



## News Bulletin

August 13, 2011 / KHRG #2011-B24

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### **Village heads negotiate with Tatmadaw, armed groups to forestall human rights threats amid continued conflict in Dooplaya District**

*This bulletin details how six community leaders in Kawkaik Township, Dooplaya District negotiated with both the Tatmadaw and Karen armed groups in an effort to reduce threats to local villagers as conflict escalated in April 2011. Saw Bp---, the headman of T--- village, described how, prior to April, he and other village leaders met and communicated with local personnel from all parties to the conflict in order to maintain relations and prevent misunderstandings between civilians and each armed group. In April, threats to civilians intensified when a Tatmadaw camp was attacked multiple times, and villagers in the area made preparations to flee to more secure locations, with residents of one community opting to hide in the forest at night and only return to their village during daylight. Village leaders continued to engage and negotiate with the Tatmadaw, and raised the threat of civilian displacement in response to Tatmadaw threats to burn villages, to prevent serious human rights abuses until a new Tatmadaw battalion rotated in to the area. This report is based on information provided by Saw Bp--- to a KHRG researcher in May 2011.*

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In May 2011 Saw Bp---, the headman of T--- village, Kawkaik Township described to a KHRG researcher how he and the leaders of five nearby communities engaged and negotiated with soldiers of the Tatmadaw and Karen armed groups in order to protect civilians in their communities from abuse, and enable them remain in their homes as conflict escalated during April 2011.

According to Saw Bp---, several armed groups have been active around T---, K---, M---, G---, Gh---, and Gk--- villages for more than a decade. The Tatmadaw and the Karen Peace Force (KPF) have maintained camps in Gk--- and conducted operations in the area since 1997.<sup>1</sup> Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) forces lived and operated in the area before entering into open conflict with the Tatmadaw in November 2010, and have since remained active. Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forces also regularly travel through the hills near these communities. Saw Bp--- said that residents were accustomed to the presence of these groups, but that the situation for villagers has become less secure since late 2010, when local DKBA units decided not to transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions.<sup>2</sup> A DKBA force led by

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<sup>1</sup> According to the KHRG researcher who collected this information, the KPF soldiers based in Gk--- were transformed into a Tatmadaw Border Guard battalion in 2010, and remain based in Gk---.

<sup>2</sup> DKBA forces in Dooplaya District that refused to transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions, and have been fighting Tatmadaw forces since November 7th 2010, have been variously referred to as DKBA #907, *Klo Htoo Baw* [Golden Drum], and Brigade #5. Each of these terms refers to different configurations of DKBA units commanded by Na Kha Mway. Na Kha Mway left the KNU/KNLA in 1997 and became the commander of DKBA Battalion #907; in 2007 he was promoted to head four DKBA battalions (#901, #906, #907 and a security battalion) as the commander of the *Klo Htoo Baw* [Golden Drum] Tactical Command. In May 2009 this unit was reconfigured as DKBA Brigade #5, with Na Kha Mway commanding Battalions #901, 905, 906, 907 and 909; Brigade #5 was active in the Kya-In Seik Kyi, Kawkaik and Myawaddy areas of Dooplaya and Pa'an districts. For more on the

Column Commander S--- remained active in and around these six communities in late 2010 and early 2011; starting in March 2011, this unit established a camp near T--- village, which is just 35 minutes on foot or 10 minutes by motorcycle from Gk---.

Saw Bp--- reported that the relationship between local villagers and the Tatmadaw soldiers based in Gk--- changed after the column of DKBA soldiers set up their camp near his village. He stated that Tatmadaw soldiers no longer spoke with villagers they encountered during patrols, and that the battalion's officers ordered the heads of the six villages to report to their camp each day to provide information about DKBA and KNLA activity in the area.

Saw Bp--- told KHRG's researcher that he and the other village leaders went to meet with the DKBA and KNLA soldiers to seek permission to report information about those groups' activities to the Tatmadaw; he said that the village heads thought they would '*gka htee dta gkaw dta keh [face a problem]*' if they provided information about the DKBA and KNLA without first receiving their permission. Emphasising the importance of this concern, Saw Bp--- also described to KHRG's researcher examples of earlier instances in which he had felt threatened by local KNLA and DKBA soldiers for providing, or not providing, information regarding the activities of different armed groups.<sup>3</sup> According to Saw Bp---, when he met with DKBA and KNLA officers in March 2011, he stressed the dangers that village heads might face from the Tatmadaw if they did not cooperate and provide truthful information:

*"We don't dare to lie to the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw] that the DKBA and KNLA armies [soldiers] aren't active around our villages, because if the SPDC Army finds out that we've lied to them we don't know how they'll make trouble for us. In the past, three or four years ago, we've seen the SPDC Army punch, torture and put a village head in jail after they found out that he told a lie."*

Saw Bp--- reported that the DKBA and KNLA subsequently granted him permission to provide accurate information about their activities to the Tatmadaw battalion based in Gk---, which he did once per day as instructed. Saw Bp--- told KHRG's researcher that he provided details on where the different groups were operating, and warned the Tatmadaw that they should be alert because they were likely to face attacks from the DKBA and KNLA.

