians' situation and their livelihoods. The leaders of the KNU are giving ceasefire awareness to the villagers, where they explain about the peace process and where they [the KNU] made commitments with the Government, and ask advice from the villagers to be able to work [on the ceasefire process] together in the future.

The situation of Burmese army

Compared with an earlier time before the year 2013, the Burmese army [Tatmadaw] does not force or oppress the villagers anymore. However, we cannot say [this] for sure. We do not know what will happen in the future. But on the other hand, if we look at the activities of the Burmese army, they get more opportunities to send rations and ammunition freely without any harassment. The reason why we can say that is because the situation of the Burmese army is the same as before. They have not reduced their military camps but instead, they repair and build more military camps.

On March 15th 2013, a villager who lives near Klaw Mee Der area told me that the Tatmadaw built one more military camp in Klaw Mee Der area and the place [where the Tatmadaw army camp is built] is called Nat Tha Mee Taung [Fairy Mountain]. We do not know the date that they finished building [the camp] and started staying there. However, because there is more military [presence], the villagers are not feeling very comfortable and they do not want the military camps to be increased. If possible, they even want the Tatmadaw to withdraw their troops.

LID [Light Infantry Division] #66 used to be based in Toungoo District in the beginning of 2013. But after the beginning of year 2013, MOC [Military Operation Command] #9 replaced the LID #66. So, currently, the military that is based in Toungoo District is MOC #9.

Situation of the civilians

If we look at the beginning of year 2013, from February to July, the situation of the civilians is changing a lot because the KNU and the Burmese government made a ceasefire agreement and the villagers can work comfortably and can travel more freely. Most of the villagers in the Toungoo area work on cardamom, betel nut and the other fruit plantations for their livelihoods. They have to sell these things at Kler La [village] and some people have to go and sell in Toungoo [city] but mostly, they [villagers] do trading in Toungoo city. When they want to go to Toungoo, they have to get permission

considerations. For additional reports categorized by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's redesigned Website.

from the Kler La Tatmadaw camp. This permission is only for cars and motorbikes. It is dangerous for the villagers to ride a barge and there is no bridge on the way from Kler La to Toungoo. If we look back to the Toh Bon dam, the company said that they will build a rope bridge for the villagers to make their traveling easy but we cannot see the actual shape of it yet.

The villagers are worried that if the ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burma government is not a real one, it will become a problem for the civilians. Some of the villagers said, *"We know that the Tatmadaw always say something, but do something different so we cannot trust them. Therefore, we always need to be careful."*

The villagers said that, currently, there are no forced labour demands by the Burmese military. We also do not want them [demands to do forced labour] anymore. The other thing is many businessmen want to come and do business but the people [leaders] from KNU do not give them permission. But they bought some land with a very high price. Some of the villagers do not sell their land to the businessmen, but some sold it to them because they did not know [that they were businessmen]. The problem that happens mostly after the ceasefire is the land problem because, in the past, the Tatmadaw confiscated a lot of land from the villagers.

If we look back to the past, in Ber Htee area, the Tatmadaw Battalion [Infantry Battalion] #39 which is based in R--- village, confiscated villagers' lands and defined it as [Battalion] camp area. They confiscated lands from the villagers who are living in Q---, R---, S--- and T--- villages. We do not know the exact date [when the land was confiscated], but some of it was confiscated in the year 2005. The Burmese army leases the land that they confiscated to the Burmese villagers [who are from nearby villages], but now because the situation is getting better, the owners of the land want their land back to work on. They are trying very hard to get back their land in many ways. But they do not have the chance to work on their land yet. They not only go and meet with the responsible people [regional leaders] for land but more than that, they also submitted letters to them. However, they do not get permission to work on the land yet. They also submitted a letter to the KNU in charge. So, the [people] in charge from the agricultural department [KNU] have a plan to resolve the land issue.

