



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

August 27, 2015 / KHRG #14-91-S1

Hpa-an Situation Update: Paingkyon Township, June to October 2014

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District prior to and during June to October 2014. The events include land confiscation, militarisation, arbitrary taxation, landmines, and local meetings regarding drug issues.

- *On May 31st 2014, Border Guard Force (BGF) Cantonment Area Commander Kya Aye came to T-- village to inspect land that had been allocated for new housing in Yay Pu Gyi village tract, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District. Cantonment Area Commander Kya Aye plans to confiscate this land, claiming that it is not being used.*
 - *Soldiers from the Tatmadaw camps that are based in Wa Mee Klah village tract, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District made repairs to the roads that they use and cleared vegetation from around the camps so that they are able to see clearly into the distance. They have also dug trenches around their huts. The villagers think that there are landmines in and around the camp.*
 - *Representatives from four Karen armed groups, the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC), the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) and the Border Guard Force (BGF) had three meetings with local Karen people concerning efforts aimed at the elimination of drug issues in Nabu Paingkyon townships in Hpa-an District.*
 - *Buyers of wild yams have to pay between 30,000, 50,000 and 100,000 kyat (US \$25.70, \$42.84 and \$85.67) in tax to armed groups. The wild yam seller deducts 20 or 30 kyat from the wild yam price to compensate for this taxation. Around September, villagers produce charcoal to sell and every armed group in the area collects tax from where the charcoal is produced.*
 - *Villagers made repairs and improvements to their homes and community buildings in an attempt to protect themselves against attacks by armed groups.*
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Situation Update | Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District (June to October 2014)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in November 2014. It was written by a community member in Hpa-an District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions.¹ It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.²

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeast 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 southeast 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.

Introduction

From June 15th to October 30th 2014, I went and visited Hpa-an District, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, and worked for KHRG as much as I could. The cases [information] that I mention [below], I [have] tried to state as precisely as I could.

Subjects:

1. The villagers' lives.
2. [The] Burmese military [Tatmadaw] base.
3. The BGF [Border Guard Force]³ confiscated villagers' land.
4. [There is a] Tatmadaw camp that has been repaired.
5. A second Tatmadaw camp and a road [used by the Tatmadaw] has been repaired.
6. Four Karen armed groups, the KNU [Karen National Union], KNU/KNLA-PC [KNU/Karen National Liberation Army – Peace Council],⁴ DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army],⁵ and the BGF held a meeting with civilians in Hpa-an District and talked about drugs.
7. The villagers from Meh Ta Poo [village] tried to take an opportunity to set [raise] the Karen flag before [in front of] the primary school.
8. The villagers from Meh Ta Poo [village] repaired their houses and improved the village situation [in order] to protect themselves from the armed groups.

The villagers' lives

[In] 2014, the villagers from Hpa-an District, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township mostly do [work on] hill farming and [flat] land farming. The farming is going well. There are [also] three ways for the villagers to make money to cover [pay for] the cost of rice if they do not make enough rice from farming.

During the summer, in October, normally the villagers find and dig wild yams in their [village] area. They sell one viss⁶ of wild yams for 500 kyat (US \$0.49).⁷ For some people who are strong, like a strong man, they [can easily] find and dig [the yams], making 100,000 kyat (US \$96.81) within one month. For the teenagers, youth and married women, they probably make 30,000 kyat (US \$29.03) from finding and digging wild yams in one month. The [wild yam] buyers are [buying] wild yams [from the yam sellers] and as they are regular customers [they

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 battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and 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.

⁴ The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (also called the Karen Peace Council or KPC), is an armed group based in Htoth 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 the Tatmadaw Border Guard. See: "[KPC to be outlawed if it rejects BGF](#)," *Burma News International*, August 30th 2010.

⁵ 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/Myanmar 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/Myanmar 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.

⁶ A viss is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg or 3.52 lb.

⁷ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the April 3rd 2015 official market rate of 1,033 kyat to the US \$1.

buy in bulk] and then resell the yams. The yam sellers have regular and non-regular customers. The buyers have to pay between 30,000 kyat (US \$29.03) or 50,000 kyat (US \$48.34) and 100,000 kyat (US \$96.81) to each armed group [when they buy yams]. The [wild yam] seller reduces 20 [kyat] (US \$0.02) or 30 [kyat] (US \$0.03) from the wild yam buying [retail] price because they [the buyer] has to pay tax [to the armed groups]. This means the original sellers are not getting the 500 kyat (US \$0.49) for one viss of the wild yam as they are supposed to, but only receiving 470 kyat (US \$0.45) to 480 kyat (US \$0.46) for each viss of wild yam. This is the first step of the experience of [income generating activities used by] the villagers from Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District.

