



**Situation Update**

February 19<sup>th</sup> 2021 / KHRG # 20-76-S1

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**Taw Oo District Situation Update: Education, healthcare, development, livelihood and military activities (January to July 2020)**

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Daw Hpa Hkoh and Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) townships, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District from January to July 2020. It includes information about livelihood, education and healthcare during COVID-19,<sup>1</sup> as well as human rights violations regarding development and military activities.<sup>2</sup>*

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**Education**

There are both Karen Education and Culture Department [KECD]<sup>3</sup> schools and Myanmar government schools in Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District.<sup>4</sup> The schools experienced delays in opening for the academic year 2020-2021 due to COVID-19.

[As of the writing of this update] the Myanmar government high schools are planning to open on July 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 and student registration has started already. There are [new] policies for the high school students and their parents to follow, as well as [school-wide] hygiene procedures to protect the students.

The policies require students to wear masks and stay three feet [0.91 metres] away from each other. The parents or the guardian must arrange transportation for their children. People who bring and pick up their children must not be over 60 years old. The person who brings the children must be the same person who picks them up, and must wear a mask [when doing so]. This created issues for parents who have financial and livelihood problems, because some are unable to buy masks on a daily basis in order to bring and pick up their children from school.

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<sup>1</sup> 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](#)".

<sup>2</sup> The present document is based on information received in February 2020. It was provided by a community member in Taw Oo 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 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.

<sup>4</sup> The KECD schools are only in the KNU-controlled areas of the district.

[Other substantive changes have also been made.] *"The Myanmar government schools have changed their curriculum [primary students will only be taught reading, not writing, and will have group exams instead of individual exams] which is a problem for students who are attending school in the academic year 2020-2021. [Additionally, if] the students fail to follow the [new COVID-19] policies and procedures, they will be punished or they will be fined"* recounted one of the students' parents.

One of the students said that, *"There are more chances that students will have to drop out or quit school when they fail to follow the procedures for preventing the virus."* [Moreover, if] the students have to stay three feet away from each other, there will be not enough space in the classroom. There will be not enough buildings [classrooms] or school supplies.

The parents are afraid and have concerns about their children going to school because of the COVID-19 situation. The reason is that the teachers who are assigned to Daw Hpa Hkoh High School and Htaw Ta Htoo [Htantabin] High School are from other areas such as Mon State and from towns where the Covid-19 infection rate is high. The parents do not know how the relevant government administrators and the township educational administrator are going to arrange for prevention. Therefore, the parents worry about COVID-19 infection. There are still weaknesses [in the prevention policies] of the Myanmar government schools, even though they are going to open. There is not enough [disinfectant] spraying at the schools and in the classrooms, and there are not enough prevention supplies for the health safety of the students.

There are two townships in Taw Oo District: Htaw Ta Htoo and Daw Hpa Hkoh. And there is one KECD middle school and one KECD primary school in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. The schools are self-funded schools, established by the local villagers [but they receive support from the KECD]. The teachers who are teaching at the schools have graduated from KECD schools in Taw Oo District. The students who finish grade four continue their education at the Hsa Thoo Lay Middle School in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township.

The students who graduate from KECD schools such as Hsa Thoo Lay Middle School in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township continue their education at Htoh Lwee Wah High School [a KECD school which actually covers grades 5 to 12] and at Kaw Thoo Lei Junior College [a KECD post-secondary school] in Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. Most of the students who go to study at the middle school in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township are from KNU-controlled areas and their parents have livelihood difficulties. The students who attend the Hsa Thoo Lay Middle School have fewer expenses [than schools in towns like Toungoo] because their parents bring rations [food] for them.

Similarly, the students who graduate from [other] middle schools in Htaw Ta Htoo and Daw Hpa Hkoh Townships continue their studies at Htoh Lwee Wah High School and Htoh Lwee Wah Junior College in Htaw Ta Htoo Township. The annual school and dormitory fees total 300,000 kyats [USD 213]<sup>5</sup> per student who attend the high school or college [which occupy the same campus]. However, if there are two or more students from one family who go there, they will only have to pay the fees for one student. Therefore, these two schools are more affordable [than other schools in the area], which means fewer numbers of students are unable to go to school [continue their secondary and post-secondary education].

There are at least 300 students studying at Htoh Lwee Wah High School and the junior college. The school committee and the dormitory committee still plan to open the school and accept dormitory students by finding donors to support the school and the dormitory.

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<sup>5</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the February 18<sup>th</sup> 2021 official market rate



This photo of the local government school was taken on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2020 in Koe Dit Ywa Tan Shay village, Koe Dit village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District.

The school is too small for the number of students and, thus, there is not enough space for all the students. Local leaders, villagers and teachers sent a letter to the Thandaunggyi education administrator's office requesting to build a new school for the local villagers but there has been no reply and no action taken yet.

[Photo: KHRG]

## Healthcare

There are [several] Myanmar government hospitals for healthcare services in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. They are Leik Tho, Daw Hpa Hkoh, Thandaung Myo Thit, Kler La [Baw Ga Li] Hospitals. There are also clinics in the villages, including Thaut Yay Kat Clinic. The common diseases that the local villagers have faced are dengue and other illnesses due to changes in the weather.

