



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

January 27th 2022/ KHRG # 21-270-A1-I1 & 21-270-A2-I1

Doplaya District Interview: Looting, fighting, forced labour and COVID-19 infections, September 2021

The following two interviews describe events that occurred in Noh T’Kaw village tract, Noh T’Kaw Township, Doplaya District during the period between August 26th and September 14th 2021, and include information on looting by State Administration Council (SAC) and Border Guard Force (BGF) soldiers who set up camp in local villages following the destruction of their army camp, fighting between Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and SAC troops, forced labour, and a rise in COVID-19 infections.¹

Interview | A--- village, Noh T’Kaw village tract,² Noh T’Kaw Township, Doplaya District (September 2021)

Name: Saw³ B---

Gender: Male

Religion: Christian

Ethnicity: Karen

Looting and firing by State Administration Council (SAC)⁴ security forces and Border Guard Force (BGF)⁵ troops in A--- village

As you are a local authority [his role/position is unclear], have you seen any human rights abuses happen since the turmoil with the SAC military⁶ [on August 26th 2021 an SAC military camp was burnt down⁷]?

¹ The present document is based on information received in September 9th 2021. It was provided by a community member in Doplaya 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 staff.

² A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

³ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

For a few days during the turmoil, villagers were afraid, so they fled [from the village temporarily]. Some people who had tested positive for COVID-19 fled from the village and slept overnight [in the forest] together with dozens of other villagers who were fleeing. For me I didn't flee.

This was when their [the SAC] military camp was burnt down by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁸ [on August 26th 2021]. In retaliation, [on August 28th 2021], they [the SAC] came firing gunshots along the way until they reached their camp. They didn't arrest or stop any villagers.

Did they use small guns like G-3, G-4 [Gewehr 3 and 4 battle rifles] when they came firing?
They fired big guns [unsure of the type of guns]. Their intention was to clear the road [prevent the approach of KNLA troops].

Did they fire big guns several times or just a few times?
They were firing along the way to their camp. It was up to ten times that they fired [while traveling]. And now they are rebuilding the camp.

Have there been any more COVID-19 infections due to the infected villagers fleeing with the other villagers?

The infected villager who fled with the other [villagers], he and his parents were all infected. In addition, there was one more person infected. His name is C---. The infected person who fled was D---. Some of the fleeing villagers also said they lost their sense of smell. They might have been infected without knowing it before they fled. Because of this, we do not worship [in church] or visit each other's houses anymore right now. They fled together in a group but now they cannot visit each other's houses anymore.

So if the SAC fire weapons again, the villagers will run together?
I think they will flee together, but fortunately there is no more firing. When villagers flee [from SAC soldiers], they forget to be afraid of the Coronavirus. They are only afraid of SAC soldiers.

We heard that they [stole and] ate villagers' chickens when they came to A--- village. Is that true?

Yes, they cooked [and ate] villagers' chickens on the first night they arrived in the village [August 28th 2021]. They came with some BGF soldiers as well. Some villagers said it was the BGF soldiers who ate the chickens of the villagers. However, they were not sure because the house owner, Naw⁹ E---'s mother, was not even at home [when the soldiers ate her chickens]. She was afraid, so she fled and slept at her rice barn in the village. However, she was sure that the chickens were eaten by the soldiers. Naw E---'s mother said she had about 100 chickens at first [before the soldiers arrived]. After the soldiers came, there were only about 30 chickens.

⁶ Tatmadaw is the term most commonly used in referring to Myanmar's armed forces. The term has been used by KHRG throughout its reporting history, and most consistently during periods of civilian government. Since the February 1st 2021 coup and the military's establishment of the State Administration Council (SAC) as the executive governing body of Myanmar, Myanmar's armed forces have also come to be referred to as the SAC military. KHRG uses the term SAC military in specific reference to the Myanmar military since the February 1st 2021 coup. During previous periods of military rule, KHRG also used the names adopted by the military government in referring to the Tatmadaw (i.e. SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) between 1988 to 1997, and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011), because these were the terms commonly used by villagers in KHRG research areas.