The second step [of income generating activities used by the villagers] is usually at the beginning of March. In 2014, the villagers from Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District found and cut [down] the *ta wee* trees and stripped the bark from the trees and sold it.⁸ The price of the bark in Myanmar is 500 kyat (US \$0.49) for one viss. There are also different customers [from different areas] for the *ta wee* bark. This [situation] is similar to the wild yams [situation mentioned above], as there is tax [imposed] on [buying] the bark. Villagers face the same problem [they have to reduce the retail price of the bark for the buyers to compensate for the buying tax]. They buy rice, chili and [anything else] the house needs with the money that they make [from selling *ta wee* tree bark and wild yams]. This is the second step [stage] of the experience [of income generating activities].

The third step [of incoming generating activities] is in Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District. The villagers, usually in autumn in the month of September, produce charcoal and sell it. [To produce the charcoal] they dig a big hole under the ground and cover it [with rice husks or soil, creating a large dome shape]. They then find wood and tree branches from the trees that people have cut down. They put them in the hole and burn it and when it is ready [turned into charcoal] they sell it. For the charcoal production, every armed group collects tax from the place where it [the charcoal] is produced. For one charcoal production area they tax between 25,000 kyat (US \$24.20) and 30,000 kyat (US \$29.04). For some villagers [charcoal producers] they can produce between 500 [viss] (800 kg / 1,760 lb) and 800 viss (1,280 kg / 2,816 lb) of charcoal. One viss of charcoal is worth 500 kyat (US \$0.46).

This [section] is about the villagers in that area who are facing problems regarding their livelihoods. So that the villagers' businesses are not interrupted [adversely impacted] by the armed groups' taxation, the villagers asked [for] help from their customers to help them reduce the tax collected by the armed groups so that it is not harmful for them [and their businesses]. It is known [by the people] that sometimes they [armed groups] reduce [the tax] and sometimes they keep [the tax] at the same rate.

[The] Burmese military [Tatmadaw] base

On May 17th 2014, I passed by S--- village close to the mountain side, situated in Thay Maw Koo village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District, and I saw the Burmese military [Tatmadaw] base at Ta Nya Kyoh and I saw that the Burmese military [Tatmadaw] were repairing their base's buildings and bridges. The place [military base] is on the mountain and it is 2,000 feet higher than S--- village. The place [military base] is fenced. [The fence] has sharpened bamboo spikes on the interior and exterior sides of the fence; there are also mines between the poles [two bamboo fences]. I know this information because a villager named Saw M--- told me exactly. You can see S--- village from the top of the mountain. The Burmese [Tatmadaw] soldiers are often present in the village. Sometimes, if they [soldiers or officers from the base] need something from the village they send their privates to meet with the village head and ask the village head to send them the things that they need in time. The villagers said sometimes they [soldiers] pay for it [the items] for the soldiers or officers in the camp and

⁸ There is no direct translation from Karen to English for the name of this tree. The bark was stripped and sold as it is believed to have medicinal properties.

sometimes they do not, but mostly they do not pay. This happened recently. When I saw it, the soldiers who were sitting [stationed] at the military base were the soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁹ #549. I do not know the camp commander's name. It [the battalion stationed at the base] always rotates once [every] three or six months. This is the exact information.

Burmese military [Tatmadaw] activity

In Hpa-an District, in Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, there are five big Burmese military [Tatmadaw] bases, [they are]:

1. Ta Kreh military base: situated close to L--- village, Ta Kreh village tract, Hpa-an District. LIB #339 is based there.
2. Ler Poo military base: situated close to R--- village, Hpwee Htaw Roh village tract, Mi Kyaung village tract, in Hpa-an District. LIB #338 is based there.
3. Ta Nya Kyoh military base: situated close to the S--- village, Thay Maw Koo village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District. LIB #549 is based there.
4. Poo Loo Too military base: situated close to A--- village, Wa Mee Klah village tract, Ta Kreh village tract, Hpa-an District. LIB #101 is based there.
5. Maw Hpoh Kay military base: situated close to B--- village, Wa Mee Klah village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District.

Last September [2014], the LIB's were set [stationed] according to their schedules which are created by their superiors, as it is mentioned above. They do military rotation [rotate battalions between bases] every three or six months.

The BGF is situated in Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District and [they] have two big bases there:

1. A [BGF] military base is situated close to K--- (Y--- in Burmese) village, Peh Kruh village tract (A'Tat Piang Kyone village tract), Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District.
2. A [BGF] military base is close to G--- village, situated in Pa Ta village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District.

