



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

May 13<sup>th</sup> 2023 / KHRG # 23-223-S1

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## **Dooplaya District Situation Update: Fighting, SAC shelling, abusive construction projects, and education, healthcare and livelihood challenges in Kaw T'Ree Township (April to June 2023).**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Kaw T'Ree (Kawkareik) Township, Dooplaya District, during the period from April to June 2023. In these three months, fighting frequently happened between combined troops of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and People's Defence Force (PDF) against combined troops of the Border Guard Force (BGF) and State Administration Council (SAC), inside villages. Both armed groups conducted abuses towards villagers, like looting and property destruction. The SAC also conducted shelling into villagers' plantations, set new checkpoints, and burned villagers' houses, forcing villagers to flee. Villagers also reported facing barriers to accessing healthcare because of high costs, transportation difficulties and the destruction of some clinics. Many schools across Kaw T'Ree Township could not reopen for the 2023/24 academic year and some have been closed since 2021. Villagers also reported livelihood challenges since the 2021 military coup related to fighting near plantations. In addition, local Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) and KNLA soldiers began the process to construct a dam, that will divert water away from villagers' land, and have also built a casino, without consultation with local villagers. <sup>1</sup>*

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### **Fighting and displacement in Kaw T'Ree Township**

In the first few days of April 2023, fighting broke out in many places across Kaw T'Ree Township between combined troops of the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> and Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>3</sup> against combined troops of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in July 2023. It was provided by a community member in Dooplaya 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> Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Burma military 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 government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Burma military.

<sup>4</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

and People's Defence Force (PDF)<sup>5</sup>. This fighting forced many villagers in this township to flee for safety. Following the fighting, the SAC set up a checkpoint at the entrance of Bler Doh village, Thay Baw Boh village tract<sup>6</sup>, Kaw T'Ree Township. Villagers from Bler Doh village did not dare to return to their village after having fled to safer areas during the fighting and due to ongoing SAC presence at the entrance to their village. Moreover, villagers from the following villages were also displaced and did not dare to return to their villages after the fighting: T'La Aye Thay, Htee Meh Wah Hkee, and Lay Kay Kaw villages, in Pa Lu village tract; Aw Hpa Kyee village, in Aw Hpa village tract; Kaw Nweh, and Ywa Thit Kon villages, in Kaw Nweh village tract; Thay Baw Boh, Wa Mee Hta, and Lay Ghaw villages, in Thay Baw Boh village tract; Maw Hkee, Maw Poe Kloh, Htee Ther Leh, K'Neh Lay villages, in Maw Hkee village tract; Aoo Kray Hta village, in Cho K'Lee village tract; K'Meh Hkoh, Ywar Tha Say, Ywa Thit, Noh K'Thee villages, in Maw Ma village tract; Aw Hpa Poe and Aw Hpa Hpa Doh villages, in Aw Hpa village tract; Meh K'Neh village, in Noh Poe village tract; and Khon Ther Si Ther Pler [also known as Khoh Ther Si] (33 Hsu (pagodas)) village, in Maw Ma village tract.

In early April 2023, fighting [also] broke out in Meh K'Neh village, Noh Poe village tract, between the 'Black Panther Column' [combined forces of local KNLA and PDF] and SAC forces, including BGF Battalions #1022 and #1019, SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>7</sup> #355, Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>8</sup> #275, and Light Infantry Divisions (LIDs)<sup>9</sup> #22, #44 and #88. At first, the Black Panther Column intruded into villagers' houses and looted villagers' belongings. Then, the Black Panther Column set up a temporary army camp inside Meh K'Neh village. On April 5<sup>th</sup> 2023, the SAC combined forces attacked the Black Panther Column. On April 6<sup>th</sup>, the Black Panther Column increased the number of soldiers in this area. On April 7<sup>th</sup>, fighting happened [between the two parties] once again. The fighting resulted in a lot of damage to civilian property: more than 200 houses were damaged, and 12 houses were burned by the BGF and SAC soldiers. Villagers in nearby village tracts were afraid because the SAC troops (IB #97, LIB #931) were shelling artillery weapons near villagers' plantations almost every day in Kaw Nweh village tract, Maw Ma village tract, Hkoh Ther Si village tract, and Pa Lu village tract, in Kaw T'Ree Township.