The local villagers are concerned about going to the hospitals and the clinics to get treatment because of COVID-19. The doctors and nurses provided better and closer treatment before COVID-19 started. Since the spread of COVID-19, the health workers, doctors and nurses stay far away from the patients (three to six feet – 0.91 to 1.82 metres) when they go to the hospital for treatment. Some patients are not satisfied with this [...] and have stopped going to the hospitals and clinics for treatment.

People who live in the plains areas do not go to hospitals or clinics. When they are sick, they just go to see the local villagers who have received medical training [the level of formal training can be quite varied]. However, if they don't get better or have a serious medical condition, then they are sent to the hospital.

Local villagers from Leik Tho Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District go to the nearby hospitals for treatment. There is a clinic in Thaut Yay Kat, Leik Tho Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township.

The local villagers [in particular, pregnant women and children] have to get vaccinations [for example, for polio] once a month or quarterly so they only go to the clinic at that time. Otherwise, when they are sick, they find ways to get treatment from people in the village who understand medicine or have medical knowledge.

Myanmar government healthcare services only operate in the [main] towns. So local villagers [outside of towns and in remote areas] receive healthcare services from the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW).<sup>6</sup> When the local villagers in areas controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>7</sup> get seriously ill, they go to the two township and district hospitals under

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</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

KNU control. They also go to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>8</sup> battalion clinic for treatment.<sup>9</sup>

### COVID-19 pandemic

KNU district leaders and other relevant leaders have been collaborating and organising healthcare awareness training for the prevention of COVID-19 for local villagers to be able to protect themselves. Local villagers are given awareness training about personal hygiene and sanitation; they are also given soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, buckets, cups, handkerchiefs, towels, and sanitary pads (for the women).

For the second step [on a broader level], there are travel restrictions and time limitations for visitors and outsiders entering into other villages. The KNU leaders from Taw Oo District set up travel restrictions in their control areas for COVID-19 prevention and the safety of the local villagers. Some local villagers have also placed bamboo at the road's entrance into the village, along with a signboard (checkpoint barrier) that says "No visitors allowed". Some of the village leaders also take turns at [a lookout point at] the top of the village and watch out for people going in and out of the village.

Screening checkpoints have been set up at the main roads in Taw Oo District. KNU leaders from Taw Oo District and the local villagers collaborated to organise a meeting in March 2020 where they discussed how to handle prevention of the virus. They also gave awareness training to the [other] local villagers.

KNU leaders set up travel restrictions and local villagers have been complying with these procedures. However, there have been some disturbances from Tatmadaw<sup>10</sup> soldiers. In March 2020, Tatmadaw soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>11</sup> #413 came to check [on the villagers] and put pressure on them to remove the screening checkpoint which was set up by the Taw Oo KNU District authorities in A--- village, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. [Although earlier in the year, local Tatmadaw soldiers had let the screening checkpoint operate,] now, the [KNLA] soldiers and the healthcare workers responsible [for the checkpoint] are facing difficulties due to new pressure by Tatmadaw soldiers to remove the screening checkpoint.

[A similar issue arose at] a COVID-19 screening checkpoint at B--- vehicle road, which goes to Leik Tho, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. This checkpoint is run in collaboration by the KDHW (under administration by the KNU from Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District) and Brigade #2 Security Guard Company #2 (under the control of KNLA Battalion #5). In early April 2020, the deputy commander from Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion<sup>12</sup> #26 came to the checkpoint and put pressure on those who were at the checkpoint to remove it. He said it is not appropriate when the [government] upper [higher] leaders see this [checkpoint].

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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.

<sup>8</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>9</sup> KNLA battalion clinics are typically open to both military and civilians.

<sup>10</sup> Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most 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. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

The [checkpoint] staff from Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District did not want to have any conflict so they removed the checkpoint. Afterward, they only set up and organised checkpoints within areas under KNU control. One of the villagers said that he feels safer and has more confidence for his healthcare (protection) because of the screening checkpoints set up by the KNU.

There is one quarantine site at Htoh Lwee Wah School, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, as well as at the sport stadium in Daw Hpa Hkoh Town, the Thandaung Myo Thit Primary School, and inside the Liek Tho Three Floors Building in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. There are many people in different places and they have to quarantine for 21 days and get a medical check-up. Villagers who come back from abroad must follow these procedures as well.

The local social association and local donors have made donations and provided food support and materials for hygiene. The local Myanmar Police Force (MPF) has also participated in providing security, but this is seen as a threat by local villagers who have to quarantine. There are also young women who have to quarantine at the temporary [quarantine] sites in C--- Town, Taw Oo District. In April 2020, at 2 pm, one of the policemen responsible for security at the quarantine site in C--- got drunk and entered the quarantine room of two young women without his shirt on. The two girls were frightened and shouted for help. One of the other policemen on duty went to remove the drunk police officer from the girls' room and took him back to the security guard office. One of the local villagers who was in quarantine said that they do not know whether the police officer was punished or not.

