



Interview

June 2nd 2020 / KHRG # 20-36-A1-I1

Mu Traw District Interview: Shelling by the Tatmadaw resulting in temporary displacement in Lu Thaw Township, January to April 2020

This interview describes events that occurred in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District between January and April 2020. According to the interviewee, the Tatmadaw¹ fired a total of 164 mortar shells into several areas of Ler Mu Plaw village tract from January 29th to April 21st 2020, mostly while transporting rations. On one occasion, the shelling even prompted some local villagers to hide in the forest for six days. The local population is now afraid that fighting might break out between the Tatmadaw and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)² over a military road construction project.³

Interview | P--- village, Ler Mu Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District (May 2020)

Name: Saw⁴ O---

Gender: Male

Age: 54

Religion: Christian

Ethnicity: Karen

Family Status: Married

Occupation: Farmer

How many households and people are there in your village?

There are 20 households and 185 people.

Can every household produce enough rice and paddy from their farms?

No, we don't have enough rice because of flooding and mice damaging paddies.

Do you have access to humanitarian aid from any service providers?

We did not receive it this year. We used to receive it in the past.

So what solutions do villagers come up with to get enough rice?

¹ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

² The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

³ The present document is based on information received on May 2nd 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 staff.

⁴ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

Villagers have to find casual daily work and once they receive their wages, they go and buy rice from Mu Theh Town [Nyaunglebin District], which takes one day.

How much do they pay for one basket [12.5 kg] of rice?

They have to pay between 12,000 and 13,000 kyats [USD 8.5 to 9.2]⁵ for one basket.

Is there a Tatmadaw camp nearby?

Yes. A group of Tatmadaw [soldiers] are based on the Htaw Muh Pleh Meh hill.

Is there any Tatmadaw activity related to the road construction?

Yes, they have a plan but currently they are not constructing it.

Are the Tatmadaw intimidating the local people through shelling?

Yes.

Could you tell me in more detail about the Tatmadaw shelling such as location, date and number of times they have fired?

From what I have noted, on January 29th 2020 at 3:20, the Tatmadaw fired mortar shells into local farms in the Ler Mu Plaw area, killing a buffalo belonging to a local villager. They fired 13 mortar shells in total.

Do you know whose buffalo was killed?

The buffalo belonged to a villager but I am not sure which one exactly. Again, on March 10th 2020 at 7:42, the Tatmadaw fired two mortar shells into a local plantation and another one into the community forest [in the Ler Mu Plaw area]. At 13:20, the lower side of the community forest was burning [because of the shelling], including 55 local plantations. On March 26th 2020, the fire started up again burning five hill farms.

Who do the farms belong to?

The farm owners are villagers from A--- and R---; B---, C---, D---, E--- and F--- villages. On April 5th 2020, the Tatmadaw came to Q--- and spent the night there. They fired 27 mortar shells into local plantations [in Q---] at 16:00. Again, at 21:30, they fired 11 shells. [...] On April 7th 2020 at 19:47, they fired 21 mortar shells. At 22:40, they fired seven mortar shells into P--- village [...]. [...] From January 29th to April 21st 2020, the Tatmadaw fired a total of 164 mortar shells into the local area.

Why were the Tatmadaw shelling?

They were shelling because they transported rations to their army camp.

Were villagers scared when they saw the Tatmadaw transporting rations?

Yes.

Did villagers flee into the forest when the Tatmadaw were shelling?

Yes. The local villagers fled and hid in the forest for six days.

Are the Tatmadaw still shelling?

They were only shelling when they were transporting rations. There is no shelling at the moment.

Did any skirmishes and/or fighting happen between January and April 2020?

There has been fighting but I don't know the exact times and date anymore.

Why was there fighting? Who started shooting?

⁵ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the May 15th 2020 official market rate.

In some cases, the KNLA started shooting because the Tatmadaw trespassed into areas controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU).⁶

Do you think the Tatmadaw have a plan to construct a road?

We heard something like that, but we are not sure. If this happens, we will be displaced.

Are you scared when you encounter the Tatmadaw?

No, we are afraid to meet them. We always flee when we hear the Tatmadaw shelling.

Why are you scared of the Tatmadaw?

We see their activities which are violating the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)⁷ such as setting up their military camps near the local area. Sometimes, they show up and transport rations. Therefore, we are scared of them and we doubt their commitment [to the NCA] as well.

Do you think the Tatmadaw are sincere about the NCA?

Based on their activities, no, they are not sincere.

Do you know if anyone gave permission for the Tatmadaw to construct a road here?

I don't know about that.

Do you know the military power of the Tatmadaw that are based near the local area? Such as number of soldiers, weapons, etc...

I don't know about that either.

Do the Tatmadaw use drones to spy on the local area?

I have heard about that from our local leaders but I have never seen it with my own eyes.

Who saw the Tatmadaw's drone?

A local villager saw it during the night.

What would you do if you saw this?

