



## Short Update

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020 / KHRG #20-119-D1

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## Mu Traw District Short Update: Villagers subjected to forced labour by the Border Guard Force in Bu Tho Township, October 2020

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*This Short Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw [Hpapun] District in October 2020. Around 150 villagers from M--- and D--- villages were ordered to build a camp for the Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>1</sup> Battalion #1014 in L--- village. They worked from October 3<sup>rd</sup> to October 13<sup>th</sup> but did not receive any payment. The villagers did not complain about it because they are afraid of the BGF soldiers. They tried to report the incident to the local authorities, to no avail.<sup>2</sup>*

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On October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, BGF Battalion #1014 ordered villagers from M--- and D--- villages to work on the construction of a new BGF camp in L--- village. BGF Battalion #1014 is under the authority of Commander Bo Maung Chit. The BGF soldiers and their commander did not write an order letter, nor did they call a meeting to let the villagers know in advance. The BGF soldiers told the villagers that, since they have helped the Karen National Union (KNU),<sup>3</sup> they also have to help the BGF.

The new camp is located on a plot of land owned by a local villager, beside his house. This villager is afraid of the BGF and did not dare to complain about it. The former BGF camp was located beside the monastery [outside of the village]. Because of the presence of the BGF soldiers, the local villagers were afraid to go to the monastery. The BGF ultimately decided to move their camp to the village, but still operates near the monastery.

Overall, around 150 villagers had to work on the construction of the new camp from October 3<sup>rd</sup> to October 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 – four to five villagers on the first day, then one villager from each household from October 4<sup>th</sup> onwards. The villagers worked from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. They ultimately built eight living structures and fenced the newly-built camp, but did not receive any payment for their work.

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

The BGF also asked the villagers from M--- and D--- villages to provide bamboo logs and T'La aw leaves.<sup>4</sup> Each set of three households had to provide 100 bamboo logs. As there are around 155 households in these two villages, the villagers had to gather more than 5,000 bamboo logs from a place located at a four-hour walking distance from the new BGF camp. The BGF gave 12,000 kyats [USD 9.27]<sup>5</sup> to the village authorities for the bamboo logs and their delivery. The money was shared among the villagers, but they complained about the low amount they received.

The villagers reported the forced labour case to the local [KNU] authorities, to no avail. The villagers told KHRG that they did not report the incident further because they are scared of the BGF. Eighteen BGF soldiers are now manning the camp. The local villagers are afraid of them, as they consume Yaba<sup>6</sup> and alcohol.

The BGF also asked male villagers from M--- village to dig a trench around the new camp. They promised to pay each villager 5,000 kyats [USD 3.86] per day, and told them it would take five days in total. The villagers started working on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2020. Four to five villagers work on this project each day. They were still digging the trench as of November 9<sup>th</sup> 2020. The BGF said that they would only pay them after the work is completed.



These photos were taken on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 in L--- village, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. They show the new BGF camp that was built by the villagers from D--- and M--- villages. [Photos: Local source]

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<sup>4</sup> T'la aw trees are teak-like trees with large leaves, which are traditionally collected by villagers and used to make thatched shingles for the roofs of houses.

<sup>5</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat and baht in this report are based on the November 10<sup>th</sup> 2020 official market rate.

<sup>6</sup> Yaba, which means 'crazy medicine' in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine.

Further background reading on human rights abuses committed by the BGF in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Hpa-an District Interview: Arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and intimidation by BGF soldiers and village authorities, February 2020"](#), June 2020.
- ["Hpa-an District Situation Update: Gambling activities run by armed actors causing social disruption in T'Nay Hsah and Ta Kreh townships, 2019"](#), May 2020.
- ["Hpapun Incident Report: Physical abuse against a child and confiscation of property by a BGF Corporal in Dwe Lo Township, May 2019"](#), September 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).

# Mutraw (Hpapun) District

