



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### Short Update

March 31<sup>st</sup> 2022 / KHRG # 21-290-D1

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## **Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Forced portering and the use of civilians as human shields by the SAC and BGF in Bilin Township, September 2021**

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*This Short Update describes events that occurred in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District during the period between September 14<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> 2021. It covers the military activities and human rights violations committed by the State Administration Council (SAC) military and Border Guard Force (BGF) troops under BGF Battalion #1013, which operate in the area between Lay Kay and Yoh Klah army camps. The SAC and BGF committed human rights violations such as the imposition of forced portering, the use of civilians as human shields, theft, looting and other threats against local civilians while sending rations and rotating troops between their army camps in Bilin Township.<sup>1</sup>*

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### **SAC and BGF activities**

Between September 14<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 2021, about 24 soldiers from the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> military along with about 22 Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>3</sup> soldiers travelled from Lay Kay army camp to Yoh Klah army camp. They passed through Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>4</sup> territory without receiving permission from the KNU. The BGF troops are from BGF Battalion #1013 led by Battalion Commander Bo<sup>5</sup> Hla Kyaing, which has been operating in the area between Lay Kay and Yoh Klah army camps. The battalion number of the SAC troops could not be identified by local villagers. The SAC and BGF troops went to Yoh Klah army camp to bring more rations and

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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 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> 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>4</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.

<sup>5</sup> Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer.'

to rotate BGF troops in BGF Battalion #1013 already at Yoh Klah camp. The head [officer] at Yoh Klah army camp is Bo Wa Soe. At Yoh Klah army camp, the majority of the soldiers are with the BGF and only a few (two or three) are actually SAC soldiers. In travelling between Lay Kay and Yoh Klah army camps, the SAC and BGF had to pass by several towns and villages such as Kyaik Kaw Town, A---, O---, H--- and L--- villages. They departed Lay Kay army camp on September 14<sup>th</sup> 2021.

According to the local villagers, the BGF at Yoh Klah army camp engage in regular troop rotations every 45 days, and the SAC soldiers accompany them during their troop rotations. Before August 2021, the SAC and BGF travelled along the vehicle road from K'Ter Tee Town and Baw Kyoh Leh village to Yoh Klah army camp, but since August the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>6</sup> has blocked [prevented use of] the road by attacking any BGF and SAC troops that carry out their operations in KNLA territory [the KNLA had already told the BGF and SAC troops not to use the road, but that demand had been ignored]. Therefore, as of August 2021, the SAC and BGF started travelling on the local unpaved roads from Lay Kay army camp to Yoh Klah army camp. In doing so, the SAC and BGF also began forcibly recruiting porters, navigators and [using civilians as] human shields whenever they do troop rotations.

### **Forced portering, human shields and villager insecurity**

#### *a. From Lay Kay to Yoh Klah army camp*

On September 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC and BGF travelled from Lay Kay to Kyaik Kaw and P'Ya Raw by military truck. The SAC and BGF stopped at A--- village for several days and then continued their trip to O--- village on September 17<sup>th</sup> 2021. During that time, they forced local villagers from A--- village to send the rations using their own tractors, five in total [according to some reports received by KHRG], to O--- village without paying the tractor owners.

On September 17<sup>th</sup> 2021, when the SAC and BGF arrived at O--- village, the SAC and BGF ordered the KNU village tract<sup>7</sup> administrator of O--- village tract to send rations for them by boat. The KNU village tract administrator did not feel safe to do so because the local KNLA are likely to attack the SAC and BGF [for trespassing into KNU territory]. Therefore, the village tract administrator decided to flee from the village to another place. In response, the SAC and BGF arrested his wife that day in order to force the village tract administrator to return to the village and accept sending rations for them. However, he did not return.

