



Short Update

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Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Forced labour, looting and skirmishes between the SAC and the KNLA, August 2021

This Short Update describes events that occurred in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District during the month of August 2021. From August 9th to 11th 2021, Border Guide Force (BGF) and State Administration Council (SAC) troops travelled from Lay Kay army camp to Yo Klah army camp to collect information and measure Yo Klah army camp land. This area is under Karen National Union (KNU) control, and is one of the zones in which the KNU restricts SAC and BGF operations. As the BGF and SAC moved through KNU-territory on their way to Yo Klah army camp, the local KNLA defended their territory, and skirmishes broke out between the SAC and BGF troops and the KNLA. During their journey to Yo Klah army camp, the BGF and SAC troops forcibly apprehended villagers on two separate occasions, requiring them to act as human shields and navigators. The SAC and BGF troops also looted villagers' property, taking items such as phones and livestock when they stopped in the community. On August 23rd 2021, the SAC and BGF troops returned from Yo Klah army camp to Lay Kay army camp. During their return journey, they forcibly apprehended another villager, requiring him to act as a human shield and navigator.¹

On August 9th 2021 State Administration Council (SAC)² troops and affiliated Border Guard Force (BGF)³ troops—about 80 soldiers total—left Lay Kay army camp to travel to Yo Klah army camp, which is located in Karen National Union (KNU)⁴-controlled territory, in order to collect information about the situation on the ground and measure Yo Klah army camp land. Villagers do not know the battalion or division number of the BGF troops involved in this incident, but [KHRG has previously been informed that] the BGF battalion operating in the area between Lay Kay and Yo Klah army camps is Battalion #1013, under Battalion Commander Maung Hla Kyaing.

¹ The present document is based on information received on August 13th 2021. It was provided by a community member in Doo Tha 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. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG.

² The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Myanmar and leads the Military Cabinet of Myanmar, the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup.

³ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

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.

The SAC and BGF began moving through KNU territory without receiving prior consent from the local KNU authorities. They had to pass the villages of R---, S---, T--- and U---. However, [a villager interviewed by KHRG mentioned that] the local Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁵ were prepared to defend the security of their territory, and SAC and BGF troops knew that they would be targeted for attack by the local KNLA [if they entered without permission]. When SAC and BGF troops arrived at R--- village by vehicle, villagers warned them not to proceed and to retreat from the village to prevent skirmishes [with the KNLA] in the community. However, the SAC and BGF troops ignored these suggestions from local civilians and, on August 10th and 11th, the troops continued to head from R--- village to Yo Klah army camp on foot due to flooding. According to Naw⁶ B---, a local villager, SAC and BGF troops told villagers that “*it is necessary for us to go. And it is our duty.*” According to Naw Y---, another local villager, the troops also said: “[E]ven if we die, we need to go.”

Local KNLA soldiers [battalion number unknown] ambushed the SAC and BGF troops before they arrived at T--- village [while the SAC and BGF were moving in formation]. The fighting was brief and, since it took place outside of the village, it did not involve or immediately endanger any villagers. However, local civilians, especially T--- villagers [who live nearby], could hear the gunfire, so villagers in the surrounding areas fled from their villages in fear. Naw B--- said: “[W]e heard it [gunfire] and fled. We were afraid of the shooting. That’s why we fled.” Moreover, some villagers’ paddy plants were damaged by the indiscriminate shelling during the fighting. The fighting between the BGF and SAC troops and the KNLA was brief [less than 15 minutes long]. Following the skirmish, the SAC and BGF continued on their way to T--- village. As they travelled toward T--- village, the SAC and BGF troops forcibly apprehended several T--- villagers who were working on their farms, fishing or looking after their livestock and forced these villagers to act as human shields to protect them from further KNLA attacks [the exact number of villagers is unknown]. The villagers included men, women and children. The SAC and BGF troops released these villagers right after they arrived at the entrance of T--- village.

Following the skirmish, the BGF and SAC entered T--- village. Villagers were hiding because of the fighting, and when the SAC and BGF soldiers entered the village, they began searching the village [potentially looking for KNLA soldiers]. As the soldiers searched, they threatened villagers, pointing their guns at villagers, including children, when they saw villagers hiding under their houses. The soldiers also threatened that they would fire mortars into the village if they were attacked by the KNLA.

The SAC and BGF entered two villagers’ houses in the western part of T--- village to engage in looting while the owners were hiding from the fighting. They did not take anything in the first house because they heard a sound in a neighbouring house [and so, afraid they were being observed, moved on to another house]. However, they went to another villager’s house and searched through the homeowner’s possessions [for valuable or useful items], and stole three kilograms of steamed betel nut leaves and one phone.

The troops stayed at the monastery [on the night of August 10th]. While at the monastery, they also shot at villagers’ chickens and ducks that had wandered close to the monastery, but they did not manage to kill any. They also confiscated as food at least one duck owned by villagers when it wandered near the monastery [the exact number of ducks and chickens confiscated is unknown].

