



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Situation Update

January 28, 2016 / KHRG #15-71-S1

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## Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, January to June 2015

*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Thaton Township, Thaton District between January and June 2015, including ethnic discrimination, land confiscation, education and health care improvements and ongoing concerns, and NGO and UN agencies' activities.*

- *Two hundred fifty acres of Thaw Maw villagers' lands had been previously confiscated in order to establish a tire factory named Factory Number Two. Villagers are now allowed to lease some of those lands for 60,000 kyat (US \$46.11) an acre. Those who were able to lease a plot can now work the land for the next 30 years; however, they are required to plant rubber trees, and give a third of their rubber sheet yields to the factory.*
  - *On June 21<sup>st</sup> 2015, Major Saw Mo Naing from Military Security Affairs (MSA) announced that the schools that are based in T'Maw Lay village tract are strictly prohibited from displaying the Karen national flag and warned that there will be consequences for offenders.*
  - *The Karen Education Department (KED) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have been supporting education in Thaton Township by providing school supplies; however, there are still children who are unable to attend post-primary school because their parents face financial difficulties and food shortages and are thus unable to support their education.*
  - *Burma/Myanmar has built five clinics in Maw Lay T'Maw Daw, Way Raw, Kaw Ler and Neh Hpaw Htaw village tracts but these lack medicines and medical staff and do not yet provide healthcare services for the villagers.*
  - *The NGOs and UN agencies which are implementing community development projects in Thaton Township are World Concern, UNICEF, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), American Refugee Committee (ARC), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Projects include school construction, installation of toilets, construction of water storage facilities, distribution of school supplies and vocational training.*
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## Situation Update | Thaton Township, Thaton District (January to June 2015)

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in July 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.<sup>1</sup> This report was received along with other information from Thaton District, including three interviews and 238 photographs.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains community members in southeastern 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.

<sup>2</sup> In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeastern Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received

## Township location

The KNU [Karen National Union], also known as mother organisation,<sup>3</sup> set up our district for us and it is located in Mon State and it is linked to Kyeh Htoh [Kyaikto] Township, Bilin Township, and Hpa-an Township. There are 13 village tracts in our Thaton Township and 72 villages are based in there. Each village tract has its own village head. Moreover, the organisation [KNU] and other [sub] departments [of the KNU, as well as NGOs] also have their own activities, each in their way [independently of each other]. As the political situation has changed, [KNU] workers from township, district and headquarters [level] gathered together and went to the villages to have fellowship [build their relationship] with the villagers. [The relationship between KNU leaders and the villagers] has been improving. As we know, nowadays there are many challenges regarding Burma government activities. They are active in many ways such as ruling, organising [a governance system], and military activity. It also created problems for us [villagers] because they [Burma/Myanmar government] have many different activities.

## Education situation

There are three kinds of schools which form the education [system] in Thaton Township.

- (1) Burma government schools;
- (2) villager-KNU joint schools;<sup>4</sup>
- (3) religious schools.

Since the ceasefire<sup>5</sup> took place, the education situation has been improving a little. In our township, UNICEF [The United Nations Children's Fund] entered to provide support for the students, [distributing supplies] such as bags and notebooks as needed.

The Karen Education Department (KED)<sup>6</sup> from the KNU also provided support to the students, as well as many [different] kinds of materials for the schools. We could say that the quality of education is getting better because the ceasefire took place. [Some of] the students who were not able to [receive] support from their parents for further study have now [begun getting] themselves ready for continuing their education [as they are hopeful that someone will soon be able to support them].

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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.

<sup>3</sup> Because the KNU has been active for many decades in southeast Burma/Myanmar, it is common for Karen people to refer to it as the "mother organisation," but this does not specifically indicate an affiliation with the KNU on behalf of the speaker.

<sup>4</sup> These joint schools are funded partially by the KNU, who provide the salary for the teachers and the materials for the school and partially by the villagers themselves, who provide the food for the teachers.

<sup>5</sup> The KHRG community member is referring to the preliminary ceasefire agreement that was signed by the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [\*Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire\*](#), KHRG, May 2014. On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see "[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#)," Reuters, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The Karen National Union's Education Department. The main goals of the KED are to provide education, as well as to preserve Karen language and culture. During the civil war in Burma/Myanmar the KED became the main organisation providing educational services in the KNU controlled areas in southeast Burma/Myanmar. The KED also previously oversaw the educational system in the seven refugee camps along the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border, however in 2009 these activities were restructured under the Karen Refugee Committee – Education Entity (KRCEE). See "[Conflict Erupts over Govt teachers deployed to KNU areas](#)," Karen News, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 and the KRCEE website: "[About](#)," accessed July 21<sup>st</sup> 2015.

