



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

April 9th, 2021 / KHRG # 21-1-NB1

'Where should I flee next?': Fighting and displacement in Doo Tha Htoo, Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts, December 2020 to January 2021

Introduction

The signing of the 2012 preliminary ceasefire,¹ followed by the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)² in 2015 resulted in an overall improvement of the human rights and security situation in Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton], Kler Lwee Htoo [Nyaunglebin] and Mu Traw [Hpapun] districts. However, KHRG's documentation shows that sporadic skirmishes between armed actors have continued to occur over the last few years, mainly in the context of military road construction activities in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts.³

December 2020 saw a serious deterioration of the security situation in some areas of Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts. The Tatmadaw and its affiliated Border Guard Force (BGF) increased their presence on the ground and stepped up operations in areas controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU)⁴ without prior permission, leading to skirmishes with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).⁵ KHRG also documented several instances of indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw in December and January 2021, resulting in displacement, property damage and injuries.

¹ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way.

² 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.

³ See KHRG, [Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, killings and sexual violence, July to December 2020](#), February 2021; KHRG, [Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, landmines and sexual violence, January to June 2020](#), September 2020; KHRG, [Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Militarisation, environmental pollution and sexual violence against children](#), July to December 2019, February 2020; KHRG, [Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Growing concerns about militarisation, land tenure security, development projects and human rights abuses](#), January to June 2019, September 2019.

⁴ 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.

⁵ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

In Doo Tha Htoo District, fighting between the BGF and the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO)⁶ broke out in early January 2021 in Yo Klah village tract. Local communities and villagers from nearby village tracts are now afraid that fighting might resume in their area. Therefore, they readopted pre-ceasefire strategies to protect themselves from armed actors and organised demonstrations to call on the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the area and respect the NCA.

Note: At the time of drafting, the security situation in Mu Traw, Kler Lwee Htoo and Doo Tha Htoo districts had become even more volatile. Tensions between the KNU and the Tatmadaw rose further in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup,⁷ resulting in renewed fighting and large-scale internal displacement in late March 2021. This News Bulletin focuses on fighting that took place prior to the military coup and its consequences on the communities affected.

i. Mu Traw District

According to KHRG's documentation, the security situation in Meh Way (Meh Wai) and Hkoo Thoo Hta village tracts, Dwe Lo Township deteriorated dramatically in December 2020. Skirmishes between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw, as well as indiscriminate shelling by Tatmadaw soldiers forced local villagers to flee their villages. Some of them were still displaced at the time of drafting.

According to the Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), as of January 28th 2021, there were 4,124 IDPs in Dwe Lo Township. These IDPs were in Meh Way, Meh Thoo, Ta Nay, Hkoo Thoo Hta and Ma Lay Ler village tracts.

Meh Way village tract

On December 1st 2020, fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw broke out near Wah Tho Law village, Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township after Tatmadaw soldiers trespassed into KNU-controlled areas⁸ without informing the KNLA in advance. This is a clear violation of article 8 (b) of the NCA, which states that “[m]ovement of armed troops in the areas controlled by the other [signatory] is allowed only after obtaining prior agreement.”

On December 2nd 2020, Tatmadaw soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁹ #402, Hkoo Thoo Hta army camp; Military Operations Command (MOC)¹⁰ #8 indiscriminately fired mortar rounds

⁶ The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

⁷ On February 1st 2021, the Burma Army deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Tatmadaw invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. The coup d'état occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected during the 2020 election. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

⁸ As per the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw are only allowed to operate and travel up to 50 yards from either side of roads that connect their army camps through KNLA territory, and only within a 150 yard radius around their own army camp.

⁹ 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.

at several villages in Meh Way village tract, resulting in displacement. Such actions show complete disregard for the safety and security of villagers, in breach of the Tatmadaw's obligation to ensure the security of civilians living in ceasefire areas pursuant to Section 9 (p) of the NCA.

On December 10th 2020 the KNLA ordered LIB #338, a Tatmadaw unit based near Meh Way village, Meh Way village tract, to relocate to Hla Ghone Pyone camp (Hkoo Thoo Hta village, Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township) or Won Moun camp (Waw Mu village, Waw Mu village tract, Dwe Lo Township). The battalion refused to do so. In response, KNLA soldiers from Brigade #5, Battalions #102 and #15 started ambushing Tatmadaw soldiers operating in the area, which led to sporadic fighting throughout December.

