



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe and Nabu townships, December 2014 to January 2015

This Situation Update describes events and issues occurring in Hlaingbwe and Nabu townships, Hpa-an District during the period between December 2014 and January 2015, including embezzlement of government funds, development projects in the infrastructure and education sector, land confiscation, and healthcare disparities.

- *Between 2013 and 2015, Border Guard Force (BGF) commanders embezzled over 170 million kyat (approximately US \$152,126) from government funds earmarked for road, bridge, and school construction, resulting in lower quality infrastructure being built.*
 - *Armed actors in the area, including the BGF, Karen Peace Force (KPF), and Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) commanders, have confiscated and leased out villagers' lands to agribusinesses. As a result, these fields have been converted to rubber plantations, leaving villagers unable to graze their cattle.*
 - *On December 1st 2014, the Nippon Foundation arrived in Hlaingbwe and Nabu townships. They have since delivered rice donations and constructed several schools.*
 - *Access to healthcare remains an issue in Hlaingbwe and Nabu townships, as some villagers have to depend solely on the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), having no clinic or hospital in the area.*
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Situation Update | Hlaingbwe and Nabu townships, Hpa-an District, December 2014 to January 2015

The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in March 2015. It was written by a community member in Hpa-an 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 Hpa-an District, including 31 photographs.²

Regional summary

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.

After the ceasefire³ between the Thein Sein government and the Karen National Union [KNU], [in the period between] 2013-2015 there have been projects in the region for community development. Therefore, in Brigade #7, Hpa-an District area, [the Burma/Myanmar] government constructed vehicle roads. In Lu Pleh [Hlaingbwe] Township they built up a new town and named it Klaw K'Tee. [They] also constructed roads in the areas between Lu Pleh [Hlaingbwe] Township and Klaw K'Tee, and in the village tracts they built schools and clinics.

In Hpa-an District, Brigade #7, in T'Nay Hsah [Nabu] Township, they constructed one road at the borderline [with Thailand], from Meh Pleh village to Meh T'Ree village, that ends at Thoo Mweh Nee road. The Thein Sein government tasked the Border Guard Force [BGF]⁴ with monitoring those roads. The Thein Sein government also provided financial support for the road construction, 100 million kyat (US \$89,525.51)⁵ for one mile of road. Although this was the budgeted amount, when their [BGF] commanders constructed the road it cost only 50 million kyat (US \$44,762.75). The road was meant to last [in good condition] for 50 years but it is known [estimated] that the road [they built] will decay before that. The road [is expected to] stand firm for only around 30 years.

The same thing [happened] with the bridges, because they [BGF] reported the budget for the bridge construction as 100 million kyat (US \$89,525.51), but when they constructed the bridge they only spent 50 million kyat (US \$44,762.75). School [construction] was like that, as well. The BGF soldiers that take care of the schools also requested a budget to build a school. They requested 100 million kyat (US \$89,525.51) and when they built the school it actually cost only 50 million kyat (US \$44,762.75). And these soldiers sold the [communal] lands in many places that are close to the vehicle road. Therefore, if civilians want to buy land for [building themselves a] house or rubber plantation they can buy from them [BGF]. However, foreign business people bought those lands, as well as many Burman people. [As a result], indigenous people in Hpa-an District in Ker Ghaw [village tract], Hpah Kloo village tract, Loh Baw village tract, Htee Wah Klay village tract, Tah Kreh village tract, and Thay Maw Koo village tract experience difficulties as the guests [wealthy individuals and companies] are increasing [in number] and even though some of the guests are good, some are not. Therefore now the Karen indigenous people face a problem which is other ethnicities entering into the land that they bought [from the BGF] and staying on it.

The military commanders/administrators [BGF, Karen Peace Force (KPF)⁶ and Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)⁷] are expanding their control over lands that

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the June 25th 2015 official market rate of 1,117 kyat to the US \$1.

