



## Situation Update

July 26<sup>th</sup> 2023 / KHRG # 22-229-S1

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## Taw Oo District Situation Update: Killing, arbitrary arrest, SAC military activities, and education, healthcare, and livelihood challenges, from March to June 2022

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) and Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) townships, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District, during the period between March and June 2022, including killings, arbitrary arrest, indiscriminate shelling, and military activities committed by the State Administration Council (SAC), and education, healthcare, and livelihood challenges. In May 2022, SAC soldiers from Infantry Battalion (IB) #19 fatally shot an 18-year-old villager and arbitrarily arrested another following armed clashes in the area. In June 2022, SAC soldiers shot and injured three villagers who were on their way to harvest betel nuts. Students in Taw Oo District also faced security concerns due to the presence of SAC soldiers in SAC-run school compounds, and the number of students in Karen Education and Cultural Department (KECD) schools increased. There was also a shortage of personnel in clinics and local villagers faced difficulties in accessing healthcare services. The increase in SAC military activities, including the transportation of ammunition, troop reinforcement, indiscriminate shelling, and an increase in checkpoints, resulted in the displacement of villagers. Villagers also faced livelihood challenges.<sup>1</sup>*

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[During the period between March and June 2022], State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> troops frequently transported rations and ammunition to their army camps and checkpoints on the frontline in Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. As a result, villagers were worried and afraid. SAC soldiers from army camps on the frontline indiscriminately fired mortars and guns day and night, with mortar shells landing in villagers' gardens and betel nut and durian plantations. Consequently, villagers did not feel safe to go and work in their gardens and plantations.

### SAC killing and arbitrary arrest of villagers

After the 2021 military coup, the Thandaung Special Region Peace Group<sup>3</sup> [*Htanay Phyithu Sitt A'pweh*] broke away from the SAC and joined the resistance forces against the SAC military. In

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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 Taw Oo 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> *Htanay Phyithu Sitt A'pweh*, or 'Thandaung Peace Group', is a local militia located in Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. The group split from the Karen National Union in 1997 and was initially led by Khe R'Mun. Reports from the field claim that they are currently led by General Bo Than Myin, have around 300 troops stationed at Leik Tho Base

May 2022 [exact date unknown], fighting occurred between the Thandaung Special Region Peace Group and SAC military training unit #9, Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>4</sup> #19. The casualties were higher on the SAC's side [exact numbers unknown]. Two hours after the fighting ended, two villagers from A--- village, Kya Maing village tract,<sup>5</sup> Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) Township, Taw Oo District, encountered SAC soldiers from IB #19. Saw<sup>6</sup> B---, an 18-year-old villager, was fatally shot by one of the [SAC] soldiers, while his friend [whose name is unknown] was arrested. Saw B--- and his friend encountered SAC soldiers between Baw Di Kon village, Than Mi Taik village tract, and Kyauk Kyi Taung village, Shan Lel Pyin village tract, both in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, when they were on their way to harvest turmeric in Kyauk Kyi Taung village. When they encountered SAC soldiers, one of the soldiers shot Saw B--- in the head, killing him instantly. After that, the SAC soldiers buried the victim's body. The other villager who was with Saw B--- was then arrested and taken to the army camp in Yay Ni Town [Yedashe Township], where IB #19 is based. On the way, he was tied up and blindfolded. In order to prevent villagers from knowing about the arrest, the arrested villager was forced to wear an SAC military uniform and he was taken to the army camp by motorbike. [As of June 2023, what happened to the arrested villager remains unclear].

Three or four days after the incident, Saw B---'s family members and relatives heard about the incident from people who are close to SAC members [villagers who hold connections with SAC soldiers]. They [Saw B---'s family] then went to look for the place where Saw B--- was buried. They found that he was buried in a villager's rubber plantation where he was fatally shot.

