



Situation Update

August 19th, 2019 / KHRG # 19-24-S2

Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Logging and gold mining activities threatening community livelihoods, land confiscation by the Tatmadaw and landmine contamination in Mone and Shwegyin townships, November 2018 to January 2019

Since 2017, logging and gold mining activities conducted by local KNU leaders and businessmen have had serious impacts on the livelihood of the local population in Mone (Moo) and Shwegyin (Hsaw Htee) townships. In T--- village, Shwegyin Township, land confiscation by the Tatmadaw has resulted in the forced relocation of 48 households in 2002, and the affected villagers are now at risk of losing their lands again. In K--- village, Mone Township, local civilians fear that fighting might resume because the Tatmadaw is confiscating lands and sending more patrols to the area. Landmine contamination remains a problem in Tha Pyay Nyunt village tract, Mone Township, where two local villagers sustained injuries after a landmine exploded in December 2018.¹

The impact of natural resource extraction on community livelihoods

Natural resource extraction continues to have a significant impact on the local people's lives in Nyaunglebin District. Since 2017, according to civilians from H--- village, Maw Keh Tha Per Khoh village tract, Mone Township, some local Karen National Union (KNU)² leaders and businessmen have been collaborating to conduct logging and gold mining activities in Maw Keh Tha Per Hkoh village tract, Mone Township and Meh K'Tee village tract, Shwegyin Township. No prior consultation with the local population was held before implementing these activities, which resulted in environmental damage.

In Meh K'Tee village tract, Shwegyin Township, gold mining activities damaged streams, creating difficulties for the villagers who depend on their water. Before these activities started, some local people engaged in gold panning and used to earn between 10,000 kyats (USD 6.62)³ and 20,000 kyats (USD 13.24) per hour so they could buy food. However, local civilians

¹ The present document is based on information received in March 2019. It was provided by a community member in Nyaunglebin District 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.

² The Karen National Union is the main Karen group opposing the government.

³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 25 July 2019 official market rate of 1,508 kyats to US \$1.

are now barred from entering the gold extraction sites, notably by KNLA soldiers and businessmen. This aims to prevent them from engaging in gold panning and taking photos of the site. Villagers also used to catch fish and frogs to eat during night time. Nowadays, some of the streams have dried up and others have turned brown because of logging and gold mining activities. This makes it really difficult for local people to secure their livelihood and survive.



These two photos were taken on December 13th 2018 in Meh K'Tee village tract, Shwegyin Township, Nyaunglebin District. They show a stream that turned brown because of the pollution caused by gold mining activities. [Photos: KHRG]

Logging has caused deforestation in civilian-populated areas, resulting in droughts. Consequently, villages face more heat waves, which make it difficult to grow crops. This has caused livelihood difficulties, prompting some people to start selling alcohol, Yaba⁴ and marijuana, as they see it as an easy way to earn income to support their livelihood. Some parents have also sent their children to work in Thein Za Yat town, Kyaik Hto Township, and other towns to support their livelihood as it is becoming harder to do so in their village.

Some locals, notably young people, have started using these drugs, which could disrupt social harmony. A [position censored for security reasons] from H--- village, Maw Keh Tha Per Hkoh village tract, stated: “*Church members are using drugs and are misbehaving in the church compound.*” The village authorities have now banned the sale and use of drugs. The [position censored for security reasons] suggested that the local KNU leaders and government authorities need to solve the drug problem in the area.

⁴ *Yaba*, which means ‘crazy medicine’ in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine. First developed in East Asia during the Second World War to enhance soldiers' performance, methamphetamine has become increasingly popular in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Burma/Myanmar where it is typically manufactured.

Forced relocation by the Tatmadaw and displacement cause difficulties for villagers

In 2002, the Tatmadaw forcibly relocated 48 households from T--- village, Shwegyin Township to build a hospital and other buildings for the Strategic Operations Command.⁵ It is hard to identify which Tatmadaw battalion is now present in this land as troops are always rotating there. In order to resettle the affected villagers, the Tatmadaw demanded five acres of land from Ko Htin Kyaw, a businessman. Unfortunately, in November 2018, Ko⁶ Htin Kyaw started to reclaim his land from the relocated villagers as he realised that its value was increasing. Later, all households living east of T--- village, Shwegyin Township was forced to pay 700,000 kyats (USD 463.97), and those living west of the village had to pay 500,000 kyats (USD 331.40) to Ko Htin Kyaw. Only a few of the relocated villagers could afford to pay this high amount. Those who could not pay the price requested by Ko Htin Kyaw could no longer possess that land. In 2018, the local population asked the National League for Democracy (NLD) office in Shwe Kyin Township for help to solve this problem. However, Daw⁷ Hla Hla Win, a local official, demanded that they pay the amount of money that Ko Htin Kyaw asked for instead of offering help. Ko Htin Kyaw threatened the villagers by saying that their houses will be destroyed if they do not pay.



