



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Short Update**

May 11<sup>th</sup> 2020 / KHRG # 20-37-D1

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**Mu Traw District Short Update: *Destruction of KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoints by the Tatmadaw and skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in Dwe Lo Township, May 2020***

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*This Short Update describes events that occurred in Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw [Hpapun] District in May 2020. The Tatmadaw<sup>1</sup> destroyed two Karen National Police Force (KNPF)<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 screening checkpoints on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2020. The subsequent rise in tensions between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>3</sup> and the Tatmadaw resulted in several skirmishes along the Hpapun-Ka Ma Maung road in the following days, prompting both armed actors to implement travel restrictions. In some cases, the fighting even led to the displacement of local villagers. Local communities raised concerns about their safety and some dare not leave their village anymore.<sup>4</sup>*

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**Destruction of KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoints by the Tatmadaw**

On May 6<sup>th</sup> 2020 at 11 AM, Tatmadaw soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #410, Military Operations Command (MOC) #8 destroyed a KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoint in Khaw Klah village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. The Tatmadaw soldiers were led by Battalion Deputy Commander Aye Min Htun and Company Commander Poe Min Kyaw.

This COVID-19 screening checkpoint was built in early April 2020. The Tatmadaw did not authorise the local Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>5</sup> authorities and health workers to set it up in the first place. After the checkpoint was set up, the Tatmadaw started patrolling the area more often. Around 40 Tatmadaw LIB #410 soldiers eventually came and burned down the checkpoint. As they were fully equipped and armed, the village authorities asked them why they did not fire at the KNLA soldiers manning it. The Tatmadaw responded that they would only open fire on the KNLA if fired upon first.

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<sup>1</sup> Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military

<sup>2</sup> The Karen National Police Force is the law enforcement agency of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>4</sup> The present document is based on information received in May 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>5</sup> 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.

Prior to the incident, Tatmadaw LIB #410 soldiers asked a Ma Htaw villager to drive them to the checkpoint in his truck. The villager was afraid to accompany them so he just lent his truck to the soldiers. When they returned it, some parts of the truck were damaged, but they did not give any money to the villager to cover repairing costs.

Also on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, fully equipped Tatmadaw soldiers from LIB #405, MOC #8 burned down another KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoint in Wa Thoh Hkoh village, Lay Poe Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township. Later that day, fighting broke out after KNLA soldiers fired at Tatmadaw LIB #405 soldiers on the Na Set Ta Mei [21 mile] road, Htee Law Thee Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township. The Tatmadaw LIB #410 soldiers that destroyed the screening checkpoint in Khaw Klah village later arrived at the incident place to help their comrades.

There was a household located in the Na Set Ta Mei area where the clashes occurred. The KNLA asked them to move to another place [until the situation calms down]. They are now living in Hkaw Taw [Myaing Gyi Ngu], which is their area of origin. Around six or seven households from Htee Hsaw Meh were also staying on their plantations in Na Set Ta Mei. They have now gone back to their village.



These photos were taken on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2020. They show the KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoint that was burned down by Tatmadaw soldiers in Khaw Klah Village, Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District.

[Photos: KHRG]

### **Skirmishes between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw**

On May 7<sup>th</sup> 2020 at 4:45 PM, LIB #410 Tatmadaw soldiers from the Ma Htaw army camp fired three mortar shells at Thwa Koh Loh village. One of them did not explode, but the villagers do not know where it fell. Some of them had to flee and hide because of the fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw in the area. The villagers are concerned whether they will ever be able to live in peace because they always have to flee. They are afraid to leave the village because they know that they will be shot at if they do.

On the same day, at around 3 PM, fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw LIB #410 and the KNLA Battalion #102, Company #1 near the Ku Seink Tatmadaw army camp. On May 8<sup>th</sup> 2020, fighting broke out again in the Taung Thone Lone area. On May 9<sup>th</sup> at about 5 PM, one Tatmadaw soldier got injured after stepping on a landmine in the Htee Saw Meh area. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, fighting broke out again between the Tatmadaw LIB #405 and the KNLA Battalion #102, Company #3 in the Maw Loh Kloh area [Yay Pu in Burmese], but no deaths were reported on either side.

Skirmishes between the Tatmadaw LIB #405 and KNLA Battalion #102, Company #3 also occurred in Na Set Ta Mei on May 16<sup>th</sup> 2020 and in Khah Hkoh [also called Wah Doo, which is located between Ler Kweh and Wa Thoh Hkoh KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoints] on May 18<sup>th</sup> at 8 AM. No villagers are living near Khah Hkoh, but the gunfire damaged some crops.

### **Travel restrictions**

Due to the on-going skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, the Tatmadaw Tactical Operations Command (TOC) based in Hpapun ordered a 6 PM-6 AM curfew from May 8<sup>th</sup> onwards on the Hpapun-Ka Ma Maung road. All Tatmadaw battalions in the area, including Infantry Battalion (IB) #19, LIB #341, LIB #434, LIB #340 and TOC set up checkpoints in front of their bases along the road between Hpapun and Way Mon village. As there is no other road to get in or out of Hpapun, cars and trucks that take passengers to Hpa-an need to hurry to comply with the restrictions.

The KNLA also issued orders to forbid travel on the Hpapun–Ka Ma Maung road, except on Monday and Friday or in case of emergency. The KNU set up four KNPF-run COVID-19 screening checkpoints along this road. They are located in Ku Seink, Na Set Ta Mei, Hpah Lone and Wa Tho Hkoh. When tensions [with the Tatmadaw] arise, the KNPF withdraws from these checkpoints. The KNU also set up smaller COVID-19 screening checkpoints at the entry of the villages located along that road.

Further background reading on the tensions between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District Incident Report: Tatmadaw soldiers shot two villagers in Dwe Lo Township, January 2020”](#), (March 2020)
- [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Militarisation, environmental pollution and sexual violence against children, July to December 2019”](#), (February 2020)
- [“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](http://www.khrq.org).

# Mutraw (Hpapun) District