Even though the SAC and BGF did not harm the KNU village tract administrator's wife, the SAC and BGF kept pressuring her to send rations for the SAC and BGF. As a result, on September 18<sup>th</sup> 2021, 107 O--- villagers had to carry the rations for the SAC and BGF to H--- village in order that the SAC and BGF release the village tract administrator's wife. According to Saw<sup>8</sup> E---, a villager from nearby L--- village, they transported the rations on foot because of the added danger of doing so by boat: *"[I]f the food [rations] are sent by boat, their enemies [the KNLA] might shoot the boats and the boats will sink [with the boat owners on the boats]. So, the village tract administrator's wife chose for the villagers to carry the food [on foot]."*

Based on a discussion with local villagers, there were 105 sacks of rice and other food such as canned fish, canned milk as well as some ammunition. Due to the large amount of rations and the weight of the load, 107 villagers were required to carry the rations. It took two round trips in total between O--- and H--- villages on foot. One villager from H--- village, Htee Hpa Doh Hta village tract, Bilin Township, stated: *"Since the rice sacks are big, some rice sacks were carried*

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

<sup>7</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>8</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

*by three people (per sack) and some were carried by two people. Two men [were needed to carry] one sack and three women [were needed to carry] one sack.”*

While staying in O--- village, the SAC and BGF also confiscated [stole] villagers' ducks for meat, but villagers do not know the exact number of ducks stolen by the SAC and BGF.

Before the SAC and BGF (along with the villagers) arrived at H--- village, the local KNLA attacked the SAC and BGF twice; one time at Kreh Koe Place and one time in the jungle outside of H--- village. However, the KNLA just shot one or two times per attack so it did not cause any injuries and all villagers who were walking amongst the SAC and BGF troops were safe. The KNLA have strictly prohibited the operation of the SAC and BGF in KNU territory, and are ready to attack when the SAC and BGF disregard KNU demands. On this occasion, according to an interviewee, the KNLA clearly did not launch a full-on attack on the SAC and BGF due to the presence of villagers walking amongst them.

The SAC and BGF arrived at H--- village on September 18<sup>th</sup> 2021 and slept at H--- monastery two nights. On the evening of September 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, the KNLA attacked the SAC and BGF soldiers when they came to buy goods at the shop of one of the villagers, Naw<sup>9</sup> Y---. The incident took place in front of the shop. The SAC and BGF soldiers discriminately fired guns around the shop. One of the soldiers [not clear whether SAC or BGF] died during the incident but no villagers were injured. In response, the SAC and BGF entered into the village angrily, searching [for KNLA soldiers], shot at the shop and almost burned it down. According to H--- villager Naw C---, a female village head who has been serving the village for some time shouted at the SAC and BGF soldiers without fear, stating: *“You can't burn the shop because it is not the fault of the shopkeeper. It is your soldiers' fault [that they were shot] because they did not carry guns while they walk [entered into the shop] and you could not control them [they were not behaving properly]. It is not right to burn our village because people [the KNLA] shot your fellow.”* Naw C--- continued: *“If she [the village head] didn't yell at him, they [the SAC and BGF] would have actually burned down the shop, and if they burned the shop, the whole village would burn down.”* Although the SAC and BGF [did not burn down the shop, they] confiscated food and materials from the shop, including a phone and money. The villagers do not know how much money they confiscated.

Since the fighting happened in the village, the shopkeepers [a married couple] and most of the male villagers have fled the village. Men are typically the most at risk of abuse by the SAC and BGF. Therefore, most of the villagers who have remained are women, children and the elderly. One of the villagers, Naw C--- from H--- village, explained why men were fleeing but not women: *“Usually, men are likely to get killed [by the SAC/BGF]. [In the past] they would point guns at the men and say: ‘Go and help find [KNLA soldiers] for us. You live here but you don't know where the [KNLA] soldiers stay?’ Then they would shoot them [male villagers for not providing information]. But they are a little bit softer on women. Since there are women who don't have the strength to walk, women who are sick and women who have babies, they [the soldiers] might arrest [for forced labour] only around five women out of ten women. But women also have to worry for their security. Yesterday, they brought a female villager [as a porter/ human shield] along with them to here [into the village].”*

