



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

July 25th 2019 / KHRG # 19-57-A1-I1

Toungoo District: Tatmadaw shells fell next to a village and a KNLA camp in Thandaunggyi Township, June 2019

On June 27th 2019, three mortar shells fired during a Tatmadaw artillery exercise fell near a village and a KNLA army camp on the Naw Bu Baw Mountain,¹ Thandaunggyi Township. The Tatmadaw has also been strengthening its presence in Toungoo district after the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA),² which raises concern among local civilians.³

Interview | Thandaunggyi Township, Taungoo District (June 2019)

Name: Saw M---

Gender: Male

Age: 39

Religion: Christian

Ethnicity: Karen

Family Status: Married

Occupation: KNLA Company second-in-command

¹ The Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain's Sanctuary was established in 1993 by Reverend Nay Blut, a local Karen Christian leader. It is now a famous religious site and tourist landmark that is respected and honoured by the local Karen community.

² On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement \(NCA\)](#) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see "[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#)," Reuters, October 15th 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12th 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Karen civilians and the KNU have more recently expressed their concerns about the lack of progress in moving from a ceasefire towards genuine political dialogue. See, [KNU Chair Highlights Weaknesses In The NCA During Anniversary Celebrations](#), Karen News, October 2017 and [NCA signatories urge government to reboot peace process](#), DVB, October 2017. In February 2018, two additional armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

³ The present document is based on information received in July 9th 2019. It was provided by a community member in Toungoo 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.

What do you think about the situation after the 2012 ceasefire?

After the 2012 ceasefire,⁴ transportation is the only thing that has improved compared to the past. Tatmadaw military activities remain the same. They are strengthening and increasing their army camps in almost every area.

Do you know how they strengthen their army camps?

We see them carrying their weapons when they are in transit. They have three to four snipers in each Company. They have different kinds of weapons in each of their camps. In the Late Pyar K'LAY camp, they have one RPG but sometimes, they have two and sometimes they do not have any RPGs, but they do have mortars.

What do you think of their conduct since the ceasefire? What do you think their purpose is?

I see that they take this ceasefire as an opportunity to construct roads and strengthen their army camps.⁵ This situation raises big concerns among local civilians.

Why is it a concern for local civilians?

When they [Tatmadaw] transport their rations and soldiers, it looks strange because even though they engage with civilians, they do it only for political purposes. In 2015 or 2016, their health workers came and gave medicine to the local villagers. The villagers asked the health workers to give them medicine but they only gave them one pill of paracetamol each. This is one of the reasons why I said they do it for political purposes. The local civilians have concerns because they are afraid that the situation will get worse than it was in the past – if it does, they will not feel safe. The Tatmadaw is trying to take control of some areas so that the villagers will not have any place to hide if something happens.



This photo was taken on July 4th 2019 in Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain area, Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District where artillery shells fired by Tatmadaw soldiers from Ba Yint Naung army camp landed in civilian areas. [Photo: KHRG]

⁴ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the [KNU Stakeholder webpage](#) on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014. In March 2015, the seventh round of the negotiations for a national ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and various ethnic armed actors began in Yangon, see ["Seventh Round of Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations," Karen National Union Headquarters](#), March 18th 2015. Following the negotiations, the KNU held a central standing committee emergency, see ["KNU: Emergency Meeting Called To Discuss Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement And Ethnic Leaders' Summit," Karen News](#), April 22nd 2015.

⁵ Such activities are a violation of section 5(c) of the NCA, which states that the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations shall avoid troop reinforcements in the ceasefire areas other than the provision of administrative support, emergency medical support and routine rotation of troops; avoid building new military bases and supplying of ammunition and weaponry, except those already agreed by both parties.

What do you think about the situation between 2010 and 2019? Do you see any difference or change?

Two months ago, Tatmadaw soldiers in the Late Pyar K'Lay army camp told the villagers that they would like to buy land if any villager wants to sell it to them. They actually live on the villagers' lands already and they still ask the villagers to sell the lands to them. But the villagers did not sell their lands. We do not know what kind of purpose the soldiers have. Since Bu Yint Naung Tat Myot [Tatmadaw military training school and target practice area] was established in 2000, they have always fired their artillery but the shells have never fallen on the Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain before. But on June 27th 2019, three Tatmadaw mortar shells fell on the Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain. The local civilians said that they have never seen this before so they do not feel safe anymore. It was really scary.

