



Situation Update

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Mu Traw District Situation Update: Villagers face critical situation during COVID-19 pandemic and are concerned about an increase in military activity, July to October 2020

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District during the period between July and October 2020. This report highlights the livelihood, education, and healthcare situation of local villagers during the COVID-19¹ pandemic. The second wave of COVID-19 has led to increased restrictions that have created livelihood, education, and healthcare challenges for villagers. In addition, an increase in Tatmadaw² activities and the transportation of military equipment has raised concern for villagers living in Bu Tho Township. This report also includes information on the 2020 general election as well as on KNU plans for road construction in Bu Ah Der, Meh Klaw and Meh Nyoo village tracts,³ as well as Pa Heh village tract.⁴

Introduction

This situation update for Bu Tho Township covers the period between July and October 2020. The update includes information about the livelihood, education, and healthcare challenges faced by villagers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, even though fighting subsided, Tatmadaw activities of transporting military equipment by military truck raised great concern for the villagers who live in Bu Tho Township. In response to the upcoming 2020 general election, villagers in Bu Tho Township were provided Myanmar National ID cards free of charge in the months prior to the election, without being asked to provide household registration documents. In October, Karen National Union (KNU)⁵ district authorities held a meeting with three village tract administrators in Bu Tho Township about constructing two new vehicle roads (joining Meh Nyoo village tract, Bu Ah Der village tract and Meh Klaw village tract) for both cars and motorcycles. Another road is planned for Pa Heh village tract.

¹ Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was first identified in December 2019 in China, and has resulted in an on-going pandemic. For more information, see WHO, "[Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#)".

² Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

³ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

⁴ The present document is based on information received in October 2020. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw 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.

⁵ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the Burma/Myanmar government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, relations with the government remain tense.

Livelihood during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in livelihood difficulties for villagers. Most of the villagers living in Bu Tho Township work on their farms for their livelihood. Travelling to crowded places has been restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From September to October 2020, increased travel restrictions were put in place, leaving villagers unable to travel to other areas, even within the township. These travel restrictions have created problems for the villagers who do trading [sell seasonal fruits such as durian].

In Bu Tho Township, there are also people who work as day labourers. The payment for a day's work covers only a big tin of rice [about 15 kilogrammes, which costs 300 baht or 15,000 kyats – USD 9.63].⁶ Day labourers have to find other work to be able to buy another tin of rice [if the previous one runs out].⁷ If the travel restrictions continue month after month, and no special arrangements are made for the villagers, it will be difficult for them [to survive]. Because there are no more job opportunities [as day labourers] in Bu Tho Township, some villagers have begun selling betel leaves, jengkol [dog fruit], cardamom [seasonal fruit] and elephant foot yam. Other villagers have been selling bamboo. They sell these seasonal products depending on their availability. As such, this kind of work activity is not stable. People who rely on day labour are now in need. They need help with making other income arrangements.

There is no one [no companies] doing big business in Bu Tho Township either [which means there are fewer job opportunities]. There are only people who do small trading [of seasonal products] and who sell cows and buffalos. From September to October 2020, people were however unable to sell any of their cows and buffalos due to travel restrictions.

Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education has been impacted since July 2020. Students who attend government schools have been waiting for months [since June or July] and schools have still not re-opened. Moreover, KECD (Karen Education and Culture Department)⁸ schools normally have limited numbers of students and teachers. Because of [government] school closures, the number of students is increasing [students who usually attend government primary schools have begun attending KECD schools], so the [KECD] schools do not have enough materials to use or enough space for students to study [they end up being cramped together in the classroom]. Students are provided materials such as books, pens and pencils by KECD, [but the quantity of these supplies is] based on the [regular] number of students [so there were not enough supplies to accommodate the increased number of students]. The number of students has increased in every KECD school in Bu Tho Township. Some of the schools are small and have also had to expand the school buildings.

The grades also had to be extended. For instance, the primary school in Klaw Day village, Mae K'Law Village Tract normally only covers grades 1 to 2, but had to add grade 3, even though it only has two teachers for the school. Thus, there is a shortage of teachers in extending the grades. Teachers now have over 50 students [in their classes].

⁶ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the April 30th 2021 official market rate.

⁷ On average, a big tin of rice will feed a family of five for 15 days. This, however, may depend on other available foods.

