



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

January 27<sup>th</sup> 2023 / KHRG # 22-394-S1

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## **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**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) and Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) townships, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District during the period between February and October 2022. This report covers unexploded ordnance (UXO), military activity, travel restrictions, live-fire exercises, fighting, killing, displacement, humanitarian aid, indiscriminate shelling and looting. In March 2022, SAC soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #19 shot at two villagers while traveling in Seik Pu Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township after a skirmish happened between LIB #19 and the Northern Thandaung Aye Chan Yay Group. As a result, one villager died, and another villager was injured. In August 2022, an unexploded ordnance was found in Hpa Wel Doe Koh village, Day Law Mu Htaw area, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, which made villagers feel insecure. Since the coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) increased military activity in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, setting up checkpoints, carrying out live-fire exercise, indiscriminate shelling, troop rotation and the transportation of food and ammunition. Due to the increase of military activity in the area, local communities fled from their villages and sought refuge in different places.*<sup>1</sup>

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### **Unexploded ordnance (UXO)**

On August 29<sup>th</sup> 2022, villagers [in Hpa Wel Doe Koh village] found a landmine on the road that cuts through the middle of the village when they were re-constructing the road. [This was a landmine that was likely planted in 1999 or 2000.]

In 1999 or 2000 [specific date is unknown], the Tatmadaw<sup>2</sup> forced villagers from Hpa Wel Doe Koh village to relocate to other villages [outside of Thauk Yay Khat Chaung area]. Hpa Wel Doe

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received from March to October 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 term most commonly used in referring to Burma/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 Burma, Burma'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 Burma 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.

Koh village is in Day Law Mu Htaw area [Thauk Yay Khat Chaung area], Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. After villagers relocated to other places, Tatmadaw soldiers conducted military operations in the eastern part of Thauk Yay Khat Chaung area in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township. When they travelled to the eastern part of Thauk Yay Khat Chaung area, they burned down villagers' houses and planted landmines in [Hpa Wel, Doh Hko, Hpa Wel Doe Ka, Leh Kho, Thay Yar You and Kaw Mee Hko] villages [in the eastern part of Thauk Yay Khat Chaung area]. Therefore, some villagers were afraid to return to their villages and instead they chose to stay in other villages that were close to Thandaunggyi Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. Some villagers also fled to refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border.

In 2012, the preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>3</sup> and Burmese government. In 2015, the villagers returned to their villages [including those from Hpa Wel Doe Koh village].

According to a local villager [commenting on the recently found landmine], Tatmadaw soldiers planted this landmine in order to target local communities. Villagers frequently walk on the road where the landmine had been planted, but it did not explode. It might have exploded if villagers were not careful. Villagers feel insecure, as they think that there might be other landmines that have not been found in the area.



This photo was taken on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2022 in the middle of Hpa Wel Doe Koh village, Day Law Mu Htaw area, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. It shows a UXO that villagers found when they were re-constructing the road. The sign in the photo [written by local villagers who found the landmine] states, “The Tatmadaw planted this landmine in 1999 or 2000. It was found on August 29<sup>th</sup> 2022.” [Photo: KHRG]

## Military activity

[Since the 2021 coup,] State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>4</sup> Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>5</sup> #19 conducted military activity in an area [where Northern Thandaung Aye Chan Yay Group<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</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 Burma 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>4</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>5</sup> An Infantry Battalion (IB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are understrength 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>6</sup> *Aye Chan Yay A'pweh*, which translates as ‘Peace Group’, is a government-sponsored militia first formed in 1998, led by U Ko Gyi. It is sometimes referred to as the Northern Thandaung Aye Chan Yay A’Pweh. It has operated

operate] including Thar Mit Tike village tract<sup>7</sup> and Su See village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. They increased military activity every single day by sending and transporting their troops and ammunition to the area in order to attack the local People's Defence Force (PDF)<sup>8</sup>. When they conducted their military operations, they also attacked villagers.

[Within this reporting period,] the SAC transported their food rations from Toungoo Town to Leik Tho Town twice per month. They also [regularly] transported troops from Toungoo Town to Leik Tho Town. When they sent their food and troops, they indiscriminately fired mortars, especially in areas where they could not set up security guards. They fired mortar shells into some villages in order to clear the road, to ensure their security.