Where did they shoot the mortars from?

They shot them from the Ya Ka Tha military training camp [within the Bu Yint Naung Tat Myot area].

Do you know why they shot the mortars? Did they shoot during training or they shot them with a purpose?

We do not know what their purpose was but they said that they fired them during their mortar training. When I asked the Military Security Affairs (MSA) [Sa Ya Pa] about it, they said that they missed their target. How could they miss their target? They fired at Maung Nwet Gyi but [the shells] fell on the Thandaunggyi side.

Where did they aim for in the beginning?

They aimed for the Keh Kee Hkoh Mountain.

Did they ever shoot to Naw Bu Baw Mountain?

They never shot at the Naw Bu Baw Mountain before [...].

Why do you think they shot the mortars to that place [Naw Bu Baw Mountain]? How do you feel about it?

We moved here around [June] 20th, or later than that, and on [June] 27th they fired the shells. Only two days went by from the day we moved there and the day they fired the shells.

Did they shoot the mortars in June?

Yes, June 27th 2019.

How many times did they shoot?

We do not know how many times they shot but only three mortar shells reached here.

Did they hit your camp?

They fell on the upper part of our camp. One fell 300 yards (275 metres) away from us. Another one fell 300 or 400 yards (275 metres or 365 metres) away from us. The last one was the loudest so I guess it was a 120 mm shell. The first two were 81 mm.

Before they fired the artillery, did they inform you or the other soldiers in advance?

We tried to find out where they shot the artillery from, then I called Soe Naing from [Sa Ya Pa] and asked him why they shot the artillery and what their purpose was. He told me that they simply missed their target. I do not think they missed the target because the shells fell on the Thandaunggyi side, which is in a different direction from their target. But they keep saying they missed the target.

What time was it when they fired the shells?

The first shell was fired around 1:30 PM, the second one was fired at around 2:15 PM, and the last, which was the loudest one, was fired at 3 PM.

Were any villagers travelling when the shells were fired?

The road that villagers use is right under the place they fired at. Their artillery shells fell [next to] the road.

Did villagers face any difficulties?

The villagers told us that the Tatmadaw wanted to test us because they never fired their mortars like this before. They did it because [the KNLA] moved here.⁶

Do you have any feelings about this?

I just want to say that we live here but we do not disturb any civilians or Tatmadaw soldiers. We live here for the safety of civilians. We do not know how Tatmadaw will disturb us in the future. We never encountered them when we were traveling in the past. We will only know what they will do if they encounter us. We will encounter them for sure, but we have not met yet. The place where we are living now, and Thandaunggyi, are only a mile away from each other. It is not far.

Are there any restricted areas where Tatmadaw cannot travel or cross here?

According to the NCA, they are only allowed to travel from Maung Nwet Gyi to Thandaung, from Late Pyar Gyi to Thandaung, and from Nan Chain Kwin to Thandaung.⁷ In the past, after the ceasefire, they always used the forest roads or the road that other people do not usually use. The [KNLA] leaders told them to use the main road and they started using it a little bit. But they keep requesting to use the forest road. They will try to make friends with you, and they will say that they will visit you, but only because they want to use the forest road. But we did not make friends with them so they still use the roads that we tell them to use. We only allow them to use the other road to go to their army camps. For example, Tatmadaw soldiers from Late Pyar K'Lay army camp have to go to Thandaung directly. They cannot take the shortcut in Maung Nwet Gyi and they cannot go to Maung Nwet K'Lay.

What is your opinion or your concern about the NCA?

The NCA is good but the opinions or the actions of the Tatmadaw are the problem. If we follow it, the NCA is good. But the problem is that the NCA is in a deadlock and it cannot move forward in the current situation.

Why do you think the NCA cannot move forward?

I think it is because the government does not have any power. The people who have power are the Tatmadaw. People from the government should be more powerful than a Battalion Commander, but a member of government has less power than a Battalion Commander.

Do you know the Company Commander of the Tatmadaw soldiers who fired these shells?

The Company Commander is Bo Hla Min.

Is he the head of Bu Yint Naung Tat Myot training school?

Yes.