There are two kinds of teachers in Thaton Township, [which] are Burma government teachers and the teachers who are supported by the villagers [and the KED]. The teachers who are supported by the villagers [and the KED] are given 7,000 baht (US \$192.71)<sup>7</sup> by the KED for each year, as well as the uniforms. The KED has decided to build a Kawthoolei headquarters high school in Thaton Township.

There are many weaknesses to the education [system] in the [Thaton Township] area because students' parents do not have enough [food and money] to support their children to go to school; therefore, they have many problems. We know that many children had passed primary school [and] after that, some of their parents could not support them to continue their schooling. We have seen that in terms of education, many children have very little interest [in gaining education].

### **Healthcare situation**

In terms of healthcare in Thaton Township, the quality of healthcare is still weak [low] because there is not enough treatment. The KNU sent the Backpack Health Worker Team into Thaton Township and [they are] based in T'Rwa Hkee village tract but the quality of their work has not [been] strong enough [to improve the overall healthcare situation in the township] yet.

The Burma government has built clinics in five villages in Thaton Township, but they only built [the physical building for each] clinic. They built the clinics in Maw Lay village tract, P'Nweh Klay village; it was set up by the Burma government in there. [The other clinics were built in] T'Maw Daw village tract, T'Maw Daw village; Way Raw village tract, Way Raw village; Kaw Ler village tract, Kaw Ler village; Neh Hpaw Htaw village tract, Wa Poo village. In total these are all the five clinics in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township. They [the Burma/Myanmar government] just declared the building of the clinics under their name [so they can claim they have worked for the development of the villages]. We know this as they have not yet [provided] enough medics, nurses and medicines. If you question the villagers [living] in there, [near] the clinics that they had built, they only say that those are not clinics [since they are never open for patients].

As for NGOs, we know that UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] already built a clinic in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township. They established it in T'Rweh Hkee village tract in the lower part of Naw K'Toh village but when they provided mosquito nets and other materials I saw only a few medics in there. We did not see [whether] they provided medicines in there or not. This organisation came through [permission from] the [Burma/Myanmar] government and are working together with the government staff. We can say that in terms of healthcare, the clinics have already been built in there, but there are no leaders [people] to support [provide] the medicine and health workers [for providing treatment to the patients]. If the villagers are not able to treat the patients who got a serious disease, they send them to the town [hospital].

In terms of healthcare, the ailments that usually occur in the area are malaria, fever, stomach ache, diarrhoea, arm joint pain, leg joint pain, itchy skin, cough, and malnutrition. The [Burma/Myanmar] government set up a clinic in some villages but they [the Burma/Myanmar government] did not do their work properly. With regard to healthcare, we have seen many weaknesses.

### **The active NGOs**

The NGOs which came to be active [conduct development projects] in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township are World Concern and UNDP [United Nations Development Programme]. [They] built schools, toilets, and water storage [pools] in our areas. UNICEF provided bags, notebooks, and pencils to the students. ARC - American Refugee Committee built bridges for the students in order for them to travel to school more easily, [instead of] crossing the rivers. They also help the

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<sup>7</sup> All conversion estimates for the Thai baht in this report are based on the January 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 official market rate of 36.32 baht to the US \$1.

villagers [with respect to] animal husbandry and agriculture. The MRC<sup>8</sup> and UNHCR came to conduct training such as vocational training and Life Skill Awareness Training in the area. Mya Sein Young [local development organisation] [which is funded by] the Burma government also came to [conduct] village [development] projects in our area.



