



News Bulletin

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Arrest, looting and flight: Conflict continues to impact civilians in Dooplaya District

Villagers in eastern Dooplaya District continue to fear for their safety amid ongoing conflict between Tatmadaw and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces in and around their villages. Temporary displacement remains a preferred strategy for many civilians seeking protection from conflict and instability. The ability of villagers to access protection in Thailand, however, has been inconsistent, limiting the options available to civilians who feel that they cannot safely remain in their villages. Incidents reported by residents of Tatmadaw-controlled Waw Lay village, meanwhile, indicate that villagers and Tatmadaw forces continue to distrust each other, and that this mutual suspicion, and abuses that result from it, is a major protection concern for civilians in Waw Lay.

Villagers in eastern Dooplaya District continue to fear for their safety amid ongoing conflict between Tatmadaw and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces in and around their villages.¹ Civilians remain uncertain of when and where fighting will next occur, and of how they will be treated by armed groups as the military situation in their communities remains unstable.



This photo, taken on November 13th 2010, shows a man identified by a Waw Lay resident as a Tatmadaw soldier, dressed in civilian clothes. The man is standing on the Burma side of the Moei River, peering across the river at a group of refugees that had recently fled to Thailand. A second villager queried by KHRG recognised him as a soldier in plain clothes and immediately attempted to hide, telling KHRG that he worried for his safety if he was seen speaking to an unknown villager with a camera. [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers in eastern Dooplaya have been fleeing their communities in small groups, seeking safety in discrete locations as the military context continues to be unstable and difficult to predict, conditions which have persisted since fighting first broke out on November 7th. Civilians seeking safety in Thailand, however, appear to be limited to hiding in dispersed, secret sites in Thailand, or else to temporary locations inside Burma from which they can quickly flee to Thailand should their security situation further deteriorate. Villagers attempting to take refuge in Thailand until they feel they can safely return to their homes have in

¹ For a background on the fighting between Tatmadaw and DKBA forces in eastern Karen State, and a summary of major civilian concerns, see: "Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, November 2010

some cases been prevented from crossing by Thai soldiers stationed along the Moei River.² In other instances villagers have been permitted to stay in designated sites on Thai soil for a brief period until fighting temporarily abates, and then immediately returned by Thai authorities. Several villagers who fled the Waw Lay area recently interviewed by local community members in Thailand's Phop Phra District explained the difficult situation they faced since they could neither return safely to their village nor remain in Thailand.

"If we're asked to go back, we'll have to think about it. I want to wait and see the situation for two or three days and then go back. I don't dare to go back now because if we go back now, the situation isn't stable and we'll have to flee again. But if we're forced to go out from here, we'll have to move around. I don't know where we should go, but we'll have to find a place to hide."

-Saw A--- (male), Waw Lay village, Kawkareik Township (Interviewed in Thailand, November 17th 2010)

"The last time we fled here, we were allowed to stay only one night and we were asked to go back. Then, we stayed in our village one night and had to flee back here again... I don't dare to go back because the SPDC [Tatmadaw] troops are still taking positions in our village. I don't know how many SPDC soldiers, but there are many. I can't count them. I really don't dare go back, but the last time we were told by the Thai soldiers 'Pai, Pai, Pai [Go, go, go],' and we had to go back because we're afraid of them and they had guns in their hands. We went back and now you see we've had to come back again. So, there is no safety at all if we go back again [now]."

-Naw B--- (female, 30), Waw Lay village, Kawkareik Township (Interviewed in Thailand, November 17th 2010)

The most recent example illustrating the instability of the present situation, and that temporary displacement remains a preferred strategy for many civilians seeking protection from conflict and instability, occurred on November 23rd 2010 in Waw Lay village. Local sources say that Tatmadaw soldiers began warning villagers that they were expecting an attack by an armed Karen group that day, and that if an attack occurred they would respond with shelling. Afraid of being caught in the fighting, at approximately 3 pm residents of Waw Lay began fleeing the village, with some heading for their field huts outside of the village and others crossing the Moei River into Thailand. A villager who spoke with KHRG said that by 5:30 pm nearly the entire population of Waw Lay, estimated at 3,000 inhabitants, had fled the village. Notably, while KHRG interviewed two villagers that had fled to Thailand, no major influx was noted by Thai residents, suggesting that refugees were arriving quietly and staying in hiding, or were opting to remain in Burma but staying outside of Waw Lay village proper.

"I'm not sure how many people and how many households there are in Waw Lay village, but the village head told me before that there were more than 400 households and more than 3,000 villagers in the village. Yesterday [on November 23rd 2010] at around 3 pm, villagers started fleeing out of the village. I also fled to the Thai side and later, at around 5:30 pm, I returned to my village. When I arrived back in the village I only saw a few people; I guess there were only 20 to 30 people continuing to stay in the village."