People from town, along with the section administrators, have been collaborating to look after the quarantine site in Thandaung Myo Thit and also monitor people who are going in and out of the town as part of their prevention measures.

The local villagers who leave KNU-controlled areas in Daw Hpa Hkoh Town, Taw Oo District to work in other areas or abroad have to quarantine for 21 days when they return to their village. The local villagers and the KNU leaders from Hta Poe Chi village, Htee Tha Saw village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District have collaborated in setting up a quarantine site. There are now 29 villagers who have come back from abroad. These [29 people] came back on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020.

The KNU local leaders from Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District arranged for the quarantine site according to a request by local villagers.

When COVID-19 reached [spread] into Myanmar, the Myanmar government told the local villagers to wash their hands often and to avoid public gatherings in order to prevent the spread of the virus. There have been problems regarding work and trading activities for some villagers since outsiders cannot enter the villages when a signboard has been posted and [when there is heavy] monitoring of the local areas. Therefore, there are limitations for the local villagers to sell their fruits and to buy goods and food items. Normal trading is not allowed, so the local villagers are facing livelihood difficulties for their families.



This photo was taken on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2020 in Nga Mel section, Toungoo Town, Taw Oo (Toungoo District). It shows the Covid-19 prevention supplies that were prepared and organised by The Consortium of Dutch NGOs (CDN) for distribution in Taw Oo District. Taw Oo District KNU Chairman and district leaders then held a meeting to discuss the distribution of those materials to the local villagers as well as the local quarantine sites. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020 in Thaut Yay Kat Section #3, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. It shows the Covid-19 screening checkpoint set up by KDHW healthcare workers from Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District together with KNLA soldiers from Brigade #2, Battalion #5 Sub-battalion #2. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## Development

Several companies are building [dirt] roads (not concrete roads [Myay Ni Lan]) in Daw Hpa Hkoh and Htaw Ta Htoo Townships, Taw Oo District for the development of the local areas. Phyo Wai Kyaw Company [under Toungoo Southern Command Headquarters (Ta Pa Ka) led by Commander Bo<sup>13</sup> Kyaw Wai] received a referral from militia leader Lieutenant [Thandaung Peace Group<sup>14</sup> Commander] Kyaw Win to build a road from the north of Liek Tho Town to D---village, Shan Leh Pyin Gyi village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. Another road from D--- village to E---, Ngway Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township was built by one of the retired majors from Taw Kin Tun Company with funding from the Myanmar government. NGOs are also building a concrete road the width of 3 metres through the mountain areas so that motorbikes are able to travel [through those areas].

When [Taw Kin Tun] Company built the road [KHRG was not able to establish the exact date] [from D---village to E---], they only asked for permission from the Myanmar government, not from the local villagers. They [the company] did make sure to get permission from the village head and/or the village administrator, however there was no participation from the local

<sup>13</sup> Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer'.

<sup>14</sup> Thandaung Special Region Peace Group is also known as Htanay Phyithu Sitt A'pweh, or 'Thandaung Peace Group', is a local militia located in Toungoo District. The group split from the Karen National Union in 1997 and was initially led by Khe R'Mun. Reports from the field claim that they are currently led by General Bo Than Myit, have around 300 troops stationed at Leik Tho Base (Battalion Commander Bo Kyaw Win), in Leik Tho Township, and an additional 40 soldiers at Pya Sa Khan Base (Battalion Commander Khin Maung Lwin), near Thandaung town. It has been reported that they control a number of different illicit operations, including gambling and black market car licencing. They are also allegedly employed as security personnel by local companies and wealthy individuals involved in logging and mineral resource extraction, in addition to having direct involvement in the lumber and mineral business. Htanay Phyithu Sitt A'pweh should not be confused with Nyein Chan Yay A'pweh, which is occasionally translated as Peace Group but refers to the Karen Peace Army (KPA), aka the Karen Peace Force (KPF). Nor should it be conflated with Aye Chan Yay, another small militia group also operating in Toungoo District that the Thandaung Peace Group has come into conflict with. It is also distinct from the KNU/KNLA-Peace Council, which is also sometimes translated as 'Peace Group'.

villagers. The villagers' plantation areas were damaged so the villagers asked for compensation from the village administrator. The village administrator tried to negotiate with Taw Kin Tun Company for the compensation but it said the lands are "vacant, fallow and virgin" (VFV). Therefore, the company [claimed that they] do not need to give compensation for them [the damages] and [that] the villagers do not have land forms #7 [land use certificate, thus the lands have not been registered]. The local villagers did not know enough [about the regulations] to talk to them so they had to give up.

The local villagers who lost their lands were from F---village, E--- village, and G--- village, Ngway Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The representatives from the company [say that they] are building the road for the development of the villages. If the villagers do not accept it, there will be no vehicle road [concrete road]. If they want the vehicle road, they have to sign. But there were only a few village heads that signed the agreement for building the road; most of them did not agree or sign [they did not agree with the conditions laid out by the company, nor do they trust the company, and so did not sign the agreement].