⁶ Karen Peace Force was formed in February 1997 after splitting from the KNU/KNLA and surrendering to and signing a ceasefire with the Burmese military government. The KPF controls some administrative areas in Three Pagodas Pass and operates a number of road and river checkpoints in the area of Three Pagodas

are close to the vehicle road [land that was under government control in the past] and are cooperating with business people by leasing the land to agriculture businesses. Then, the business people come and check the land first and if the land seems profitable for their business, they give the money to the land leaser [military commanders/administrators]. They also have a contract [regarding] this payment. The military commanders/administrators agreed that if the land does not make the agriculture business succeed then they cannot get back the land that they leased to the business people. Therefore the places of indigenous people are becoming rubber plantations. A *Thit Ner Moo* [Agarwood]⁸ plantation has now [also] been acquired by business people and the lands [owned by] business people are increasing in several places. Therefore, the indigenous people are faced with the problem that there is no place for grazing their animals (cow and buffalos). As for the vehicle road from Meh Pleh [village] to Meh T'Ree [village], BGF commander Maung Chit Thu⁹ took the responsibility [is the contractor] for it.

There are five townships in Brigade #7, Hpa-an District. In the past, these townships were controlled by the KNU, especially T'Nay Hsah [Nabu] Township, Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township and Lu Pleh [Hlaingbwe] Township, which are close to Thailand. In the past these three townships used to be places where there were a lot of mountains and forests. Moreover, there were many valuable plants such as ironwood trees, teak, and *t'la aw* trees.¹⁰ During the period when the British colonised Burma, more ironwood trees and other trees were replanted and the British also kept the forests preserved efficiently. But when the Karen revolution began, these trees had a good price in Thailand so bosses [businessmen] from Thailand came to buy the ironwood trees in the region of Karen [Kayin] State and then Karen revolutionaries, as well as the Burmese military [Tatmadaw], sold the plants. The price of ironwood trees was very good from 1985 to 2014, so loggers tried to do the logging commercially until they dug out the roots and sold the entire tree.

Pass. Following repeated rejections of Burmese government proposals to reform KPF into the Tatmadaw Border Guard, substantial elements have since reformed in the Tatmadaw Border Guard in 2010 while others remain independent.

⁷ 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.

⁸ *Thit Mway* is the Burmese term for Agarwood. It is also known as *Thit Ner Moo* in Karen, as well as oud, oodh, or agar. Agarwood is a dark resinous heartwood that forms in *Aquilegia* and *Gyrinop* trees, two large evergreens native to Southeast Asia. The entire tree can be used for various purposes, including the trunk and the roots. The tree can be used to produce oil, and can be made into perfume, among other uses. It is a very popular investment among business people in Burma/Myanmar due to its versatility and its high commercial price.

⁹ Maung Chit Thu, commonly referred to as Chit Thu, was the operations commander of Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, now the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, (DKBA) Battalion #999 prior to the DKBA transformation into the Tatmadaw Border Guard Force, which began in September 2010. His role has grown considerably since the transformation, and he is now second in command of Tatmadaw BGF forces, overseeing BGF battalions #1017, #1018, #1019 and #1012 based in Ko Ko, Hpa-an District. Abuses committed by Maung Chit Thu have been cited in previous KHRG reports, including ordering the forcible relocation of villagers from eight villages in Lu Pleh Township in July 2011, while acting as a Border Guard commander, see, "[Pa'an Situation Update: June to August 2011](#)," KHRG, October 2011.

¹⁰ *T'la aw* trees are teak-like trees with large leaves, which are traditionally collected by villagers and used to make thatched shingles for the roofs of houses.

In 2014-2015, [Burma/Myanmar] President Thein Sein constructed a road [supervised by] the BGF and the leader of the BGF, Maung Chit Thu, took the responsibility for [overseeing] the road [construction which will run] from Meh Pleh [village] to Meh T'Ree [village]. President Thein Sein provided a budget of 100 million kyat (US \$89,525.51) per mile of road for Maung Chit Thu, but General Chit Thu only spent 50 million kyat (US \$44,762.75). He took all of the remaining money for his own profit. We also have known that the Meh Pleh River, Meh T'Way River and other rivers need bridges to be constructed [over them]. Therefore General Chit Thu requested a budget of 50 million kyat (US \$44,762.75) for one bridge, but when he constructed the bridge he spent only around 30 million kyat (US \$26,857.65). The BGF constructed a bridge which should have cost 50 million kyat (US \$44,762.75). They only spent 30 million kyat (US \$26,857.65) constructing it, however, which led to the bridge [being of lower quality, so that it will probably only] last ten years instead of 30.

In Meh Pleh Toh region, in the past, there were a lot of valuable plants so people who lived there got fresh air. But now the ironwood trees are gone and other plants are also gone so that region became hot and dry and deforested.