Some of the soldiers asked two villagers—one of whom was an 8-year-old child—to buy alcohol for them. Since the BGF and SAC soldiers were drunk, villagers, especially women and girls, felt more insecure and worried that the soldiers would commit more violations, such as sexual violations and indiscriminate shelling, as they had in past periods of conflict. Because of this,

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

⁶ Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name

women and girls did not feel secure sleeping in their own houses, particularly since male villagers were no longer staying in the village at night. Fearing they would be forced to act as porters, the men, and a few families, began sleeping outside of the village in tents on their farms after the soldiers arrived in their village. Naw Y--- explained: *“Yes, it [sexual violations] happens to the women the most. At night, they [SAC or BGF soldiers] ask the villagers to buy alcohol for them. We worry that if they get drunk, they will rape the women. So we ask teenaged girls [under the age of 18] to go and sleep in the west [the western part of the village, far from the monastery where the troops are staying, which is located in the northern part of the village]. On the other hand, male villagers sleep in the forest or outside of the village. We worry that they [the SAC troops] will call them [the villagers] for forced labour [and to act as] navigators. [...] We worry that when the SAC troops get drunk, they will start indiscriminately shelling [into the village]”* [this has occurred during past periods of conflict, so villagers worry it will happen again].

In addition, fearing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the villagers are staying outside of the village to avoid encountering people from outside [of their village area]. Because SAC soldiers are outsiders from crowded, urban places, villagers are afraid that they could be infected with COVID-19 and spread the virus during their patrols in the community. According to Naw Y---, the SAC soldiers told the villagers that *“good people [those who do not pose a threat to the BGF and SAC] have to sleep in the village.”* She added: *“Whoever they see at night will become their enemy they say”* [they said that they will shoot at anyone they encounter outside the village at night, since anyone found outside the village at night must be the enemy]. Therefore, local villagers trying to protect themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic by staying outside the village are at further risk of harm by the SAC.

At about 9:00 am on the morning of August 11th 2021, SAC and BGF troops ordered village leaders and one representative from every family in T--- village to meet them at the monastery. They ordered 15 villagers, including men, women and village elders, to accompany them to Yo Klah army camp as navigators by claiming not to know the way to the camp. As one witness, Naw L---, stated: *“[T]hey [the troops] mentioned that they don’t know how to go to that [U---] village. They don’t know the way so they want the villagers to accompany them.”* According to Naw B--- : *“They actually knew how to get to U--- village, but they were afraid [...] of attack by the KNLA. The KNLA were ready to attack them and to surround them [once they left the village]. [...] That was why they forced women villagers and used them as human shields.”*

The SAC and BGF said they would release the villagers right after they arrived at the Yo Klah army camp. However, most of the villagers, especially elders, were able to safely refuse to follow this order [to accompany the troops] and suffered no violations from the SAC and BGF troops. According to Naw Y---, village leaders also tried to advocate for other villagers, arguing that they should not be forced to be navigators or human shields and saying: *“[Y]ou should release them because they are just villagers. If you don’t release them, their cows and buffalos will starve”*. Though most villagers were able to avoid being forced to act as navigators, two female village leaders volunteered to accompany the troops to protect the other villagers [it appears the SAC may prefer to use women as human shields because the KNLA may be less likely to attack SAC troops when the troops are using women as human shields as compared to men]. Two male villagers also volunteered to accompany the troops in order to protect the two female village leaders. The four villagers had to accompany the SAC and BGF until they arrived at Yo Klah army camp. These four villagers did not have to carry military supplies as porters, but they had to travel on foot in the rain over rough and muddy terrain, and they had to cross a river with a high level of water. They were forced to travel with the SAC and BGF troops through this difficult terrain for the whole day, and were also used as human shields, putting them at high risk.

The SAC and BGF troops released these four T--- villagers right after they arrived at the entrance of U--- village. After the villagers departed, the troops indiscriminately fired mortars around their base outside of U--- village.

Since these events, civilians in Yo Klah village tract have lived in fear and have had concerns for their safety, and some of them no longer feel secure enough to sleep in their own homes. Naw Y-- expressed her concerns, saying: “[I]f they [the SAC and BGF] meet their enemy and fight, they don’t need to interact with the villagers [involve villagers in the conflict]. [However,] they attack villagers if their enemy attacks them. As you know, most of the villagers faced those kinds of threats and bad experiences in the past and they still experience the same things now. Therefore, the villagers assume that they will face the same violations they faced in the past.”

Villagers received information from the SAC and BGF troops that the troops were going to Yo Klah army camp in order to collect information on the situation on the ground and to measure Yo Klah army camp land, and that they would return to Lay Kay army camp. However, when KHRG conducted interviews with villagers on August 13th 2021, the SAC and BGF troops had not yet returned.

KHRG received an update that, on August 23rd 2021, the SAC and affiliated BGF troops returned to Lay Kay army camp from Yo Klah army camp, travelling through U---, T---, S--- and R--- villages. According to local villagers, the BGF and SAC troops detained a U--- villager and forced him to act as a human shield, claiming they needed a navigator between Yo Klah army camp and T--- village on their way back to Lay Kay army camp. According to the villagers, however, they [SAC and BGF troops] already knew the way back to Lay Kay army camp [and so did not need a navigator]. They released this villager when they arrived at T--- village and tried to give him 5,000 kyats [USD 2.80]⁷, but he would not accept the money, saying, “You do not have to pay me anything. I am already okay when you guys [BGF and SAC soldiers] do not beat me!” This villager was deeply concerned for his security while he was with the BGF and SAC troops, and was also worried that the BGF and SAC would torture him, as had occurred during past incidents of forced labour.

Further background reading on skirmishes between the SAC and KNLA, looting, and BGF activities in the Doo Tha Htoo District of Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Doo Tha Htoo Short Update: Looting by BGF and SAC soldiers, June 21st 2021,”](#) July 2021.
- [“Doo Tha Htoo Situation Update: Fighting and indiscriminate shelling by SAC forces, April to May 2021,”](#) June 2021.

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.khr.org.

⁷ All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the December 3rd 2021 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.56 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).

Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District