In April 2011, the Tatmadaw camp at Gk--- was attacked three times by DKBA and KNLA forces. According to Saw Bp---, the attacks prompted residents of Gk--- to collect and hide their belongings in the forest outside of the village in case they had to flee on short notice; most villagers also slept outside of the village and only returned to their homes during the day. Saw Bp--- stated that Tatmadaw officers became angry after the third attack on their camp and instructed each of the local village heads to come individually to meet with them at Gk---. Prior to his meeting with the Tatmadaw, Saw Bp--- met again with officers of the DKBA and KNLA units active in the area, to discuss what information he had their permission to provide to the Tatmadaw. E---, a DKBA Company Commander, told Saw Bp--- to report the following statement to the Tatmadaw: '*My name is E---. My unit and the KNLA soldiers joined hands and went to attack them [the Tatmadaw]. I'll continue attacking them in the future.*'

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origins of the current conflict and the transformation of DKBA troops into Border Guard battalions, see: "Protection concerns expressed by civilians amidst conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts," KHRG, November 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Saw Bp--- described how between 2008 and 2009 local KNLA, and then DKBA, personnel became angry with him for sharing, and then failing to share, information about the KNLA. Saw Bp--- said that fellow village leaders informed him that a KNLA soldier had made public statements suggesting that he supported the Tatmadaw because he had confirmed, when questioned by Tatmadaw soldiers, that KNLA troops had passed through his village; Saw Bp--- understood this to be a threat, and feared for his safety. Around the same time, Saw Bp--- said DKBA soldiers also confronted him for failing to report that a group of KNLA soldiers was passing through the area. Saw Bp--- went into hiding for two months when these incidents occurred; he added that his relatives were able to contact senior KNU officials to resolve the misunderstanding with the KNLA soldier, and that he occasionally paid bribes to maintain his relationship with DKBA personnel.

Saw Bp--- told KHRG that he repeated E---'s statement when he went to Gk--- to meet with the Tatmadaw as ordered, and that the Tatmadaw threatened to burn his village, T---, before burning other villages in the area because the DKBA force was based near T---. Saw Bp--- said he repeatedly apologised and requested that the soldiers not burn T---, and that the officer then threatened to burn every house in the village except for Saw Bp---'s. According to Saw Bp---, he then responded that he might have to flee the area – implying an end to his cooperation with the Tatmadaw – if the situation became too dangerous for civilians:

*"It isn't fair if you leave my house and burn all the other houses in my village. If you burn my village, burn every house in my village. Don't leave any remaining. You can see now that I come to meet you once per day, because I dare [feel safe] to come. If you don't see me any more, you'll know that I don't dare [feel safe] to come any more and meet you, and that I've run away."*

Saw Bp--- said that the Tatmadaw officers did not say anything in response to his statement. After his meeting with the Tatmadaw, he met the head of Gk--- village, who told him that the Tatmadaw officers had also threatened to burn Gk--- before burning other villages in the area, because the camp at Gk--- village had been attacked three times that month.<sup>4</sup>

According to Saw Bp---, the unit of Tatmadaw soldiers that threatened to burn T---, Gk--- and other villages in the area was replaced by a new Tatmadaw unit at the end of April 2011. When Saw Bp--- spoke with KHRG in May, the new unit based at Gk--- had not been attacked by the DKBA or KNLA, and residents of Gk--- had returned to sleeping in their homes instead of outside the village. Villagers and village leaders remained worried, however, about the previous threats to burn their villages. Saw Bp--- said that the communities were monitoring the situation and preparing as best they could for further fighting in the area, and possible displacement: Saw Bp--- himself had stored extra rice in a metal drum buried in the forest, and said that other villagers had hidden food and personal possessions at secret locations outside their villages, in case they had to flee renewed human rights or security threats.

Further background on the current situation in Dooplaya District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- *Displacement Monitoring: Regular updates on protection concerns for villagers in Dooplaya and Pa'an districts and adjacent areas in Thailand* (August 2011)
- *Dooplaya Interview: U Sa---*, July 2011 (July 2011)
- *Tatmadaw shelling kills one child, injures another in Mae T'Ler village* (June 2011)
- *Three villagers killed, eight injured during fighting in Kyaikdon area* (May 2011)
- *Human rights abuses and obstacles to protection: Conditions for civilians amidst ongoing conflict in Dooplaya and Pa'an Districts* (January 2011)
- *Threats to human rights, obstacles to protection: Conditions for civilians seeking refuge in Phop Phra District, Thailand* (November 2010)

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<sup>4</sup> Saw Bp--- added that Tatmadaw soldiers based at Gk--- usually met with local village heads individually or in smaller groups, but that the village leaders regularly communicated amongst themselves to share information and remain aware of threats to residents of their communities.