## Travel restrictions

[Following the February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 coup,] SAC soldiers [battalion number is unknown] from Hton Bo Gyi village, Kone Pin village tract set up checkpoints on the Toungoo – Leik Tho road, which many villagers use. Then, they asked villagers who travelled through their checkpoints to pay a toll. These checkpoints are located in Leik Tho and Toungoo towns, as well as in Hton Bo Gyi, Yar Don, Sa Let, Lay Mine and Khum Nat Mine and P'Hone villages, which are on the road between Toungoo and Leik Tho towns.



This photo was taken on September 20<sup>th</sup> 2022 in Hton Bo Gyi village, along on the Toungoo – Leik Tho road, Kone Pin village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. It shows the road where SAC soldiers forcibly asked villagers to pay them money at their checkpoints. *[Photo: KHRG]*

They also set up security guards [at their army camps between Leik Tho and Toungoo towns], and SAC soldiers patrolled from village to village [in the area between the army camps]. They also did not allow villagers in the area to travel from 6 pm to 6 am. The SAC ordered their soldiers to shoot anyone who travelled during the period between 6 pm and 6 am. There has not been a recent case [since the orders to shoot on sight] of the SAC shooting at villagers during the night. However, they have strictly restricted local villagers' movements. SAC soldiers have

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mainly out of a base in the upper region of the Kyaung Haung area in Leik Tho Township, Toungoo District near the Kayah State border, but there are also small camps in Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District. The group previously made a peace agreement with the Tatmadaw in 1998, but since the 2021 military coup, it has engaged in armed conflict with the military junta.

<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> 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 Myanmar, which then formalized the PDF on May 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

questioned villagers who travel in the area. They threatened villagers and they also asked for money from villagers.

The livelihood situation for villagers is getting worse. Villagers faced challenges when travelling to sell and buy things. It was not easy for villagers to buy food and medicine, so they faced healthcare challenges, especially when they were sick during the rainy season.

On September 20<sup>th</sup> 2022, soldiers from SAC IB #605 from Hton Bo Gyi army camp indiscriminately fired [small arms and approximately 10 mortar shells] in the area A--- village and other villages in Kone Pin (K'Saw Lar) village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township] from 3 pm to 9 pm to threaten the community. As a result of the indiscriminate shelling and the increase in checkpoints in the area, many villagers could not travel and faced fear while travelling in the area.

### **Live-fire exercises**

On February 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC troops [from Ba Yin Naung camp in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township] conducted live-fire artillery exercises without warning local villagers in Mweh Kone village, Shwe Zay village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo District. [It is estimated that more than 100 shells were fired throughout the day.] The artillery shells landed in villagers' plantations. Many plantations were damaged. The shelling [was so intense] that it caused villagers' houses to shake. Villagers noted that the artillery shells used in this live-fire exercise had a more powerful payload than in previous exercises. Villagers are also now concerned for their security, as they are not certain whether all of the artillery exploded [and there is a risk that there are still some unexploded artillery shells in the area]. Live-fire exercises have long been a security threat for villagers in Taw Oo District.

On September 10<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC soldiers from Ba Yin Naung military school, Ba Yin Naung camp, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township conducted live-fire exercises in the area [Section (1), Thandaunggyi Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township]. When they conducted live-fire exercises, some of the mortar shells fell into [numerous] cardamom plantations owned by villagers and the shells exploded. Cardamom trees were damaged as a result. Even though villagers who were working in the cardamom plantation were not injured, it was not safe to stay in their plantations, so they fled to other places. Some returned to their villages, while some may have temporarily fled to other areas.



This photo was taken on September 13<sup>th</sup> 2022, in Section (1), Thandaunggyi Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. It shows villagers' plantations where mortar shells fell when the SAC conducted live-fire exercises in the area. [Photo: KHRG]

### **Fighting and killing**

On March 28<sup>th</sup> 2022 at 9:40 am, a skirmish occurred between SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>9</sup> #19 and the Northern Thandaung Aye Chan Yay Group in the area between Baw Dee Kone and Yay Pu villages, Thar Mit Tike village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. During the skirmish, some SAC soldiers died, and some SAC soldiers were injured [numbers are unknown].

