



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

February 25, 2016 / KHRG #15-100-S1

Thaton Situation Update: Bilin Township, October 2015

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin Township, Thaton District in October 2015, including updates on the 2015 general election, education, and development projects.

- *Villages under the administration of the Burma/Myanmar government are able to vote in the 2015 general election. However, villages located in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled areas have not been adequately informed ahead of the election.*
 - *Local Karen teachers selected to teach in villages have had to resign after Burma/Myanmar government teachers were sent to teach in Bilin Township, sparking concerns that Karen language education will be given less attention and taught outside of school hours.*
 - *Heavy rain and floods damaged paddies, and, combined with an increase in the paddy price, caused livelihood concerns among some villagers.*
 - *The main roads that have been under construction in Bilin Township since 2013 will be completed during 2016. Although useful for the villagers, the road construction has caused problems for some villagers whose lands have been damaged.*
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Situation Update | Bilin Township, Thaton District (October 2015)

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in November 2015. It was written by a community member in Thaton 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 Situation Update is about the situation from October 1st 2015 to November 1st 2015, in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District. I [as a KHRG community member] wrote about the subjects in this Situation Update, including villagers' livelihoods and their challenges, the military situation, education, healthcare, development projects and the 2015 election.

This [Bilin] Township is under the control of the KNU [Karen National Union] and most of the villages are [ethnic] Karen villages, with a minority of other ethnic groups [also living there]. The [minority] ethnic groups present in the area are Burman, Mon and Muslim. They [the ethnic Karens] are Karen Buddhists, animists, and Baptists.

Villagers' challenges

This year, because of heavy rains and floods, the paddies of farmers were damaged by floods and some of them had to plant their paddies twice. If we compare last year to this year, the number of rats had increased when the bamboos were flowering to produce seeds. The rats

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.

attacked the paddies when they were producing their seeds and it affected [damaged] a lot of paddies. This year the paddy price rose to 19,000 kyat (US \$14.77)² for one basket,³ therefore the villagers faced food problems.

Healthcare

Most of the illnesses facing the villagers are malaria, headache, coughing, and itching skin and eyes. In this township a clinic was built by the healthcare department and it is KNLA's [Karen National Liberation Army] [KNU's] clinic. The villagers who face serious illnesses have to go to Hpa-an, Bilin, and Thaton towns [for treatment]. [The health workers] from the Burma government also came to provide immunisations to children. They [the Burma/Myanmar government] are also building a hospital in Lay Kay village but it still under the construction.

Education

In Bilin Township there are primary schools in each village. They are Burma government schools, self-help schools [that do not receive any external funding], KNU and religious schools. We have seen that more government teachers are present in this township; therefore, some teachers who had been selected by the villagers have had to resign from the schools. If more government teachers come in the future, there will be less time to teach Karen language in school, and it will have to be taught outside of school hours. The teachers who teach Karen language have to be selected by the villagers, who have to support the teachers.

Armed actors

The armed groups that are situated in this township are the [Burma/Myanmar] government military and the KNLA. The government army camps are situated in Lay Kay, Yoh Klah, Ta Paw, Meh Pyee Hkee, and Na Gyi villages. The LID⁴ [Light Infantry Division] #22 is operating in the Brigade one [Thaton District] area.

Development projects

Main roads were being constructed in Bilin Township. The road from P'Nweh Klah to Lay Kay [villages] was started in 2013 and the construction will be completed during 2016. Another road is being constructed from Na Gyi to Meh Naw Ther village tracts and it will also be completed during 2016. From P'Nweh Klah to Lay Kay [villages] it [the road] is being constructed by Win Laing, and from Na Gyi to Meh Naw Ther [village tracts] it is being constructed by U Ye Tun. A new hospital is being constructed in Lay Kay [village] and there might be more work [done, in terms of building roads,] in the coming dry season. These roads are very useful for the civilians but on the other hand they have caused damage to plantations and farms because they go through civilians' lands.

2015 election

In Bilin Township, the villages that are located in the lower part, such as Lay Kay village, down to the villages that are under the control of the Burma government administration, are all villages [that are] able to vote. They will set up a polling station in Lay Kay village and the nearby villages have to go there to vote. Because of that, it becomes challenging for the villagers to travel and it is [also taking place] in the harvest season. The villages which are under the control of the KNU stay in their own way, and [feel that] it [the election] is not relevant to them [the

² All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 28th of January 2016 official market rate of 1,288.50 kyat to the US \$1.

³ A basket is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One basket is equivalent to 20.9 kg or 46.08 lb of paddy, and 32 kg or 70.4 lb of milled rice. A basket is twice the volume of a big tin.

⁴ Light Infantry Division (Tatmadaw); commanded by a brigadier general, each with ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, "search and destroy" operations against ethnic insurgents and narcotics-based armies. LIDs are organised under three Tactical Operations Commands, commanded by a colonel, (three battalions each and one reserve), one field artillery battalion, one armoured squadron and other support units.

villagers]. Moreover, they have not been informed about the election and no one has educated them. Furthermore, the KNU does not involve itself in any part of this election.

Conclusion

The information that I have mentioned above was documented during one month. In my opinion, the election will take place soon and it might cause problems for the villagers because of the working period [harvest season].

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

- “Thaton Short Update: Hpa-an Township, October 2014,” (February 2016)
- “Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, January to June 2015,” (January 2016)
- “Thaton Field Report: January to December 2014,” (November 2015)
- “Thaton Interview: Saw A---, October 2014,” (October 2015)
- “Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, January to February 2015,” (October 2015)

Doo Tha Htoo (Karen)



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