⁸ The Karen Education and Culture Department is the education department of the Karen National Union. Its main goals are to provide mother tongue education services to rural Karen populations in Southeast Myanmar, as well as to preserve the Karen language, culture and history. Despite being an important education provider in the region, it is not officially recognised by the Myanmar government.

At the middle school and high school levels, students who normally attend the government schools have not been able to attend school at all. Instead, they have returned to their villages and stay at home or help out their parents.

When the reported cases of COVID-19 began increasing in September, an order was released at the district level on September 25th 2020 to close schools for two weeks. If no more COVID-19 cases were reported within those two weeks, schools would be allowed to re-open. [That has still not happened.] The COVID-19 pandemic has created many obstacles for the education system.

Healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic

There have also been challenges for the villagers regarding healthcare. Villagers have started to worry that they are infected with COVID-19 when they suffer from malaria, catch a cold, or develop a cough. [However, there is no testing available in the village to confirm whether or not they have COVID-19.] Since everyone is currently facing difficulties, including livelihood difficulties, it is not easy to help one another. There are also communication and transportation problems [the road is not good]. If a person becomes sick, he or she will have to contact the doctor, but that is not always possible for the villagers. Regarding COVID-19 prevention, it is not easy for villagers to get prevention materials. Villagers really need protection.

Many local villagers and villages are not close to a medical clinic or a Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) clinic. If something happens to them, they won't be able to follow healthcare procedures in line with the established COVID-19 prevention and protection guidelines.

COVID-19 prevention measures

The local leaders from Mu Traw District formed a committee at the district and township levels to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the local areas of Bu Tho Township. On September 15th 2020, the committee from the township discussed building a quarantine centre for the suspected COVID-19 patients. At the time, there were not enough building materials, so they contacted the village tract administrators and relevant leaders to arrange for the needed materials. There are two quarantine sites planned for Bu Tho Township local areas. One will be at the clinic in Day Wah village tract and another one at the clinic in K---village, Meh Klaw village tract. They plan to build the one in Day Wah village tract 30 feet [9.14 metres] away from the Day Wah village tract clinic. These structures will not only be for the [treatment of] COVID-19 patients, they will also be for [the quarantine of] outsiders who come into the local areas. Outsiders will be required to quarantine there for 21 to 28 days.

[The villagers were able to finish construction of the quarantine centre next to Day Wah clinic.] Construction of the quarantine site in K---village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township was planned for October 2nd 2020. The huts are to be built with wood, bamboo and other materials. On October 4th 2020, they started building, but have not finished construction.

There are two screening checkpoints in D---village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township. [Although the committee agreed to build quarantine centres,] they did not [make plans to] build more screening checkpoints. They are just continuing as before [are not building more screening checkpoints] based on the decision of the local leaders. There are also concerns that there might not be enough supplies at the screening checkpoints.

If local villagers want to travel, they are supposed to be screened for COVID-19. The local leaders and some villagers have noticed however that some people are travelling from Hpapun

to A---, P---, and H---villages and then going back to Hpapun, yet there is no testing [screening] for them. Many places still need screening checkpoints. Local villagers from E--- and U--- are aware that it is essential to do screening or testing. They are concerned because they come into contact with people from Hpapun for the food deliveries [see below], but there is no testing [screening].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)⁹ also gave awareness training about COVID-19 to the villagers. On September 20th 2020, KNU district authorities released a radio message with instructions for every village tract in all three townships (Bu Tho, Dwe Lo, and Lu Thaw) to follow. This included avoiding travel to crowded places. Each village tract informed the villagers about the instructions given by the district authorities to prevent the COVID-19 outbreak in their areas.

[Travel restrictions]

On September [20th] 2020, the KNU realised that the second wave of COVID-19 was taking place in Myanmar. Therefore, they immediately strengthened prevention strategies and sent out orders to the villages in every village tract. Since then, there have been restrictions on the main road and in public areas. The local villagers cannot travel if there is no important issue [reason].

The regulations vary by village tract. Some village tracts allow the local villagers to travel twice in a month. Some village tracts do not allow the local villagers to travel at all and they arrange provisions for the local villagers for two or three months ahead so that the villagers do not face a food shortage [see below]. Some village tracts have been waiting to see how the COVID-19 situation progresses. If there is no change, they will let the local villagers travel to buy food.