The company cut down the local villagers' trees and the bamboo beside the areas where they built the road and the bridge [the company actually ploughed more area than was required for the road]. Then they took that timber and bamboo to the town with their trucks, according to a local villager. The companies that built the roads have a relationship with the armed groups and the Tatmadaw. Therefore, the local villagers were afraid to deal with them and they had to give up their [land, trees, and bamboo].

Zay Ka Bar Company from Thandaung Myo Thit, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township also put pressure on the local villagers to be able to buy the lands in H--- [H--- River], in Thandaung Myo Thit Town [KHRG was not able to establish the exact date]. They worked in deceptive ways and bought the local villagers' lands even though the villagers did not agree to it. [The company said they received permission from the government to measure the lands and when the villagers complained, they were asked to present their land titles. Because most villagers did not have land titles, the company claimed the lands were "vacant, fallow, and virgin," or reserved forest land, and thus put pressure on the villagers to sell their lands.] They built the road and also built resorts on the local villagers' lands. They only gave compensation after they damaged the local villagers' lands and they also had conflicts with some villagers.

Pa Thee Chaung in Thandaung Myo Thit Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District is the river that the local villagers from Daw Hpa Hkoh town use. Many other villages also rely on this river for drinking water. Zay Ka Bar Company built a resort that releases waste into the river, so the water from the river is no longer useable as drinking water. They [the resort] throw plastics and other rubbish into the river. Therefore, the local villagers cannot use the water from the river anymore. Since 2015, the water from the river has become dirtier and there have been more difficulties for the local villagers to access clean drinking water.

In March 2020, a solar electricity project was undertaken in I--- village, Naga Mout village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. Thaut Yay Kat dam, which was built in 2012, was supposed to provide electricity to the local communities [but has not benefitted them at all since the electricity is being sold off to foreign buyers instead]. The dam staff is in charge of caring for the dam and the surrounding forest areas [but allowed] the lands to be levelled by big machinery [to make room for the solar panels]. A lot of lands have now been damaged. Shwe Swan Inn Company Manager U Ba Wan did not ask for prior permission from the local villagers or the local authorities [prior to levelling the land], and it [the project] has damaged a lot of lands and forest. Therefore, there have been conflicts with the local villagers. The local villagers sent a complaint letter to the KNU leaders in Taw Oo District to stop the project led by Shwe Swan Inn Company in April 2020.

The KNU leaders from Taw Oo District met with Shwe Swan Inn Company Manager U Ba Wan in April 2020 and told him that the solar panel electricity project has damaged the local villagers' plantation areas. They told him to stop levelling the lands and to halt the solar panel electricity project [since he did not have] the local villagers' permission. The solar panels increase the [surrounding environmental] temperature, which impacts the local villagers, animals and plants. Therefore, he was told to stop this solar panel electricity project, out of a request by the local villagers.



These photos were taken on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2020 in I--- village, Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. They show the lands bulldozed by Shwe Swan Inn Company to construct the solar panel electricity project. Land on both sides of the river was destroyed. Some of this land had been owned by villagers and confiscated by Shwe Swan Inn Company. [Photos: KHRG]



This photo was taken on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2020 in I---village, Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. The sign in this photo reads: "No entry allowed on Htoh Boh villagers' ancestral lands". The local villagers put up this sign to protect their lands from confiscation. [Photo: KHRG]

This photo was taken on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. It shows a bulldozer that belongs to Taw Kin Tun Company. The company is constructing a road between G--- village and F--- village, Ngway Taung village tract, Leik Tho Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The bulldozer broke down and was left in the local villager's farm without prior notification and consultation with the farm's owner. [Photo: KHRG]



## Livelihood situation

The local villagers in Taw Oo District mainly work in agriculture for their livelihood. In the mountain areas such as Kler La [Baw Ga Li] and Leik Tho towns, in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, villagers plant seasonal crops such as durian, mangosteen, dog fruit, cardamom, and coffee for their livelihood.

The local villagers from the mountain areas rely on seasonal fruits and sell the fruits from their plantation for their livelihood, and to cover their family's social and education expenses. This year, there has been a lot of damage by mice to fruit and plant crops, such as cardamom and coffee. However, [the main problem] the local villagers have faced in 2020 [is being unable to] sell the seasonal crops from their plantations because of COVID-19. There are fewer merchants who will buy their fruits both within the country and abroad.

The prices of seasonal fruits have decreased, and the travel restrictions, including the temporary border closures, prevent merchants from exporting their goods. No merchants from China have come to buy cardamom from the local villagers this year. Because the villagers are unable to sell their cardamom, they are facing livelihood problems. Some of the industries in Taw Oo [Toungoo] Town have also had to shut down so the local villagers cannot sell their [other] seasonal fruits either.

The villagers from the mountain areas are also afraid to go buy goods and food items in Taw Oo Town because of COVID-19.