These two photos were taken on December 13th 2018 in T--- village, Shwegyin Township, Nyaunglebin District. They show the land on which the 48 households were forcibly relocated to in 2002. [Photos: KHRG]

In addition to the case above, the local villagers also reported that, in 1974, the Tatmadaw confiscated land in K--- village, Maw Keh Tha Per Hkoh village tract, Mone Township. However, they couldn't confirm the name of the battalion involved. In 2018, the Tatmadaw confiscated more lands, including some located next to the Christian church compound. For this reason, the local villagers dare not go to church anymore. The Tatmadaw furthermore strengthened their army camps and increased patrolling in the areas where villagers live, putting their safety at risk. One of the community members stated that: "*Nothing would happen if the Tatmadaw was positioned in their own place. Now, they are coming to live here to take over the local population's lands.*" Because of this situation, villagers are afraid that fighting might break out worse than before between the Tatmadaw and Karen armed groups.

⁵ Strategic Operations Command; under regional command, three to four battalions and a headquarters, covers an area mostly for defence.

⁶ Ko is a Burmese title meaning older brother. It can be used for relatives as well as non-relatives.

⁷ Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

Landmine explosions



This photo was taken on December 28th 2018 in N--- village, Tha Pyay Nyunt village tract, Mone Township, Nyaunglebin district, where a landmine exploded around 30 feet away from this primary school. *[Photo: KHRG]*

On November 15th 2018, a landmine exploded around 30 feet [9.14 metres] away from a primary school located in N--- village, Tha Pyay Nyunt village tract, Mone Township. The landmine was triggered by a buffalo that lost one leg after stepping on it. Following the explosion, the school closed for three days out of concern for the students' safety. After the incident, the N--- village head and some Tatmadaw soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁸ #53 fenced the area where the explosion took place to make it inaccessible for the students. Later on, LIB #349 replaced LIB #53 in the army camp near Tha Pyay Nyunt village.



This photo was taken on December 28th 2018 in N--- village, Tha Pyay Nyunt village tract, Mone Township, where two siblings from D--- village hit a landmine on December 22nd 2018. *[Photo: KHRG]*

On December 22nd 2018, another landmine exploded on a forest road near the first incident site. Two siblings from D--- village, Tha Pyay Nyunt village tract who were visiting their grandfather in Thantaungyi Township, Toungoo District hit a landmine while travelling by motorbike. The boy is 18 years old and the girl is 12 years old now. They were both hit by landmine shrapnel and sustained injuries to their legs. Fortunately, they did not have to be admitted to the hospital. Since the incident site was not far from the school, the students and their parents are now scared and very concerned for their security. 49 students are still attending the N--- primary school.

Following these two landmine explosions, neither Tatmadaw nor KNLA soldiers took action to clear landmines in the area. These remain a threat for the local people, especially children.

⁸ A Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

Further background reading on land confiscation by the Tatmadaw can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Dooplaya Situation Update: Theft of civilian property by Tatmadaw soldiers, land confiscation and drug-related human rights abuses in Win Yay, Kawkaik and Kyainseikgyi townships between December 2018 and February 2019"](#), (August 2019)
- ["Do Not Trespass" Land Confiscation by Armed Actors in Southeast Myanmar](#)", (May 2019)
- ["Hpapun Incident Report: Land confiscation by armed actors impede refugee return in Bu Tho Township, February 2018"](#), (December 2018)
- ["Development without us: Village Agency and Land Confiscations in Southeast Myanmar"](#), (August 2018)

Further background reading on landmine contamination in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar"](#), (May 2019)
- ["Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo and Lu Thaw Townships, March to April 2018"](#), (November 2018)
- ["Hpapun Interview: Naw A---, November 2017"](#), (July 2018)

Further background reading on the environmental impact of economic activities in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Merqui-Tavoy Situation Update: K'Ser Doh Township, March to May 2017"](#), (September 2018)
- ["Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Shwegyin and Kyaukkyi Townships, November 2017 to February 2018"](#), (August 2018)
- ["Villagers raise concerns regarding proposed stone mining and cement production in Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District"](#), (January 2018)

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.khrg.org.

Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District

