



## Situation Update

January 27<sup>th</sup> 2023 / KHRG # 22-216-S1

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## Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Military activity, shelling and displacement, May to June 2022

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in K'Ser Doh, Ler Doh Soh (Dawei) and Ler Muh Lah townships, Mergui-Tavoy District during the period from May to June 2022, including skirmishes, indiscriminate shelling, arrests, displacement, and humanitarian assistance. The State Administration Council (SAC) and ethnic armed groups [local resistance forces] conducted several operations in civilian areas, leading to greater skirmishes. Allegations of civilian involvement with different armed groups [the SAC and local armed forces] led to killings and arrests of civilians by armed groups, and caused conflictual relationships and suspicion between local civilian community members. Increased armed conflict between the SAC and local resistance groups led to increased civilian displacement. Some internally displaced people (IDPs) in K'Ser Doh, Ler Doh Soh and Ler Muh Lah townships received humanitarian support from NGOs and local CBO/CSOs.<sup>1</sup>*

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This Situation Update describes an increase in military activity that occurred from May to June 2022 in K'Ser Doh, Ler Doh Soh (Dawei), and Ler Muh Lah townships in Mergui-Tavoy District. The situation for civilians has worsened due to this increased military activity.

### **Military activity**

Armed groups, including the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup>, Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>3</sup>, Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO)<sup>4</sup>, People's Defence Force (PDF)<sup>5</sup>, including Karen People's Defence Force (Karen-PDF), were very active in K'Ser Doh, Ler Doh

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in June 2022. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions on the ground. The names of the victims 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> 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>5</sup> The People's Defence Force (PDF) is an armed resistance established independently as local civilian militias operating across the country. Following the February 1st 2021 military coup and the ongoing brutal violence enacted by the junta, the majority of these groups began working with the National Unity Government (NUG), a body claiming to be the legitimate government of Burma/Myanmar, which then formalized the PDF on May 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

Soh, and Ler Muh Lah townships from May to June 2022. The KNDO and PDF operated along the main road in Paw Hkloh area, K'Ser Doh Township, with soldiers entering into some villages in the area. [In Paw Hkloh area,] both armed groups continuously spied on SAC activities and planted landmines where SAC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>6</sup> #402 and #403 often travelled. During troop rotations taking place between May and June 2022, [an unknown number of] SAC soldiers were injured or killed and their trucks were damaged by the landmines set up by PDF soldiers on the road between Tavoy Town and Htee Hkee area, Ler Muh Lah Township.

In response to KNDO and PDF activities, SAC soldiers retaliated by indiscriminately firing mortars into civilian areas [throughout the reporting period in K'Ser Doh, Ler Doh Soh, and Ler Muh Lah townships]. Some mortar shells landed in the villages [no deaths or casualties were reported]. This caused fear and displacement among local villagers. For example, 69 households consisting of over 400 villagers from Hkay Tuh Hkee village, Paw Hkloh area, were displaced because of this shelling. Many villagers living in P'Law and T'Poh area [Ler Muh Lah Township] fled because of the same issue. Similarly, villagers in Kyaw Meh Taw and Wa Ku villages, K'Moh Thway area, had to flee when SAC troops fired mortars into the area in response to a previous attack [launched on May 14<sup>th</sup> 2022] on the police station in Kyaw Meh Taw village, K'Moh Thway area, Ler Doh Soh Township, by the KNDO and PDF.

Another issue arose due to [allegations of local villagers serving as] secret spies working with the different armed groups [KNLA/PDF and SAC]. This caused misunderstandings, [suspicion] and conflictual relationships [among local villagers]. The PDF arrested those who [allegedly] cooperated with the SAC and the SAC arrested those who [allegedly] cooperated with the PDF. According to local villagers, most arrests were made by the SAC [for alleged cooperation with the PDF]. During the months of May and June 2022, four villagers from Kya Plaw village, two from Yay Shan village, one from P'Nah Mee village, one from K'Wer village and around 30 villagers from K'Wa Kone village, all located in P'Louk area, Ler Muh Lah Township, were arrested by the SAC on those grounds. Some of those arrested were killed, while others were detained or released after having to bribe the soldiers. The one villager from K'Wer village has disappeared since his arrest and, as of December 2022, villagers do not know whether he is still alive or dead.

### **Fighting and displacement**

Civilians [in K'Ser Doh, Ler Doh Soh, and Ler Muh Lah townships] are trying to survive despite the conflict and fear. Due to the [ongoing] fighting between armed groups, civilians had to flee their homes, becoming internally displaced persons. Villagers from K'Moh Thway area in Ler Doh Soh Township; P'Law area and T'Poh area in Ler Muh Lah Township; and Paw Hkloh area in K'Ser Doh Township were displaced. Whenever fighting happened between the combined forces of the KNDO and PDF against the SAC, the SAC fired mortars into villages [in K'Moh Thway area]. As a result, villagers lived in fear and fled to Plaw Ner Moo and Hkay Tuh Hkee villages, Paw Hkloh area. Some of them fled to Hkay Ta village, Hpaw Taw village tract, K'Ser Doh Township, whereas others fled to Hpaw Taw village, Paw Hkloh area, K'Ser Doh Township.