As the fighting took place during the harvest period, many of the local villagers were unable to fully harvest their paddy crops. This was the case for Saw¹¹ B--- from W--- village, Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township: *"In the past, we could harvest enough food, but [we could] not [harvest] enough this year. It was not enough because the fighting broke out. We do not dare to travel or to work. You know... our paddy fields turned into battlefields. We do not dare to go to our fields."*

The skirmishes and indiscriminate shelling also prompted local villagers in W--- village to flee. On January 28th 2020, Ashin¹² T---, a Buddhist monk from W--- village, Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township explained the situation to KHRG: *"Villagers are afraid to stay in the village because fighting is happening continuously. Villagers had to flee from the village."* On January 24th 2021, Daw H---, another local villager who fled to N--- village, recounted: *"We [chose to] stay in safe places. Some people fled to T--- [Town]. Others might be hiding in nearby places [neighbouring villages or forests], but I am not sure about it."*

As W--- villagers had to leave in a hurry, they could not bring enough food and clothes with them. They also had to leave their livestock behind. In the words of Daw H--- *"We left our houses and fled so we could bring only one set of clothes with us. We left all of our belongings behind. We could not bring any spoon."* The lack of clothing and medicines, coupled with the impossibility to access healthcare services, put displaced children and elders at great risk of becoming sick in the forest [December is a winter month in Myanmar]. In addition, the fighting and shelling resulted in the closure of schools, and displacement disrupted the ability of local children to access education. On January 25th 2021, the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)¹³ reported that six of its schools in Meh Way village tract had to stop their activities due to the deterioration of the security situation.

According to Daw H---, IDPs did not receive any kind of humanitarian support and are now facing food shortages and dire livelihood challenges: *"At the moment, I can [get food to] eat and live by borrowing [food or money from neighbours], but it will be very difficult for us if I keep being unemployed [...]."* She added that, even if she were to return to her village, it would be difficult for her to re-establish a livelihood because there are no job opportunities in the area due to the fighting.

¹⁰ A Military Operations Command is composed of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

¹¹ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

¹² Ashin is a Burmese title given to senior monks.

¹³ 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.

However, as skirmishes and fighting continue, W--- villagers do not feel safe enough to return. Daw H--- explained that she does not know when she will be able to go back to their village: *"We were also asked [by the KNU and local leaders] to remain temporarily displaced outside of the village. We said it would be temporary, but it has been over one month already. We do not feel safe to return."* She also told KHRG she was deeply worried about her future: *"It [displaced site] is not our home town, and our future is uncertain. I am like [blind people] who do not see the road ahead [I feel like I am lost]. [...] [W]here will we be able to work for a living? Where should I flee next? Should I return or should I displace further? I cannot think anymore."*

According to information provided by the Salween Peace Park Committee and the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), over a thousand people from 30 villages held anti-Tatmadaw demonstrations in two locations of Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township on January 6th 2021. The protesters called on the Tatmadaw to stop their attacks on local civilians and to withdraw from the area.¹⁴

Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract

KHRG's documentation show that shelling by the Tatmadaw also resulted in temporary displacement in Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township. From December 15th to 30th 2020, Tatmadaw soldiers from Hkoo Thoo Hta camp indiscriminately fired mortar rounds at local villages. Saw D---, a villager from K--- village, Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township told KHRG that he had to flee after Tatmadaw soldiers from Hkoo Thoo Hta fired mortar shells into the village on December 29th 2020: *"They shelled one artillery round in the morning, and another one in the evening. [...] When they fired the second artillery round, we did not dare to stay in the village anymore so we fled [...] into the forest. [...] We stayed in the forest for about six or seven days."* According to a KHRG researcher, most of the villagers fled to B--- Town after the shelling. Only seventeen households stayed behind.

