



## Short Update

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## Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: Killing, house burning, forced portering and use of civilians as human shields, in Ler K'Saw Township, July 2023

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*This Short Update describes events that occurred in Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District in July 2023. On July 9<sup>th</sup> 2023, the State Administration Council (SAC) Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) #559 and #560 forced more than 10 villagers, including a 3-year-old child, to act as porters and human shields when fighting broke out with the combined forces of Kaw Thoo Lei Army (KTLA) and the People's Defence Force (PDF) near A--- village, Taung Ngar Tan village tract, Ler K'Saw Township. The SAC forces also burned a villager's house in retaliation after the skirmish occurred. On July 30<sup>th</sup> 2023, in a separate incident, PDF soldiers killed a villager from A--- village, accusing him of being an SAC informant.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Fighting, house burning, forced portering and use of civilians as human shields

On the morning of July 9<sup>th</sup> 2023, State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>3</sup> #559 and #560, who were based in an army camp in Lay Nyar village, Taung Ngar Tan village tract<sup>4</sup>, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, went to A--- village, Taung Ngar Tan village tract. At around 8:00 am, on their way to the village, they arrested D---, a villager from A-- - village. According to D---, the SAC soldiers arrested him and asked him to carry their ammunition. D--- responded to them: *"I suffer from lower back pain. I cannot carry your bullets"*. Then, one of the SAC soldiers, Ko<sup>5</sup> San Naing, told him: *"Don't talk nonsense. You have to carry bullets as we ask you to do so"*. They forced D--- to carry their bullets.

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in July and August 2023. 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, 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> A Burma Army Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. Most Light Infantry Battalions in the Burma army 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>4</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>5</sup> Ko is a Burmese title meaning older brother. It can be used for relatives as well as non-relatives.

In addition, the SAC arrested whoever they saw on their way and took them with them as porters and human shields. D--- reported that the SAC arrested ten villagers and asked them to carry their ammunition and forced them to walk in front of them [to protect the soldiers from attack]. Among the arrested villagers there were a three-year-old child and his mother, who were forced to accompany the soldiers as human shields.

When the SAC reached a plantation owned by a villager named C---, in B--- [place], at around 9:00 am, they encountered Kaw Thoo Lei Army (KTLA)<sup>6</sup> and People's Defence Force (PDF)<sup>7</sup> soldiers and fighting happened near C---'s house, which is near A--- village, Taung Ngar Tan village tract. The KTLA [and PDF] soldiers realised that there were villagers with SAC soldiers and so they stopped firing guns and retreated. During the fighting, the SAC soldiers asked those arrested villagers to crouch down but they did not let villagers put down the ammunition they carried. The villagers did not get injured or hit by the bullets during the fighting, nor were any of the KTLA/[PDF] and SAC soldiers. After the fighting, the SAC told the arrested villagers: "You did a good job", and released them all, leaving them to walk two hours home. D--- said: "They [SAC] would not [have] release[d] us if any of their soldiers [had] died or [had been] injured." D--- reported to a KHRG researcher that he and the other arrested villagers still feel fear and panic after they were released. They worry and fear they will be arrested again and killed. Major Min Htun is responsible for LIB #559 and #560.

Once the villagers had been released by the SAC, at around 9:30 am, fighting happened again between the SAC and combined forces of PDF/KTLA close to B--- place. After they fought for about 30 minutes, KTLA and PDF soldiers retreated from the fighting place. C--- [plantation owner] was hiding somewhere nearby during the fighting. As he explained to a KHRG researcher, the SAC soldiers burned his house down after the fighting in retaliation because they thought he helped the KTLA/PDF soldiers. The estimated value of property damage of C---'s house is 30 million kyat [14,296 USD]<sup>8</sup>.



These photos were taken in July 2023 in a place near A--- village, Taung Ngar Tan village tract, Ler K'Saw

<sup>6</sup> The Kaw Thoo Lei Army (KTLA) was founded on July 17th 2022 by Brigadier-General Nerdah Bo Mya. Nerdah Bo Mya, former Commander-In-Chief of the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), was dismissed by the KNU in 2022. KTLA operates in two districts in Southeast Burma, in KNU-controlled areas, namely Mergui-Tavoy and Dooplaya districts. In Dooplaya District, they operate in alliance with resistance armed groups. KTLA battalions in Mergui-Tavoy District are in conflict with both SAC and KNLA troops.

<sup>7</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>8</sup> All conversion estimates for Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate as of November 10th 2023 at 1 USD = 2,098.48 MMK, conversion rate available at <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter>

Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. They show C---'s house, burned down by SAC LIB #559 and #560 after a skirmish between armed groups nearby. [Photos: KHRG]

### Enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killing

On July 30<sup>th</sup> 2023, at around 1:00 pm, PDF soldiers came to B--- place, A--- village, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. There, five members of "Pa Ka Hpa" [PDF] Battalion #1, abducted U<sup>9</sup> F---. They came to U F---'s house [dressed in civilian clothes] and one of them asked him for help: "Uncle, can you show us where U G---'s house is and can you accompany us to his house as a guide?". Then, U F--- accompanied them in order to show where U G---'s house is. U F---'s wife was there in the house when they came.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after U F--- went out with them, it occurred to his wife that, if those people were from this area, they would know where U G---'s house is, as everyone in the area knows. After a while, his wife heard the sound of gunfire.

Other villagers and his wife did not initially believe that U F--- was killed. His wife first thought that the KTLA had abducted her husband, guessing which armed group may have taken him. Therefore, she called a KTLA officer over the phone and asked what had happened to her husband. After this conversation, she realised that the KTLA did not do anything to her husband. As soon as she realised that the KTLA did not do anything to her husband, she started to look for him on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2023, but she could not find him. The next day, KTLA members tried to help her find her husband. On August 1<sup>st</sup> 2023, they [villagers] finally found the body of U F--- near a stream which is close to A--- village. They could see that U F--- had been shot because they saw a small hole in his head.

No one dared to find out the truth and get justice for this case, fearing for their own safety. U F---'s wife said that she assumes her husband was killed because his brother is an SAC informant. Therefore, she presumes the PDF wrongfully killed him thinking that her husband was his brother. She reported that she really wanted to get justice for her husband.



KHRG received this photo on the first week of August 2023. It shows the body of U F--- near A-- village, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. He was killed by members of the PDF. [Photo – a local villager]

<sup>9</sup> 'U' is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>10</sup> KHRG, "[In the Dark - The crime of enforced disappearance and its impacts on the rural communities of Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup](#)", November 2023, p. 33

Further background reading on the situation of killings, house burning, use of human shields, and enforced disappearances in Mergui-Tavoy District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [\*"In the Dark - The crime of enforced disappearance and its impacts on the rural communities of Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup"\*](#), November 2023
- [\*"Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: SAC indiscriminate shelling, killing, arrests, torture, house burning, and villagers' displacement in K'Ser Doh Township, June 2023"\*](#), November 2023
- [\*"Why would they target us?": Exploring patterns of the Burma Army's retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma"\*](#), June 2023.
- [\*"Burning Karen State: Retaliatory burning of houses and property against rural civilian communities of Southeast Burma \(2021 and 2022\)"\*](#), March 2023.

### 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).

# Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