On September 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, the female shopkeeper, Naw Y---, returned to the village, but her husband has not returned to the village yet. When the SAC and BGF were based in the village, they confiscated two chickens from villagers [for meat]. They were also drinking alcohol and threatened to burn down the village if the KNLA attack them. Villagers who have remained in the village feel greater insecurity and are worried the SAC and BGF will engage in indiscriminate shelling and other forms of human rights violations. Women, children and the elderly have been deeply concerned for their safety since men are absent from the village, but they do not know where to flee to be safe so they take the risk of remaining in the village. As of yet, there have

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

been no incidents regarding sexual violence against women and girls, but the fear of sexual violence is present, especially among older villagers concerning their daughters due to trauma from past experiences of sexual violence committed by the Myanmar military [under previous military regimes]. In the words of Naw C---, *“We have to worry while living in the village. That [risk of sexual violence] is why we are really scared. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to flee even if I want to flee. [...] We really have to worry and are scared about it [sexual violence]. I will not let my daughter go [for portering], I will go myself.”*

On the morning of September 20<sup>th</sup> 2021, BGF soldiers ordered villagers from H---, O--- and W--- villages to carry rations as well as some ammunition for them as they continued on to Yoh Klah army camp. Close to 300 villagers in total (180 from H--- village and 100 from L--- village), including men, women, children, the elderly and sick people, had to carry rations and ammunition for them. The majority of the villagers required to serve as porters were women, and another 12 were underage (nine girls and three boys). The men were fewer in number because some were busy working for their family’s livelihood and others had fled to other places. According to Naw R---, who was herself forced into portering: *“I went because my husband is not home. When I returned home, my legs were in pain. It was so painful.”* They started travelling from H--- village at 10:30 am and arrived at Yoh Klah army camp at 12:30 pm (thus a two-hour walk each way) under extremely hot conditions. They also did not receive any food or drink along the way. Naw R--- added that there were crowded together while portering so they do not exactly know how many types of materials they had to carry. As far as she could tell, some villagers had to carry rations such as rice and canned fish while others had to carry ammunition such as mortars. The SAC and BGF soldiers walked between the villagers along the way to Yoh Klah army camp. There were no attacks by the KNLA [on this portion of the journey] so villagers were able to return home safely.

The SAC and BGF used the villagers not only as porters but as human shields to protect themselves from attack by the local KNLA while travelling from A--- village to Yoh Klah army camp. Saw E--- from L--- village, Yoh Klah village tract, Bilin Township, stated: *“The KNU doesn’t give them permission [to enter into KNU territory]; therefore, they [SAC and BGF] arrested [used] the villagers to shield them [from attack].”*

Villagers were afraid to refuse the orders of the SAC and BGF as Saw E--- explained: *“The villagers didn’t dare to complain. If they complain, they might get shot with a gun. [...] or be arrested.”* In addition, the SAC and BGF staying in the village meant increased security risk [of abuse and rights violations] for the villagers and increased possibility of continual fighting with the local KNLA. Local villager, Naw R---, explained that villagers agreed to send rations for the SAC and BGF because they hoped it would allow the soldiers to leave their area: *“Yes, we tried to get rid of them that way [by portering] because if they stay in the village, people [the KNLA] will attack them in the village. We sent them [carried rations] to another place. Actually, none of us wanted to carry things for them.”*

Villagers were also afraid of the spread of COVID-19 because the SAC and BGF soldiers were from other communities [and thus could be carriers of the virus]. Additionally, some of the villagers who were required to be porters were already experiencing the symptoms of COVID-19. According to Naw R---: *“Many people with nasal congestion (like, lost sense of smell) and other illnesses had to go [for portering]. We do not know whether they were infected with the flu or Coronavirus. For instance, one of the female villagers had just taken an injection [to ease flu or COVID-19 symptoms] the night before and then the next morning had to carry things [porter]. [...] Now, the disease is already spreading in the whole village where I live.”*