⁷ Karen Information Center (KIC), "[KNLA သိမ်းယူလိုက်ညှဉ်း ခြံတွားစခန်း အနီးသို့ စစ်ကောင်စီတပ် ချီတက်နေ](#)", August 2021.

⁸ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁹ Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

I see. And were there any other household materials taken [by the soldiers]?

They took some pots, plates and spoons from the house. I don't remember the exact number.

So the SAC soldiers are not coming anymore right now?

Many soldiers are still there at the house of Naw E---'s mother.

That means the SAC soldiers are still at her house?

Yes, they are still there. They do not leave anymore. They were there with a car. There are about 30 soldiers in that house. [...] They also set up a machine gun beside the car [at Naw E---'s mother's house].

Is it SAC Infantry Battalion [IB]¹⁰ #32?

People said it is [SAC IB] #32.

Did the soldiers disturb villagers by questioning them when they pass by [the house of Naw E---'s mother]?

They did not do anything. They stayed there by themselves. The soldiers who are on guard duty would just sit on the bare ground. They knew that other armed groups won't shoot them. Some of them [soldiers] might [also] watch in secret but we don't know.

So you can see them when you pass by?

Of course, every time. [...]

The other day, there were two soldiers who went to T'La Aww Klah [a forest near the village]. They took only one gun with them. The soldiers also patrol in nearby areas [near the place they have set up camp].

Have you heard about soldiers bothering villagers when going to F--- and G--- villages, besides firing gunshots?

No, they did not bother villagers. Such things happened in H--- village when the skirmishes happened.¹¹ You might have heard about it too.

Right, I know about the skirmishes. I also would like to know more about how they [the soldiers] treat villagers.

Here, there was only one issue, about the soldiers' taking villagers' chickens and cooking and eating them. There were no other issues like intimidating villagers. However, since villagers have not heard about [incidents of] troop reinforcement in a long time, they were terrified when it happened again. So they fled from their homes.

Right, villagers might be terrified because the SAC soldiers fired gunshots as they came.

Yes, villagers were already terrified even before they fired. Most of the soldiers were BGF though. There were just a few SAC soldiers.

Which battalion of the BGF?

¹⁰ An Infantry Battalion (IB) 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.

¹¹ Karen Information Center (KIC), “[ကံတိုးတိုးကြည့်၊ ပုပ္ဖဝတ္ထသညာ စုစုကောဇ္ဇိတည်း ဘုန်းသင်္ကန်းဝေးဝေး နေအိမ်၊ ကြင် တပြု၊ ဒေသခံတို့ စိုးရိမ်](#)”, Karen News, September 2021. See also, Karen Information Center (KIC), “[Burma Army Soldiers Take Up Positions in Karen Homes and Monasteries – Villagers Security Shattered](#)”. Karen News, September 2021.

I heard that it was Eh Htoo's and Saw Balue's groups [BGF Battalion #1023 and #1021 based in Noh Ler village].

Did anyone tell them that the place they have settled [occupied] is a villager's house inside the village?

Probably the village head was afraid to tell them. The SAC soldiers ordered him to meet with them once. People asked the [KNLA] soldiers to tell them [the BGF and SAC] about this. They [BGF and SAC troops] said they would change the place [move] but they kept stalling day after day. [KHRG's researcher provided an update that the SAC troops and BGF stayed in the villager's house from August 28th to September 14th 2021.]

Do you think they have any secret strategy?

They might have that too. They said that their camp was destroyed and they have not rebuilt it completely yet. So they had to wait [stay in the village].

Did they ask for volunteer workers when they rebuilt the camp?

No, they just did it themselves.

So they cut trees from the reserved [protected] forest that you maintain?

I think many trees were cut down from there.

COVID-19 infections

Are you able to travel freely to buy food right now?

We can travel freely but we are afraid to go to Seikkyi Town because of the infection [COVID-19]. We just buy from the shop near the front gate of the village. That shop orders things from Seikkyi Town that are then delivered [to the village]. So we just buy from there. We are allowed to go to Seikkyi but we just don't want to go.