### **Travel restrictions imposed by the SAC**

The SAC military not only had a checkpoint at the entrance of Leik Tho Town, Ta Boo village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, but they also set checkpoints along the road from Taw Oo (Toungoo) Town to Leik Tho Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. The SAC set two checkpoints in Ton Bo Gyi village, Kywun Pin village tract; one checkpoint at the exit of Khon Nit Maing (7 Mile) village,<sup>7</sup> Kyauk Taing village tract; and another checkpoint at Lay Maing village (4 Mile) [Day Lo Mu Nu Lar area], all in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. There were also checkpoints at the entrance and exit of Thandaung Myo Thit Town. The SAC also set checkpoints at the entrance of Thandaunggyi Town, Thandaung Town, Chaung Na Kwa army camp, Nit Shel Maing (20 Mile) village, Pa Le Wa place, Pyaung Tho village, and Baw Ga Li Town [, all located at the border of Day Lo Mu Nu Lar area.] The SAC established checkpoints where they imposed travel restrictions, extorted money from local people, threatened villagers, and disrupted travel.

[During the reporting period,] SAC soldiers posted at the checkpoints between Toungoo Town and Leik Tho Town collected money from people who travelled by car. People were only

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(Battalion Commander Bo Kyaw Win), in Leik Tho Township, and an additional 40 soldiers at Pya Sa Khan Base (Battalion Commander Khin Maung Lwin), near Thandaung town. It has been reported that they control a number of different illicit operations, including gambling and black market car licencing. They are also allegedly employed as security personnel by local companies and wealthy individuals involved in logging and mineral resource extraction, in addition to having direct involvement in the lumber and mineral business. *Htanay Phyiithu Sitt A'pweh* should not be confused with *Nyein Chan Yay A'pweh*, which is occasionally translated as Peace Group but refers to the Karen Peace Army (KPA), aka the Karen Peace Force (KPF). Nor should it be conflated with *Aye Chan Yay*, another small militia group also operating in Toungoo District that the Thandaung Peace Group has come into conflict with. It is also distinct from the KNU/KNLA-Peace Council, which is also sometimes translated as 'Peace Group'.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</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>6</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>7</sup> Villages sharing the same name in the region include numbers to differentiate between them.

allowed to travel from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. SAC soldiers [also] pretended to be ordinary civilians by wearing plain clothes and they tried to blend themselves among civilians to collect information [unclear which information specifically]. SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>8</sup> #603, which is under Military Operations Command (MOC)<sup>9</sup> #6 and based in Leik Tho Town, indiscriminately fired mortars regularly [to unspecified locations]. The mortar shells landed in villagers' gardens destroying villagers' fruit trees. Villagers [from Daw Hpa Hkoh Township] expressed that they faced many challenges because of the SAC's mortar shelling. According to villagers, SAC troops targeted villagers when they fired mortars. Some villagers have already been displaced [in an unspecified past date] due to SAC indiscriminate mortar shelling. Villagers from villages where fighting happened, as well as villagers from other nearby villages, were also displaced.

[At an unspecified date between March and June 2022,] the SAC set up one checkpoint in Lay Mine area, outside of Toungoo Town; and another checkpoint on Kha Paung Street, in Kha Paung village, Htaw Ta Htoo Township. At the checkpoints, they searched and questioned travelling villagers. They also checked the phones, backpacks and bags of people travelling. Due to this activity, people in towns and local villagers did not feel safe and were concerned about their security.

### **Militarisation and fighting**

On May 5<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC troops from Toungoo Town transported rations and ammunition with three trucks to LIB #603 army camp in Leik Tho Town. On May 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC troops continued the transportation of their rations and ammunition. They also conducted military operations [in an unknown location]. On May 10<sup>th</sup> 2022, soldiers from Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>10</sup> battalion #5 in Taw Oo District attacked Z'Le army camp with a sniper. Z'Le camp is an SAC army camp located on the frontline, in Z'Le village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. In retaliation, SAC soldiers [from Z'Le army camp] indiscriminately fired mortars [in the area], which landed in villagers' durian and betel nut plantations. Some villagers were harvesting their betel nuts at the time the shelling was conducted, causing them to be frightened and flee from their plantations. At 9:00 pm, on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC soldiers [from an unspecified LIB] indiscriminately fired mortars into the area near Z'Le village. Villagers from Z'Le village were afraid and hid inside their houses because they did not dare to flee.

