



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020 / KHRG # 20-82-S1

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## **Kler Lwee Htoo District Situation Update: Gold mining activities and COVID-19 restrictions threaten local livelihoods in Moo Township, May to July 2020**

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Moo (Mone) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District from May to July 2020. Gold mining activities along the Klaw Myaw and Puh Lo Kloh rivers have damaged local farmland and have resulted in the pollution of plantations and water sources. More than ten villages were negatively impacted by these activities, and several villagers lost their lands after the local Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>1</sup> authorities allocated them as gold mining sites. The villagers affected now face livelihood issues and difficulties to access water. The local communities reported the problem to the KNU township authorities, to no avail. The KNU authorities also implemented travel restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19<sup>2</sup> in June 2020, which translated into livelihood difficulties for the local villagers.<sup>3</sup>*

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### **Introduction**

The information in this situation update was collected in June and July 2020. It was provided by local villagers and village heads in Moo (Mone) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District.

### **Gold mining activities**

Gold mining activities have been conducted since 2015 along the Klaw Myaw and Puh Lo Kloh rivers. These rivers are located between O--- and L--- villages, Moo Township. They flow near - E--- village, N--- village, A--- village, Y--- village, S--- village, I--- village, W--- village, and M--- village. They also flow near O--- villagers' farms and ponds, and near the Kler Law Seh and

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</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>3</sup> The present document is based on information received in August 2020. It was provided by a community member in Kler Lwee Htoo 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.

Maw Poo ponds [these ponds are connected to the river through ditches]. The Kler Law Seh pond is located east of S--- village. The Maw Poo pond is located east of M--- village.

In May 2020, there has been an increase in gold mining activities in Th'Bay Lah Muh Hkoh place,<sup>4</sup> along the Puh Loh Kloh river [more land was allocated to conduct gold mining activities]. Around ten businessmen are engaged in the gold mining activities: U<sup>5</sup> Say Pout, Daw<sup>6</sup> Mya Yay, Daw Say Yar Aye, Daw Jet Ma, U Kyaw Thu Ra, U Nga Zaw, Maw<sup>7</sup> Zaw Oo, Kay Chaw Oo, U Zaw Lwin and U Aung Aung Oo. U Say Pout is from Shwegyin Town, but got married in Moo Town.

These businessmen received permission from the Moo Township KNU authorities to mine gold in the area. Saw Eh K'Lu, the Moo Township leader, is taking responsibility regarding this case [was responsible for granting the permission]. The gold mining committee is led by company commander Kyaw Kyaw from Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA)<sup>8</sup> Brigade #3, Battalion #8, Company #3 [a gold mining committee was established to monitor the gold mining activities and decide which lands will be allocated as gold mining sites. It is composed of local KNU officials and KNLA officers from Brigade #3, Battalion #8, Company #3].

Naw P---, Saw D---, A--- and Saw K--- from Z--village were negatively impacted by the gold mining activities. These villagers stopped working on their hill fields in 2020, as their lands were designated as gold mining sites. [At first, the KNU Township authorities said that their lands were located in a reserved forest, and therefore refused to compensate them. However, Maung Zaw from the gold mining committee collected 6 million kyats [USD 4,493.70]<sup>9</sup> from six of the businessmen engaged in the gold mining. Although the four villagers were given one million kyats [USD 748.95] each as compensation, they do not have lands to farm anymore. They asked the company commander Kyaw Kyaw and a local KNLA platoon commander for new farmland. The KNLA officers responded that they would consider their request, but the villagers had yet to receive new lands as of December 10<sup>th</sup> 2020. It seems that, in this case, the remaining two million kyats [USD 1,497.90] were shared among the committee members.]



These photos were taken on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020 in O--- village, Thaw T'Hkoo village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. They show plantations that were destroyed because of the gold mining activities. [Photos: KHRG]

<sup>4</sup> Place refers to the name given by local communities to a specific location. It is smaller than what local communities refer to as an area.

<sup>5</sup> U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

<sup>6</sup> Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>7</sup> Maw is Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

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

<sup>9</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the December 10<sup>th</sup> 2020 official market rate.