Naw¹⁵ N---, another local villager from K--- village, recounted a similar experience: *"We were afraid it [mortar shell] would hit us. We did not hear it when it was on its way to us. We heard it after it fell. We first ran under the house and stayed underground for a while. Later on, we were in fear and worried it would hit our children, so we fled [to the forest]."* She explained that she did not return to the village for 10 days after the incident: *"I stayed in the forest for two nights. Then, I fled to my younger sibling[s house] in C--- village. I slept in C--- for about eight nights. [...] I just returned home today [January 9th 2021]."*

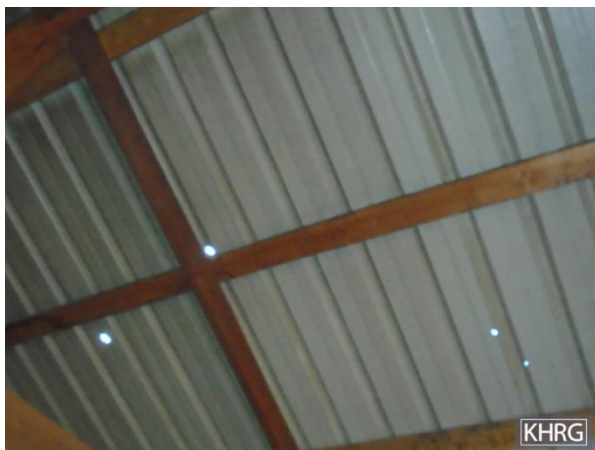
¹⁴ This information was taken from the [Facebook page of the Salween Peace Park](#).

¹⁵ Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.



These photos were taken on January 9th 2021 in K--- village, Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. They show some of the makeshift bunkers villagers built to protect themselves from skirmishes and shelling. Some households already had a bunker before the last round of displacement; and new ones were built upon the return of the displaced villagers. *[Photos: KHRG]*

The mortar shells damaged plantations, water pipes and houses, and killed livestock, thus creating livelihood difficulties for the local community. Naw N--- told KHRG that the roof of her house was damaged by shrapnel, and that she could not afford to buy a new one: *“We can’t use the roof anymore [the roof is no good anymore]. We need to buy a new one, but I don’t have money. We just renewed [bought] it last year.”*



These photos were taken on January 9th 2021 in K--- village, Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. They show the damage caused by LIB #402’s indiscriminate shelling to local villagers’ plantations, houses and water pipes. *[Photos: KHRG]*

Villagers who fled the fighting but eventually returned to the village are worried they might have to displace again in the near future, which prevents them from re-establishing sustainable livelihoods. In the words of Saw D---: *“[W]e had to flee, so it violated our right to work and earn an income. Besides, our children cannot go to school anymore. We also cannot earn an income [at the moment]. We just think about when we will have to flee again, and where we will flee to. Is it safe to stay in the valley or do I have to move to another place or further away?”*



These photos were taken on January 9th 2021 in K--- village, Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. The photo on the left shows villagers who returned to the village after being displaced. They are holding palm leaves to swipe out bad spirits from their houses according to their traditional beliefs. The photo on the right shows a house whose owners have not yet returned. [Photos: KHRG]

It stems from the above that villagers in areas that are currently affected by militarisation and fighting will have a hard time securing their livelihoods while military operations and skirmishes continue to put them at risk of displacement and to restrict their ability to travel and work. In the words of Naw N---: *“I returned because other people returned, but I will have to run [flee] when other people run. When we are in fear, we have to run. Even though we came back, we just have to live with uncertainty [in fear].”*

ii. Kler Lwee Htoo District

According to CIDKP, the Tatmadaw resumed its road construction activities between Hsaw Mee Loo and Mu Theh areas, Ler Doh Township on December 11th 2020 (this road connects the Than Bon, Hsaw Mee Loo, Hkoh Hplah Lay Hkoh, K'Baw Soh and Mu Theh army camps). They did not consult with local civilians nor obtain permission from the local KNU authorities in advance. Tatmadaw soldiers from LIB #589 and #350 (among other battalions) then started patrolling along the road between Hkoh Plah Lay Hkoh and Bin Byeh army camps to guard the road works. Fighting between KNLA Brigade #3, Battalion #9 and Tatmadaw LIB #598 eventually broke out on December 14th 2021 in Kler Hko place, between Ka Pae and Bin Byeh military outposts. After the fighting, reinforcements from Infantry Battalion (IB)¹⁶ #75 and IB #92 were dispatched to the area. As the military road passes through IDP hiding sites and KNLA/KNDO outposts, the presence of Tatmadaw soldiers and convoys in the area resulted in several skirmishes.¹⁷ KHRG also documented several instances of indiscriminate shelling by Tatmadaw troops.