[In reaction to] the skirmish, [on the same day] SAC soldiers [from LIB #19] deliberately shot at two male villagers from B--- village, Kya Mine village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District [who were driving past the soldiers on a motorbike]. These two villagers are Saw<sup>10</sup> C--- (aged 22 years) and Saw D--- (aged 17 years). They were shot at when they were travelling from B--- village to Min Lan Taung village, Seik Pu Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. [They were travelling on the same motorbike, with Saw D--- driving and Saw C--- as a passenger.] As a result of the gunfire, Saw D--- was hit on [the right side of] his head [by a bullet] and he died immediately. Saw C--- sustained minor injuries on [both of] his legs when he fell off their motorbike. SAC soldiers then arrested him. [He was released later.] SAC soldiers buried Saw D--- in the place where he died. Later, these two victims' family members and other villagers were informed about the incident. When villagers went to the incident place, they found out that Saw D--- was buried at the place of the incident when his family members dug up his grave. However, the dead body of Saw D--- had already decayed and was rotten. Therefore, according to one of Saw D---'s family members, the family could not bring him to their village [in order to bury him] and instead re-buried him in the same location that the SAC had buried him.

### **Displacement, humanitarian aid, indiscriminate shelling and looting**

From July 28<sup>th</sup> 2022, due to increased SAC military activity [unknown battalion number], including fighting with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>11</sup>, indiscriminate shelling and the burning down of four houses in O--- village, Min Lan Taung village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, local villagers fled from their villages as they feared for their security and safety. Villagers from more than 10 villages from Min Lan Taung, Su See and Than Min Titke village tracts fled from their villages. KHRG cannot confirm the number of displaced villagers. Some villagers fled to Leik Tho and Toungoo towns in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. Some villagers fled to B--- village, Kya Mine village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. As the SAC conducted military operations every day, villagers did not feel safe staying in one place and had to [keep] moving from village to village. Therefore, villagers could not build a stable displacement site in one area.

On June 18<sup>th</sup> 2022, fighting occurred between the SAC [unknown battalion number] and KNLA Battalion #5. After the fighting, this SAC troop indiscriminately fired mortar shells into F--- village and other villages in Mine Lon village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. Villagers' houses and plantations were damaged as a result of the shelling. Villagers fled from their villages as they were fearful. Many villagers fled to other villages including G--- village, Ta Wah Law Chin village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. Displaced villagers did not receive support from any humanitarian organisations, so they faced livelihood challenges. However, on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022, Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) gave support to displaced villagers. They provided 30,000 kyats [USD 14.29]<sup>12</sup> to each displaced villager. This financial support benefited displaced villagers, temporarily resolving their livelihood challenges.

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<sup>9</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. Most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are understrength 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>10</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>11</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>12</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the January 27<sup>th</sup> 2023 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.48 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).



This photo was taken on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022 in G--- village, Ta Wah Law Chin village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. It shows the displaced villagers from Mine Lon village tract receiving financial support from KORD. [Photo: KHRG]

On October 6<sup>th</sup> 2022, around 100 SAC soldiers from Military Training Unit #7 travelled to I--- village, Kyouk Ta Gar village tract, Way Htoo area, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, when they conducted a military operation in the area. At around 11 am [on October 6<sup>th</sup>], before they arrived in [I---] village, they indiscriminately fired mortar shells and small weapons [M3 and M4 guns] around the village. They fired more than 10 mortar shells. Afterwards, they burned down a goat shed owned by villagers in I--- village.

Due to the indiscriminate shelling, villagers from I--- village and three other villages in the area (J---, K--- and L--- villages) fled to neighbouring villages including B--- village, [Kya Mine village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township] as they were in fear and were concerned about their security.

Local villagers could not bring food with them when they displaced to B--- village. A local community volunteer group from B--- village provided as much food as they could for those displaced villagers. However, food support was not enough for [these] displaced villagers.

Therefore, [as displaced villagers who were staying in B--- village were facing food shortages], on October 8<sup>th</sup> 2022, some displaced villagers from I--- village went back to their villages in order to bring their food back [to their displacement site]. According to some displaced villagers, when they went back to their village, they saw that the doors to their houses and other property had been destroyed by the SAC soldiers. The SAC also looted villagers' property including their chainsaws and weed whackers.





