



## Situation update

March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 / KHRG # 19-44-S1

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## Hpa-an District Situation Update: Landmine contamination, land confiscation, extortion and pollution from mining activities, January to May 2019

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Lu Pleh (Hlaingbwe) and Ta Kreh (Paingkyon) townships, Hpa-an District between January and May 2019.<sup>1</sup> In Lu Pleh Township, the DKBA splinter group<sup>2</sup> planted new landmines in the Meh Proo village tract area in May 2019; and the Tatmadaw is still occupying 10 acres of confiscated land between E--- and T--- villages. In Ta Kreh Township, a Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>3</sup> built a pagoda on lands belonging to local villagers, and forced every village tract to provide money for its inauguration ceremony in May 2019. In Paw village tract, stone mining activities by an unidentified company working together with the BGF resulted in water pollution and damage to farmlands.*

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### Landmines planted by the DKBA splinter group in Lu Pleh Township

Internally displaced persons who fled because of previous rounds of fighting [notably to Myaing Gyi Ngu] are afraid of returning to their villages in the Meh Proo village tract area, Lu Pleh Township due to the new landmines that were planted by the DKBA splinter group there. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2019, DKBA splinter group's Deputy Commander-in-Chief Bo Bee, who is in charge of that area, ordered his soldiers to lay more landmines. Subsequently, they planted landmines in Pwa Doo Poo, Naw Ta, Htee Thay Khee, Weh, Htee Klo Thaw, Htee K'Neh, Guh Thaw Poo and K'Ser Klo villages [mountainous areas] to prevent the Myanmar government from constructing a dam and to stop the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>4</sup> and the BGF from entering these areas.

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in May 2019. It was provided by a community member in Hpa-an 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. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG.

<sup>2</sup> In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) split from the KNLA over religious considerations. In 2010, the majority of DKBA troops transformed into BGFs, but one faction refused and changed its name to Democratic Karen Benevolent Army in 2012. In 2015, the DKBA Splinter Group split from this faction and reused their origin name. It is active in Mu Traw and Hpa-an districts, and it has not signed the NCA.

<sup>3</sup> Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

<sup>4</sup> The Karen National Union is the main Karen group opposing the government.

## **Militarisation and land confiscation by the Tatmadaw<sup>5</sup> in Lu Pleh Township**

E--- and T--- villages, Klaw K'Tee village tract are in a KNU-controlled area. However, many armed actors have established bases in the area, including in recent years. The faction that is now the DKBA splinter group established their permanent base there in May 2013, before splitting from the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army in 2015. They eventually moved to another place following clashes with the BGF. According to KHRG researcher, the area has seen BGF presence and control since March 2018.

Most recently, the Tatmadaw established their base between E--- and T--- villages in 2018 [KHRG was not able to find out the exact month] and now has full control over the village tract administrators and BGF officials in the area, who must report KNU and NGO/CBO/CSOs activities to the township administrator frequently. The Tatmadaw even gave phones to the village tract administrators to be able to communicate with them directly. In the first week of May 2019, the Tatmadaw soldiers in Klaw K'Tee military camp [Light Infantry Division (LID) #44] went to M--- village, Hkaw Taw area and to the Meh Proo area when they rotated with [soldiers from] Military Operations Command #8.

In 2018, the Tatmadaw confiscated about 10 acres of local people's lands, farmland and plantations [the victims had KNU land titles] to expand their control over territories in and around U--- village, Kloo Htaw village tract. The Tatmadaw built education and healthcare facilities on those confiscated lands for their own use, and also used them for agricultural purposes. Tatmadaw soldiers have remained there ever since. Therefore, some of the victims of land confiscation cannot work for their livelihoods anymore.

Such presence and activities have created and continue to create tension between the KNU, the Tatmadaw and the other armed groups present in the aforementioned areas.

## **Extortion by the BGF in Ta Kreh Township**

Civilians are being pressured by the BGF to not support the KNU. On April 5<sup>th</sup> 2019, Second Lieutenant Hsa Bu from BGF Battalion #1015 ordered Saw<sup>6</sup> V---, the P--- village tract administrator [Ta Kreh Township] to meet with him. The BGF suspected him of working with the KNU and of reporting BGF activities in the village to them. After questioning Saw V---, who denied the accusations, the Lieutenant declared that the BGF would now use the services of an administrator appointed by the Myanmar government, and that he was relieved of his responsibilities. Saw V--- stated: *"I was not chosen by the KNU. I was chosen by the villagers through voting. The KNU simply organised and held a meeting for us."*

From May 1<sup>st</sup> to May 10<sup>th</sup> 2019, the BGF hired a theatre group to celebrate the newly-built pagoda in G--- village, Yay Poo Gyi village tract. This pagoda was erected on fields belonging to local villagers without their permission [the victims had KNU land titles]. The BGF also extorted money from the villagers to pay the theatre group. Each of the 12 village tracts in Ta Kreh Township was asked to pay 200,000 kyats [USD 139.50].<sup>7</sup> Although villagers were displeased, they obeyed without complaining because they did not have weapons and feared retaliation by BGF officers.

## **Stone mining in Ta Kreh Township**

Since 2015, an unidentified company which works together with BGF Battalion #1015 has been conducting stone mining in a cave outside F--- village, Paw village tract, Ta Kreh Township. The

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<sup>5</sup> Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

<sup>6</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>7</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the March 20<sup>th</sup> 2020 official market rate.

stone was used to build a road connecting Kawkareik, Nabu, Paingkyon and Hpa-an. The mining activities had detrimental environmental impacts in the vicinity, such as the pollution of a pond by residual gunpowder [presumably potassium nitrate]. They also have resulted in stones falling on and damaging the villagers' farms. Consequently, farmers were unable to plant their rice crops. Overall, four villagers were affected, but they were not adequately compensated for the damage caused. Local people also reported that miners who live close to the farms were littering in the fields.

Further background reading on the activity of armed actors in Hpa-an District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["\*News Bulletin: Killing, physical abuse, arbitrary detention and land confiscation by the KNU/KNLA-PC in Hpa-an and Dooplaya districts, October 2018 to November 2019\*"](#), (January 2020)
- ["\*Hpa-an District Interview: Land confiscation by the Tatmadaw in T'Nay Hsah Township, March 2019\*"](#), (December 2019)
- ["\*Hpa-an Situation Update: Land confiscation by the KNU/KNLA-PC in T'Nay Hsah Township and resettled refugees facing difficulties in Lu Pleh Township, February 7th to May 18th 2019\*"](#), (November 2019)

### 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).

# Hpa-an District