For example, in May 2022, 69 households consisting of 317 people fled K'Moh Thway area to H--- village, Paw Hkloh area. Some of the villagers who took refuge [in H--- village] returned to their village after two weeks, but 247 displaced people still remained at the displacement site [as of June 2022]. They received humanitarian support from Ta K'Paw organisation and the township administrator of [K'Ser Doh] Township, who provided basic food for villagers, such as rice, beans and chili. Local villagers and churches also provided basic food but it was not

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<sup>6</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, 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.

adequate. Some displaced people were elderly, people with physical disabilities, pregnant women and children. These individuals in particular were facing malnutrition as the food they received was not nutritious enough.

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC troops based in Z'Weh village and T'Poh Hta village, T'Poh area, Ler Muh Lah Township returned to Htee Moh Pwa area, Ler Muh Lah Township for troop rotation and conducted indiscriminate shelling along the road. This caused displacement in T'Poh area. The displaced villagers were from T'Poh Hta [predominantly Bamar<sup>7</sup>], eastern T'Poh Hta [predominantly Karen], Hsel Eein Su, Doo Kyo, T'Koo, Thein Daw, and Htee Law Thee Hkee villages, T'Poh area, Ler Muh Lah Township. Villagers fled to T'Poh Hkee, Ta Meh, Nya Ber Baw, T'Leh Da, K'Weh, Pler Hta, Baw T'Naw, and Hpway Plaw villages, T'Poh area, Ler Muh Lah Township. Some villagers fled to Myeik Town, Tainintharyi Region, and M'Saw, T'Ka, M'Saw area, K'Wer Hta, P'Louk area, Moh Roh, Htee Moh Pwa area, Ler Muh Lah Township, and Kay and T'Keh areas, T'Naw Th'Ree Township. At the time, at least 3,964 villagers in T'Poh area were displaced. These IDPs received humanitarian support from the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP). After a month of displacement, they could return to their villages. KHRG was not able to verify the number of displaced persons in other places.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2022, fighting took place in Kyaw Meh Taw village, K'Moh Thay area between the combined forces of the KNDO and the PDF against the SAC. It caused villagers from Kyaw Meh Taw and Wa Koo villages to be displaced to Khaw Htee Kloh, Hkler Poo, Naw Truh Taw, Hkaw Paw and Hpway Klah villages in K'Moh Thway area, Ler Doh Soh Township. About 50 IDPs from Kyaw Meh Taw village and over 400 from Wa Koo village were recorded. They received humanitarian aid from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Trip Net, Karen Development Network (KDN), CIDKP, local villager-led group K'Moh Thway Karen People (KKP), and religious organizations, as well as some donations from unaffected neighbouring villages. They [these groups] provided basic food supplies for displaced villagers. On June 15<sup>th</sup> 2022, most displaced villagers returned to their villages. However, Kyaw Meh Taw villagers did not return because an SAC police station was set up in their village in June 2022.

In June 2022, civilians in Aaw Poo and P'Nah Mee villages, P'Law area, Ler Muh Lah Township had to displace because the SAC fired mortar shells into the villages. Especially the elderly, children and women were displaced, but entire families also had to flee. Some villagers in Aaw Poo village were either displaced to the forest or fled to their relatives' villages. An Aaw Poo villager stated that *"conflictual relationships arose between villagers because some villagers cooperated with the PDF and some cooperated with the SAC. Fighting occurred between the PDF and SAC on June 10<sup>th</sup> 2022 in Aaw Poo village. The SAC burned down four villagers' houses in Aaw Poo village and all villagers were displaced. Some villagers fled [to nearby areas]."* Other villagers in Burman [Bamar] villages such as P'Law Kone and Nant Aein Taung, in Palaw area, T'Naw Th'Ree Township [Thanintharyi Region] also fled. On June 13<sup>th</sup> 2022, the SAC entered a Burman village called Kyauk Neint, Tanintharyi Region and a skirmish with the PDF took place. All villagers from the village [Kyauk Neint village] fled due to the clash. The SAC burnt seven houses. After the fighting, the SAC left the village and the PDF remained.

Further background reading on the security and human rights situation in Mergui-Tavoy District in Southeast Burma can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: SAC military activities and travel restrictions, livelihood challenges, education, an armed clash, displacement and indiscriminate shelling by the SAC, April to May 2022"](#), December 2022.
- ["Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Shelling, displacement, threats, arrest, travel restrictions and telecommunication shutdowns in Ler Doh Soh Township, April to May 2022"](#), August 2022.

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<sup>7</sup> The majority ethnic group in Myanmar, also known as ethnic Burmese or Burman.

- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: SAC shelling, arbitrary arrest and torture, extortion, and looting, March 2022”](#), July 2022.
- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Fighting and displacement, property damage, deaths caused by landmine explosion, travel restrictions, and the COVID-19 situation, December 2021 to February 2022”](#), June 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).