At around 10:00 pm, on the same day [May 10<sup>th</sup> 2022], SAC troops from Than Mo Taung army camp fired mortars into the area near C--- village and D--- village, Than Mo Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. Villagers who went to stay in their farm huts were frightened because of the shelling. They returned to their village that same night. Villagers could have been hit by the SAC shelling that night if they had not left their farm huts to return to the village.

On May 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, fighting happened between SAC troops from Miang Lon army camp, in P'Shaw Loh village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, and KNLA soldiers from Battalion #5 in Taw Oo District. Miang Lon army camp is located outside of the lower part of Miang Lon village [one of the village's three sections, located west]. The place where the fighting happened was about seven miles [11.3 km] from the SAC LIB #603 army base in Leik Tho Town. Although fighting happened during the night and it was hard to see, SAC soldiers from LIB #603 fired mortars from a distance towards the place where fighting was happening [near Miang Lon village].

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<sup>8</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>9</sup> Military Operations Command (MOC) is comprised of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) made up of three battalions each.

<sup>10</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

Mortar shells landed in the area around the middle and lower parts [western sections] of Miang Lon village, and a villager's house was hit. Villagers from other nearby villages were also afraid because mortar shells landed near their village. As a result, on the morning of May 13<sup>th</sup> 2022, villagers from the villages around Miang Lon area fled and sought refuge at their relatives' or acquaintances' houses. As of June 2022, there were villagers who were still not able to return to their village, partly because the SAC reinforced its troops and increased military operations in the area.

Moreover, SAC soldiers from Miang Lon army camp and other nearby army camps, such as Kyauk Lon Kyi army camp and A'Lel Chaung army camp, frequently fired mortars into [nearby] villages. They fired mortars approximately five times per day [during an unspecified number of days]. Because of this, villagers were afraid to go back to their village. Villagers knew that if they returned to their village, their lives would still be in danger. As a result, they sought refuge in other nearby villages. SAC soldiers questioned villagers whom they saw working in their [villagers'] vegetable gardens and plantations outside of the village. If the villagers they encountered had phones, they [SAC soldiers] checked their phones, [likely to check if they shared connections to resistance forces in the area,] which further frightened villagers.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC soldiers were transported in five military trucks from Toungoo Town to Leik Tho Town for troop reinforcement on the frontline. The purpose of their troop reinforcement was for clearance operations [attempting to clear the area of KNLA soldiers]. SAC soldiers who were sent to the frontline were staying in villagers' vegetable gardens outside of the village, so villagers were afraid to go to their gardens. Villagers were also afraid to stay in their village, so they went to seek refuge in other places. SAC soldiers on the frontline sometimes fired mortars into villagers' vegetable gardens and plantations.

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC troops were transported from Toungoo Town to Thandaung Town, in five military trucks, and from Toungoo Town to Leik Tho Town, in five trucks. These troops started conducting military operations in the areas that they were sent to. Starting from May 20<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC troops began undertaking road security [setting up checkpoints and having troops secretly monitor the road] for their soldiers who were going to conduct military operations. They [SAC troops] also fired mortars indiscriminately for road clearance. As a result, local villagers had to live in fear and they expressed that it was not safe for them to travel and carry out their livelihood activities.

During the period between May 20<sup>th</sup> and June 11<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC soldiers on the frontline fired mortars almost every night [towards Z'Leh and Than Mo Taung areas, located near army camps]. Due to constant mortar shelling by SAC troops, villagers' lives were in danger. Villagers were fearful of going to pick vegetables from their gardens and it also created difficulties for villagers' livelihoods [, including working on their plantations].