I would not know what to do other than be scared. I don't know what the Tatmadaw's strategy is concerning us.

How do you find solutions to the problems you face because of the Tatmadaw?

I cannot do anything by myself, so I will ask our leaders for help. They can direct us or make suggestions.

Have you ever learnt about human rights?

No, I have never learnt about them.

So do you know that you have to document information when you face any abuses or when any issues happen?

⁶ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the 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.

⁷ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups, 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 Karen National Union. It was followed by the adoption of a Code of Conduct by the signatories in November 2015. In February 2018, two additional armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

Yes, people [in my community] told me that. I know that I should document the abuses and report it to the responsible person. However, I am not always dutiful in doing it.

Why do you think the Tatmadaw has planned to construct a road and operate in the area?

They might want to strengthen their army in KNU-controlled areas and fight them out. They want to oppress indigenous villagers and displace us.

If you saw the Tatmadaw occupying the area, would you flee to the forest to stay there, [either] permanently or temporarily?

We would stay in the forest temporarily because we have our land and houses in the village. I do not want to stay in the forest long term. I think other people might also feel like this.

What is your perspective on the Tatmadaw?

The Tatmadaw are not honest to us [Karen people]. They continue military activities because they want to oppress us.

What is your perspective on the KNU?

The KNLA ensures our security. They never threaten us.

What would happen if the Tatmadaw road construction continues?

Fighting would break out for sure.

Is the road located in the local villages or near the plantations? Has there been any damage to the plantations?

The Tatmadaw used to pass through the local plantations when travelling along the road. The troops damaged plants and crops as they crossed through. Now, the plantations and paddy fields that are a long distance from Tatmadaw army camps are not being damaged because the Tatmadaw troops only use the road near their army camps. However, the plantations and paddy fields located near the Tatmadaw army camps are still being damaged because Tatmadaw troops often travel along there.

Do the Tatmadaw provide any compensation for the damaged crops?

No, they do not provide compensation. Villagers are also afraid to see them [to ask for compensation].

Do the Tatmadaw persuade local villagers through letters or materials?

Local leaders told us that the Tatmadaw left a letter on the road saying that they would not cause trouble for us.

Have the Tatmadaw ever shot villagers?

Yes, they shot villagers in the Saw Mu Plaw area.

In light of the Tatmadaw militarisation, what do the local people worry about?

Local people always live in fear of fighting and displacement.

Have they built any shelters and huts for emergency refuge in the forest?

Yes.

Is there any other information you would like to share?

Due to the constant fears we have in regard to the presence of the Tatmadaw, we would like them to withdraw from the local area.

Which villagers had to flee due to the Tatmadaw shelling?

They were from R--- village, T--- village and U--- village.

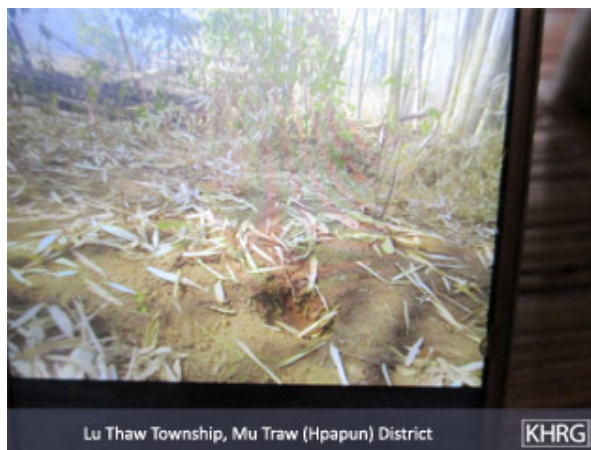
Do you have other experiences you want to share?

We are facing livelihood issues and food shortages.

Thank you so much for your information.

Instances of shelling by the Tatmadaw in the Ler Mu Plaw area according to the interviewee - January 29th to April 21st 2020

Date	Time	Tatmadaw units involved	Number of mortar shells fired	Location
January 29 th 2020	3:20	Unspecified	13	Ler Mu Plaw area
March 10 th 2020	7:42	Unspecified	3	Local plantations and community forest in the Ler Mu Plaw area
April 5 th 2020	16:00	Tatmadaw soldiers temporarily based in Q--- village	27	Local plantations in Q--- village
April 5 th 2020	21:30	Unspecified	11	Local plantations in Q--- village
April 6 th 2020	9:40	Unspecified	Unspecified	Unspecified
April 7 th 2020	19:47	Unspecified	21	R--- village
April 7 th 2020	22:40	Unspecified	7	R--- village
Unspecified date in April 2020	8:30	Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion (IB) #30 from the Htaw Mu Pleh Meh camp	12	Local plantations in the Ler Mu Plaw area
Unspecified date in April 2020	9:15	Tatmadaw IB #30 from the Htaw Mu Pleh Meh camp	3	Local plantations in the Ler Mu Plaw area
Unspecified date in April 2020	Unspecified Time	Tatmadaw soldiers from the Du Htaw camp	2	Unspecified
Unspecified date in April 2020	12:00	Unspecified	30	Local areas and plantations in the Ler Mu Plaw area
April 18 th 2020	08:20	Tatmadaw IB #30 from the Htaw Mu Pleh Meh camp	2	S--- village and nearby farms