Local villagers rely on their lands and mainly work on seasonal crops and agriculture. However, since 2000, Ba Yint Naung Tatmadaw soldiers [from the Ba Yint Naung army camp Military Operations Command (MOC) #6, LIB #603, MOC #3] confiscated the lands of at least 500 villagers, totalling not less than 5,000 acres. They built a military training school on the lands that they confiscated. Along with the military school, the Tatmadaw built a military base and small and heavy weaponry shooting areas between J--- village and K--- village, Maung Nwet Gyi village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. Moreover, nearby is a consecrated mountain area where local villagers from 10 villages have built a church and go to worship. This mountain is called Sit Ku Taung in Burmese and Kaw Koo K'Ser in Karen. The Tatmadaw soldiers from Ba Yint Naung military school fire weapons at the mountain and also at the areas where the local villagers work on their plantations beside the mountain. As a result, the local villagers' lands have been destroyed.

Since 2019, the Tatmadaw began releasing [giving back] the confiscated lands, but the Ba Yint Naung military school headmaster Major Thu Ya La Min told the local villagers to prepare a list of the land owners (whose lands were included in the confiscation) and measure the land areas (to give them back the correct amount of land). The local villagers then asked for advice from the township administrator about what to do to get their plantation lands back. The local villagers paid for the land measurement costs and other expenses. The section administrator, one of the Myanmar government land surveyors, and the Ba Yint Naung army camp authorities then measured the lands. However, the Daw Hpa Hkoh Township land surveyor has not said anything [to the villagers] about (giving back) the lands, so as of July 2020 the local villagers still do not know anything about [what is happening with] the lands. The land surveyor can do nothing further than measuring the lands so there is no guarantee [for the villagers] of getting their lands back.

Since the beginning of 2020, the local villagers have had problems working on the confiscated lands and getting their seasonal crops from the plantation lands near the Ba Yint Naung military school. The local villagers face threats, and [fear] being stopped by the soldiers from Ba Yint Naung military school. The heavy weaponry bullets [shells] have landed in some of the local

villagers' plantation areas and have damaged their lands. They are also afraid to go to their plantation areas for that reason.

Since after the civilian government came to power in 2011, the local villagers have faced problems securing their livelihood because the Tatmadaw confiscated their lands. They cannot rely on the land for their livelihood so they have to work as casual labourers. They [believe that they] will be able to solve their livelihood problems and restart their lives within three years if they are able to get back their lands. Therefore, they [have tried to] cooperate to get their lands back from the Tatmadaw, but until now (July 2020), they still have not heard anything and are not sure whether they will get their lands back. So they feel hopeless about getting their lands back and helpless in facing this situation.

Some of the local villagers face difficulties working as casual labourers because of COVID-19. They cannot leave their area, and even if they do, there is no hiring of workers. So they are facing livelihood difficulties. There are signboards at the entrance of the villages that read "Outsiders cannot come in" so the vegetable sellers cannot go into the villages to sell their products. They are struggling to find solutions to their livelihood difficulties as well.

Some of the villagers are afraid of COVID-19 but they have to work as casual labourers to provide for their family. Normally [as casual labourers] they [can expect] to earn 5,000 kyats [USD 3.55] a day, but there are no employers offering casual work. The Myanmar government also created restrictions forbidding the celebration of the water festival and other public gatherings. There has been one time food distribution for each house that includes one basket of rice, 30 viss<sup>15</sup> of chicken and one bowl of beans. Villagers who live close to town received the full amount, but villagers who live further out only got four bowls of rice, 30 viss of chicken and three milk tins of bean for each house due to arrangements made by the village administrators from each village. This led to arguments between the villagers.

For the prevention of COVID-19, the local villagers are required to stay at home and wash their hands as directed by the local social association. But some of the local villagers have to work [find work] as casual labourers [outside the home] to provide for their family.

Some of the local villagers [particularly those who do not own lands to plant their own crops] from Liek Tho Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township have faced difficulties finding work so they have been picking bamboo shoots and selling them to provide for their family. They have been picking bamboo shoots in the rainy season, cutting and selling bamboo in the summer and working as casual labourers for their livelihood. [Because of COVID-19] they cannot leave the village for work so they are now facing more problems, such as family, social, and education issues.

Parents who cannot leave to find work because of travel restrictions are facing financial problems in sending their children to school. There are some parents who cannot afford to send their children to school so the children have to drop out.

The rubber price dropped to 500 kyats [USD 0.35] per pound in 2019, resulting in a loss for rubber plant owners, who are also now unable to hire workers to extract the latex. So the local villagers are now jobless and are facing livelihood difficulties. The local villagers from the mountain areas do not have work or lands to work on because the Tatmadaw confiscated their plantation areas. Therefore, they have been doing vocational work, such as thatching mats, baskets and fish traps, and selling them in order to resolve their families' livelihood difficulties.

The prices of crops this year have decreased, as have the prices of goods. [This has led to a decrease in income for villagers selling crops and other goods], so local villagers who had to

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<sup>15</sup> A *viss* is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg or 3.52 lb.

take a loan from Mya Sain Yang Company are now having problems repaying the loans. Some villagers have taken out new interest-bearing loans in order to pay off the original loan money, while others have had to sell their property to pay off the loan.



This photo was taken on March 18<sup>th</sup> 2020 in E--- village, Ngway Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. It shows the dried turmeric that the local villagers now rely on for their livelihood.