On December 28th 2020, Tatmadaw soldiers indiscriminately fired mortar rounds that landed in the vicinity of a COVID-19 quarantine site near Hsaw Mee Loo village, Hsaw Mee Loo village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. None of the rounds actually hit the quarantine site, but the shelling prompted local villagers and health workers to flee out of fear of further attacks. Although there were medicine, solar panels, batteries, rice and cooking materials in the quarantine site, the villagers could not take anything with them. LIB #603, LIB #350, IB #57, IB

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ This information was provided to KHRG by CIDKP.

#92 and IB #75 were operating in the area at the time of the incident, but KHRG was not able to establish which battalion fired the mortar rounds or the reasons behind the shelling. According to a KHRG researcher, local villagers could hear gunfire and mortar shell explosions almost on a daily basis from December 28th 2020 until mid-January 2021.

On January 11th 2021, at around 6:45 am, fighting between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw broke out in Kheh Der village tract [KHRG was not able to establish the exact location]. The Tatmadaw fired about 30-40 mortar rounds during the skirmish. Fighting lasted until 8:15 am, but villagers heard three other explosions later that day (at 6 pm, 6:25 pm and during the night, respectively). On January 12th, at around 7:55 am, local villagers heard two explosions followed by gunfire and mortar shelling. According to a KHRG researcher, the Tatmadaw sent reinforcement to Ler Doh Township from February 1st to 15th 2021. In total, 51 Tatmadaw trucks were seen travelling throughout the Township over this period.

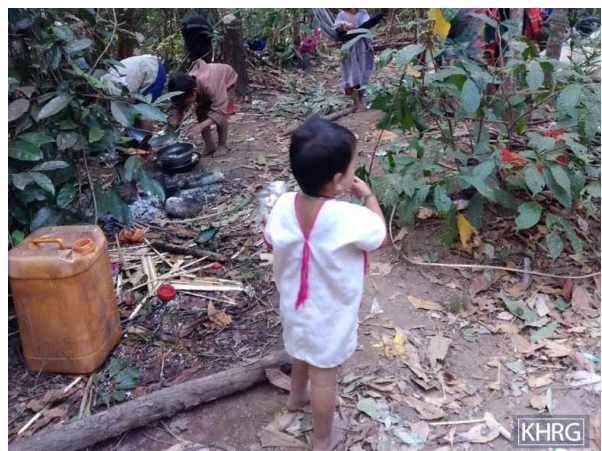


This photo was taken on January 19th 2021 in P--- village, Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District.

It shows an exploded mortar shell. This particular shell was fired by Tatmadaw LIB #603 led by Battalion Commander Maung Maung Soe.

[Photo: Villager]

The skirmishes and indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw led villagers from four villages in Kheh Der and Saw Kar Der village tracts to flee their village and displace from place to place from December 2020 onwards. In total, 228 villagers from L--- village and 375 villagers from V--- village had to displace. According to CIDKP, there were 1,195 IDPs in Kheh Der and Saw Kar Der village tracts, Ler Doh Township as of January 28th 2021.



KHRG received these photos from a local villager on March 2nd 2021. They show L--- villagers at the W--- displacement site, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. [Photos: Villager]

Some IDPs from L---, P--- and V--- villages fled to the W--- displacement site. They told KHRG that they did not have access to healthcare services or medicine because humanitarian organisations cannot reach the area, mostly due to travel restrictions and security risks. IDPs have to risk going to the Ler Doh Town hospital in case of emergency, but it is not always possible due to transportation challenges and security concerns. On March 10th 2021, a 78-year-old widow from L--- village passed away at the W--- displacement site. She had previously fallen ill and was not able to access healthcare services.



KHRG received this photo from a community member on March 2nd 2021. It shows a 78-year-old villager from L--- at the W--- displacement site, Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. She was reportedly suffering from an unidentified illness but could not access healthcare services. *[Photo: local villager]*



This photo was taken on March 10th 2021 at the W--- displacement site, Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. It shows the body of the 78-year-old villager from L--- after she passed away due to her illness. *[Photo: KHRG]*

The fighting and shelling also resulted in the closure of three schools in Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township. According to an update provided by a KHRG researcher on March 9th 2021, L--- villagers and local KECD education staff tried their best to continue providing education services at the W--- displacement site. The teachers organised the final exams in the forest and even held a school closing ceremony on March 6th 2021.



This photo was taken on March 6th 2021 at the W--- displacement site, Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District.