There are many places where the BGF set up smaller camps [in different areas]. We cannot document exactly because [sometimes] there are only [a few] soldiers [in the camp]. In their small camps they [BGF] do not usually have soldier rotations. Their big military bases are more permanent than the smaller camps.

BGF forcibly confiscated the villagers' land

On May 31st 2014, BGF Officer Maung Kya Aye,¹⁰ number two Cantonment Area Commander, came to T--- village to check out the housing lands [land allocated for new housing] there, in Yay Pu Gyi village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District. He said [to the villagers] that there are no owners on [using] these lands and he plans to confiscate the land. The place

⁹ Light Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Primarily for offensive operations but sometimes used for garrison duties.

¹⁰ Cantonment Area Commander Kya Aye, an ethnic Karen and Buddhist, is administratively responsible for BGF Battalions #1015 and #1016 in Hpa-an District. He is a powerful, well known figure in the area and is feared by villagers in Paingkyon Township. He is responsible for many of the human rights abuses in Paingkyon Township, either directly committed by him, or by BGF Battalion #1015 soldiers under his orders. Cantonment Area Commander Kya Aye, also known as Hpah T'Kaw, lives in A--- village, Poh Yay Hpoo village tract, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District. See more at: ["Human rights violations by BGF Cantonment Area Commander Kya Aye in Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District, February 2013 to July,"](#) KHRG, September 2014.

[land] has an owner. [The owner] keeps the land for the cows and buffalo to graze on and to grow plants on. There are [also] Kaw La Thu¹¹ and Karen people living there.

The villager's name: Saw O--- (Male)

Age: 45 years old

Nationality: Kaw La Thu

Relationship: Has Karen relatives

He [the land owner] said that when BGF Officer Kya Aye came to look at the land he did not bring any company [BGF officers] with him. He came in and marked the land, forbid the land [from being accessed by villagers] and asked his privates to fence off the land with the [spiked] bamboo [fence].

We heard that in the near future the Officer [Kya Aye] will sell the land and he will also distribute it area by area [in plots] and one area of land that he sells will be 200,000 kyat (US \$193.21). If there are people who want to buy the land they can buy the land from Officer Kya Aye. The villagers dare not complain about this but the one thing that the villagers can do is inform the village head and [ask] the BGF soldiers to help them by talking [to Officer Kya Aye] in a diplomatic way. Currently the case is not complicated yet and the villagers are still waiting to see what will happen next. The KHRG researcher told the villagers that if anything were to happen, to let us [KHRG researchers] know as soon as possible.

Two Burmese military [Tatmadaw] camps

A Burmese military [Tatmadaw] camp is also based in Wa Mee Klah village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District. On May 13th 2014, I went to A--- village close to the military camp. I saw that the Burmese [Tatmadaw] soldiers were repairing their place [camp], [repairing the] road [that they use] and clearing vegetation so that they can see things far away from their camp. They [have] also dug trenches around their huts and do not let the villagers in and out of the camp. We can see that the place [camp] is very wide and long. No one knows the [schedule of the] soldiers in the place [camp]. The military battalion that set [is currently stationed] in that place [camp] is LIB #101. The battalion can be replaced [by] other battalions [at any time]. They do not allow the villagers to graze their cows and buffalo near their camp. The villagers also think that there are landmines inside and around the camp. I mentioned this information as I know [from the villagers] and it is truly [honest] reporting.

Four Karen armed groups cooperated with each other and had meetings with local Karen people about eliminating the drug issues

The four Karen armed groups cooperating are named the KNU, the KNU/KNLA-PC, the DKBA and the BGF. This is the type of cooperation that will make the lives of Karen people better and not become ruined under [by] drugs. [From what] we saw among the villagers, we can say it [the drug issue] has decreased by 50 percent.¹² This also means that [the cooperation between the Karen armed groups is] helping out the local people in Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District.

The first meeting

¹¹ *Kaw La Thu*, “thu” meaning black, is a S’gaw Karen term which is sometimes used to refer to individuals in Burma/Myanmar who are perceived to have a darker skin colour. In Kayin state, it is often associated specifically with followers of Islam (Muslims), although this association is sometimes erroneous, and Muslim individuals do not typically self-identify with this term.

¹² In this case the researcher is explaining that in his opinion, the combined impact of drug issues on the villagers has been reduced by half. See more on the negative impact of drug issues in Paingkyon Township at: “[Negative impacts of dam building and drug use in Paingkyon and Nabu townships, Hpa-an District, May 2014](#),” KHRG, July 2014 and more generally in southeast Myanmar at: “[Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire](#),” KHRG, June 2014.

