



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Situation Update**

October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019 / KHRG # 19-15-S1

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**Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: UXO and landmine contamination, ethnic tensions, physical abuse by a KNLA soldier and extortion by local Myanmar government officials in Ler Doh Soe, Ler Mu Lah and K'Ser Doh townships, November 2018 to January 2019**

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Ler Doh Soe, Ler Mu Lah and K'Ser Doh townships, Mergui-Tavoy District from November 2018 to January 2019. They include UXO contamination as a result of Tatmadaw<sup>1</sup> live fire exercises in Ler Muh Lah Township, as well as tensions between ethnic groups, a landmine incident and a case of physical violence by a Karen National Liberation Army [KNLA]<sup>2</sup> soldier in Ler Doh Soe Township. In Ler Mu Lah Township, logging activities continue to have detrimental impacts on the environment, and the allocation of land as reserved forest by the Myanmar government threatens the livelihoods of local villagers. Extortion from local Myanmar government officials also remains a problem in K'Ser Doh Township.<sup>3</sup>*

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**UXO contamination as a result of Tatmadaw activities in Ler Mu Lah Township**

In 2001, the Tatmadaw Higher Military Training School (Ta Ta Ka) #12, led by General Oo Aung Thein Oo, confiscated more than 600 acres of lands belonging to 49 villagers in P'So Oo village, P'Law village tract, Ler Mu Lah Township to build a training camp. Over the reporting period, Tatmadaw soldiers fired guns and mortars in the area for training purposes. They left unexploded grenades on villagers' plantations. When the local people found these grenades, they reported the incident to the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC). However, a member of the JMC responded that these were KNLA hand grenades, to which the villagers responded: "If these are KNLA hand grenades, why did we not see them when we first cleared the land and planted betel nut trees?" Therefore, the villagers reported this case to the local Myanmar government authorities. On January 25<sup>th</sup> 2019, Tatmadaw soldiers came back and destroyed the unexploded hand grenades.

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<sup>1</sup> Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

<sup>2</sup> The KNLA is the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU).

<sup>3</sup> The present document is based on information received on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions on the ground. The names of the victims, their photos and the exact locations are censored for security reasons.



These photos were taken in January 2019 in Ler Mu Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. They show the unexploded hand grenades left by the Tatmadaw on local villagers' lands. [Photos: KHRG]

### **Tensions between ethnic groups in Ler Doh Soe Township**

There are three ethnic groups living in the Dawei Hkee area, Ler Doh Soe Township: Karen, Bamar and Mon. On January 21<sup>st</sup> 2019, Karen village leaders and villagers from M--- village reported that they do not know if they should obey the Myanmar government, the Karen National Union or the New Mon State Party. Ten years ago, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) settled in Dawei Hkee. They sold the virgin lands belonging to local Karen people to rich Mon villagers. There are now eight Mon villages in the area. The Mon also formed their own district in the Dawei Hkee area and named it Mon Pyi Thit (New Mon State).

The local Karen villagers dare not go to their plantations because they are close to the Mon areas. They reported the case to the KNU Township leaders, who responded that they could go and work on their plantations. But when they did, one villager stepped on a landmine and lost his leg. The incident happened in 2018, but the local villagers do not remember the exact date. The person who lost his leg did not receive compensation or help from any armed actor.

The presence of the Mon National Liberation Army causes security concerns among the local Karen population. One villager from M--- told KHRG: *"We allow Mon villagers to stay here but we do not want the Mon army to stay here anymore. We want them to go back to their own state."*

### **Physical abuse by a KNLA soldier in Ler Doh Soe Township**

The KNLA Battalion #10, Company #2 is now based in M--- village, Dawei Hkee area, Ler Doh Soe Township to look after the security of the local Karen villagers after their lands were confiscated by the MNLA. Over the reporting period, a KNLA soldier accused a young man of using drugs and beat him. The mother of the victim said: *"I never saw my son using drugs. I cannot accept what this soldier said."* The victim had to go to the hospital because his nose was bleeding. The local villagers do not remember the exact date of the incident.

### **Logging activities in Ler Mu Lah Township**

Villagers reported that logging activities are continuing in the P'Law area, Ler Mu Lah Township. They resulted in environmental damage, such as flooding, landslides, shortages of water during the summer and water pollution. All these created problems for the local population. The logging activities are conducted by four individual businessmen, two Bamar (U San Yut and U Hla Aung) and two Karen (Saw Pah Kheh and his son), in collaboration with local Karen National

Union officials. Therefore, the villagers reported the case to the KNU Township authorities. The people who carry out logging activities said that they are doing it for the development of the local area.

### **People living in a reserved forest facing livelihood difficulties in Ler Mu Lah Township**

Most people in Mergui-Tavoy District are doing plantations, farming and raising domestic animals for their livelihood. They now face problems such as businessmen or companies confiscating their lands, and the Myanmar government allocating lands as reserved forest in their area without consulting with the local population. Seven villages in the P'Law area, Ler Mu Lah Township are located inside a reserved forest, and the local villagers were not given recommendation letters to be able to continue working on their plantations [it is technically forbidden to use lands allocated as reserved forest for agricultural or animal husbandry purposes]. It therefore became difficult for the local people to work and raise their animals, which caused concern and livelihood difficulties for them.

### **Extortion from a local Myanmar government official in K'Ser Doh Township**

Sayar Thaw Thi, a village tract administrator for the Myanmar government, is supposed to help and support the villagers in Kleh Mu Htee village tract, K'Ser Doh Township. A villager from T--- village wanted to renew his household registration document, so he asked the village tract administrator to assist him. Later, Sayar Thaw Thi asked 170,000 kyats (USD 111.27 as of 12/09/2019) from that villager. Similarly, another villager in T--- village had to change her ID card so she asked Sayar Thaw Thi to go with her. The latter asked her to give him 25,000 kyats (USD 16.36 as of 12/09/2019). Both these cases happened in 2018, but KHRG was not able to find out the exact dates. The two villagers gave Sayar Thaw Thi the money he requested, even though these services should be free of charge. There is a lot of corruption among local authorities, but the local villagers dare not report it as they fear that they will be punished and hurt by the authorities.

### **Karen villagers unable to obtain ID cards in K'Ser Doh Township**

The requirements to obtain an ID card at the Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population office (La Wa Ka) in K'Ser Doh Township create difficulties for local villagers. Some were asked to bring school certificates, school recommendation letters, police recommendation letters and recommendation letters from their village tract administrator. Since some villagers never went to school, they could not bring these documents, which prevented them from obtaining an ID card. This can have negative effects on their children's ability to access education, as children of parents who do not have an ID card cannot go to school.

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

- ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Extortion and Land Confiscations in Tanintharyi Township, November 2017 to January 2018"](#), (December 2018)
- ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Tanintharyi Township, November 2017 to March 2018"](#), (September 2018)
- ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: K'Ser Doh Township, June to September 2017"](#), (December 2017)

## About KHRG

Founded in 1992, the Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Myanmar. KHRG trains local people to document and gather evidence of human rights abuses, and publishes this information to project the voices, experiences and perspectives of local communities. More examples of our work can be seen online at [www.khrq.org](http://www.khrq.org).