The responsible people from the agricultural department who measure the [villagers'] land with GPS [Global Positioning System] have a plan to make new land titles for the villagers. The purpose of doing this is because people cannot confiscate the land if the villagers have a land title. The villagers whose land was confiscated want to work in their land, but the Burmese [civilians] who have been working on their land want to create conflicts and they [people who are currently working on the land] said that the land belongs to them. But the owners of the lands said that they will work in their land this year and if any problem occurs, they will solve the problem together. However, when they [KNU] go and measure the land with GPS, the Burmese people who used to work in their land submitted complaint letters to the Township administrator and Tatmadaw IB #39 came to the group who are measuring the land with GPS and asked them who gave them permission to measure the land. One of the responsible people from [the KNU] agricultural department replied to them, that they are measuring their civilians' land in their region and told them that there is no need to disturb them. He also told them that they have a plan to make land titles for the people who are living in their area.

Education

Nowadays, if we look at the education in Toungoo District, it is very sorrowful. There is no high school in our area; we only have primary schools. There are also no people who will teach. People lack understanding and education. So, it is a big sadness for the future of the children. For the people who are educated, they have no commitment and they are only doing their own job. Moreover, most of the schools in our region only have up until the fourth standard. These schools are supported by the government [of Burma], but they do not receive enough support from the Government. However, now, they get some support from KESAN [Karen Environment and Social Action Network Education], but some of the schools do not receive support from KESAN because the schools are not open regularly. They open in one year and close in the next year in our district because some of the parents of the students cannot afford to pay for the salary of teachers and they cannot find teachers [to teach in the school]. The parents of the students said that the Government teachers do not come to school regularly. Because of these reasons, this is an issue to think [about] and also a big concern for the students.

There are some students whose parents cannot afford to send them to school. Some of the students leave school after they finish grade four and help their parents with the housework. But some of the children do not want to go to school even if their parents can afford to send them to school. They said, “*thay li aw may, ta thay li aw may* [everyone is able to earn money for food to eat regardless of if they are educated or illiterate]”.

During this year, the leaders of Toungoo District established two high schools; one is in Htaw Ta Htoo [Tantabin] Township and the other one is in Daw Hpa Hko [Than Daung] Township, but they do not have enough teachers and do not get enough support. However, the township leaders tried their best for children in their area to be able to go school. It is good for the students because they do not need to go to the city and also good for the parents because they do not need to spend a lot of money.

Health

If we look at our Toungoo District, we have hospitals built by the Burma government and we also have clinics built by the KNU. But we can say that it is not sufficient because there are so many diseases that are occurring today. The villagers say that the Government hospitals are very expensive and, mostly, they do not go there because they cannot afford to go, and they also say you will not receive good care if you do not have enough money.

However, most the villagers in Kler La area go to Kler La Hospital. Kler La Hospital is the Government hospital. People who are living in KNU-controlled areas go to the KNU hospital. But, the KNU hospital does not have enough medicine and it becomes a problem for the staff and the villagers.

The Tatmadaw government did not allow people to bring medicine from Toungoo to Kler La in the past. When they found out that people brought medicine, they arrested, beat and tortured people. Moreover, they also fined them.

Nevertheless, people have more opportunities to bring medicine [to the villages] after the ceasefire. So, it is a benefit for the villagers and more than that, it is a benefit for the KNU. The reasons why we are saying this is because the villagers can buy the medicine that they need by themselves, they can keep it [the medicine] and they can use it when they need it for treatment. Nowadays, the disease that occurs the most in our Toungoo District is malaria.

On April 19th 2013, our Htaw Ta Htoo Township held the fourth township congress. The leaders discussed health issues during the congress and FBR [Free Burma Rangers] in charge of Toungoo District said that the FBR wants to support Toungoo District to establish a hospital. Therefore, the leaders discussed this issue and agreed [to establish a hospital]. The reason why they agreed to establish the hospital is because building a hospital is good and it will benefit not only the villagers but also the staff [medics of KNU].

To be able to establish this hospital, FBR needs more staff to look after the hospital and work in the hospital. FBR wants people to attend training with them before they work for the hospital. The leaders of KNU also said that the health workers of the township will also work with FBR. This hospital will be built in Maw Nay Bga area, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, because this place is very far from the [Burma government] hospital and more than that, there are no people who have knowledge about medicine. Thus, the representative of villages who attended the congress agreed to the idea of building a hospital. They also said that health is very important for human beings. We can only work if we are healthy. Therefore, this is a benefit for the people from that area and it would make them happy.