Starting from September 22nd 2020, there were travel restrictions from Hpapun to K'Mah Moe for both cars and motorcycles. If no more cases are found in these areas, there will be another plan [regarding travel restrictions]. [As of this report, the restrictions have still not been lifted.]

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic [and the livelihood issues faced by local villagers], Bu Tho Township leaders have been arranging food for villagers [and dropping it off for them] where they can access it more easily [since they cannot travel to town]. [The central KNU formed a COVID-19 relief committee to support the needs of local villagers during the pandemic. The committee has been purchasing food for villagers who are unable to travel to town to purchase supplies themselves. The committee arranges for a convenient drop-off point, and provides the food at cost (i.e., the original price)]. H---, P--- and A--- villages are brought rice, which is left for them near Khoh Loh Klo River. O---, W--- and Y--- also receive rice. There are also two places arranged for pick up near Hpapun Town for villagers living in E--- and M--- villages. For the rest of the village tracts such as S---, Z---, N---, B---, J---, K---, and A---, rice is arranged for pick up at a place close to the vehicle road which is easier to access.

On October 7th 2020, each household from Meh Pa area, Bu Ah Der village tract was allotted one basket of rice, which they could choose to take or not. The rice was provided by the Myanmar government.

⁹ The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Myanmar. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.

2020 general election

Villagers learned that [voting in] the 2020 election would be held in the local areas of Bu Tho Township. There are five parties in the area: KNDP [Karen National Democratic Party], USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party],¹⁰ UBP [Union Betterment Party], NLD [National League for Democracy]¹¹ and UNDP/UDP [possibly the United Democratic Party]. (The villagers did not actually know the full name of these parties). The parties campaigning along the vehicle road in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township were competing with each other and some parties tried to provide for the villagers' needs [in the hope of gaining votes]. Prior to the election, local immigration offices [presumably at the bidding of campaigning political parties] worked on processing the national ID cards for villagers without any payment. They did not even ask villagers to provide them household registration documents. The NLD party provided the villagers in L--- village [Meh Klaw village tract] with solar panels and batteries.

Tatmadaw soldiers' activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since July 2020, travel restrictions have been imposed to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19 in local areas. Tatmadaw soldiers have taken advantage of this to continue travelling [to their army camps]. Furthermore, military trucks have been transporting military equipment. Some villagers were saying that military trucks were coming at night with the whole truck covered so that they [villagers] could not see what they were transporting from the outside. They have been transporting supplies unimpeded.

On June 5th 2020, the Tatmadaw soldiers from Da Wei Army came into [Mu Traw District] during the day and at night. There was nothing impeding them. They came into Mu Traw District and stayed at the army camps of multiple Mu Traw battalions: Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)¹² #434, LIB #341, LIB #340 and Infantry Battalion (IB)¹³ #19.

On July 5th 2020, Light Infantry Division (LID)¹⁴ commander Thet Paing Zaw from the Tatmadaw Da Wei Army came with 400 soldiers to stay at the army camp of LIB #434, LIB #341, LIB #340 and IB #19 in Mu Traw District.

¹⁰ The Union Solidarity and Development Party (Pyi Khaing Pyo in Burmese, Pa Ka Hpa in Karen) is the successor of the Union Solidarity and Development Association. It was officially registered as a political party on June 2nd 2010 and is headed by Burmese politician Than Htay who is the current chairman and retired Brigadier General in the Tatmadaw. Previously the party was run by former Burmese President and Prime Minister, Thein Sein who was in charge until 2015. In November 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) ousted the USDP in a landslide election, winning a majority of seats in parliament.

¹¹ The National League for Democracy (NLD) is the political party that governed Burma/Myanmar from 2016 to January 2021. Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD won landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 General Elections. The NLD government was deposed by the Burma Army in the February 2021 Myanmar coup d'état, after which elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

¹² 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.

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¹⁴ Like a Military Operations Command, a Light Infantry Division has ten (Light Infantry) battalions divided into three Tactical Operations Commands and is used for offensive operations. However, LIDs take their orders from the Ministry of Defence rather than the Regional Command.

On July 6th 2020, Daw Wei LID commander Thet Paing Zaw met with the village tract administrator and some of the village heads from X---, L---, G---, and Q---villages. He told the village heads that he was coming to maintain security during the [2020 general election] voting. He also told village heads that they would have to help with supplying medicine and medical services if needed. The meeting was held in LIB #434 army camp.

The increase of over 400 soldiers became most apparent on the day of the elections since they were providing security for the voting.