So Seikkyi is highly prone to the infection [COVID-19].

Yes, Seikkyi and Kya Inn are highly prone.

So, you might not be allowed to visit each other's villages?

Yes, we are not. We are afraid to get close to other villagers. We just talk at a distance when seeing them. We are allowed to meet and talk to other people but we have to keep a six-foot distance. We just have to be highly aware of it and protect ourselves the best [way we can]. We cannot do anything once we are infected.

Don't you have access to preventive medicine [vaccines]? Or [do only] those who are in Seikkyi Town have access to it?

No, we don't have access to the vaccine. Those who were infected were given C-Vit [vitamin C], paracetamol, and cough medicine. The health worker in our village used to work in Hpa-an last year, so she had experience treating this disease while she was there. She tried to treat the infected villagers during the short period she stayed in our village. Now, she has already moved to G--- village. One of her fellow workers remained in the village to help treat us.

Have your children recovered well?

Yes, two of my children [who were infected with COVID-19 and] who currently live in Htee Wah Kluh village have all recovered. They [the medical staff] are now treating the other [COVID-19] patients. It is said that those who have recovered from the virus have less risk [of being infected again], or that they cannot be infected again within two to three months. H--- is not yet recovered, but [name is inaudible] and I--- have already recovered [these are his children].

Is H--- able to move around?

H--- can move around but is not allowed to go anywhere. However, those who were infected claimed that they feel very tired to move around. Some of them lost their sense of smell while others still have their sense of smell, but all of them said they feel so tired. Some also said they have body pain.

So they [COVID-19 patients] might not be able to run around?

Yes, they are not able to run around. They are just asked [told] to move their hands and legs, like light exercise.

They cannot do heavy movement like playing cane ball or football, right?

When Saw J--- [perhaps his son, but otherwise another villager] came back [had recovered], he could do these activities but he was not allowed to do so. They [the medical staff] said you are not allowed do the activities that could make you tired if you are infected.

Right, he is a teenager [so he might have more energy].

This disease is more dangerous for the older people with underlying diseases. The young people recover quickly once they are infected. They do not suffer that much.

Didn't the Myanmar government say anything about providing the vaccine?

Even though they talk about it, people in A--- village won't accept the injection [vaccine] if it comes through the SAC. We are afraid to take it.

What if you receive the vaccine from Thailand through Karen [organisations]? Will you feel confident to get the injection?

Of course, some people already got the vaccine injection, like Saw K---. However, if it comes through the SAC, people from here won't accept it.

I mean if it came through a Karen organisation.

Yes, we will be confident to accept it, except if it comes from China and Russia. We know that China and Russia are cooperating with the SAC, so we have concerns.

Has this pandemic and the restrictions impacted the price of local cash crops such as lime, lemon and elephant yam?

The price of elephant yam remains the same. We can sell lime at the normal price. But there is too much big lime [lemon] on the market so we cannot sell it all. One hundred limes is around 600 to 700 kyats [USD 0.34 to 0.39]¹² already now. We just sell it here, we don't have to go to Seikkyi Town. There are people who came to buy it [directly] from here [the village].

It is better for villagers if they can still sell their cash crops.

Yes, we can still sell them.

Are there any social issues such as complaining or arguing about the restrictions?

We haven't had that in our village. We heard that some villages have had these arguments over the restrictions. Some village heads had to run [from the angry villagers]. For us, we are still allowed to go to work, so it is not bad. How can [authorities] restrict everything heavily when they cannot feed the whole village? Even though there are still heavy restrictions, people are infected more [infections are increasing].

So is there any medical support from the government? You mentioned Para [paracetamol] and other medicine.

We have paracetamol and C-Vit.

¹² All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the January 26th 2022 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.56 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate?>)

Do you mean Tiffy [a tablet for treating a cold]?

Yes, COVID-19 patients were only given those medications. They have to take them three times a day if they have a fever. If there is no fever, they have to take them only once daily. They also have to consume a bottle of ORS [Oral Rehydration Solution] daily.