On June 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, 75 SAC soldiers from an unknown battalion travelled from Z'Le army camp [Z'Le village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township] to Than Mo Taung army camp [Than Mo Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township]. After they left Z'Le army camp and before they reached Kaw Bat Chan village, [in Than Mo Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township,] the SAC troops encountered three villagers who were on their way to collect their betel nuts from their betel nut plantation. They [SAC soldiers] shot at them [the villagers, for unknown reasons]. The three villagers were injured by the bullets as they tried to escape. Before they arrived back to their village, they had to hide in the forest without having any food for three days. On June 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, after having shot at the three villagers whom they encountered, SAC soldiers also fired guns and mortars into betel nut and durian plantations that belonged to Kaw Bat Chan villagers. The gunfire and shelling lasted for fifteen minutes and villagers who went to stay in their huts at their plantations had to rush back to the village.

Due to the shelling and gunfire by SAC soldiers, villagers' plantations and gardens were damaged, but villagers were not injured and houses were not hit. However, this kind of activity [shelling and gunfire] threatened villagers' lives and their security. The SAC also placed their soldiers along the road between Thandaunggyi Town and Toungoo Town in order to conduct military surveillance. SAC soldiers hid in villagers' cardamom and rubber plantations [beside the road] while conducting military surveillance. As a result, villagers were afraid to go and work in their plantations. If fighting happened between SAC soldiers and local armed groups, SAC soldiers would go to Thandaunggyi Town and would open fire in the town. Whenever things like this happened, villagers were afraid to go out and they just stayed inside their houses.

[During the reporting period,] in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, SAC troops transported their rations and ammunition from Toungoo Town to Baw Ga Lee [Town] and to Bu Sa Hkee [army camp]. SAC troops also conducted military operations while transporting their rations and ammunition. When SAC troops conducted military operations, they arrested and interrogated local villagers [under the suspicion that villagers were communicating with local armed groups]. Whenever fighting happened [between SAC soldiers and local armed groups], SAC troops in Thandaung Myo Thit Town arrested villagers and interrogated them. In some cases, they entered villagers' houses without any notice and arrested villagers arbitrarily. Some young people [exact number not reported] were arrested from their houses and they were interrogated for three or four days.

### **Education challenges**

Government schools in Daw Hpa Hkoh and Htaw Ta Htoo townships have been closed since the military seized power in the 2021 coup. Civil servants, including school teachers, left their jobs and participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).<sup>11</sup> Many students also quit school. The SAC put pressure on teachers to reopen schools for the 2022-2023 academic year and to go back to teaching. Parents also faced pressure [from the SAC] to send their kids to school.

Not many people were enrolled in SAC-run schools for the 2022-2023 academic year. Students attending SAC schools faced safety concerns as SAC soldiers and police officers were present inside the school compounds. [Many] parents were not in favour of the SAC education system and, therefore, they tried to find other possible means for their children to receive education. In rural villages in both Daw Hpa Hkoh and Htaw Ta Htoo townships, villagers hired teachers and established their own schools. However, these schools only cover primary and middle education. As a result, students who had to attend high school were sent to a high school [Htoh Lwee Wah high school] under the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)<sup>12</sup>, which is located in another area of Taw Oo District [, in Per Htee village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township]. During the academic year of 2021-2022, there were only 800 students in Htoh Lwee Wah high school, which also has a junior college program. However, for the 2022-2023 academic year, there are over 1,000 students enrolled in Htoh Lwee Wah school. Due to an increase in enrolment, students have been facing difficulties in accessing food, water, electricity, and accommodation.

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<sup>11</sup> On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers at state-run hospitals and medical facilities across Myanmar spearheaded what is being referred to as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) consisting of labour strikes in protest against the February 1st 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to include civil servants from all sectors of the government who are walking off their jobs as a way of non-recognition and non-participation in the military regime. Because of the popularity of the movement, and its seminal role in wider protests across the country, some people have begun using it as a catch-all phrase to include other protest forms like boycotts and pot-banging.

<sup>12</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 Burma, 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.