Since 2017, the land of local villagers is being destroyed by logging undertaken by the Thandaung Peace Group in collaboration with the Tatmadaw. Forest burning has also taken place every year. As a result, the local villagers can only plant turmeric to meet their livelihood needs.

*[Photo: KHRG]*

## **Military activities**

Military Operations Command (MOC) #4 (Sa Ka Ka #4) has been conducting military activities in Baw Ga Li Town and the eastern part of Baw Ga Li (in non-town areas) located in Taw Oo District. Nay Pyi Daw Territory Security Force, MOC #6 and the troops under the Southern Command Headquarters have been operating from Thandaunggyi to Leik Tho.

MOC #4 has been operating in Htantabin Township, Taw Oo District. It has placed frontline army camps from Chuang Na Kwa army camp in Thauंगाung Township to Baw Ga Li Town. The Light Infantry Divisions (LID) #701 to #710 are operating there. One of the LID Commanders, Phyo Thein, is based in Baw Ga Li Town; and frontline army camps have been operating from L--- Town to M---. Tatmadaw soldiers based in frontline army camps have been renovating their barracks and fencing their camps. They have also reinforced their troops by sending soldiers to their army camps. The Tatmadaw soldiers based in L--- Town and M--- entered into villagers' plantations to cut bamboo and wood to fence their army camp. The bamboo and wood fell on and damaged villagers' crops, in particular, their Pala [indigo] plants and coffee plants. The Tatmadaw soldiers strengthened their frontline army camps and constructed their bunkers out of bricks. This construction triggered more concern by the villagers.

Even though the Tatmadaw army camps constructed before the ceasefire were not strong [heavily fortified], fighting occurred very often. After the preliminary ceasefire in 2012, the Tatmadaw soldiers began conducting their military activities on the frontline and constructing stronger army camps. This has created a more unstable situation for the local villagers.

[Since 2012] Tatmadaw soldiers have been sent to the frontline to strengthen their military force. Also, rations and weapons are continually being transported either by military trucks or by soldiers [on foot]. Moreover, weapons are often transported by over 100 horses. Villagers have been saying that this must be military preparation. They have also been saying that it could easily lead to fighting. Because of this unstable situation, some villagers living in mountainous areas have not re-established their village yet. Tatmadaw army camps are based near their villages and [villagers fear that] they [Tatmadaw soldiers] could burn their villages at any time, like before the ceasefire. Therefore, villagers are living on their plantation lands.

When Tatmadaw soldiers operated before the ceasefire, they indiscriminately planted landmines in the area. Even though a ceasefire agreement has been made, the route Tatmadaw soldiers used for their operations and the temporary military sites where they were based are still contaminated with landmines [and these are lands now being used by villagers].

Landmine fragments are often found in the villagers' plantation lands. Landmines have also been found in the lands cleared for [setting up] plantations. After finding them, villagers mark a warning or danger sign for no entry. Landmine fragments can probably be found in N--- village, Htaw Ta Htoo Township as well.

Since 2012, Tatmadaw's MOC #4 in Htantabin Township, Taw Oo District, has been constructing a road from Baw Ga Li Town, Thandaung Township, Taw Oo District to the intersection of Maw Chee and Yay Tho Gyi village, Yay Tho Gyi village tract, Htantabin Township, Taw Oo District. Even though the KNU leaders from Taw Oo District did not give permission, the Tatmadaw soldiers gradually worked on the road each year.

MOC #4 has been taking advantage of COVID-19 restrictions and prevention measures to construct roads from Baw Ga Li Town, Thandaung Township, Taw Oo District to the intersection of Maw Chee and Yay Tho Gyi villages, Yay Tho Gyi village tract, Htantabin Township (Kaw Thay Der area), Taw Oo District. They started to construct the road in the summer of 2020 and have continued constructing it through the 2020 rainy season. Because of the road expansion during the rainy season, the roads were damaged, making it difficult for villagers to travel by motorbike or car. The road is now a thick muddy road.

Tatmadaw soldiers have been constructing the road and undertaking security of the road construction. They have also been sending their soldiers to the frontline army camps. Villagers are worried that the ceasefire will be broken and that fighting will start again because of all of these activities.

Tatmadaw soldiers transported rations and weapons to [their camps] in Taw Oo District by military trucks and horses. While they were sending them [rations and weapons] from Toungoo to Baw Ga Li Town and to their army camps in eastern Baw Ga Li, villagers were worried and had to delay their travel plans.

On December 12<sup>th</sup> 2019, Tatmadaw soldiers were transported by military trucks from Toungoo to eastern Baw Ga Li. Again on December 25<sup>th</sup> 2020, 25 Tatmadaw military trucks transported rations and weapons, seven of which also carried soldiers to the frontlines.

On January 5<sup>th</sup> 2020, 13 military trucks sent soldiers and weapons. On January 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, three military trucks sent more weapons. On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2020, 14 military trucks transported more weapons and rations. On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2020, three trucks transporting rations returned to Toungoo Town. On January 9<sup>th</sup> 2020, 10 more military trucks from Baw Ga Li Town returned to Toungoo Town.

