



## Situation Update

August 30<sup>th</sup> 2022 / KHRG # 21-261-S1

## Mu Traw District Situation Update: Militarisation, displacement, humanitarian aid, landmines and the impact of COVID-19 in Bu Tho Township, June to August 2021

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District from June 2021 to August 2021. Skirmishes occurred between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the combined forces of the State Administration Council (SAC) and Border Guard Forces (BGF). A villager was shot in the shoulder by SAC troops and sent to a hospital in Thailand for treatment. Three villagers were arrested, beaten and used as porters and human shields before they were released. Due to the intensification of fighting and air strikes, many villagers have displaced to nearby forests. Some villagers received humanitarian support from Karen organisations in the months of June and July. SAC troops and the KNLA continue to plant landmines. A villager lost his leg after stepping on one of these landmines. COVID-19 continues to spread in Bu Tho Township and is having a significant impact on villagers' ability to travel.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

This situation update covers the period from June 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to August 31<sup>st</sup> 2021. It describes landmine incidents, the activities of State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> troops, humanitarian aid to support civilians, and the impact of COVID-19.

### SAC troop activity

Every day from August 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to August 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, there were skirmishes between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>3</sup> and the combined forces of the SAC and Border Guard Forces (BGF)<sup>4</sup> along the road from Kamarmaung [K'Ma Moh] to Hpapun towns.

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in August 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions on the ground. The names of the victims, their photos and the exact locations are censored for security reasons. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG.

<sup>2</sup> 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 Burma/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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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

On August 16<sup>th</sup> 2021, Saw<sup>5</sup> A---, a 24-year-old unmarried man from O--- village, Hkaw Poo village tract, Lu Thaw Township, went to visit R--- village, Hkaw Poo village tract. He encountered troops from SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>6</sup> #341 and #410 [who were patrolling in Hkaw Poo village tract] on his return to O--- village. As a result, he was shot in the right shoulder by the SAC troops [without being questioned]. After Saw A--- was shot by the SAC troops, he was sent to a hospital in Ei Tu Hta IDP camp for two days, and then he was transferred to a hospital in Thailand. He was not discharged from the hospital within the reporting period.

On August 19<sup>th</sup> 2021 at 1:00 pm, SAC LIB #341 and LIB #410 soldiers were travelling back from T'Khay Hkoh army camp [in Bu Tho Township] to Hpapun Town when they met three female villagers who were going to their farms. The three villagers were Naw Dv--- (65 years old), Naw Dw--- (56 years old) and Naw Dx--- (42 years old) and they are from Dy--- village, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. The SAC soldiers arrested these three villagers, kicked them and stepped on their heads without questioning them. The SAC soldiers also threatened them by firing a machine gun two times into the sky. After torturing and threatening them, the SAC soldiers ordered the three villagers to carry loads for them from Dy--- village to Dz--- village and used them as human shields along the way. Then, the three villagers were released. [The SAC troops then continued to Hpapun Town.]<sup>7</sup>

On August 20<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC LIB #338 travelled from Hpa-an District to Thoo Mweh Hta army camp and then Meh Leh Hta army camp, located in Buh Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. [KHRG's field researcher was unable to find out the name of the SAC battalion commander from LIB #338.] Thoo Mweh Hta and Meh Leh Hta army camps are close to U--- village, Z--- village, B--- village, N--- village and S--- village in Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township. There were a total of 60 SAC soldiers from LIB #338 who travelled to Mu Traw District [on August 20<sup>th</sup>]. Local villagers did not know why these SAC troops travelled to Mu Traw District. The Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>8</sup> and KNLA leaders thought that these SAC troops came to capture Meh Ra Hta army camp in Bu Tho Township, from the KNLA.

On August 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, over 80 SAC soldiers from LIB #409 also travelled from Hpa-an District to Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. During this time, some soldiers from BGF Battalion #1014 travelled with SAC LIB #409. They [soldiers from SAC LIB #409 and BGF Battalion #1014] travelled to the same area as SAC LIB #338 [Thoo Mweh Hta and Meh Leh Hta army camps].

## **Displacement and humanitarian aid**

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ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

<sup>5</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>6</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. 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>7</sup> This incident was previously reported in KHRG, "[Southeast Burma Field Report: Intensification of armed conflict, air and ground attacks, and widespread human rights violations, July to December 2021](#)", March 2022.

