



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: SAC militarisation and impacts on travel, education, health and livelihoods in Ler K'Saw Township (October to December 2023)

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, during the period of October to December 2023. It includes information about Burma Army militarisation and other difficulties related to education, livelihood challenges, and healthcare. Villagers in Ler K'Saw Township faced difficulties to work on their plantations, or travel to buy supplies, because Burma Army soldiers were staying in the plantations beside the roads that villagers used. Villagers also feared arbitrary arrests from those Burma Army soldiers. Market prices have also increased, posing serious livelihood challenges for farmers and daily wage workers. In G--- village, Kaw Baw area, children's education was impacted as many teachers faced different difficulties to continue their profession, leading to a lack of qualified teachers in schools, as well as due to parents being unable to pay schooling fees. Reportedly, with school dropouts, there had also been an increase in underage villagers getting married. Villagers also faced serious difficulties in accessing medical treatment due to the unaffordable costs as well as travel restrictions imposed by the SAC at checkpoints.¹

Introduction

This Situation Update describes incidents occurred during three months in Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, from October to December 2023. Issues include (1) militarisation by the Burma Army, (2) livelihood challenges, (3) education, and (4) villagers' healthcare issues.

Militarisation of the Burma Army

From December 1st to 5th 2023, there was an increase in the militarisation by the Burma Army of Kleh Muh Htee area, Lay Nyah Lah Kaw area, and S'Toh area, in Ler K'Saw Township.

The [increased] presence of Burma Army soldiers in Kleh Muh Htee area has spread fear among villagers due to their indiscriminate firing of guns and the fact that they carry firearms in the villages. That has also led to concerns [among villagers] about [the risk of] arbitrary arrests. [During this time,] the Burma Army were stationed beside roads and among palm oil plantations, causing anxiety for villagers who needed to travel to buy essential supplies. The militarisation [increase in military activities] of the Burma Army columns from Kleh Mu Htee area were of particular concern, as their activities were unpredictable. The extensive presence of the Burma

¹ The present document is based on information received in December 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.

Army has made it difficult for villagers to access their hill farms and betel nut plantations for work.

Livelihood challenges

In Ler K'Saw Township, the predominant occupation among villagers is [working on] betel nut plantations and hill farms. The [military and political] conflict in the country [since the coup in 2021] has led to fluctuations in market prices, particularly affecting the betel nut industry, causing some villagers to seek employment in other villages or countries.

Additionally, the rising prices of agricultural produce have resulted in increased incidents of theft within the village. Daily wage workers are experiencing food scarcity due to the escalating cost of goods, compounded by the challenges of travelling [due to proliferation of Burma Army checkpoints] amid political tensions caused by the SAC.

Education challenges

After the military coup [in 2021], some villages in Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, experienced a decline in education opportunities. In G--- village, Kaw Baw area, Ler K'Saw Township, there has been a critical shortage of qualified teachers, which severely impacts the education of children in the community. The government-employed teachers [now under the administration of the State Administration Council (SAC)²] are afraid to fulfil their duties due to safety concerns [fearing attacks by local resistance armed groups], while other teachers [under the Karen National Union (KNU)³ administration] have left their positions to seek employment in other countries, as their salaries are not sufficient to support their livelihoods. Consequently [due to the lack of available teachers], during the school season [academic year], many children are unable to attend school and instead some children are marrying at a young age, typically between 14 and 16 years old.⁴

In response to the lack of professional teachers, villagers have taken it upon themselves to assign villagers [who have higher education] to teach, leading to a decline in the quality of education received by the children [as the education is informal]. These appointed teachers receive a monthly salary of only 120,000 Kyat [57.11 USD]⁵, a figure that many parents are unable to afford, particularly as the cost of living continues to rise. This leaves some families struggling to obtain even basic necessities such as food. As a result, parents are growing increasingly concerned about the future prospects of their children, who are not receiving the quality of education they deserve. This situation poses a significant obstacle to the overall well-being and development of the community's young population.

² 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.

³ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar 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.

⁴ Child marriage is any union (formal or informal) where at least one of the parties is underage. The practice violates a child's human rights and disproportionately affects girls. Child marriage is a human rights violation, and illegal under Burma's Child Rights Law (passed in July 2019) and also according to Karen National Union (KNU) law, both setting 18 as the minimum age of marriage. Myanmar has also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Despite its illegality, it is still practiced in Southeast Burma.

⁵ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the September 23rd 2024 official market rate of 1,000 kyats to US \$0.48. (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).

Healthcare challenges in Lay Nya Hta Hkaw area

In Lay Nya Hta Hkaw area, villagers encountered challenges relating to the cost of healthcare. There was a notable increase in medical costs, resulting in difficulties for villagers seeking treatment at government hospitals [administered by the SAC]. Reports show that villagers who are unable to afford medical fees encountered reluctance from [SAC-employed] nurses and doctors to provide treatment. As a result, villagers were compelled to borrow money from wealthy people or moneylenders in order to access [essential] healthcare services.

However, not all villagers were able to secure the necessary funds, leading to delays in receiving medical attention. If villagers are unable to borrow money, they need to use their land as collateral and provide evidence of property ownership. If villagers have money for the cost of treatment, then, nurses and doctors provide treatment. Consequently, if they [villagers] have illnesses [and cannot afford medical treatment] they [villagers] seek traditional medicine.

Those who are seriously ill, seek treatment at a hospital located in J--- Town [treatment at this hospital does not cost much however transportation fees and food are expensive]. However, in order to access care at this facility, patients are required to procure an official letter of evidence from the village administrator, and at times, the presence of the village leader is necessary to facilitate passage through Burma Army checkpoints. This process [the physical presence of village leaders as companions] aims to streamline the [village] administration and access to medical assistance for seriously ill patients. However, these conditions have led to a situation where villagers opt for traditional remedies when they are unwell, due to the difficulties accessing medical treatment.

The need to rely on borrowed funds and navigate bureaucratic procedures to access healthcare has posed significant challenges for the local community in the Lay Nya Hta Hkaw area.

Conclusion

Regarding the situation of education, travel restrictions, [available] work, militarisation of Burma Army, villagers' livelihood and healthcare, it has not improved during these three months [October to December 2023].

Further background reading on the situation in Mergui-Tavoy District, Southeast Burma/Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [*Schools Under Attack: Challenges to the Right to Education in Southeast Burma \(June 2023 – February 2024\)*](#), July 2024.
- [*"Mergui-Tavoy District Incident Report: A 19-year-old villager was injured by a landmine explosion in K'Ser Doh Township, October 2023"*](#), May 2024.
- [*"Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: Forced recruitment of villagers by an SAC-affiliated militia causing displacement in Ler K'Saw Township \(December 2023 to March 2024\)"*](#), April 2024.
- [*"Mergui-Tavoy District Incident Report: Arbitrary arrest and killing of a villager by the SAC in K'Ser Doh Township, October 2023"*](#), March 2024.

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.