On January 15<sup>th</sup> 2020, 25 military trucks carried 117 horses to be used for transporting rations and weapons to eastern Ba Ga Le, Taw Oo District. Three other military trucks transported bags of rice and other military supplies. Two additional military trucks transported items that will be transported [further] by the horses [where the trucks cannot pass].

On January 15<sup>th</sup> 2020, 22 military trucks sent horses from Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District to Toungoo Town and returned later that night. On January 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, 10 [more] military trucks transporting rations and horses returned from Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District to Toungoo town.

On January 18<sup>th</sup> 2020, 12 military trucks sent rations and weapons from Toungoo Town to Baw Ga Li Town and the army camps based in eastern Baw Ga Li. On January 19<sup>th</sup> 2020, 11 military trucks returned to Toungoo Town from Ba Ga Le Town and sent 60 more horses to Thandaunggyi Township, Taw Oo District.

On January 20<sup>th</sup> 2020, eight military trucks transported more rations from Toungoo [Town] to Baw Ga Li [Town]. On February 5<sup>th</sup> 2020, five military trucks sent more soldiers to Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District. On March 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, two military trucks returned to Toungoo from Baw Ga Li [Town].

On March 7<sup>th</sup> 2020, 18 military trucks transported rations and weapons from Toungoo Town to Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District. On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, three military trucks went from Toungoo to Baw Ga Li without carrying anything. On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020 at night, one military truck carrying about 35 soldiers returned to Toungoo from Baw Ga Li Town. On March 18<sup>th</sup> 2020, five military trucks carrying soldiers returned to Toungoo Town from Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District. The Tatmadaw soldiers have been constantly transporting rations, weapons and soldiers and this has triggered worry for the local villagers.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020, seven military trucks went to Baw Ga Li [Town], Taw Oo District from Toungoo Town without transporting anything in the trucks. On March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 at night, seven military trucks carried frontline soldiers back to Toungoo Town from Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District. On March 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, a Tatmadaw truck transported diesel to use for the road construction. The diesel was transported to Baw Ga Li Town from Toungoo Town.

On April 5<sup>th</sup> 2020, three military trucks carried soldiers from Toungoo [Town], and later that night returned to Toungoo Town from Baw Ga Li Town. When they went up to Baw Ga Li Town from Toungoo, they were carrying soldiers, however, the soldiers did not return. On April 7<sup>th</sup> 2020, three military trucks transported more military equipment and soldiers to Baw Ga Li Town, Taw Oo District from Toungoo Town. On July 5<sup>th</sup> 2020 three Tatmadaw army trucks filled with soldiers went from Toungoo Town to Baw Ga Li Town. The trucks went back the same way but the soldiers stayed behind.

The Tatmadaw have been using rubber plantations confiscated from villagers for live fire target practice by Ba Yint Naung Tat Myo (a military town composed of a military practice school, army camp, and military clinic). This caused damage to the rubber plants. Furthermore, rubber plants were cut down to clear space for the mortars and the mortar artillery shell cases left on the farms, which has caused concern for the villagers about their land and livestock.

The Tatmadaw soldiers went to the frontline in Thandaunggyi Township, Taw Oo District and they rotated their troops once every three or four months. They also transported rations. Tatmadaw soldiers attended military training and they left the mortar shells [did not remove them] after the completion of the training. In addition, the live fire [heavy artillery] training and [general] military training has been increasing. The trainees who attend the police and firefighter training have also had to attend the military training. Because of the groups [large numbers] of soldiers attending live fire training, villagers' concerns have increased.



This photo was taken on March 7<sup>th</sup> 2020 in P'Leh Wa and Na Seh Ta Mine, Si Pin K'Lay village, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. This is the ferry that the local villagers from Baw Ga Li Town and Htaw Ta Htoo Township are using to cross the Thaut Yay Kat River. There are only two ferries there and priority is given to the Tatmadaw trucks and the vehicles of the development companies to cross the river. Therefore, the local villagers face challenges crossing the river. During the summer months it can also get very hot, since there is no shade or nearby shelter to rest, which is particularly taxing on children and older villagers. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on June 27<sup>th</sup> 2020 in A---village, Taw Pya Gyi village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. This photo shows the transportation and support unit #930 while transporting rations, artillery and ammunition to their Tatmadaw soldiers and army camps on the frontline. This unit operates under the authority of the Southern Command Headquarters (Ta Pa Ka). Despite the ceasefire, the Tatmadaw have continued to transport rations and ammunition. During the reporting period, this movement has increased, raising concern among local villagers. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## Perspective

Regarding education and healthcare, the government should provide enough medicine, healthcare services and healthcare workers for the local villagers in the two townships in Taw Oo District. They should also arrange to reduce the medicine [medical] fees.

Regarding education, the government should prepare an information guide about the prevalence of this virus for the academic year 2020-2021 for the students to study. The government should provide enough school materials, buildings and educational services for the students.

Regarding the livelihood situation, the government should control the market price for regional fruits and vegetables for the local villagers. The government should conduct a survey of the needs of the local villagers and create more opportunities for them.