More Tatmadaw soldiers arrived and set up base close to Meh Klaw village tract. This created concerns for villagers. Villagers could see that there were more Tatmadaw soldiers guarding road security.

Villages that are next to the vehicle road in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township include: C-- , X---, L---, F--- [villages]. [Due to the increased military activity,] villagers do not dare work on their hill farms to plant peanuts for their income. Most of the villagers said military cars come both day and night, and that this started in June 2020. Villagers do not know what was being carried in the vehicles.

These types of concerns were not just reported by one or two village tracts. All villagers living in the township have been worrying about this [the increase in Tatmadaw military operations] and are fearful of it [new fighting].

KNU and KNLA activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

From July to September 2020, there were no special operations by the KNU. They were operating per usual instruction.

KNU road construction

On October 14th 2020, the authorities from Bu Tho Township held a consultation meeting with three village tract administrators from the following three village tracts: Bu Ah Der, Meh Klaw and Meh Nyoo. The main issue was the construction of two new roads for vehicles (cars and motorbikes).

These roads will connect Meh Nyoo village tract, Bu Ah Der village tract and Meh Klaw village tract areas. Construction for the roads will begin in Pweh Loh Kloh, Meh Nyoo village tract and will then continue to Ba Kyoo or Bu Mee Kyoh which is in Bu Tho Hkoh Place¹⁵ [Meh Nyoo village tract]. Then the road construction will continue, connecting Bu Ah Der to Hkoh Loh Kloh Nee Hkoh in Bu Ah Der village tract and Paw Dee Der areas [Bu Ah Der village tract], and then also connect with Meh Kaw Hta areas [Meh Klaw village tract].

On October 20th 2020, the three village tract administrators will go to do a survey of the area to determine where they will be able to dig the roads more easily. On October 25th 2020, these three village tract administrators will have to come back and report about the survey they did. They plan to pay a fair amount to the local villagers whose farms or livelihood areas would be affected by the road construction. The township secretary and township administrator told the village administrators that they will try to prevent the villagers from asking for compensation [they will discuss the impacts and make sure that the villagers are satisfied with the arrangements].

¹⁵ Place refers to the name given by local communities to a specific location. It is smaller than an “area.”

No road has ever been constructed near Pweh Loh Kloh, Meh Nyoo village tract, or from Bu Ah Der village to Khoh Loh Nee Hkoh and Meh Hkaw Hta places.

Another road will be constructed in Pa Heh village tract, between I--- village and R--- village. This road only belongs to [is located in] Pa Heh village tract. The KNU district authorities aim to make this happen during 2020. This road construction is not related to any Myanmar government plan [the Myanmar government is not involved in this road construction]. This is the plan of [a project initiated by] the KNU and if the road is well constructed there will be benefits for local organisations and the local communities.

A road from I--- to R--- villages was constructed once in 2018-2019. The road was constructed by the local villagers themselves. Then the road became usable only in the summer for motorbikes to travel. When the local villagers constructed the road, they also had to cut down some of the betel nut trees that were in the way. They are going to construct it [the new road] with a bulldozer but they will try to avoid the local villagers' livelihood areas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some situations are getting better but some situations have worsened. Even though the fighting is silent [has calmed down] in Bu Tho Township during this reporting period, travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have become an obstacle for the villagers. [Yet,] Tatmadaw soldiers have been travelling everywhere they want during the pandemic. [Access to education and healthcare has become more challenging for villagers, with many schools closing, and healthcare options becoming more limited. Travel restrictions have made it difficult for villagers in some areas to access towns to purchase food supplies. The KNU has stepped in to arrange for food drop-offs for villagers in these areas. The increased military activity in some areas has created further stress for villagers.]

Further background reading on the situation in Mu Traw District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Mu Traw District Situation Update: 2020 general election, livelihood difficulties, Tatmadaw activities, education and COVID-19 situation \(August to October 2020\)"](#), January 2021.
- ["Mu Traw District Situation Update: The Tatmadaw repeatedly fired large numbers of mortars into civilian areas and burned forests in Lu Thaw Township, January 2020 to April 2020"](#), December 2020.
- ["Mu Traw District Situation Update: Militarisation, indiscriminate shelling, displacement and landmine contamination in Bu Tho Township, May to July 2020"](#), December 2020.

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.

Mutraw (Hpapun) District