Villagers from Kaw T'Ree Township were distressed due to the military operations and shelling. Fighting happened most commonly in Maw Hkee village tract, Kaw Nweh village tract, and Noh Poe village tract. The SAC frequently conducted indiscriminate shelling into villages and around the outskirts of the villages, causing villagers to live in fear and causing significant challenges for villagers' livelihoods. Villagers were frequently forced to flee urgently.

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<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.

<sup>6</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>7</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Burma military 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 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

<sup>8</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>9</sup> A Light Infantry Division (LID) of the Tatmadaw is commanded by a brigadier general, and consists of ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, search and destroy operations against ethnic insurgents. They were first incorporated into the Tatmadaw in 1966. LIDs are organised under three Tactical Operations Commands, commanded by a colonel, three battalions each and one reserve, one field artillery battalion, one armoured squadron and other support units. Each division is directly under the command of the Chief of Staff (Army).

## **Military-led construction projects: dam and casino in Thay Baw Boh village tract**

In first week of May 2023, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)<sup>10</sup> and KNLA soldiers initiated a construction project to build a dam in Kaw Ngaw river, near A--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township. This project involved three parties: DKBA soldiers led by Sai Kyaw La, the DKBA Deputy Brigade Commander Lieutenant; Saw<sup>11</sup> Eh Htoo, KNLA Company #3 Commander operating under the command of Battalion #103 (based at A--- village, A--- village tract); and the village head of A--- village. When the dam is built, it will divert the flow of water in Kaw Ngaw river which ordinarily flows down to the plantation fields of villagers from A--- village. Villagers did not dare to speak up even though they knew that the dam will be cutting off their water source for rice paddy fields, and [hence] were very dissatisfied. The villagers witnessed around 120 DKBA soldiers carried in more than 10 VIGO [pick-up truck] cars to the project site. A--- villagers were not informed of, or consulted about, this activity. The building of the dam was secretly arranged by the A--- village head with DKBA Brigade Commander Sai Kyaw Hla, and KNLA Battalion #103 Company #3 Commander Saw Eh Htoo.

In addition, the DKBA Commander, Lieutenant Sai Kyaw Hla, who is stationed in Ra Ma Tee Town, beside Ghaw Lay Town road, in Kyaw Hkeh area, Kaw T'Ree Township, coordinated the building of casinos. At Thoo Mweh Kloh river[bank], in Kyaw Hkeh area, casinos are popular with Chinese visitors. Due to not having enough space to build more buildings, Saw Eh Htoo, the Company #3 Commander under KNLA Battalion #103, negotiated with the A--- village head [to allocate more space to build casinos near Thoo Mweh Kloh river bank].

## **Education challenges: School closures in Kaw T'Ree Township**

[There are more than 50 schools in Taw Naw Mu Htao area (the eastern side of Kaw T'Ree Township), mainly operating under the Karen Education Cultural Department (KECD)<sup>12</sup>. After the 2021 coup, many teachers in Taw Naw Mu Htao area, who were teaching in schools of KECD and Burma government combined curricula, joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, such combined schools have become KECD-run schools.]

Some schools [around 18 KECD-run schools and six Burma government-run schools] in Taw Naw Mu Htao area, Kaw T'Ree Township, were unable to reopen for the academic year of 2023-2024 [beginning in May/June], due to fighting in the area (in the eastern part of the Dawna Range [the mountain range that runs through the centre of Kaw T'Ree Township]). Many schools in Noh Poe village tract, Pa Lu village tract, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Cho K'Lee village tract, and Kaw Nweh village tract had to close because fighting was happening in nearby areas. [For instance,] the schools, mostly primary schools, in Aoo Kray Hta village, Cho K'Lee

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<sup>10</sup> In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) split from the KNLA over religious considerations. In 2010, the majority of DKBA troops transformed into BGFs, but one faction refused and changed its name to Democratic Karen Benevolent Army in 2012. The DKBA signed the NCA on October 15th 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Saw is a male honorific title in S'Gaw Karen language used before a person's name.