The government has a responsibility to respect and protect the rights and opportunities of the local villagers regarding land [ownership]. The government should take action and responsibility to protect the local villagers' lands from the Tatmadaw and companies engaging in forced confiscation or buy-outs.

The Tatmadaw should not do anything that goes against the local villagers or without the local villagers' approval. There should be transparency when handling cases where the Tatmadaw have committed human rights violations and there should be fair judgment [for the local villagers/victims].

The Tatmadaw should avoid any development projects that go against the local villagers' wishes while they are there [based in these local areas]. They should instead cooperate with the local KNU to honour the peace process in accordance with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

This situation update has covered information regarding the COVID-19 situation, as well as human rights violations regarding livelihood issues, development, and Tatmadaw activities in the townships and the local areas in Taw Oo District from January to July 2020.

Further background reading on the situation in Taw Oo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Taw Oo District Situation Update: Livelihood, Tatmadaw activities, education and development projects, July to October 2019"](#), November 2020.
- ["Toungoo Situation Update: Increasing militarisation and land issues in Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, December 2018 to May 2019"](#), September 2019.
- ["Toungoo Situation Update: Tatmadaw military activities continue in Htantabin and Thandaunggyi townships"](#), January 2020.

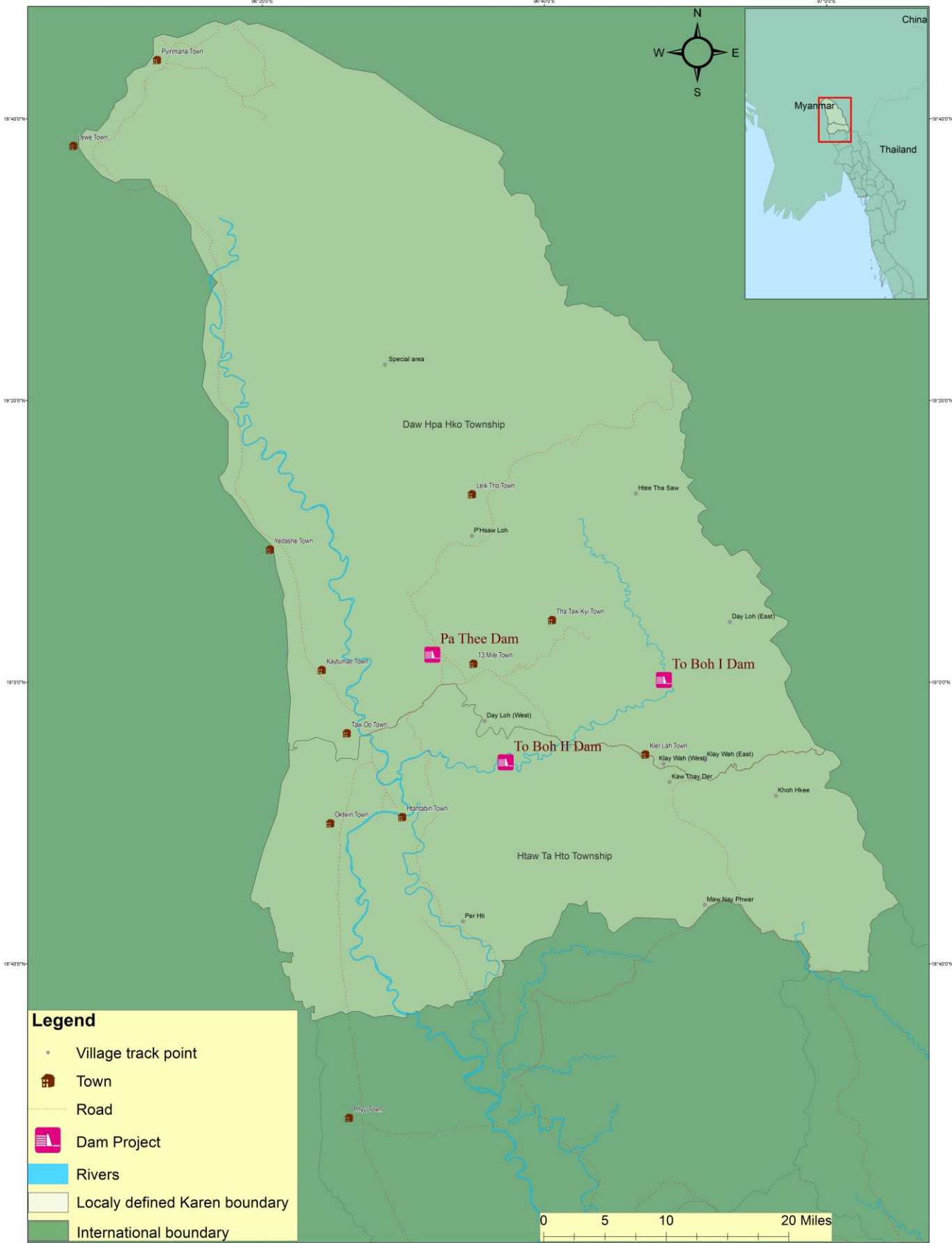
## About KHRG

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](http://www.khrq.org).

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<sup>16</sup> 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.

# Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



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