*b. From Yoh Klah army camp to Lay Kay army camp*

On September 24<sup>th</sup> 2021, the same SAC troops, along with BGF, returned to Lay Kay army camp from Yoh Klah army camp, taking the same road. There were about 50 soldiers in total. The SAC and BGF arrested three O--- villagers and five H-- villagers, some of whom were women, to use as human shields while travelling from L--- village to H--- village. Naw C--- from H--- village explained: *“They [SAC and BGF] didn’t dare to go back by themselves. That is why they brought along two to three villagers and walked between villagers like that. It is because they worry that they will be ambushed. By walking amongst the villagers, if they are ambushed, those villagers will get shot instead of them.”*

Before the SAC and BGF arrived at H--- village with the eight villagers, the SAC and BGF were ambushed by the local KNLA in a jungle outside of L--- village. According to Naw C---, *“We fled randomly [scattered] when we heard the gunshots from here [the village]. One of the villagers, Saw M---, said that while he was fleeing from the SAC [and BGF], he encountered Myanmar soldiers and was taken [for use as a human shield]. He said that there were a lot of gunshots [while he was fleeing] but the bullets just missed hitting him in the head.”* Fortunately, all villagers were safe. Two SAC soldiers got minor injuries.

After the fighting, the SAC and BGF arrested anyone they saw on their way to be a human shield while travelling from the eastern part of H--- village to the H--- monastery. They also forcibly apprehended some villagers who were hiding inside their bunkers and under their houses during the skirmishes. The SAC soldiers fired guns in the village and the SAC commanders encouraged their soldiers to shoot villagers on sight in the village. According to Naw C---, *“If they [SAC and BGF] couldn’t call [order] them [villagers to accompany them], they [SAC and BGF] would shoot at them [in the direction of villagers and their living spaces]. Their captain told them that ‘if you shoot them, don’t shoot astray. Just shoot them straight on]. Shoot them to death [shoot to kill].’ So, the female H--- village head, Naw P--- approached them and told them that it is not right to shoot us dead. [...] While he [the SAC commander] came back beside my home, villagers fled when they saw them [SAC and BGF soldiers]. Then his [the commander’s] subordinates [soldiers] shot at the villagers indirectly. So, he [SAC commander] ordered them: ‘Don’t shoot astray. Just shoot straight on. Shoot them to death.’”* According to one villager, Naw C---, the BGF soldiers were also patrolling with the SAC and they saw the SAC reacted violently toward villagers, but they were quiet [did not stop them] because they are under the command of the SAC.

The SAC and BGF reaction frightened the local civilians, including children. As Naw C---, one of the villagers who was forced to porter, explained: *“I do not know how to describe this feeling. We are in extreme fear now and we shit ourselves [because we were so afraid].”* Another villager Yaw Cher added: *“One of the Muga [villagers], Naw B---, her poo [feces] came out under her sarong when SAC ordered her to follow them so the SAC soldiers told her, ‘You go back Muga, I cannot handle [the smell of your poo] anymore.’”*

Naw C--- also informed KHRG that the elderly were forced to porter: *“Another older male villager, Saw U---, told me that the SAC and BGF ordered him to follow them too. I asked him, ‘What did they [SAC and BGF] do to you? How did they release you?’ He replied, ‘I did not do anything. I was too tired to walk with them, so I just stopped walking and had to breathe out from my mouth. I took a rest beside the road and then the SAC and BGF soldiers passed me one by one until they were gone, so I was able to go home.’ He is old and he is already over 70 years old so could not walk well anymore. They [SAC and BGF] also ordered me to follow them too and they told me just to follow them half way.”*

According to Naw C---, the behaviour of these SAC and BGF troops was worse than that of State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)<sup>10</sup> soldiers. In describing SAC and BGF cruelty, Naw C-

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<sup>10</sup> The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) was created by the military junta ruling Burma/Myanmar in 1997. It followed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which ruled from 1988 until its