Civilian situation

Civilians claim that during 2014-2015 their anxiety has decreased and they do not have to fear much and do not have to be afraid of landmines when they are grazing their cows and buffalos. [One villager said], *"So the situation is getting better for us but we do not understand the politics. As we are villagers, we can't imagine what will happen in the future."*

In December 1st 2014 there were a lot of donations from Nippon Foundation to the townships. The Japanese donations were rice and education [aid]. The person responsible [for executing the task] distributed a package of rice to individual villagers. Villagers mostly do farming and hill cultivation for a living.

Because the democracy process that is being implemented by President Thein Sein is not complete yet, the human rights situation is not significantly improved. Even though President Thein Sein and his group are saying positive words, the people are still afraid to trust them completely. For our Karen people we do not know anything about how exactly the Burmese leaders will manage and develop the country in the future.

Education

In 2014 Japan [Nippon Foundation] entered into the townships and built schools and offered aid for education. So [in the] village, for the education sector, the Burmese government sent school teachers to the Karen villages but some Karen villagers do not want school teachers from the government. However, if they do not mix [include] local school teachers and government teachers [in the education system], the students cannot continue their education into high school because they do not have high school and college [Karen teachers in the village] so this is causing difficulty. Karen villages in rural areas only have primary school, so after students pass fourth standard¹¹ [and have] to continue into high school, there are only [Burma/Myanmar] government schools for them. Therefore they need the country to improve and peace and freedom so that they can access education better. We do not want to have conflict among ethnicities and we hope there is no more war in the country.

Health Sector

¹¹ A Standard refers to a grade in the Burmese education system. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 4, middle school is Standards 5-8 and high school is Standards 9-10.

In Brigade #7, Hpa-an District, in some villages, we found that the support for the health sector is coming from two sides which are from the Thein Sein government and foreign countries but [in some areas] there is only backpack team [Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT)]. There is no actual hospital [building] so if a disease becomes serious then they refer [patients] to Hpa-an Hospital or send them to a hospital in Thailand. Now, in 2015, BGF Commander [Pah T’Kaw] intends to build one hospital in Ta Kreh [Paingkyon] Township, somewhere at the borderline [between] Thah Leh Htah village [and] Thay Maw Koo village, just for the displaced people who came back from Thailand and have lived there for a while.

Religion

In Brigade #7, Hpa-an District, the main religion is Buddhism and there are two types of Buddhist religion, divided into vegetarian Buddhism and non-vegetarian Buddhism. As for Christianity, there is Baptist Christianity and Anglican Christianity. Currently there is nothing special about human rights issues concerning religions. So for our Karen people the only thing that we need is to have a good understanding of each other as the Burmese majority [government] tries to divide us by the different religions.

Local armed groups

There are five townships in Hpa-an District in Brigade #7 and the situation is not the same in each township. There is the Thein Sein government armed group [Tatmadaw] and the DKBA Kloh Htoo Lah¹² armed group [present] in Lu Pleh [Hlaingbwe] area [while] in the area of T’Nay Hsah [Nabu] Township the armed groups that take the responsibility are Thein Sein government armed group [Tatmadaw], KNU [Karen National Union] armed group, KNU/KNLA-PC [KNU/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council]¹³ and DKBA armed groups. In some areas, the KNU still [has] strict control.

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

- *‘With only our voices, what can we do?’: Land confiscation and local reponse in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- *PRESS RELEASE: ‘With only our voices, what can we do?’: Land confiscation and local reponse in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- “Hpa-an Interview: Saw A---, May 2014,” (May 2015)
- “Hpa-an Interview: U A---, November 2014,” (May 2015)
- “The Asia Highway: Planned Eindu to Kawkareik Town road construction threatens villagers’ livelihoods,” (March 2015)

¹² *Kloh Htoo Lah* is under the command of *Bo* (Officer) Bee and is one of the three current DKBA battalions, the others being Kloh Htoo Wah and Kloh Htoo Baw, that were formed in September 2011 and refused to transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions. Kloh Htoo Baw (Golden Drum) referred to the DKBA before 2011, but was then reconfigured to have the two additional battalions as well. DKBA forces in Hpa-an and Dooplaya districts that refused to transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions began fighting Tatmadaw forces in November 2010 and have been variously referred to as DKBA #907, Kloh Htoo Baw, Golden Drum, and Brigade #5.

¹³ 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 the Tatmadaw Border Guard. See: “[KPC to be outlawed if it rejects BGF](#),” Burma News International, August 30th 2010.

Hpa-an District



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