The first photo above was taken on March 16<sup>th</sup> 2015 in the lower part of Naw K'Toh village, T'Rweh Kee village tract, Thaton Township, Thaton District. It shows the clinic that was built by the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They had also distributed mosquito nets to villagers, reaching almost every family. The second photo was taken on May 26<sup>th</sup> 2015 in the upper part of Naw Ka Bo village, Ta Ma Daw village tract. It shows the bridge which the American Refugee Committee (ARC) constructed to enable the students in the area to go to school in other villages with greater ease. [Photos: KHRG]

### **Government troop situation**

The Burma government troops that have situated their battalion headquarters in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township are LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #1 based in Nya T'Weh [village], LIB [Battalion] #118 [based] in Thatoon Myo Thit [Town], LIB [Battalion] #9 [based] in Win Pa [village], LIB [Battalion] #3 [based] Tan Ta Hka Kyo [village], IB [Infantry Battalion] #8 [based] in section 8 of Bilin [Town], LIB [Battalion] #24 [based] in Du Yin Hseik [village], training area number 9 [based in] A' Lan Ta Ya [area], Artillery #314 based in in Zi Wan Nauk Ka Zaing [village]; Artillery #402 [based] in Noh Pa Htaung [village], Artillery #202 [based in] Thatoon Myo Thit; LIB #206, [which is] under the control of LID [Light Infantry Division] #22, [is based] in Kya Pan [village]. Their [following] army camps are located close to our township: P'Nweh Klah army camp and Way Raw army camp.

### **Government troop activity**

The government troop activity [which took place] in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township as we know is that on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, Battalion [Light Infantry Battalion] #202's [under the control of] LID [Light Infantry Division] #22 came with their Lieutenant Colonel U Thi Ha into T'Maw [Daw] village to provide immunisation to the children.

The LIB #202, which is under the control of LID #22, rotated their army camp with LIB #3, which is under the control of LID #44, to P'Nwe Klah army camp on February 13<sup>th</sup> 2015. On April 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 LIB #202 which is under the control of LID #22, came to patrol in T'Maw Daw [village] and went up to Plaw Hpoh village [and then] came back [down] to K'Dee Poo [village]. LIB #3 went to patrol in K'Dee Poo [village] on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2015. The leaders of this battalion are Captain Ye Min Thein and Captain Thet Naung.

<sup>8</sup> KHRG is unsure which organisation "MRC" refers to. It is possible that the community members were referring to NRC – the Norwegian Refugee Council, which is known to be active in other districts in the region.



On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, IB [Infantry Battalion] #8 went to patrol in K'Dee Moo village tract, Kyeh Too Koh village, Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township with 20 soldiers.

LIB #202, [which is] under the control of the LID #22, and *Sa Aa Pa* [Military Affairs Security]<sup>9</sup> Major Saw Mo Naing [announced] on June 21<sup>st</sup> 2015 that the schools which are based in T'Maw Lay village tract were strictly prohibited from putting up the Karen [national] flag in front of the schools. They said if the [Burma/Myanmar] government teachers put up the Karen flag in front of the school they will take serious action [to punish offenders]. Therefore, the government teachers did not permit the school committee to put up the Karen flag in front of the school.

After the [2012] ceasefire has taken place, during 2015, the [Burma/Myanmar] government troops have gradually [increased their] activities in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township.



The above photos were taken on June 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 at Noh Htoh Kay monastery, Maw Lay village tract, Thaton Township, Thaton District. They show Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #202 which is under the control of Light Infantry Division (LID) #22 when they came into T'Maw Daw village in order to provide immunisations to the children in the village. [Photos: KHRG]

### Government economic situation

The [Burma/Myanmar] government businesses in Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township are rubber plantations, cashew plantations, rubber factory, Bilin Sugar Factory, and an alcohol factory. On May 11<sup>th</sup> 2015 one Thaw Maw villager reported [to a KHRG community member] that in the past, Factory Number Two, [which is a] tire factory, had confiscated 250 acres of Thaw Maw villagers' lands and they [the factory workers] have already planted their rubber trees [on it]. Now the market price of rubber is very low [therefore] they resold [leased] one acre of land for 60,000 kyat (US \$46.11)<sup>10</sup> to the villagers and asked them to plant rubber [trees on it]. They also provided [the villagers] a 30 year land grant for use [of the land as instructed by the factory]. After the rubber [trees] are planted and are ready to produce the sap [rubber latex], it [has to be allowed to] harden into rubber sheets. If they [the villagers] get 10 rubber sheets then [they]

<sup>9</sup> Military Security Affairs (MSA), commonly referred to by its Burmese acronym *Sa Ya Pa* (*Sa Aa Pa* in Karen), is the office of the Burma/Myanmar armed forces tasked with intelligence gathering. It was created to replace the Military Intelligence Service, which was disbanded as its chief Khin Nyunt fell from favour in 2004. The office is charged with handling political issues, and had played a central role in monitoring the 2007 popular protests in Burma/Myanmar; coordinating widespread arrests of protesters and their interrogation. Human Rights Watch reported that as part of its interrogation process, MSA uses sleep deprivation and condones the beating and kicking of detainees until they are unconscious, see "[Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma](#)," *Human Rights Watch*, December 2007. As of September 2014, MSA is headed by former army chief of staff Lieutenant General Mya Tun Oo. For further details see, "[Burmese Military Reshuffle Sees New Security Chief Appointed](#)," *The Irrawaddy*, September 2014.