⁶ Deliberately firing mortar shells at an area in which KNLA soldiers are based would clearly amount to a violation of Section 5(b) of the NCA, which states that the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations shall “avoid any direct or indirect action that may be regarded as hostile or contemptuous.

⁷ Such travel limitations are usually agreed upon at the local level between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw, as the NCA does not contain any specific provision on geographical demarcation.

Did Bo Hla Min's superiors tell him anything?

No leaders have told him anything so far. They will talk with the JMC first. We also contacted other leaders and they told us to document what happened. I personally contacted Sa Ya Pa only.

Was the place that the artillery shells fell close to the houses of the villagers?

There are around 500 or 600 yards (457 or 550 metres) between the place where the shells fell and the houses of the villagers. They did not fall on Thandaung town. They fell on the Naw Bu Baw Mountain, around which people live. The shells fell where the villagers go to find vegetables and firewood. It was really dangerous.⁸

Did they let the villagers know about it?

Since they fired the mortars until now, they still have not told us anything.

Why do you think they did this?

I think they wanted to threaten and intimidate us. They want to let us know that they have those kinds of weapons to intimidate the villagers and the KNLA. They want us to be scared of that. They just threatened us.

What action do you want them to take in this case?

This is a violation of the NCA because when I asked them, they said they missed their target. If they had missed their target, one shell should have been enough. Since they fired three shells, it must be a violation of the NCA.

Do you think that their artillery shells only slightly missed the target, or did they fall in a different place?

Their target and where their shells fell are in completely different areas. It is like east and west.

So do you mean they shot the shells at that area on purpose, rather than just missing the target?

Yes. If they slightly miss their target, we can understand it but they just [fired the shells] to threaten us.

Do you think this kind of thing can cause fighting in the future?

I think this can cause fighting because the Tatmadaw's actions and what they say to civilians are a threat. If we [KNLA] give up, the fighting will stop. But the civilians want peace as agreed in the Panglong agreement, and if they do not get it, fighting can break out at any time.

So what about Tatmadaw not following the KNU restrictions, such as using restricted roads and breaking other rules - do you think it can cause fighting as well?

Fighting could break out because the Tatmadaw always tries to blame us. Fighting has not broken out yet because we understand them. If we look at the NCA, the fighting could have broken out a long time ago, but we were flexible so we did not do anything. But they now use the restricted roads that we do not allow them to use, and they even carry weapons with trucks on those roads. In the past, they did not use them but they have used one restricted road recently.⁹

⁸ By putting civilian lives in danger, the Tatmadaw also failed to comply with its obligations under section 9(p) of the NCA, which states that Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations shall ensure the security of civilians living in ceasefire areas.

⁹ These actions amount to a violation of section 8(b) of the NCA, which states that movement of armed troops in the areas controlled by the other party is allowed only after obtaining prior agreement. They also contravene section 8(a) which allows for free movement of unarmed troops, except in security-restricted areas.

When did they use that restricted road?

In April.

Do you still remember the date?

No. I cannot remember the date. It was at the end of April and the beginning of May.

Did they carry their weapons with their own trucks or with the villagers' trucks?

They used the villagers' trucks.¹⁰

You said they did not use that road in the past right?

No, they did not use that road in the past. Different groups [of soldiers] come at different times. Some groups talk to us in a gentle way whereas other groups talk to you very harshly. They use so many different strategies.

What do you want to get in the future?

We just want peace. Karen people also hope to see only Karen soldiers and not Tatmadaw soldiers in Karen state. We also want to stand on our own and rule our own people. We do not want others to rule us.

Further background reading on on-going militarisation in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Hpapun Short Update: Fighting breaks out between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in Lu Thaw Township"](#), (January 2019)
- ["Hpapun Short Update: Skirmishes between the KNLA and Tatmadaw and indiscriminate shelling in Lu Thaw Township"](#), (February 2019)
- ["Hpapun Situation Update: Tatmadaw road construction activities results in skirmishes with the KNLA and displacement in Lu Thaw Township,"](#) (January 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.

¹⁰ Asking the local civilians to transport weapons with their trucks could amount to a violation of section 9(d), which states that that Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations should avoid forcibly taking services from civilians, as Karen communities in Southeast Myanmar are often too afraid of Tatmadaw soldiers to refuse to comply with their demands.

Tatmadaw target practice activities near Thandaunggyi Town, June 2019

