



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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**Tatmadaw soldiers fire at four villagers carrying rice,
order forced labour in Toungoo District**

During June 2012, Tatmadaw LID #66 re-supplied troops situated in front-line camps in Toungoo District. On the same day that supplies were sent, and local villagers were ordered to transport them, LIB #1 soldiers based at Th'Ay Hta fired at four villagers carrying rice to their village after purchasing it in the larger town of Klay Soh Kee. In the days directly after this incident, a community member described increased military activity in the area, including a Tatmadaw helicopter patrol and skirmishing between KNLA and Tatmadaw troops.

At the beginning of June 2012, Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #1, under Light Infantry Division (LID) #66 and Commander Win Boh Shein,¹ replaced LIB #5 stationed at Th'Ay Hta camp in Tantabin Township, Toungoo District. On June 23rd, Tatmadaw LID #66 soldiers sent 50,000 sacks of rice to the Kler La area, and demanded Kler La villagers in possession of trucks to transport the rice sacks to front line camps for them.

On the same day, at approximately 10:00 am, soldiers from LIB #1 fired at four villagers crossing the Toungoo - Mawchi vehicle road in a forested area near Wa Baw Day village. Two of the villagers were from D---village, while the other two were from H---village.

According to the community member based in the area who provided this information, these four villagers were travelling back from Klay Soh Kee² in order to buy rice and

¹ For recent information on LID #66 operations in the Kler La area, see "Toungoo Situation Update: Tantabin Township," KHRG, May 2012.

² Klay Soh Kee is the Karen-language name for a larger village in the area, also known as Yay Tho Lay in Burmese.

transport it back to their homes.³ When they saw the Tatmadaw soldiers, they dropped their rice and fled. None of the four villagers were injured at this time.⁴

The vehicle road runs through mountainous terrain and, as villagers travel back from Klay Soh Kee village carrying rice and other staples, they have to travel along a steep path to cross the road at Wa Baw Day. The place where the villagers were fired at is heavily-forested and approximately two hours on foot from Htee Hsar Per village.

After fleeing the Tatmadaw soldiers fire, the four villagers left their rice sacks on the ground for the whole day during which time there was heavy rainfall. On the following day, June 24th, when the villagers went back to retrieve their rice sacks, they found that the rice had gotten wet and was not usable anymore.

According to the community member who described this incident, the place where the LIB # 1 soldiers fired at the villagers is where villagers normally cross back and forth to transport goods to their villages, and it is near to the Tatmadaw camp at Wa Baw Day which has been abandoned since 2008.⁵The camps at Wa Baw Day, and nearby Wa Soh, were both abandoned in 2008 and Tatmadaw soldiers had not come to the Wa Baw Day area or used this portion of the vehicle roads since then, which is why the villagers were accustomed to using the path to cross the road at this point. Th' Ay Hta camp, where LIB #5 was previously and LIB #1 are currently based, is located southwest of the abandoned camps at Wa Baw Day and Wa Soh.

³The soil quality and terrain in much of Toungoo District supports only limited paddy farming and the loss of a year's crop can have devastating consequences for villagers' long-term food-security. For these reasons, most households are dependent on income generated from various plantation crops, such as betelnut, cardamom, and durian, to buy household staples, such as rice, in larger towns. For additional information on attacks on villagers' cardamom plantations in Toungoo District, see "Attacks, forced labour and restrictions in Toungoo District," KHRG, July 2008; see also, "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

⁴The shooting at four villagers on June 23rd 2012 by Tatmadaw soldiers was also reported by the Karen Information Centre in "Than daung villagers under fire despite ceasefire," KIC, July 6th 2012.

⁵In early 2003, the Tatmadaw established a number of permanent army camps along the road at Wa Baw Day, Kler Htoo Day, and Ler Wah Mu Thwa Koh to give them a better foothold in the region, see "Photo Set 2005-A: Forced Labour," KHRG, May 2005. Villagers in the area subsequently experienced sustained attacks during the 2005 – 2008 Northern Offensive, see for example: "Provoking Displacement in Toungoo District: Forced labour, restrictions and attacks," KHRG, May 2007. KHRG dates the end of the Northern Offensive to 2008, when many front line Tatmadaw camps were abandoned and the frequency of multi-battalion attacks decreased, although attacks were nonetheless ongoing in 2011; see "Joint Tatmadaw patrol burns field huts and seed stores, displaces six villages in Toungoo District," KHRG, June 2011.