When you say C-Vit, do you mean Tiffy, which is used to treat colds and nausea?

No, it is C-Vit, a kind of vitamin that has a sour flavor [Vitamin C].

Aww I see. So, people were treated with this medicine and they have recovered well. None of them died so far?

Yes, people recovered, including the old people. Saw L---'s mother is old but she is recovering now. She is almost able to dance like before. She suffered like an ill chicken at first.

Interview | M--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District (September 2021)

Name: Naw N---

Gender: Female

Age: 22

Ethnicity: Karen

Fighting between SAC soldiers and the KNLA in M--- village

Could you tell me about the current situation in M--- and O--- villages?

Villagers in M--- and O--- are highly aware of the situation right now. They are living in fear.

What is the activity of the SAC military in the area?

The SAC military are patrolling in the village areas. So villagers are afraid that fighting will happen.

Are the SAC military still active in the area?

Yes, they are guarding the place [it is unclear what place is being referred to] in P---. Some people saw it when they passed by.

Do they also come to the areas between M--- and O---?

They are patrolling a lot between M--- and P---. They also come inside the villages.

Do they steal villagers' livestock and call for [request] porters when coming around the village?

They do not call for porters. However, they are stealing the crops and vegetables that villagers grow [in their plantations]. I have not heard about the stealing of livestock yet.

When they [the SAC] were fired at [by the KNLA], did they do any retaliation against the local villagers?

No, they did not do anything. The fighting happened inside the village though. It happened near Saw Q---'s house [on September 3rd 2021]. [KHRG's researcher noted that the roof, ladder, and the wall of Saw Q---'s house were hit by bullets.]

So villagers might flee?

Yes, they fled. The house owner [where the fighting happened] kept his children at a distance [a safe place either in the forest or at other people's house].

Did they [villagers] flee to the forest?

Yes, they fled far from the village.

Did many villagers flee?

Yes, they are afraid and are staying alert.

Did the SAC soldiers ask for food from the villagers or the village head?

No. They only asked for navigators. [The KHRG researcher noted that three villagers were forced to go with the SAC soldiers as navigators.]

Why did they ask for navigators when they already knew the way?

They wanted to keep them in front because they knew people [KNLA soldiers] were active in the area.

So villagers in M--- and O--- are more afraid because the SAC troops are more active in the area?

Yes, they are very afraid. Even I stay away from there [her village, R--- village, is nearby]. I'm also afraid.

You are afraid of staying here [in your village] as well.

Yes, we heard that fighting could break out in M--- village. So villagers here returned from their farms and plantations, and from outside of the village because we heard about that [the possibility of fighting] in advance [if fighting broke out, they would not be able to return to their homes].

Well, I just would like to ask you about the situation. So far, there is not much displacement yet right?

Right, they do not face many problems with food security or the disease [COVID-19]. However, in O--- village, outsiders are not allowed to enter anymore.

What if the SAC soldiers enter?

No one dares to stop the SAC soldiers when they enter. When there is fighting, people are less afraid of the disease. But in our area [village], we have to be afraid of the disease more [since there is no fighting].

Thank you for sharing this information. Is there any more information you want to share?

No, we just have to be aware of the situation right now.

Further background reading on the security situation and fighting in Dooplaya District in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Dooplaya District Short Update: Skirmishes between armed groups and indiscriminate shelling result in displacement, casualties and destruction of villagers' property \(October 2021\)"](#), December 2021.
- ["Dooplaya District Situation Update: SAC interrogation and arbitrary arrest, arbitrary killing, and displacement due to fighting in Mu Traw District, April to May 2021"](#), December 2021.
- ["Dooplaya District Interview: Fighting between SAC troops and other armed groups resulted in villagers' displacement, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, June 1st 2021"](#), July 2021.
- ["Dooplaya District Interview: Recent fighting and displacement in Kaw T'Ree Township, June 2021"](#), July 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.khrg.org.

Dooplaya (Southeastern Karen State) District