These photos were taken on October 9<sup>th</sup> 2022 in I--village, Way Htoo area, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The photos show the damage to displaced villagers' property, including a box of books, clothes, a wardrobe and a drinking water pot. [Photos: KHRG]

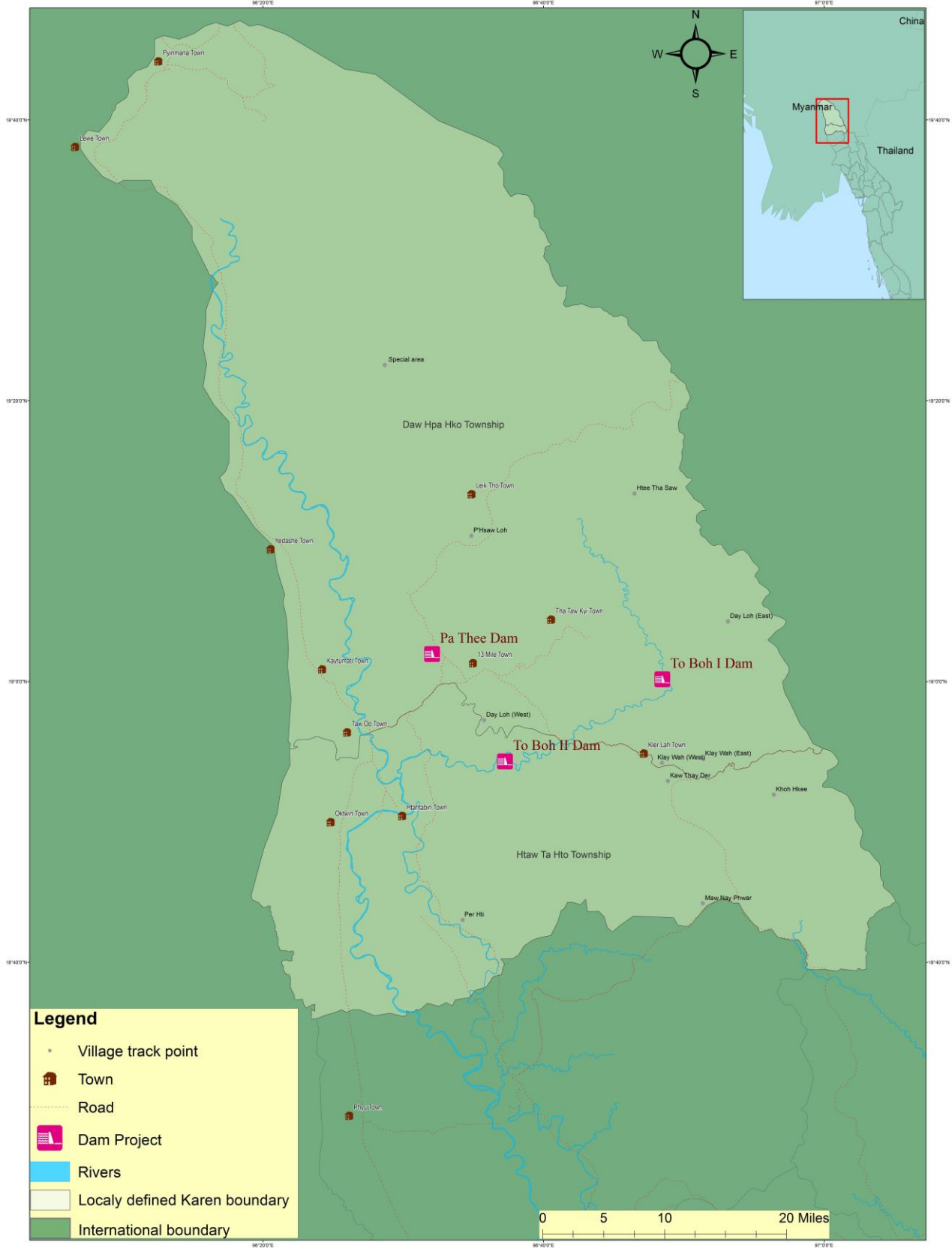
Further background reading on the security situation and human rights violations in Taw Oo District in Southeast Burma can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Taw Oo District Short Update: Skirmishes, injuries due to SAC shelling and gunfire, threats against villagers and restriction of freedom of movement in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, December 2022"](#), January 2023.
- ["Taw Oo District Situation Update: Fighting, displacement, killing, and villagers' livelihoods in Htaw Ta Htoo Township, April to July 2022"](#), December 2022.
- ["Taw Oo District Interview: Suspicious death of detainee in police custody in Htaw Ta Htoo Township, November 2021"](#), July 2022.
- ["Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC activities, March to April 2022"](#), May 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.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

# Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



KHRG