- Saw F--- (male), Waw Lay Village, Kawkareik Township (November 24th 2010)

On this particular occasion, some of the villagers fleeing Waw Lay were permitted to enter Thailand. At 8:40 am the next day, on November 24th, a resident of Waw Lay said that many of those who had fled were returning to their homes, although it is not clear if and under what circumstances villagers who had sought refuge in Thailand were returning. Another villager that spoke with KHRG on November 25th confirmed that most villagers had returned, but that many

² For one recent example, see: "Civilians at risk from continued SPDC-DKBA conflict in Dooplaya District," KHRG, November 2010

were not sleeping in the village, preferring to spend nights at safer alternate locations, including at discrete sites in Thailand.

Difficulties accessing protection in Thailand on previous occasions, however, have led to other groups of refugees staying at different locations on the Burma side of the Moei River, which forms the border between Tak Province and Dooplaya District. On the night of November 22nd 2010, for example, groups of refugees were gathering in two makeshift sites, near L--- and T--- villages, and were without food or shelter. According to community members organising support for them, on the night of November 22nd the group in L--- numbered 294 persons from 72 families and the group in T--- around 160, from 40 families. These families had previously sought refuge in Thailand and been told to return to Burma, but cannot safely return home.

Update on the situation inside Waw Lay village

According to local sources, the Tatmadaw is now in control of Waw Lay village, which was previously controlled by DKBA forces and the former home of Na Kha Mway, the commander of sections of the DKBA that have been engaged in conflict with the Tatmadaw since November 7th 2010.³ The Free Burma Rangers have reported that Tatmadaw forces occupying Waw Lay and the nearby camp of Htee Nyah Lih are under the command of Military Operations Command (MOC) #8 Tactical Operations Command (TOC)⁴ #3 commander Htay Aung and Infantry Battalion (IB) #97 deputy commander Aung Myo.⁵ TOC #3 is comprised of IB #97, Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #404 and LIB #409, which have an estimated combined troop strength of 400-500 men, and are currently active in eastern Dooplaya; IB #97 is normally deployed to locations along the Thai-Burma border to the northeast of Sakanthit (see map).

Residents of Waw Lay village have fled on a number of occasions; many have remained outside the village since initial flight on November 8th and 9th, while others have returned for differing lengths of time, to monitor fields, secure belongings or attempt to resume regular in spite of difficult conditions. Waw Lay villagers that have spoken with KHRG have indicated that villagers and Tatmadaw units active in the village view each other with suspicion; villagers have expressed distrust of the Tatmadaw, and concern that they will be mistreated by soldiers, particularly if they are suspected of supporting the DKBA or Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Villagers have cited specific incidents as confirming their views that they cannot trust Tatmadaw forces, and that the presence of Tatmadaw soldiers in their village is a threat to civilians.

On November 23rd, for example, most residents of Waw Lay had heeded the Tatmadaw warning about potential conflict and temporarily abandoned their homes. Saw G---, however, remained in the village in order to prevent lumber stored at his home from being damaged or destroyed if fighting occurred. A villager that spoke with Saw G--- told KHRG that he later described witnessing Tatmadaw soldiers entering and searching empty homes belonging to villagers while transporting the lumber by tractor to his field hut. Later, at 5:30 pm, Saw G--- was returning from moving the first load of lumber to his field hut; he was stopped by a group of approximately 20 Tatmadaw troops and ordered to come to a monastery in Waw Lay at 6 pm, where he was to help the soldiers transport things on his tractor. Aware that Tatmadaw troops were occupying

³ For details on fighting in Waw Lay approximately one week ago, see: "Civilians at risk from continued SPDC-DKBA conflict in Dooplaya District," KHRG, November 2010; "Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, November 2010.

⁴ A Tatmadaw Military Operations Command (MOC) typically consists of ten battalions. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

⁵ "School girl killed, villagers wounded and hundreds displaced as the Burma Army continues attacks in Central Karen State," Free Burma Rangers (FBR), November 20th 2010. This information has been corroborated by a source in the KNLA, who did not wish to be identified.

the monastery, but afraid of what might happen to him if he did not comply, Saw G--- reported to the monastery. He was then sent to a location in H---, a neighbourhood of Waw Lay, where Tatmadaw soldiers loaded a large number of unidentified items in plastic bags and rice sacks on his tractor; he was then instructed to drive the items back to the Tatmadaw camp at the monastery. After spending two hours making two such trips, Saw G--- was allowed to go home, but was unable to finish removing the lumber from his home. Based on the searches of empty villagers' homes he had witnessed earlier, the source who spoke with Saw G--- said that he believed that the items he had been asked to transport were belongings Tatmadaw soldiers had taken from villagers' homes.