<sup>10</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the January 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 official market rate of 1,301.17 kyat to the US \$1.

have to give three rubber sheets [to the factory, without receiving payment]. Only 15 indigenous people [were able to buy plots] in the lands that were being resold [leased] by the factory, therefore the rest of the land was bought by the rich people [from outside Thaw Maw village].

The government has been constructing [their] caustic soda<sup>11</sup> factory project<sup>12</sup> between Noh Ta Hsguh and Noh Hpa Htaw New villages in Noh Ta Hsugh village tract and it took [stretches over] 407.30 acres of lands. They were building many buildings [in their factory compound] during 2015. We have seen that they started to build a storage [warehouse] for [building] materials, the road inside and outside the compound and many other [buildings] were being [constructed] in the compound.



The above photos were taken on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2015 near Noh Pah Htaw village, Noh Tah Hsuh village tract in Thaton Township, Thaton District. They show the ongoing construction of a caustic soda factory. [Photos: KHRG]

There was a cliff in Maw Lay village tract; [therefore,] the company, which is Pyu Min Tun Company, will conduct the [stone mining] for brick production. They got permission [by] first holding a discussion with the township administrator [joint secretary] there on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2015 [where they just received permission] to examine the cliff. They again came to hold a discussion for a second time with them on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2015. The company owner's name is U Thein Tun and they [his] main office is based in Japan. They came to access the [cliff] on June 11<sup>th</sup> 2015 [with] other co-workers from [the company's] Singapore, Japan and Korea [branches].

<sup>11</sup> Caustic soda, commonly known as lye, is an industrial bi-product of chlorine production usually available in granular form or in ready-made solutions of varying strengths. It has several uses from the manufacturing of paper to use in detergents. It is highly corrosive and can cause severe burns to the skin and eyes.

<sup>12</sup> A previously published KHRG Situation Update describes eleven companies which are involved in the construction of this caustic soda factory. See, "[Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, January to February 2015.](#)" KHRG, October 2015.



The first photo above was taken on June 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 in Maw Daw village, Ta Maw Daw village tract, Thaton Township, Thaton District. It shows Pyu Min Tun Company Manager Min Thu meeting with Thaton Township joint secretary in the house of the village tract leader of Ta Maw Daw village tract. The second photo was taken on June 12<sup>th</sup> 2015 in Noh Htoh Day village, Maw Lay village tract, Thaton Township, Thaton District shows Maw Lay cliff which the Pyu Min Tun Company received permission to examine for potential stone mining. [Photos: KHRG]

### **Villagers' situation**

In Thaton Township the villagers are ordinary people. The main forms of livelihoods for them are cultivation [of hill fields] and farming [of farm land]. At the present time the [soil] quality of the land plantations has decreased, therefore it cannot produce as much food as before. They [the villagers] do not have enough food to feed their families. The numbers of farmers are decreasing. Many farms and plantations have emptied [stopped being used as farms]. Some [land owners] started planting the [cash crop] trees such as rubber [trees] in the farms. In terms of hill farming, there are no more forests, therefore they have to do hill farming in areas with no forests [which is less effective]. The hill farms also cannot produce as much rice as before.

As for animal husbandry, some [villagers] raise a few cows and buffalos: [some] for using them to work [the land] and some for sale. They also raise goats, pigs, and chickens for their income, as well as for their subsistence. They just raise some livestock and do not [have any] big businesses in there. In their [area there are] no jobs for earning a living, therefore some people [villagers] go to find a job at the border [with Thailand] and other countries.

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

- "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)
- "Forced relocation and destruction of villagers' shelters by Burma/Myanmar government officials and police in Hpa-an Township, Thaton District, June 2015," (August 2015)
- "Thaton Interview: Ma A---, July 2015," (August 2015)



# Doo Tha Htoo ( Karen)



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