Landmines

In our Toungoo District, there are no serious landmine cases. If we look back since the ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burma government, we know that no new landmines have been planted. We only have the old landmines from the past, and they have not been taken out. The front line leaders of KNU said that they do not have the skills to do demining and they are also afraid to do demining. However, they do not allow people to travel in the area where landmines are planted.

People from that area and the KNU do not know the place where landmines are planted by the Tatmadaw, as the Tatmadaw does not let them know. Hence, we can say that none of the landmines from Toungoo District are being removed yet.

Landmines are things that can destroy the human body and can even kill people. The landmine is a very awful weapon.

Abuses and violations

The following describes the happenings of an incident of physical abuse against a villager. Major Hsan Htun, Deputy Battalion Commander of Tatmadaw IB [Infantry Battalion] #30 which is based in Htee Tha Saw camp committed abuse to Saw P--- in Htee Tha Saw area in Daw Hpa Hko Township, Toungoo District on June 26th 2013.

Major Hsan Htun, Deputy Battalion Commander of IB #30 and his group, which is based in Htee Tha Saw camp committed abuse to Saw P---, whose identification number is [number censored for security], and is the husband of a post-primary school teacher, Naw V---. On June 26th 2013, they [Major Hsan Htun and comrades] tortured³ him, cursed him and punched him until he was bleeding and was seriously injured.

While U Saw P--- was traveling from W--- to X--- by motorbike on June 26th 2013, Major Hsan Htu and his group ordered him to stop the motorbike and cursed him, kicked his chest and punched him. Then, when U Saw P--- was coming back [home] at 8:30 pm, they brought him to Htee Tha Saw camp and asked him to stand up, to sit down and then forced him to drink alcohol till he was drunk and cursed him. Then, they sent him back to the staff house, which is located in the middle of the village at 10:30 pm and they punched him and cursed him again and beat him with the butt of the gun. Consequently, Saw P--- was bleeding and got seriously injured.

Villagers took Saw P---, who was unconscious because of the serious injuries to the village clinic which is located in Thauk Yay Hket by carrying him in a hammock. They met with the Battalion Commander of IB #30 at 5:30pm on June 7th 2013, while they cured him [at the clinic]. Then, according to the Battalion Commander's order to send him to the hospital urgently, they rented a car and sent him to the nearest Leik Tho General Hospital. They arrived at 8:00 pm and he got treatment there.

Conclusion

The above information that I reported is the situation of Toungoo District occurring currently. The biggest issue is the land problem. The land of the villagers was confiscated by the Government in the past and the Government has not returned it back yet. Moreover, the villagers are worried that the companies will come in and do business in their area. Many companies want to come and do business, but the leaders of the KNU do not give permission so that they cannot do anything. However, based on the situation, we cannot say anything for sure.