Just two days prior to this incident on the morning of November 21st, residents of Waw Lay told KHRG that Tatmadaw soldiers broke into the house of a local resident and confiscated food and tools that they suspected belonged to the DKBA. The house owner, Naw D---, was sleeping at her field hut outside of the village⁶ when the soldiers broke down the locked door of her home and took 744 tins of milk, 50 kilograms (110 lb.) of chillies, and 40 machetes. Three water storage containers and lumber was also reportedly taken from under Naw D---'s house, although witnesses did not see whether these materials were taken by the soldiers or by other villagers.

In the quote below, a resident of Waw Lay, who spoke to KHRG just one day after Naw D---'s house was broken into, suggests that such incidents foster distrust between the local community and Tatmadaw soldiers, and prevent villagers from feeling safe to remain in their homes while Tatmadaw forces are in control of the area. Such comments are consistent with statements made by a number of other villagers from Dooplaya interviewed by KHRG in the last two weeks, who have indicated that villagers' ability to remain safely in their homes is undermined not only by direct conflict between armed actors, but also by the unstable and evolving military context in their communities.⁷

“The SPDC Army [Tatmadaw] wants villagers to come back and stay in the village [Waw Lay] so they keep their voices very sweet when they talk to the villagers. But they go into houses when the owners have left and take [villagers'] property, so villagers don't trust them. Villagers who come back and stay in the village have to stay with fear. Some villagers have gone to stay in Thailand. Some villagers sometimes come back secretly to their homes when the SPDC Army is not in the village even though they're staying in Thailand.”

-Naw E--- (female), Waw Lay village, Kawkareik Township (November 22nd 2010)

Residents of Waw Lay have also said that they are viewed with suspicion by Tatmadaw soldiers currently based in their village, and that this situation itself endangers civilians. KHRG has previously reported that villagers in Waw Lay have been placed under tight movement restrictions since Tatmadaw forces gained control of the village, with some residents suspecting that they might be accused of making contact with the DKBA or KNLA if they violated the

⁶ Many villagers keeping farms or plantations in rural Karen State build such huts to be able to stay near their fields or plantations during important points in the agricultural cycle, to protect crops from wild animals, and to reduce time spent travelling between their homes and their farms. While villagers in Waw Lay have recently reported restrictions on their ability to do this, they have also reported being able to purchase travel permits. Others have sought to access their fields secretly, risking punishment by Tatmadaw soldiers that catch them without permits. For more on restrictions placed on access to farm fields in the Waw Lay area, see “School closures and movement restrictions: conflict continues to impact civilians in Dooplaya District,” KHRG, November 2010.

⁷ See: “Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts,” KHRG, November 2010, especially the Appendixes.

restrictions.⁸ KHRG has also reported civilians in Waw Lay being shot at by Tatmadaw soldiers, presumably because they were suspected to be DKBA soldiers.⁹

Villagers in Waw Lay believe that they are being kept under close surveillance by Tatmadaw forces. According to one resident Tatmadaw soldiers based at Htee Nyah Lih camp, just outside of Waw Lay, patrol the village and villagers' field huts every night. The same source also reported that Tatmadaw troops enter the village during the daytime dressed as villagers. While some out-of-uniform Tatmadaw soldiers can be identified by a holstered sidearm, the villager that spoke with KHRG said that many villagers would not know to look for this and might not notice the presence of Tatmadaw soldiers in the village during the day. While conducting interviews on November 13th 2010 on the Thai side of Waw Lay, another resident pointed out a villager on the opposite riverbank whom he told KHRG he recognised as a Tatmadaw soldier who had removed his uniform. A second villager, questioned about the matter separately, confirmed that the man was an out-of-uniform Tatmadaw soldier. The villager then ran away from the riverbank to hide. When asked later why he hid, he said he was afraid of what would happen to him if the Tatmadaw soldier saw him speaking to an unknown villager with a camera.

Villagers in Waw Lay also continue to worry about how they will be treated by Tatmadaw forces if they are suspected of having links to the DKBA or KNLA. On November 21st, the same day that Naw D---'s house was raided for suspected DKBA provisions, another resident of Waw Lay, Saw C---, attempted to flee from uniformed Tatmadaw soldiers who had unexpectedly entered the village during the daytime. Saw C--- was wearing a military-style shirt at the time and worried that the troops would think he was a member of the DKBA or KNLA, even though his shirt did not have any badges or insignia. It is common for male villagers both in rural Thailand and Burma to wear military style clothing, particularly camouflage pants and fatigue jackets; they are durable and cheap clothing options and readily available for civilians. Saw C--- could not escape and was arrested; according to a villager close to Saw C---, his mobile phone was confiscated by one of the soldiers while he was being questioned. Saw C--- was later released by the troops, but his phone was not returned to him.

