



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

February 25<sup>th</sup> 2022 / KHRG # 21-288-S1

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## **Doo Tha Htoo District Situation Update: Forced portering and the use of civilians as human shields, and updates on livelihood, health and education, August to September 2021**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District between August and September 2021, and includes information on education, health, livelihood and militarisation in the area. Border Guide Force (BGF) and State Administration Council (SAC) troops forced villagers to act as porters and navigators while they were moving rations during troop rotation in Bilin Township. Throughout the district, local civilians faced livelihood challenges due to higher prices on food and goods, travel restrictions related to local COVID-19 measures and ongoing militarisation. Villagers in Doo Tha Htoo became ill and experienced symptoms associated with COVID-19, but could not confirm whether they were positive for COVID-19 because there were no testing materials in the community and the SAC has prohibited civilians from transporting medicines from the town. While the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) schools are open, most government schools are not, and as a result some villagers have opened private schools in their own villages.<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Introduction**

This Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District situation update includes information on the topics of health, education, armed group activities and local civilians' livelihoods within the period of August 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to September 30<sup>th</sup> 2021.

### **Health**

Currently, symptoms of COVID-19 have been spreading in most of the villages [in Doo Tha Htoo District]. Meanwhile, no organisations have come to give villagers [medical] check-ups or provide COVID-related medical training. According to local civilians, the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> Military Operations Command (MOC)<sup>3</sup> #8 from Pein Ne Taw camp has also prohibited civilians from transporting medicine out of the towns [any towns in the district].

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in September 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.

<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 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> 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.

According to a local civilian, people have experienced symptoms of COVID-19 in all five townships of Doo Tha Htoo District. However, no COVID-19 test materials [test kits] were available in local communities, so villagers could not confirm whether they have COVID-19. However, recovered villagers reported experiencing symptoms like cough, fever, difficulty breathing, vomiting, loss of smell and dizziness [symptoms commonly associated with COVID-19]. Local civilians do not know whether these are positive COVID-19 cases due to lack of knowledge about COVID-19 [and lack of testing], and so assumed the illness was a type of seasonal flu.

The local civilians who had those symptoms and assumed they were sick with flu, but who went to P'Lan Kaung Htaik Hospital in Hpa-an Township for treatment, tested positive for COVID-19 at the hospital. However, there have been no reports of villagers [in the district] dying due to COVID-19. Therefore, the local civilians have said that they are not highly concerned [about COVID-19].

If the civilians [in Bilin Township] try to transport healthcare and medical supplies, they have to pass through the SAC MOC #8 checkpoint at Pein Ne Taw army camp. One local villager stated that during the SAC checks in Bilin Township, they [the SAC] confiscate or destroy medicines or ask for a fine from the transporter. Due to the difficulty of getting medical supplies to the villages, villagers have been treating suspected COVID-19 cases using traditional methods such as boiling herbal roots and leaves, as well as [taking already available western medicines] according to the instructions of village healthcare staff.

### **Education Situation**

The schools in Bilin Township, Hpa-an Township, Kyaikto Township, and Thaton Township, Doo Tha Htoo District have been unable to reopen since the military coup. According to the local villagers, there are government schools, mixed schools, private schools, monastery schools, and Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)<sup>4</sup> schools. The government schools were closed, so Education Department staff from the SAC military government had a meeting with local civilians and staff of the KECD about reopening those [SAC] schools. The local villagers and Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>5</sup> agreed to reopen the [SAC] schools. However, in one village in Bilin Township, the SAC military government staff told the local civilians [that the villagers would have] to take responsibility for [the safety of] their staff [SAC teachers]. Since local villagers have to ensure their own security, they could not take responsibility for the SAC teachers and so the SAC schools could not reopen [in that village in 2021]. As result, the villagers [in that same village] founded a local private school by requesting that [some of the] educated young people in the local villages teach their children. In other cases, villagers from other villages requested permission to open schools at the monastery [buildings]. As a result, some villagers have opened private schools in their own villages, and some have opened schools at local monasteries. A few schools run by the SAC did reopen, and a small number of students attended those schools; however, most government schools did not reopen and some villages also do not have private schools. The KECD schools are open as usual.

### **Movement of armed groups, forced labour and human shields**

According to the villagers, fighting happened once every three or four days in Brigade 1 (Doo Tha Htoo District). On August 10<sup>th</sup> 2021, Colonel Saw P'Lay, who was the brigadier of Brigade 1 passed away. After he died, Colonel Saw Soe Myint Htway became brigadier and Colonel Saw Chit Thu became operations commander (G3), according to a representative of the KNU.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</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 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.