Perspective for the future

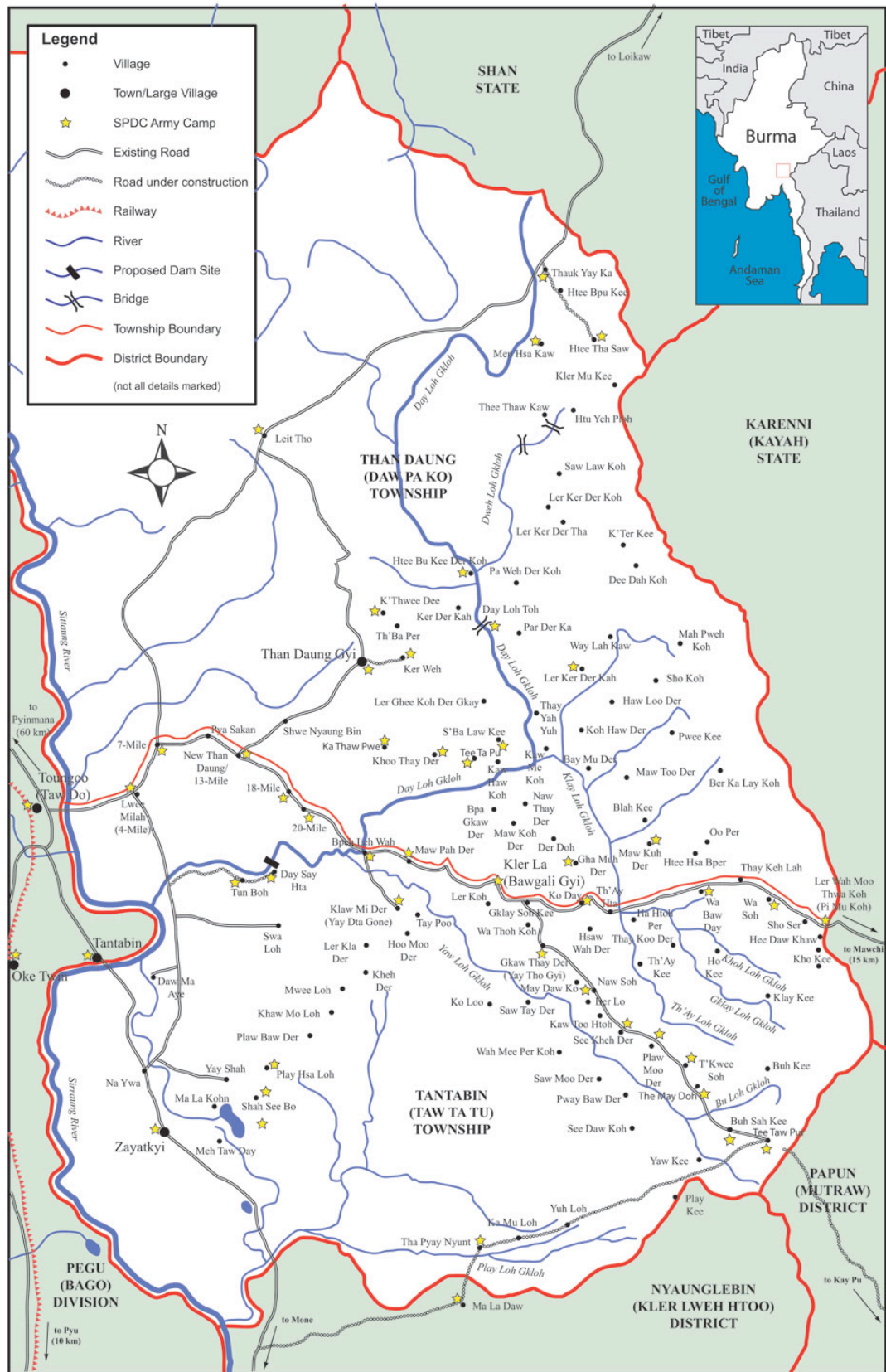
People in our Toungoo District have different perspectives on ceasefire between the KNU and the Burma government. The ceasefire agreement between the Burma government and the KNU is good for the people but it is also a concerning thing. It is also a concerning thing for our Karen leaders. The reason why I am saying this is because the Burmese people have cheated us since our parents and our grandparents' era. They are also the people who are very good at making people trust them as they can talk well. Difficulties will occur if we trust in them too easily. Regarding the ceasefire process, we should go slowly, step by step.

³ It should be noted that the villager who wrote this report/conducted this interview chose to use the Karen phrase, 'ma shah ma p'yweh,' meaning torture, as opposed to ma p'yweh, meaning 'abuse,' or ma na ma hphaw, meaning 'torment' to describe the event, suggesting that the severity of the incident justifies this classification.

Further background on the current situation in Toungoo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Toungoo Photo Set: Land confiscation and lack of educational opportunities in Than Daung Township, February 2012” (August 2013)
- “Toungoo Situation Update: Tantabin and Than Daung Townships, September to December 2012,” (March 2013)
- “Toungoo Interview: Saw H---, April 2011,” (September 2012)
- “Photo Set: More than 100 households displaced from Toh Boh dam construction site in Toungoo,” (August 2012)
- “Tatmadaw soldiers fire at four villagers carrying rice, order forced labour in Toungoo District,” (July 2012)

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



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