It shows displaced students, teachers, school committee members and villagers from L--- village during the school closing ceremony in the forest.

[Photo: KHRG]

The IDPs at the W--- displacement site could only bring limited amounts of food and clothes for their family. They also received some food from the KNU and private donors. The fact that they had to leave all their properties and livestock behind seriously undermined their ability to

continue working for their livelihoods. As they started running out of food in the forest, breadwinners (mostly men) had to return to their villages to find food for their family, feed their animals and look after their livestock. However, the heavy presence of Tatmadaw soldiers in the area makes such journeys particularly dangerous.



These photos were taken on January 11th 2021 in Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. They show villagers from L--- and V--- villages in a displacement site in the forest. [Photos: Villagers]

On January 18th 2021, Saw E---, a villager from L--- village, was shot at by Tatmadaw soldiers near his village while he was on his way to cut down bamboo. Fortunately, the bullet missed him, so he escaped unharmed. Similarly, on January 19th 2021, at about 9 am, Saw R---, an IDP from P--- village, sustained shrapnel injuries on both thighs after Tatmadaw LIB #603 fired mortar rounds at his village while he was feeding his pigs. LIB #603, which is led by Battalion Commander Maung Maung Soe, was patrolling along the road between Ler Doh and Hsaw Mee Loo areas to guard military roadworks. Saw R--- was able to access healthcare services at the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)¹⁸ clinic in the KNU Ler Doh Township office.

¹⁸ 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.



These photos were taken on January 19th 2021 in P--- village, Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. The photo on the left shows the shrapnel injuries sustained by Saw R--- after LIB #603 fired a mortar shell into his village. The photo on the right shows Saw R--- being transported to the KDHW clinic in the KNU Ler Doh Township office. [Photos: Villager]

The IDPs in Ler Doh Township had not been able to return home at the time of drafting. A KHRG researcher reported that fighting and shelling were still occurring on a regular basis as of March 9th 2021: “*I cannot count how many rounds of fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, because the fighting is happening continuously.*” In addition, the Tatmadaw also planted new landmines in Kheh Der village tract. Apart from putting local civilians and their livestock in danger (a buffalo belonging to a L--- villager was killed after stepping on a landmine, but KHRG was not able to establish the exact date of the incident), this could further impede the return of IDPs to their village.

iii. Doo Tha Htoo District

On December 28th 2020, Lt Colonel Saw Sa Thay from the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) Battalion #2 ordered the Border Guard Force (BGF) soldiers based in Yo Klah army camp in Yo Klah village, Yo Klah village tract, Bilin Township to withdraw their army camp by December 30th 2020. On the same day, Saw Myo Aung, KNDO Battalion #2's Deputy Commander, met with Platoon Commander Saw Myint Win from BGF Battalion #1013, Company #1 in Yo Klah village to discuss this matter. However, Saw Myint Win replied to the KNDO: “*We cannot withdraw unless we receive orders from above. If you want to attack us, you can do it [the original Karen formulation makes it clear that he is challenging the KNDO officer to attack].*”

Fighting between the BGF and the KNDO eventually broke out on January 2nd 2021, leaving one BGF soldier injured. On January 9th 2021, Saw S---, a villager from U--- village, recounted the skirmish to KHRG: “*It lasted for around 30 minutes. The heavy fighting happened at the*

beginning of the incident. They also fired big weapons [mortars] several times. Then, they halted it for a moment before resuming the fighting again.”

On January 28th 2021, Saw Z---, a local leader, told KHRG that several people fled their villages after the fighting: “[T]he local villagers had to flee, and they were in fear. They fled and hid in other places which were safe for them.” This was confirmed by U¹⁹ O---, a villager from nearby Y--- village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Bilin Township on January 8th 2021: “Absolutely, yes. Villagers from the eastern and western parts of the village had to displace.” KHRG was not able to establish how many people had to displace as a result of the skirmish, but they were able to return home in the last week of January 2021.

On January 8th 2021, about 100 fully armed BGF soldiers from battalions #1013 and #1014 arrived at the Yo Klah army camp from Dooplaya District. Saw S--- recounted their arrival: “I am just a villager. I do not know what their plan is. When they arrived, they called a meeting with villagers elders. [...] They told [villagers] that they would have a week-long meeting [at the camp]. Then, they would withdraw or stay [here] depending on the orders [they receive].” He added that the increased number of BGF soldiers raised security concerns among local villagers: “As villagers, we became increasingly afraid when we heard these words. [...] When [villagers] see the number of soldiers increasing, most of them think that fighting will intensify.” On January 9th 2021, some of the newly arrived BGF troops left the area. However, 60 of them remained in the camp.