Fighting occurred between Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>6</sup> forces and Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>7</sup> troops affiliated with SAC troops<sup>8</sup> once every two or three days in KNLA Battalion #1's area of operation. One of the villagers said that mortars fired during the SAC's indiscriminate shelling [during the fighting] landed on the villagers' farms, causing security concerns for villagers when they would go to their paddy fields, hill farms, plantations and gardens.

There have been multiple occasions of fighting that have occurred in KNLA Battalion #3's area of operation as well because SAC troops have increased their movements along the Bilin River, Kyaikto Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. One villager said that local villagers faced difficulty with transportation [travel to their farms, transportation of goods and food, such as transporting fruit and other products to sell] for their livelihoods because of the fighting.

Fighting also occurred in the area where KNLA Battalion #2 operates in Thaton Township. The SAC set up a checkpoint in front of the MOC #8, Battalion #9 army camp on the vehicle road between Win Pa, Wi Yaw and Pi Nei Taw villages, making travel and transportation more difficult for civilians. One of the villagers said that the SAC army camp does not allow them to transport rice, health and medical supplies, P'Leh fertilizer [a specific type of fertilizer], and electrical materials such as batteries, wires, and engine oil [most likely because of their potential use in making explosives]. They had to pass the questioning [checking] of the [SAC army camp] gate keepers whenever they transported [any] supplies. After they were questioned [by the SAC troops from the army camp], their supplies were confiscated and/or destroyed and they also had to pay fines [to the SAC].

One of the villagers said that the SAC had increased its military movement in the area where Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO)<sup>9</sup> Battalion #2 operates, so fighting has occurred between KNDO and SAC troops. Since August 7<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC Battalion #406 under MOC #8 from Lay Kay military camp has been conducting military operations in Myit Kyo, Kyo Waing, Htee Hpa Doh Hta [Pyin Ma Pin Seik] and Yo Klah [Kya Thaung Seik] village tracts<sup>10</sup> [in Bilin Township]. This has led to several instances of fighting [with the local KNDO].

On August 12<sup>th</sup> 2021 [or possibly August 11<sup>th</sup> 2021]<sup>11</sup> [SAC troops] gathered eastern and western E--- village elders, B--- village elders, and eastern and western H--- village elders in E--- village

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<sup>6</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>7</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 ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

<sup>8</sup> The term most commonly used in referring to Myanmar's armed forces is Tatmadaw. 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

<sup>11</sup> KHRG previously reported the date as August 11<sup>th</sup> 2021 based on information received from another KHRG researcher who interviewed different villagers (see KHRG, "[Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Forced labour, looting and skirmishes between the SAC and the KNLA, August 2021](#)", December 2021). Because KHRG was

and threatened those elders, saying that, if the KNLA shot at them [the SAC troops] again, they would fire mortars into the villages. [The SAC troops] also ordered the village elders to send 15 villagers from each village to accompany the SAC when they continued on their way [to Yo Klah (Kyat Thaung Seik) army camp]. [According to another KHRG report, in the end only four villagers in total accompanied the troops.<sup>12</sup>] After they departed from E--- village, they used the villagers as human shields for their protection and then released those villagers at the exit gate of the village [H--- village], according to one E--- villager. The villager also said that the SAC detained everyone they saw in their operational area along the road [between E--- and H--- villages] and forced them [the detained villagers] to follow them [and to act as human shields]. On August 12<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC troops arrived at Yo Klah army camp, and they [the troops] also stayed at the monastery [which is near the army camp]. The SAC troops came to Yo Klah army camp in order to observe and check on the ration storage location and army camp land of BGF Battalion #2 under #1013. On August 16<sup>th</sup> 2021, they [the SAC troops] departed from Yo Klah army camp and [arbitrarily] detained everyone they met on their way and released those villagers when they arrived at the next village. Because of this, villagers [said that they] had to hide and sleep in the forest and beside streams in order to escape being detained [and forced to serve as human shields]. One of the villagers also said that they [the villagers] have been facing difficulties in order to go to their plain farms, plantations, hill farms and gardens because they worry that they would meet SAC troops and they would be [arbitrarily] detained by the SAC [and made to perform forced labour or act as human shields].