The first meeting was held on September 4th 2014 in T'Nay Hsah [Nabu] Township, Hpa-an District and the meeting was headed by the Colonel Saw Hpaw Doh (KNU), [the] chairperson [was] Maung Kya Aye (BGF number two Cantonment Area Commander), the second chairperson [was] Saw Kyaw Kyaw (KNU/KNLA-PC), the third chairperson [was] Saw Hta Kler (DKBA), and they asked [village leaders] to pass the information [on] to all villagers and civilians. The [meeting] title was Unity Committee Karen Army (UCKA). [The meeting was between the] Armed Karen and Solidarity Committee¹³ and civilians, [discussing] anti-drugs issues in the all faces meeting [a face to face meeting]. There were 300 people who participated in the meeting including civilians and the military officers.¹⁴

The second meeting

Venue: K--- village (Y--- village in Burmese), Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District, September 15th 2014:

The chairpersons were:

1. Colonel Saw Hpaw Doh (KNU)
2. Number two Cantonment Area Commander Maung Kya Aye (BGF)
3. Colonel Saw Kyaw Kyaw (KNU/KNLA-PC)
4. From the DKBA, only one 2nd Lieutenant joined the meeting.

There were 800 people [in attendance].

The third meeting

Venue: Yay Pu Gyi village, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District, September 24th 2014:

The chairpersons were:

1. Saw Ba Dee (Hpa-an District Voice [district level] Secretary)
2. Saw Kyaw Kyaw (KNU/KNLA-PC)
3. Maung Kya Aye (BGF number two Cantonment Area Commander)
4. The DKBA did not join the meeting.

The meeting was held with around 350 people and drugs were discussed.

The villagers raised a Karen Flag in front of a primary school

On September 29th 2014, I went to U--- village, Meh P'Ree village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District and spoke to the villagers and the village head. They gathered and raised the Karen flag before [in front of] their primary school. Around the area [U--- village] people have not put up a Karen flag [in front of a] house or Karen schools before. In some [other] places they [Karen villagers] recognise the primary school as a Karen primary school and they have the sign [signify this by] showing the Karen flag, raised before [in front of] the school. They know that the Burma government does not like it, but they [Karen villagers] know the Karen people are asking for equality from the Burma government so they are raising the Karen flag. School teachers, students, villagers, village heads and the relatives of students and teachers gathered, and after the [flag raising] ceremony they served some food that they prepared for the ceremony. This is what the villagers do in that area.

¹³ The researcher is referring to a committee of Karen armed group representatives formed in 2013 with the aim of working towards a unified Karen political principle. The Armed Karen and Solidarity Committee was initially comprised of seven members, with representatives from the KNU, the DKBA, the KNU/KNLA Peace Council and the BGF. See more at: [Unity Committee for Karen Armed Groups](#).

¹⁴ See more on armed group discussions on drug issues in Hpa-an at: "[Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe, Nabu, Paingkyon and Hti Lon Townships, May to July 2014](#)," KHRG, 2014.

The villagers in U--- village repaired and improved their houses and the village so that the armed groups cannot harm them

On September 25th 2014, in U--- village, Meh P'Ree village tract, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, Hpa-an District, the villagers repaired and improved their houses and the village. [They do this] once a year [as they believe] that the armed groups will not harm their village and the villagers [if they do this]. This is a traditional thing that the villagers in U--- village do. I mention it as a big thing that the villagers do as it is done to protect the village and villagers. They began to do it as there was fighting in the past [between the Tatmadaw and Karen armed groups].¹⁵

Conclusion

The information in the situation update is collected according to what is happening on the ground. If there is anything changing on the ground I will report about it in the next upcoming quarterly report. If it is necessary, we hope the [KHRG] leaders will advise and share with me what they think and let me conclude my situation update here.

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

- “Hpa-an Incident Report: Land confiscation in Paingkyon Township, May 2015,” (August 2015)
- Press release on *“With only our voices, what can we do?” Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (August 2015)
- “Recent fighting between Tatmadaw and DKBA soldiers leads to killing and displacement of villagers in Hpa-an District, July 2015,” (August 2015)
- “Complaint letter to KNU agriculture department in Paingkyon Township regarding land confiscation,” (July 2015)
- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe and Nabu Townships, December 2014 to January 2015,” (July 2015)

¹⁵ On 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. In March 2015, the seventh round of the negotiations for a national ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and various ethnic armed actors have begun in Yangon, see [“Seventh Round of Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations,” Karen National Union Headquarters](#), March 18th 2015. Following the negotiations, the KNU held a central standing committee emergency, see [“KNU: Emergency Meeting Called To Discuss Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement And Ethnic Leaders’ Summit,” Karen News](#), April 22nd 2015.

Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)