<sup>8</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 Southeast Burma 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.

Civilians [living in Bu Tho Township] were in fear because they saw that aircraft from the SAC was frequently conducting reconnaissance in their area and [villagers living close to the military camp] were also afraid that they [SAC aircraft] would drop bombs [into the villages].

With the intensification of SAC military activity, [most] villagers [from village tracts located in Bu Tho Township] fled to live in the forest beginning in February 2021 [since the military coup] and had to stay in the forest for one to two months. After one or two months of displacement, some villagers returned to live in their villages to feed their livestock. Some villagers have remained displaced since February 2021.

From July 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, villagers from Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township received humanitarian aid [cash and food] from the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD), as well as other local organisations. Villagers each received 850 baht [USD 23.54]<sup>9</sup> [in cash]. This was a one-time distribution [of aid].

During the last week of July 2021, villagers from Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township also received support from the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) and each of them received 50,000 kyats [USD 23.81]<sup>10</sup>. In June 2021, Meh Nyu Hta village tract, Bu Tho Township also received support from CIDKP and KORD.

## **A landmine incident**

On August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021 at 10:20 pm, Saw C---, aged 37, from K--- village, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, stepped on a landmine. Saw C--- is a married man with three children. His eldest son is 10 years old and his youngest child is 2 years old. He is a farmer.

Saw C--- stepped on a landmine that was believed to have been planted by SAC LIB #341. The exploded landmine was on a road that villagers [frequently] use to travel. The villagers were not informed about where the landmines had been planted. Therefore, it has become a challenge for local villagers, including K--- villagers [to travel in the surrounding area].

In contrast, the KNLA informed local villagers [from K--- village] in advance regarding the areas where they had planted the landmines [if in the vicinity of villages]. When local villagers have been informed about the location of the landmines ahead of time, they have faced fewer landmine incidents.

Following the landmine incident, Saw C--- was sent to P--- hospital. Since the hospital did not have enough medical supplies, Saw C--- was sent to receive medical treatment at a hospital in Thailand on August 25<sup>th</sup> 2021 [and stayed at the hospital for treatment for one month]. His right leg was injured due to the landmine explosion [and it had to be amputated]. Since he lost his leg, his family's livelihood has been impacted. During the reporting period, his family has not received support from any organisations.<sup>11</sup>

## **The impact of COVID-19**

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<sup>9</sup> All conversion estimates for baht are based on the August 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 mid-market exchange rate of 1 baht to USD 0.02774 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).

<sup>10</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the August 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 mid-market exchange rate of 1000 kyat to USD 0.48 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).

<sup>11</sup> Previously reported in KHRG, "[Mu Traw District Incident Report: A male villager was injured in a landmine explosion in Bu Tho Township, August 2021](#)", December 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. From June to August 2021, the disease became widespread across areas of Mu Traw District. On August 28<sup>th</sup> 2021 alone, 29 villagers tested positive for COVID-19 in areas of Mu Traw District. The KNU restricted travel in order to prevent COVID-19 prevalence. Villagers living both on the road to Hpapun Town and in mountainous areas [of Bu Tho Township] have been facing difficulty buying food. Thai authorities also did not allow civilians to travel [across the Thai-Burma border]. The villagers from areas of Bu Tho Township were afraid to go to the Thai side of the river to buy food. Therefore, villagers have been facing difficulties travelling and accessing food because of the COVID-19 pandemic. [Prior to the coup,] there was proper care to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, the villagers [cannot travel because they] are afraid of the SAC military and COVID-19.