## Healthcare situation

There are two townships in Taw Oo District and there are four government hospitals in the District. Although there are local clinics in village tracts, there are not as many healthcare workers as in the period before the military coup because many healthcare workers joined the CDM. As a result, there has been a shortage of healthcare workers in local clinics. Some people went to private hospitals to receive medical treatment and some received treatment from people in the village who had some medical knowledge as they [villagers] faced financial issues and could not afford to go to private hospitals. Villagers from rural areas went to receive medical treatment from nearby clinics operated by the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)<sup>13</sup> and Free Burma Rangers (FBR).<sup>14</sup> Villagers also faced difficulties in purchasing and carrying medical supplies because of SAC military checkpoints.

## Livelihood challenges

In Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, villagers from mountainous areas work on durian, cardamom, turmeric and coffee plantations in order to support their livelihood, and villagers from plain areas rely on gardens and plantations to earn their living. Since the military coup, the price of commodities has drastically increased. As the SAC harshly restricted the movement of local villagers, villagers could not travel freely to their workplaces. Villagers also could not travel freely to go and sell their seasonal fruit [it was not safe for them to travel because of the numerous SAC checkpoints and military activity]. Although [some] villagers could sell their seasonal fruits, they could not sell them at a good price and therefore, the income that they earned was insufficient to cover their expenses. As a result, villagers faced livelihood challenges.

Villagers from Thout Yay Ket and Htee Thar Saw village tracts [in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township] work on turmeric plantations to support their livelihood. When it was time to harvest turmeric, SAC troops fired mortar shells into villagers' turmeric plantations. As a result, some villagers were afraid of going to their turmeric plantations and they had to flee from the area. SAC troops hid and stayed beside the road that villagers used in order to watch and monitor the situation. These activities made villagers feel uncomfortable and insecure when they went to their plantations or travelled to the town to sell their turmeric and coffee beans. With the money that villagers got from selling their turmeric and coffee beans, they bought rice for their family members. However, SAC soldiers at checkpoints allowed villagers to only transport 15 sacks of rice per car. Therefore, villagers could not transport as much rice as they wanted.

In May 2022, a windstorm took place in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. As a consequence, durian, betel nut and mangosteen plantations were damaged. These plantations are owned by local villagers from ten villages in Kya Mine and Hta Bon village tracts, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. Villagers could not harvest crops from their plantations as they were damaged, worsening the challenges villagers faced for their livelihoods.

In Thandaung Myo Thit Town, Shel Tone Mine, Hton Bo Gyi and Than Moe Taung areas, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, SAC troops [also] stayed in villagers' rubber plantations in order to conduct military surveillance. As a result, local villagers were afraid to go and work on their rubber plantations and it created livelihood challenges for villagers because they lost the

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<sup>13</sup> The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Burma. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.

<sup>14</sup> Founded in 1997 in response to Tatmadaw offenses, Free Burma Ranger (FBR) is a multi-ethnic humanitarian relief organisation that specialises in providing emergency health care, shelter, food and clothing to civilians in war zones and prioritises assisting IDPs.

opportunity to earn an income. When villagers travelled in the area, SAC soldiers [posted at checkpoints] asked for money from them and they were not allowed to go to their workplaces unless they gave money to SAC soldiers. The extortion by SAC soldiers caused an increase in livelihood challenges for villagers.

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

- [“Taw Oo District Incident Report: A male villager was severely injured and a female villager died from SAC indiscriminate shelling in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, in June 2023”](#), July 2023.
- [““Why would they target us?”: Exploring patterns of the Burma Army’s retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma](#), June 2023
- [“Taw Oo District Short Update: One villager was killed and three villagers injured in SAC air strikes in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, November 2022”](#), March 2023.
- [“Taw Oo District Situation Update: Deliberate shooting of two villagers, military activity, including live-fire exercises into villages, fighting, shelling and displacement in Daw Hpa Hkoh and Htaw Ta Htoo townships, February to October 2022”](#), March 2023.

### 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).

