



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

January 25th 2024 / KHRG # 23-250+267-S1

Taw Oo District Situation Update: Fighting, shelling, and house burning in Thandaung Town, and air strikes in Htaw Ta Htoo Township (January to July 2023)

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 January and July 2023. Fighting happened frequently in Thandaung Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, between the State Administration Council (SAC) and combined forces of People's Defence Force (PDF) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). In the aftermath of these skirmishes, the SAC indiscriminately fired rounds of mortar into Thandaung Town, forcing villagers to flee. In addition, the SAC burned civilian houses and some Karen National Union (KNU) leaders' houses, as well as cars and motorcycles in the town. In total, 28 houses were burned down in Thandaung Town by the SAC. On July 28th 2023, the SAC conducted air strikes in Per Htee village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, after fighting broke out between the SAC and KNLA forces. This also caused the displacement of villagers.¹

Context overview, fighting and shelling in Thandaung Town

After the military coup on February 1st 2021, workers from different [Burma government] departments, such as the health and education departments, in Thandaung (Hsel Thon Maing) Town, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, participated in the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)². In Thandaung Town, all health workers and [around] 70% of school teachers joined the CDM. In the early months of the 2021 coup, more than half of [Burma] government employees joined the CDM. Over time, some of the CDM participants left the movement due to a lack of support, family livelihood challenges, and pressure from their superiors. In February and March 2021, there were public protests every day in Thandaung Town and protestors were joining other villages and towns to hold public protests. However, later on, public protest activities decreased because of people's livelihood difficulties and threats from the military and police on protest leaders or organisers.

¹ The present document is based on information received in July and August 2023. 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.

² On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers at state-run medical facilities across Burma 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 nonparticipation 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.

Armed resistance also became popular among the youth in Thandaung Town. Young people secretly connected with relevant people [local armed groups] and went to attend military training courses. In consequence, People's Defence Force (PDF)³ in Thandaung was formed in opposition to Burma Army soldiers [under the command of the State Administration Council (SAC)]⁴ and military informants. They [the PDF] attacked the Burma military convoys by using trip-wire bombs. Later, in 2022, there was a change of positions in the Burma Army⁵ in Thandaung Town and Battalion Commander Hein Zan Htun came to operate in the town. Since Battalion Commander Hein Zan Htun arrived in the town, there was more fighting between the armed groups [Burma Army and local PDF] and some innocent civilians were arrested [by the SAC].

[SAC] Battalion Commander Hein Zan Htun called local religious leaders, parents, and the elders in Thandaung Town to warn their children to abandon the armed revolution and to not get involved in armed resistance. He also threatened to shell mortars into Thandaung Town if the Burma Army was ambushed.

The Burma Army was ambushed and attacked by snipers [from local PDF] in January 2023. In retaliation, on January 26th 2023, Burma Army soldiers started to fire rounds of mortar into Thandaung Town. As they fired mortar shells into the town continuously, every other hour, from January 26th to 29th 2023, local residents in Thandaung Town were scared and [many] displaced themselves to Toungoo Town, A--- village, B--- village, and other villages nearby in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township. Six months later, most civilians [were] still displaced from Thandaung Town, unable to return home. During the period when most people were displaced, there were many human rights violations occurring in the town against those who remained, such as arbitrary arrests, looting, and house burning [committed by the Burma Army].

House burning in Thandaung Town

House burning by the SAC [during the reporting period] happened in Thandaung Town five times, in which there were 26 houses burned down in total. Two other houses were burned down due to mortar shelling. Thus, 28 houses were burned down in total.

1. February 4th 2023: Three houses were burned by SAC soldiers
2. February 21st 2023: Seven houses were burned by SAC soldiers
3. March 4th 2023: Six houses were burned by SAC soldiers
4. March 6th 2023: Five houses were burned by SAC soldiers
5. July 7th 2023: Five houses were burned by SAC soldiers

On February 4th 2023, at around 11 am, a Burma Army military truck travelling from Thandaung Town to Toungoo Town was attacked by PDF members from Thandaung Town by using a trip-wire bomb near the Thandaung hospital. The Burma military truck was damaged and more than

³ 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 formalised the PDF on May 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

⁴ 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.