<sup>12</sup> The Karen National Union's 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>13</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.

village tract, remain closed. Primary schools in Lay Ghaw village, Bler Doh village, Wa Mee Hta village, and Shway In Myine village, in Thay Baw Boh village tract, [also] remain closed. The primary school in Pa Lu Poe village, the middle school in Pa Lu Hpa Doh village, and the primary school in T'La Aye Thay village, all in Pa Lu village tract, are also closed. Htee Meh Wa Hkee village school, in Pa Lu village tract, has been closed since May/June 2022.

### **Healthcare challenges in Noh Poe village tract**

Villagers who live in Noh Poe village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, struggled to access healthcare: villagers from T'Bluh Hkoh Hkee village, Ba Hta village, Meh K'Neh village, Htee Mu Hta village, and Noh Poe village, all in Noh Poe village tract, did not dare to travel for healthcare treatment at the hospital located in Myawaddy Town, at the Thai border. Villagers were afraid to travel because fighting happened from March 25<sup>th</sup> to April 12<sup>th</sup> 2023 between combined troops of the KNLA-PDF against combined troops of the SAC-BGF in Meh K'Neh village, and so villagers in the area were afraid to travel outside of their villages. A clinic in Meh K'Neh village was destroyed by the fighting. Other local clinics [in Kaw T'Ree Township] had insufficient medicines due to the transportation challenges in delivering medical supplies. The journey between the hospital in Myawaddy Town to the villages was dangerous because of fighting on the road and generally in the area, and so villagers did not dare to travel. Reportedly, pregnant women from Meh K'Neh village and Tha Bluh Hkoh Hkee village frequently gave birth in the forest and huts because they were not able to go to the hospital when fighting was happening on the roads.

Struggles to [maintain good] hygiene [in villages] have caused cases of diarrhoea to increase among villagers from Kaw Maw Naw and Thay Baw Boh villages, Thay Baw Boh village tract. In addition, some villagers became sick with malaria due to a lack of mosquito nets. Although the hospital can provide treatment for these diseases, villagers often could not receive treatment from the hospital because they could not afford the costs involved or due to the risk while travelling.

### **Livelihood challenges in Kaw T'Ree Township**

Livelihood difficulties have increased in Kaw T'Ree Township since the 2021 military coup. In Pa Lu village tract, almost every plantation field had to be abandoned because safety while working was compromised by nearby fighting. Villagers could not do plantation work, severely impacting their livelihoods. In 2023, hill farmers from Taw Naw Mu Hta area faced the dilemma of whether to work [in plantations] or not because of the safety risks involved.

Doing plantation work has also decreased in Thoo Mweh Kloh (Thaung Yin) river bank [also known as Moei River], because the villagers' plantation fields were part of the battlefield. Transportation of materials needed for livelihoods around the area also became harder.

Further background reading on the human rights situation in Dooplaya District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Dooplaya District Incident Report: A 21-year-old villager stepped on a landmine in Kaw T’Ree Township, December 2023.”](#), April 2024.
- [\*Permanent Scars: Torture of villagers under arbitrary detention by State Administration Council in Southeast Burma \(January - December 2023\)\*](#), April 2024
- [“Dooplaya District Situation Update: SAC indiscriminate shelling and healthcare and livelihood challenges \(February to April 2023\)”](#), February 2024
- [“Dooplaya District Situation Update: Indiscriminate shelling of villages causing displacement and livelihood difficulties \(March to May 2023\)”](#), January 2024

### About KHRG

Founded in 1992, 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).