On August 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC troops went to the Yo Klah army camp with BGF Battalion #1013, accompanied by the Company #2 Camp Commander and Company 2<sup>nd</sup>-in-Command Lieutenant Bo<sup>13</sup> Wa Tho, who ordered villagers [to meet with them]. He [Bo Wa Tho] ordered villagers to accompany them [the troops] when they withdrew their troops from the army camp on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2021. The villagers said that they were very happy that they [the SAC troops] were going to withdraw from the army camp, so villagers were ready to accompany the SAC troops out of the army camp on that day [August 20<sup>th</sup>]. However, it [the withdrawal] did not happen and the [BGF] told the villagers that they [the BGF] are under SAC [command] and they didn't get permission from their senior authority [it is unclear whether this refers to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing or Bo Chit Thoo, the commander of the BGF] to withdraw from the army camp. According to the villagers, they had to waste a day of their time waiting for the BGF troops to withdraw from the army camp.<sup>14</sup>

On September 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, [soldiers from] BGF #1013 departed from their army camp headquarters in Ka Taing Ti Town to travel to Yo Klah army camp to exchange troops and transport rations. On September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021, one of the BGF vehicles transporting rations was attacked by KNLA troops at the place between Pu Yit Kho village and Ka Meh village. The BGF vehicle was slightly damaged. [After that incident], they [BGF and SAC] sent back their [damaged] vehicle and then seized three of the villagers' vehicles from Win Ta Pan village and ordered them [the owners of the vehicles] to transport rations for them [the BGF troops]. According to one local villager, the villagers who were forced to drive [for the BGF troops] were deeply concerned they would encounter fighting [between the KNLA and BGF troops affiliated with the SAC] during the time they were forced to drive.

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not able to establish the exact date of the incident, August 12<sup>th</sup> 2021 has been kept as the official date reported in this Situation Update.

<sup>12</sup> See KHRG, "[Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Forced labour, looting and skirmishes between the SAC and the KNLA, August 2021](#)", December 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer.'

<sup>14</sup> According to a previous report by KHRG, the SAC and affiliated BGF troops returned to Lay Kay army camp from Yo Klah army camp on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021. See KHRG, "[Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Forced labour, looting and skirmishes between the SAC and the KNLA, August 2021](#)", December 2021.

They [SAC and BGF troops] arrived at Lay Kay army camp on September 5<sup>th</sup> 2021, and then they travelled to Myit Kyon village on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2021. On September 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, they seized six villagers' tractors and ordered them [the tractor owners] to transport rations from Myit Kyon village to Kyon Waing village. On September 18<sup>th</sup> 2021, according to information gathered in the village, they forced a total of 104 villagers to carry their rations and act as human shields for their [the troops'] protection on the journey from Kyon Waing village to E--- village. They [the SAC and BGF] forced the villagers to carry rations [from Kyon Waing to E--- village] twice. After that, they also forced 140 villagers from eastern and western E--- village, 11 villagers from B--- village and 97 villagers from eastern and western H--- village to act as porters to carry [the troops'] rations and act as human shields on the journey from E--- village to Yo Klah army camp. According to the local villagers, there were girls and boys under the age of 18 [who were forced to act as human shields and as porters].

According to local leaders, the SAC troops that operate [in Bilin Township] are BGF Company #3 under Battalion #1013, led by Company 2<sup>nd</sup>-in-Command Lieutenant Ka Don, and SAC Battalion #406 under MOC #8. On September 18<sup>th</sup> 2021, fighting broke out in front of Saw O---'s shop [the shop is known by the owner's name] in E--- village. [As a result,] one BGF soldier died and two other soldiers were injured. In response, the BGF soldiers destroyed all the goods and burnt down Saw O---'s shop. Moreover, one of the villagers said that they [SAC and BGF soldiers] indiscriminately fired mortars and shot at the roofs of villagers' houses. One of the local villagers added that, whenever fighting occurs, villagers are the ones who suffer [the negative consequences]. It is just like [one of the common local] proverbs: "*Whether the sharp material falls on leaves, or the leaves fall on sharp material, the leaves will be damaged.*"

### **Civilian livelihood situation**

The travel restrictions between villages due to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with military operations, fighting, and the increase in prices, have made it difficult for local villagers to buy rice and other goods. Half the local villagers need to buy rice and transport it from the town [because rice is more readily available in town]. The local villagers were facing [livelihood] difficulties because the SAC has placed limits on the amount of rice sacks that villagers are allowed to transport from the town [into the rural villages]. [In addition,] there are no job opportunities, so the villagers do not have any income and have been faced with [livelihood] difficulties. According to one of the local villagers, a majority of the civilians are working as day labourers and, since the price of rice and other products has increased, they are facing more difficulties buying food. Another villager said, "*We have been facing livelihood challenges and it is more difficult when we are infected by COVID-19.*" One of the local villagers also said, "*Even when we work for our livelihood, we are full of worry because of the fighting.*"

This report updates the situation in Doo Tha Htoo District. KHRG's researcher received this information from local villagers.

Further background reading on issues related to fighting between armed groups, education, and forced labour in Doo Tha Htoo District in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "[Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Forced labour, looting and skirmishes between the SAC and the KNLA, August 2021](#)", December 2021.
- "[Doo Tha Htoo District Situation Update: Fighting between the BGF and KNLA, and pressure to close KECD schools \(April to June 2021\)](#)", November 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.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

# Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District