⁵ The terms Burma military, Burma Army, and SAC are used interchangeably throughout this report to describe Burma's armed forces. Villagers themselves commonly use Burma Army, Burmese soldiers, or alternatively the name adopted by the Burma military regime at the time -since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC)

ten Burma [Army] soldiers died. After the incident, the Burma Army soldiers burned down a house that displayed a Karen flag and two houses of local Karen National Union (KNU)⁶ leaders, near the incident place. [It is unknown if the SAC soldiers knew that KNU leaders were living in those two houses.]

Fighting broke out between the Burma Army and Thandaung PDF on February 21st 2023, at 10:30 am. No soldiers from either group were injured in the skirmish. After the fighting, the Burma Army came into Section #1 of Thandaung Town (Section #1 was previously called Section #5), which was close to the incident place, and burned down seven houses, two motorcycles and a car belonging to civilians. As the fighting happened in a residential place, civilians had fled to other secure places.

On March 4th 2023, at 11:30 am, fighting broke out between the Burma Army and Thandaung PDF in Section #2. Four Burma [Army] soldiers died in the fighting and some were injured, including Battalion Commander Hein Zan Htun. Some Thandaung PDF members were also injured. Afterwards, the Burma Army burned down six civilian houses near the fighting place, as PDF members had been secretly hiding in the houses before the attack.

On March 6th 2023, at 2:20 pm, fighting broke out between the Burma Army and the combined troops of Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁷ Brigade #2, Battalion #5, and Thandaung PDF in Section #3, in Thandaung Town. After the fighting, Burma Army soldiers burned down five civilian houses near the fighting place. Four Burma [Army] soldiers died in the fighting.

On July 7th 2023, at 2:30 pm, fighting broke out between the Burma Army and Thandaung PDF in Section #2. No soldiers from either side were injured but two civilians were killed [by the SAC].⁸ After the fighting, Burma Army soldiers burned down three houses in Section #2 and a house in Section #3 which had a picture of the Karen flag. The fire from this house burning was strong and propagated to another house that was close to it. Therefore, five houses were burned down in total.

From these incidents, it is evident that the Burma Army systematically uses house burning in retaliation against civilians in the aftermath of fighting with local armed resistance groups. It is also clear that houses displaying the Karen flag, which is a sacred image to Karen people, are more likely to be targeted by the Burma Army in these retaliatory attacks.

⁶ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the Burma 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.

⁷ The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) is the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU).

⁸ KHRG, "[Taw Oo District Incident Report: Killings, property destruction, and indiscriminate shelling by the SAC in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township \(July 2023\)](#)", November 2023



Air strikes in Htaw Ta Htoo Township

On the evening of 28th July 2023, the SAC conducted air strikes close to C--- School and D--- village, Per Htee village tract⁹, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. Because of the air strikes, students in C--- School were scared and fled to safe places. The villagers were also scared and displaced themselves to other places as they worried that the SAC would continue conducting air strikes. Due to this incident, C--- School was closed. The SAC conducted the air strikes after fighting broke out between SAC soldiers and KNLA combined troops [with an unknown group] at 6 am on 27th July 2023. During the fighting, some SAC soldiers were injured. In retaliation, the SAC conducted this air strike as a threat to local communities. No one was injured or killed by the air strike. Currently, the displaced villagers have returned to their village.

⁹ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village

Further background reading on the situation in Taw Oo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Taw Oo District Situation Update: SAC indiscriminate shelling causing death and injury, travel restrictions, and villagers’ livelihood, education, and healthcare challenges, from January to March 2023.”](#), November 2023.
- [“Taw Oo District Situation Update: SAC attacks against civilians, militarisation, development projects, displacement, and education, healthcare and livelihood challenges, July to November 2022”](#), November 2023.
- [“Burning Karen State: Retaliatory burning of houses and property against rural civilian communities of Southeast Burma \(2021 and 2022\)”](#), March 2023.
- [“Why would they target us?": Exploring patterns of the Burma Army's retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma”](#), June 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.khr.org.

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District