The skirmish and subsequent arrival of BGF reinforcements led local villagers in U--- village to fear an upsurge in fighting. Therefore, they renovated pre-ceasefire bunkers to protect themselves should more skirmishes break out, as Saw S--- explained: “The bunkers we built during the past fighting [before the NCA] were all filled with soil. We had to rebuild them to protect ourselves. If we hear the sound [of guns], we will run to the bunkers. All the women [and children] sleep underground [inside the bunkers]. [I know it] because I asked them [about the situation] and they replied that they did not even feel safe enough to breathe at night.” He also added that male villagers started sleeping outside of the villages out of fear the BGF or the Tatmadaw would arrest them during the night and force them to serve as porters.²⁰

Male villagers in nearby Y--- village, Noh Ber Baw village tract, Bilin Township also adopted the same strategy. On January 8th 2021 Naw M---, a local villager, told KHRG that her son and husband started sleeping outside of the village after the fighting: “It is because they are afraid of being [arrested and forced to work as] porters. His [my son’s] grandmother talked about her past experiences of displacement during the Lay Htay era [1970-1980s]. She said: ‘If you are arrested as porters, you will have to carry [military materials].’” She explained that such fears had been amplified by the recent militarisation trends, as well as by warnings from other villagers: “We just heard that the Tatmadaw soldiers would come, and they are sending a lot of trucks to Brigade 5 [Mu Traw District]. The Tatmadaw also came to Lay Kay [village], so we were told to be careful. [...] We were told that, if the Tatmadaw from Brigade #5 come to our village at night, they would arrest porters like in the past.”

U O--- confirmed that he had also been warned not to sleep in his village by villagers from the western part of the Township: “[They told us:] ‘When they [BGF] arrive in the village, they will arrest us, force us to carry materials, to follow them [forced recruitment]. If we refuse to do as they order, they will torture us.’ [...] They also said: ‘Do not sleep in the village! If something happens, they will arrest us and force us to work.’”

¹⁹ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

²⁰ For more information on the use of forced civilian labour by the military prior to the 2012 ceasefire, see KHRG, [‘Beyond the Horizon’: Local Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Accountability in Southeast Myanmar](#), November 2019.

Villagers in Bilin Township had not experienced fighting since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire. But the recent skirmish between the BGF and the KNDO, coupled with increased militarisation and fighting in neighbouring districts have raised deep concerns among community members. They now worry for their security and livelihoods; and fear they might be subjected to the same abuses they faced before the ceasefire should more fighting break out in their area. Naw M--- explained that villagers in Y--- even started throwing away items that could be associated with the KNU out of fear they would be punished by Tatmadaw/BGF soldiers if they are found in their possession: *“[A] lot of villagers hide [KNU or other Karen language materials and military uniforms]. You can go and see [that there are] a lot of those in the A--- River. I saw a lot of books there too [...] They do it because they are afraid. [Y]ou can also see a lot [of these items] in another stream too.”*

The increased BGF presence in the area seems to be of particular concern for local villagers, as BGF troops are composed of Karen soldiers with arguably better knowledge of the local terrain than their Tatmadaw counterparts. Thus, Naw M--- fears that members of her community might not be able to hide and escape from abuses the way they did before the preliminary ceasefire: *“[S]ome villagers ran away to sleep [outside of the village]. I told them: ‘Even though you run away and sleep somewhere else, there is no hiding anymore because the BGF are Karen. They come to our village and they already know where the villagers will run to. Villagers have no authority to do anything [are defenceless] so they will have to be porters whenever they are forced to.’”*

In late January 2021, villagers from Bilin Township held two demonstrations to call for the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps from the area. The first demonstration was held on January 24th 2021. On that day, about 800 villagers walked from P’Ya Raw to Lay Kay villages. On January 27th, around 1,300 villagers from Yoh Klah, Htee Pa Doh Hta and Khaw Po Pleh village tract protested in Htee Hpa Doh Hta village. They made the following demands:

1. Implement the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
2. Armed actors must respect the NCA Code of Conduct
3. Villagers do not want armed conflict
4. The Tatmadaw must withdraw their bases located inside the villages
5. The Myanmar government must solve the conflicts that are happening on the ground
6. Political problems must be solved by political means

Naw A---, a villager from X--- village, Htee Hpa Doh Hta village tract, Bilin Township who took part in the second protest told KHRG that the presence of Tatmadaw camps in the area was a major threat to peace: *“There is no security for the local villagers because the Tatmadaw army camps are located in the community. Therefore, many incidents happened in Brigade #5. It is also not safe for the women and girls. The presence of army camps is the root cause of the fighting. Therefore, fighting could break out in our area, just like what is currently happening in Brigade #5. [By protesting,] [w]e are preventing it from happening in our area. We do not want any fighting in Brigade #5 either.”*

She therefore stressed the need for the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the area; and called on all parties to implement the NCA and find a political solution to bring about genuine peace: *“The situation in the local areas remains uncertain despite the signing of the NCA. Therefore, fighting broke out again. We hope that the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed groups will truly uphold the NCA; and that the local villagers will get to live in peace. We want the Myanmar government and the KNU to follow the NCA. Our hope for this protest is to achieve genuine peace. That is the main aim.”*

Another demonstrator, Saw Z--- from U--- village, emphasised that local villagers are determined to make their voices heard, and that they will continue to protest until their demands are met: *“We protest so that local villagers won’t have to flee again. We are asking for and*

shouting what we want. [...] The aim is to end the conflicts in the area. [...] We hope that the leaders, the Myanmar government and authorities from other countries will solve this issue for us. If they don't solve it for us, we will continue to do this kind of activities [protest] in the future.”



The photo on the left was taken on January 24th 2021 in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. The photo on the right was taken on January 27th 2021 in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. They both show local villagers demonstrating to call on the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the area. Protesters also called for genuine peace and the proper implementation of the NCA. [Photo: KHRG]

Conclusion

It stems from this News Bulletin that the weak implementation of the NCA has contributed to the resurgence of armed conflict in several areas of Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts. By increasing its presence in both districts to conduct contentious road construction activities, the Tatmadaw has consistently violated section 5(c), under which it must avoid troop reinforcements in the ceasefire areas other than the provision of administrative support. The military also stepped up its armed patrols in KNU-controlled areas without prior approval, in clear violation of article 8(b) of the NCA. These provocations ultimately resulted in renewed fighting with the KNLA. By choosing to resort to armed force without taking the appropriate measures to prevent confrontations, both parties have failed to meet their obligations under article 7 of the NCA.

Local civilians who were caught up in the skirmishes in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo are now paying the price of conflict; while community members in nearby Doo Tha Htoo District live with the fear that fighting might ultimately spread to their area. Both the Myanmar government and the Karen National Union (KNU) bear the responsibility for ensuring the safety and development of the civilians living in ceasefire areas under article 9(p) of the NCA. In order to do so, they should take the necessary measures to ensure full compliance with their obligations under the NCA until genuine peace can be achieved through political means. Villagers in Southeast Myanmar have been suffering from displacement the effects of armed conflict for over 70 years. They now want to be given the opportunity to go back home, rebuild their lives and enjoy sustainable peace. In the words of Naw M---: “We want to live in peace. We do not want armed conflict to resume. We want freedom of movement and [the ability to] work freely for our livelihoods.”

“Do you think we will be able to go home as soon as possible? [...] I hope the leaders will negotiate and solve the conflict so we can be able to continue our livelihoods activities without fear. Our children will also be able to go to school. It's all I hope for.”

Saw D---, K--- village, Hkoo Thoo Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District