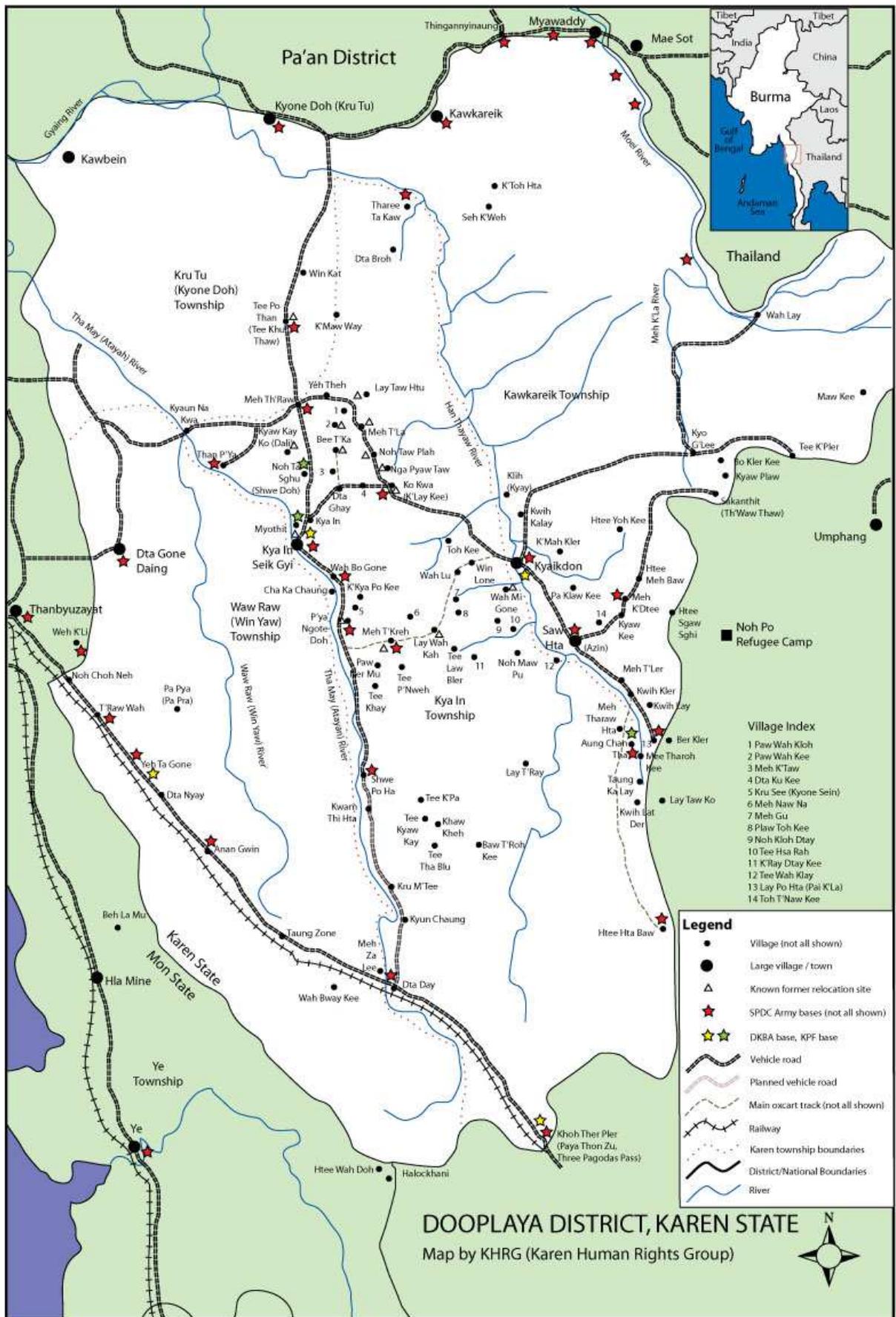
Further reading:

- *School closures and movement restrictions: conflict continues to impact civilians in Dooplaya District (November 2010)*
- *Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts (November 2010)*
- *Civilians at risk from continued SPDC-DKBA conflict in Dooplaya District (November 2010)*
- *DKBA burns village and forces residents to relocate in Pa'an District (June 2010)*
- *SPDC shelling destroys villagers' rubber plantations in Dooplaya District (May 2010)*
- *Cross-border DKBA attack displaces households in Thailand (April 2010)*
- *Joint SPDC/DKBA attacks, recruitment and the impact on villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts (May 2009)*
- *Insecurity amidst the DKBA - KNLA conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts (February 2009)*

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2009* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2008*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrg.org>.

⁸ "School closures and movement restrictions: conflict continues to impact civilians in Dooplaya District," KHRG, November 2010.

⁹ "Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, November 2010.



Karen Districts



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Scale: 1 cm to 22 km
1 in. to 35 miles