These photos were taken on April 2020 in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. They show holes caused by the explosion of Tatmadaw mortar shells in Plah Hkoh (left) and Ler Mu Plaw (right) village tracts. [Photos: KHRG]

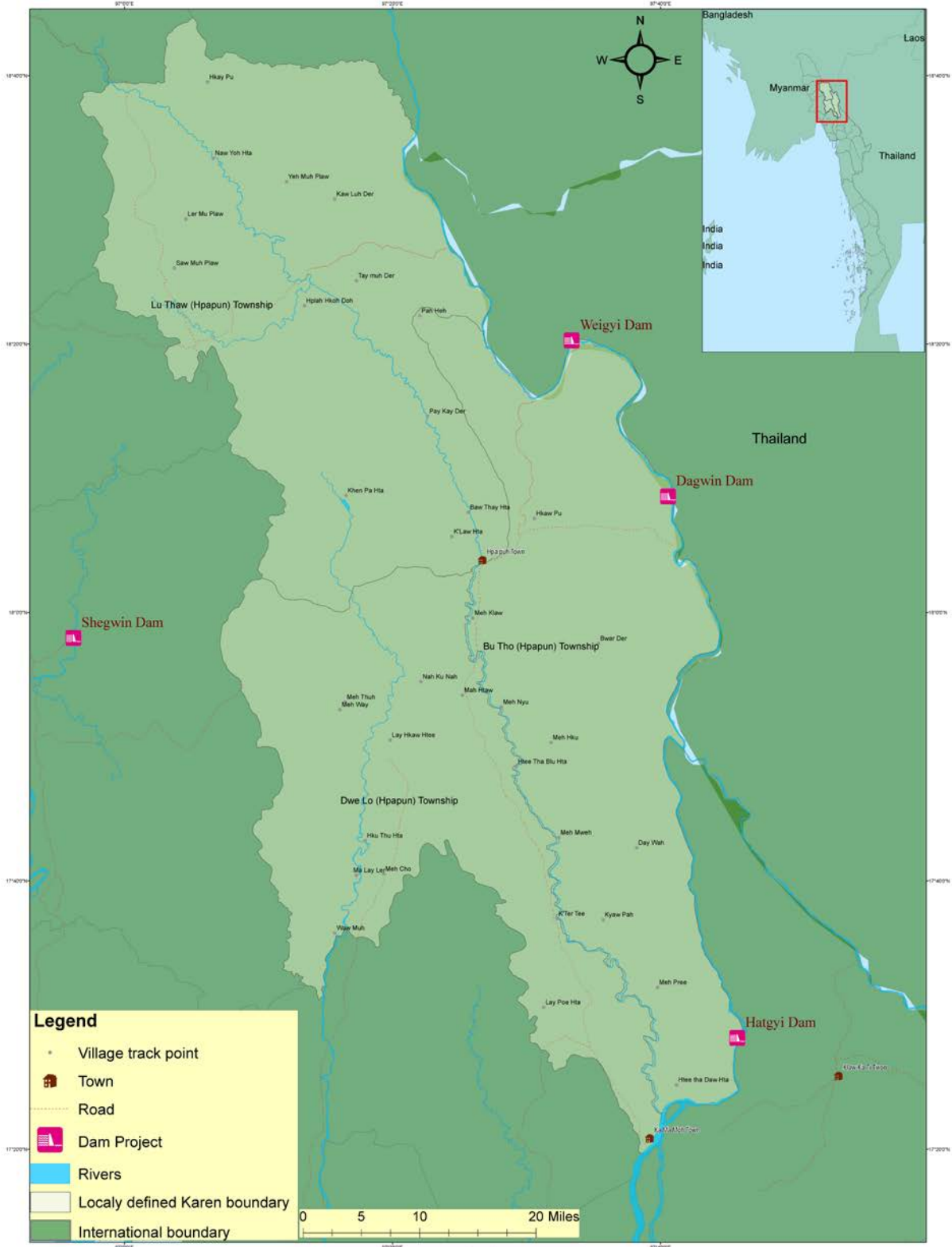
Further background reading on human rights abuses committed by the Tatmadaw in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District: Tatmadaw soldiers killed a Karen community leader and a KNU forest ranger in March 2020”](#), (April 2020)
- [“Mu Traw District Incident Report: Physical violence against a villager by Tatmadaw soldiers in Dwe Lo Township, January 2020”](#), (March 2020)
- [“Mu Traw District Incident Report: Tatmadaw soldiers shot two villagers in Dwe Lo Township, January 2020”](#), (March 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



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