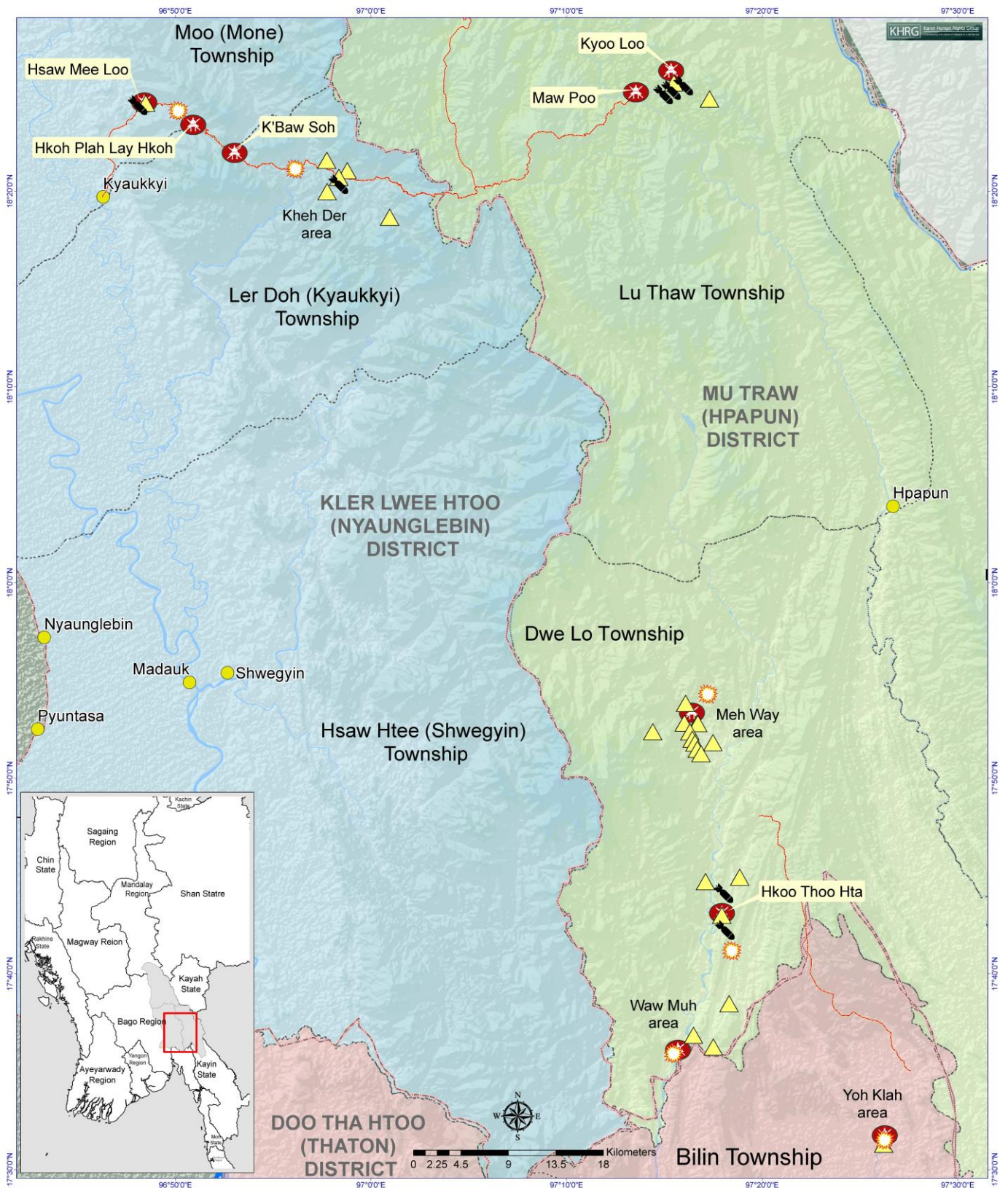
Further background reading on the consequences of sporadic fighting between armed actors in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, killings and sexual violence, July to December 2020”](#), February 2021.
- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: 2020 general election, livelihood difficulties, Tatmadaw activities, education and COVID-19 situation \(August to October 2020\)”](#), January 2021.
- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: The Tatmadaw repeatedly fired large numbers of mortars into civilian areas and burned forests in Lu Thaw Township, January 2020 to April 2020”](#), December 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.

Map: Fighting and indiscriminate shelling in Doo Tha Htoo, Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts, December 2020 to January 2021



Legend

- Town
- ▲ Village
- ☀ Fighting
- Indiscriminate shelling
- Tatmadaw Camp
- River
- Tatmadaw road project
- Kawthoolei Township boundary
- Kawthoolei district boundary
- Gov state and region boundary

Elevation (meter)

- 35 - 89
- 89 - 432
- 432 - 941
- 941 - 1,543
- 1,543 - 2,613

Data Sources

- Base Map: KHRG
- Boundary: KMP/MIMU
- River and Stream: KHRG/KMP
- Place and Name: KHRG