-- stated: *"We always have to be afraid due to the coup. [...] We worry that they will burn the village or kill people [civilians]. They might kill us if someone [KNLA] shoots at them. This group of Myanmar soldiers that came into the village is not like the Myanmar soldiers that came into the village in the past [before the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)]<sup>11</sup>. They are like rabid dogs. [...] They will bite everything they see. [...] They are not like the soldiers who have undergone training. When they came into the village, they randomly shot guns a lot as if they were getting free guns to shoot."*

Due to the attack on September 24<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC and BGF troops temporarily set up base in H--- village at H--- monastery [instead of continuing on to Lay Kay army camp]. Therefore, H--- villagers continue to worry for their security and fear that the SAC and BGF will force them to be human shields for their return through O--- village, A--- village and then to Lay Kay army camp.

### **Livelihoods**

Villagers in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District reported to KHRG that they have been facing travel restrictions by the SAC and BGF authorities since the February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 coup so they face difficulties accessing food from outside of the village and from town, like Kyaik Kaw. The following SAC and BGF army camps are based in the area between H--- village and Kyaik Kaw Town, and are located along the vehicle road: P'Nweh Klah, Way Raw and Lay Kay army camps. The SAC and BGF also do not allow villagers to pass by their army camps. In fact, they shoot any villagers who pass in front of their army camp by car or motorbike, so villagers are afraid to go to town to get food. Naw C--- from H--- village, Htee Hpa Doh Hta village tract, Bilin Township, explained: *"We usually buy food from Kyaik Kaw Town. Now, the road is blocked by several [SAC] checkpoints, so we can't go anywhere. The shopkeepers cannot go to buy things in town as well. The roads are blocked in many parts [by checkpoints], so we cannot go anymore. If we pass in front of P'Nweh Klah army camp with our motorbike, we will get shot at [by SAC soldiers]. We don't dare to walk on foot either, so we just have to stay like this. The food in the shops in the village is about to run out. If the food runs out, we will starve. Help us quickly if you [stakeholders] can help. We would like the armed conflicts to be over quickly."*

Naw C--- spoke of villagers' fear of the soldiers and their activities, and the impact on villagers' security and livelihood: *"Right now, we still have rice and oil from last year's harvest. But there will be no rice and oil left by next year. We will all die if no one helps us since the conflicts might still continue to happen. [...] We cannot go to work [on our farms] anymore because we cannot go anywhere. People, especially strong males [including teenagers] are fleeing now [out of fear]. This season [time of year] is the season to plough sesame. But people don't dare to go plough. People are hiding in their bunkers and waiting for the situation [to improve]. If we hear fighting, we all have to flee. They [SAC and BGF] will arrest anyone whom they catch. [...] We don't even dare to move. I am really scared; I cannot handle that fear anymore and I really want to flee but I don't know where to flee. Could I flee to you [to where the KHRG researcher is]?"*

### **Demands and recommendations**

Local villagers in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District expressed the desire for their voices to be heard by international stakeholders and the United Nations, and for all civilians to be under the protection of international human rights law. They want there to be an end to the armed conflict

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dissolution in 1997. The SPDC was officially dissolved on March 30th 2011 by Senior General Than Shwe following the election of a quasi-civilian government in Burma/Myanmar in November 2010.

<sup>11</sup> On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the 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.

in their communities, the opportunity for them to enjoy their full human rights and freedom of movement, to be free from fear and from violations by the SAC and BGF. A local villager, Saw E-- from L--- village, Yoh Klah village tract, Bilin Township stated: “[E]ven though there is law, none of it is for us [protects us], so we always have to worry for [the security of] our children and ourselves. [...] [A]s a civilian, I would like to say one more thing: that the law should be for [the protection of] the civilians, but now, it is not for the civilians. Since there is no law for the civilians, we now have to be scared of each other [of other humans, since SAC soldiers are also humans]. [...] [I]t is an important message for the United Nations to hear.”

Further background reading on the human rights situation in Doo Tha Htoo District in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“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”](#), February 2022.
- [“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