According to another community member, the ceasefire agreement between the Tatmadaw and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁶ limits soldiers from patrolling no further than 150 yards from vehicle roads in areas under their respective control.⁷ The Tatmadaw camp at Wa Baw Day has been abandoned for approximately four years, and the area had been regularly used by villagers as a necessary route to transport rice to their villages.

Villagers in this area have experienced decades of armed conflict, attacks against villages, and the arbitrary arrest and summary execution of villagers encountered by patrols.⁸ Many are accustomed to fleeing and seeking to avoid Tatmadaw patrols as a means of protecting themselves from abuse.⁹ Underscoring the risks civilians in areas of long-standing conflict continue to face even during the current ceasefire as they attempt to support their livelihoods, Tatmadaw soldiers did not make any attempt to verify whether the villagers who fled from them were legitimate military targets before firing.

In the days immediately after this incident, increased military activity was described by the community member in the area. On June 24th, a Tatmadaw helicopter surveyed the area around Pee Muh Hkoh in Than Daung Township, and, on June 27th, KNLA soldiers, in groups of five or six, patrolled around the Naw Soh area. While patrolling, they encountered some Tatmadaw soldiers and fighting broke out at that time.¹⁰

Currently, there are seven Tatmadaw units active in both Than Daung and Tantabin townships in Toungoo District. They are: IBs #4, #11 and #80, and LIBs #1, #5, #10, and #108. These seven battalions have been based in Toungoo District since January 2012.

⁶The January 12th 2012 meeting in Pa'an Town between representatives of the Government of Myanmar and the Karen National Union (KNU) resulted in a preliminary ceasefire between the parties and an agreement to negotiate further; see initial statement issued by KNU on January 13th 2012, the day after a 19-member KNU delegation, which included military representatives from all KNLA Brigades except 5th Brigade, attended initial ceasefire talks in the Zwegapin Hotel in Pa'an Town: Karen National Union, *Statement on the Initial Agreement between KNU and Burmese Government*, January 13th 2012; for information on the proposed further negotiations, see "Govt, KNU sign ceasefire," *Myanmar Times*, January 16th – 22nd 2012; "KNU, Govt Reach Historic Agreement," *The Irrawaddy*, January 12th 2012.

⁷ For additional information on movement restrictions placed on soldiers in the post-January 2012 ceasefire period, see "Toungoo Situation Update: Tantabin Township, January to March 2012," KHRG, May 2012.

⁸ See "Attacks, forced labour and restrictions in Toungoo District," KHRG, July 2008; see also "Forced labour and extortion in Pa'an District," KHRG August 2008; see also "Recent Attacks on Villages in Southeastern Toungoo District Send Thousands Fleeing into the Forests and to Thailand," KHRG, March 2006.

⁹ See *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, KHRG, November 2008, especially pp. 132-138.

¹⁰ According to the Karen Information Centre (KIC) fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA on June 27th 2012, four days after the June 23rd shooting of villagers described above, see "Thandaung villagers under fire despite ceasefire," KIC, June 27th 2012.

In July 2012, the units themselves did not change but they rotated some of the camp locations of where they were based.

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

- “Toungoo Situation Update: Tantabin Township, January to March 2012,” (May 2012)
- “Toungoo Situation Update: Received in November 2011,” (April 2012)
- “Toungoo Interview: Saw E---, September 2011,” (April 2012)
- “Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw L---, December 2011,” (April 2012)
- “Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw M---, December 2011,” (March 2012)
- “Ongoing forced labour and movement restrictions in Toungoo District,” (March 2012)
- “Incident Report: Forced labour and killing in Toungoo District, July 2011,” (March 2012)

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District