In E--- village, B---, Saw F---, and Saw H--- were negatively impacted by the gold mining activities. Their lands are located east of E--- village, along the K'Law Myaw river and near the gold mining area. Polluted water [with mercury<sup>10</sup> and other chemicals used in gold mining operations]<sup>11</sup> leaked into their well, so they cannot use it to get drinking water anymore. It created difficulties for them because they have to get drinking water from other wells. The villagers in E--- worry that the gold mining activities will eventually pollute all the water sources in the village, and that they might get sick because of the polluted water in the future. They also worry that their lands will get damaged [because of the pollution and the gold mining operations].



These photos were taken on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020, in E--- village, Thaw T'Hkoo village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. The water in this well was contaminated as a result of the gold mining activities nearby. [Photos: KHRG]



These photos were taken on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020, in O--- village, Thaw T'Koo village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. The local paddy fields (photo on the left) are at high risk of being polluted because contaminated water from the gold mining activities is leaking into farmland (photo on the right). Villagers worry that their paddies will not produce enough rice due to the pollution generated by the gold mining activities. [Photos: KHRG]

<sup>10</sup> In many countries, elemental mercury is used in artisanal and small-scale gold mining. Mercury is mixed with gold-containing materials, forming a mercury-gold amalgam which is then heated, vaporizing the mercury to obtain the gold. This process can be very dangerous and lead to significant mercury exposure and health risks. – US Environmental Protection Agency, “[Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining Without Mercury](#)”, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> See KHRG, “[Nyaunglebin Interview: Gold mining activities threaten the livelihoods of villagers in Mone Township, September 2019](#)”, November 2019.

The villagers from the areas affected by the gold mining activities want them to stop. If these activities continue, they will damage the environment, as well as the local farms and hill fields [even more]. They will also have a negative impact on the aquatic fauna.

The damages caused by the gold mining activities prompted the Z--- and N--- village tract<sup>12</sup> administrators to organise a meeting with the local villagers on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. They discussed ways of preventing the major damages caused by the gold mining activities and possible means of compensation for the villagers affected. In June 2020, the Z--- and N--- village tract administrators reported about the damages caused by the gold mining activities to the KNU Township authorities. The Township authorities have not responded to the report yet.

The Township authorities organised a meeting [of the gold mining committee] on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2020. They decided to stop the gold mining activities from July 1<sup>st</sup> to August 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The gold mining will resume on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2020. Saw A--- from Z--- village told KHRG that his land was included in the area allocated for gold mining, [and that he will most likely lose it] if the gold mining activities resume. [The gold mining activities did resume and are expected to continue until the end of 2020.]

One of U Say Pout's workers died in a landslide in the E--- area on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020 while maneuvering an excavator. The other workers were able to retrieve his body on July 4<sup>th</sup>, and to dig out the excavator on July 14<sup>th</sup>.

## **Covid-19**

The KNU has put in place travel restrictions in J--- and U--- villages, Moo Township to prevent the spread of COVID-19. A screening checkpoint was also set up between the two villages. Since June 2020, villagers from J--- and U--- have to obtain a recommendation letter from the village or village tract administrators, as well as a doctor's certificate [stating that they do not have COVID-19] to be able to travel. The travel restrictions have created difficulties for the villagers from J--- and U--- villages, as they depend on the sale of their seasonal crops for their livelihood.

In June, the KNU Township authorities arranged three market areas between J--- and U--- villages. Villagers from the mountainous areas and from J--- have to go to these market areas to sell and buy [crops and food].

Villagers from the J--- area who work abroad have to quarantine upon their return. The Myanmar government gave responsibility to each township to take care of these returnees. There are two designated places [quarantine facilities] in Ler Doh (Kyaukkyi) Township: one is in Ler Doh (Kyaukkyi) and the other one is Moo (Mone) Town. Later on, the township authorities delegated this responsibility to the village tract authorities. Smaller quarantine facilities were then set up at the village level. Families have to tend to the needs of and send food to their relatives in quarantine at the township and village facilities.

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<sup>12</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

Further background reading on the negative impact of gold mining activities and COVID-19 in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Delayed and Uneven: COVID-19 Response in Rural Southeast Myanmar, March to June 2020"](#), October 2020.
- ["Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, landmines and sexual violence, January to June 2020"](#), September 2020.
- ["Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Militarisation, environmental pollution and sexual violence against children, July to December 2019"](#), February 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).

# Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District