## Conclusion

In the past, [before the military coup,] villagers were only afraid of militarisation. Now, they are afraid of [SAC] air strikes. Moreover, villagers have faced difficulty travelling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

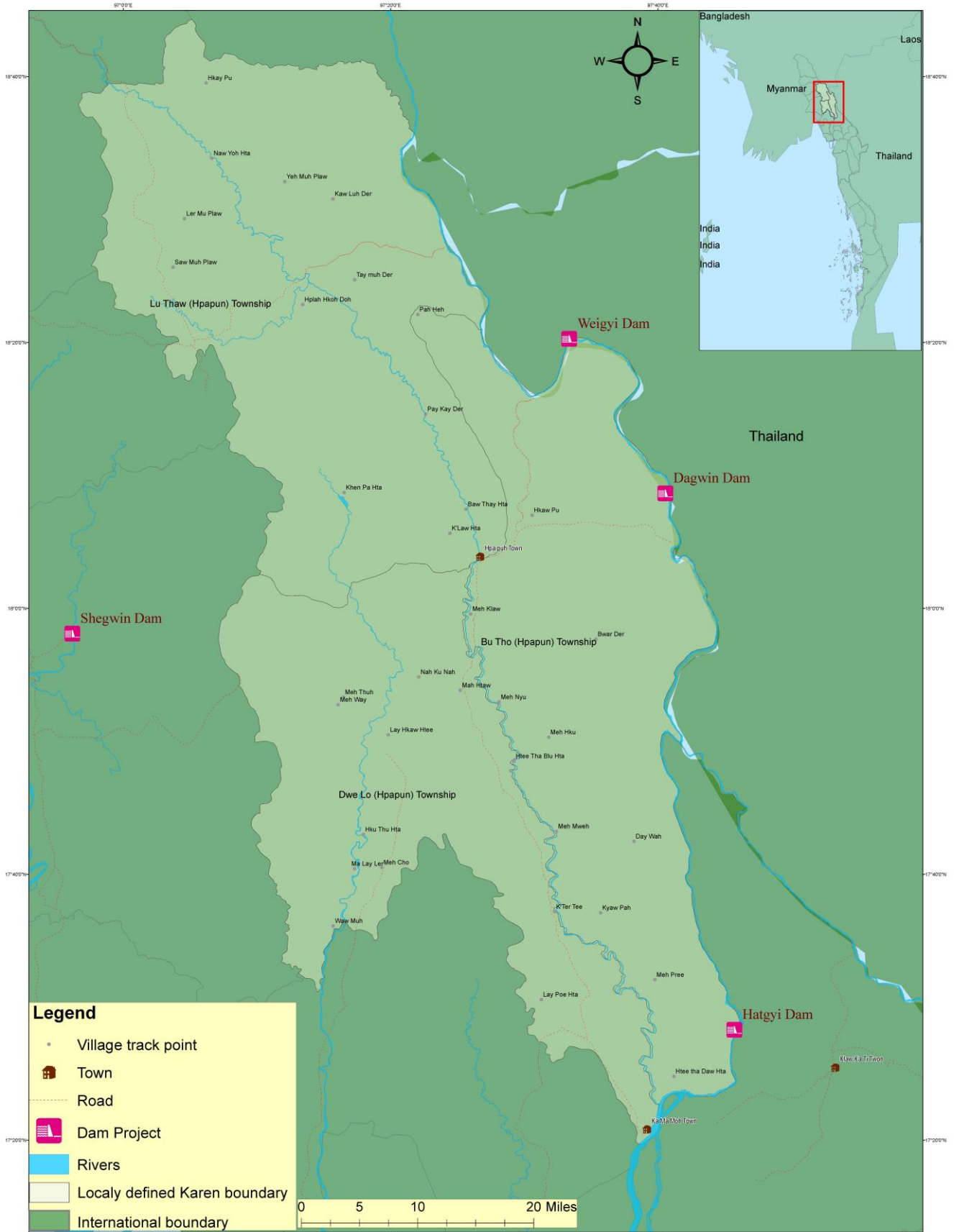
Further background reading on the security situation and human rights violations in Mu Traw District in Southeast Burma can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District Short Update: SAC troops fired mortars into a village, killing seven villagers and injuring four, March 2022”](#), March 2022.
- [“Mu Traw District Incident Report: A villager died due to a landmine explosion in Bu Tho Township, January 2022”](#), February 2022.
- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: Human rights violations including looting, killing, arbitrary arrest and torture, and the burning of houses and villages, April to July 2021”](#), January 2022.

## About KHRG

Founded in 1992, the Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Burma. KHRG trains local people to document and gather evidence of human rights abuses, and publishes this information to project the voices, experiences and perspectives of local communities. More examples of our work can be seen online at [www.khrq.org](http://www.khrq.org).

# Mutraw (Hpapun) District



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