



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Short Update**

April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024 / KHRG # 24-1-D1

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**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)**

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*This Short Update describes events in Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, including the forced recruitment of villagers. These incidents of forced recruitment began in December 2023 and are continuing to unfold at the time of publication, in April 2024. Soldiers from the State Administration Council (SAC) and an SAC-affiliated village militia in A--- village, B--- village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, are forcibly recruiting villagers. Villagers in A--- village were threatened with being forcibly evicted from the village if they refused to join the militia. In addition, the SAC and this village militia force seven villagers each week to keep watch at the gate to the SAC army base in A--- village. This situation has created severe safety and security concerns for villagers, causing many to flee.<sup>1</sup>*

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In A--- village, B--- village tract<sup>2</sup>, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>3</sup> and the village militia, who are affiliated with the SAC, are trying to forcibly recruit villagers. The militia's leaders, named Saw<sup>4</sup> Noh Kha Lay and Saw Khway, are forcing villagers to join their militia. Villagers were threatened with forcible eviction from the village if they refused to join.

This militia was formed in June 2023 in A--- village. Since then, the A--- village militia has joined with another militia from C--- village, which is nearby. When the militia was first formed, many A--- villagers did not support it and did not agree to its formation in their village [and so it could not recruit members easily]. Officially, 10 villagers have [voluntarily] joined the militia in A--- village. As only very few villagers supported the militia and there were not enough supporters from whom to recruit members, the militia intended to forcibly recruit villagers.

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in January and March 2024. 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> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

<sup>3</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>4</sup> Saw is a male honorific title in S'Gaw Karen language used before a person's name.

In response to the forced recruitment of villagers in A--- village, a battalion commander [unknown name] from the local Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>5</sup> sent a warning letter to A--- village [on an unknown date in 2023] instructing the militia to not force villagers to take up weapons. Following this, Saw Noh Kha Lay, one of the militia leaders, requested that the SAC allow him to be stationed in A--- village with the militia. The SAC agreed to this request and provided him with seven guns to arm his men [in December 2023]. Saw Noh Kha Lay is currently stationed in A--- village with the militia [as of April 2024].

Throughout December 2023, the SAC troops based in A--- village, ordered seven villagers per week to be gatekeepers at the entrance of their army base [in A--- village]. The SAC battalion feared attack from local armed resistance forces and so they used the villagers to keep watch and be a defence against attack.

One villager from A--- village, who had fled the village to avoid recruitment, explained to KHRG: *“I dare not to accept [to join the militia] because it will be very terrible if the SAC is stationed in the village, and the PDF [People Defence Force]<sup>6</sup> come [into the village] to shoot [start fighting with SAC]. If possible, I want them [villagers who joined the militia] to return their guns [to the militia]. I want to live peacefully in the village. And I do not want them to join the SAC as well. But I dare not say it because they [villagers who joined the militia] have weapons. [...] What I need [for the situation] to be better is that they leave the militia. But we were [verbally] threatened [by the SAC and the militia] so we could not stay in the village if we did not do it [join the militia].”*

As of March 2024, the SAC sent more troops to A--- village and set up a temporary shelter in the village so displaced villagers dared not to return to their village anymore. Some villagers fled to the riverbank, some to their farm huts, some to the border area, and some crossed into Thailand. Most villagers had already fled before the SAC had sent more troops, since force recruitment was occurring, but those who initially fled nearby their village were still returning at day time and back to their displacement site at night time.

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<sup>5</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed (KNLA) wing of the Karen National Union (KNU).

<sup>6</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.

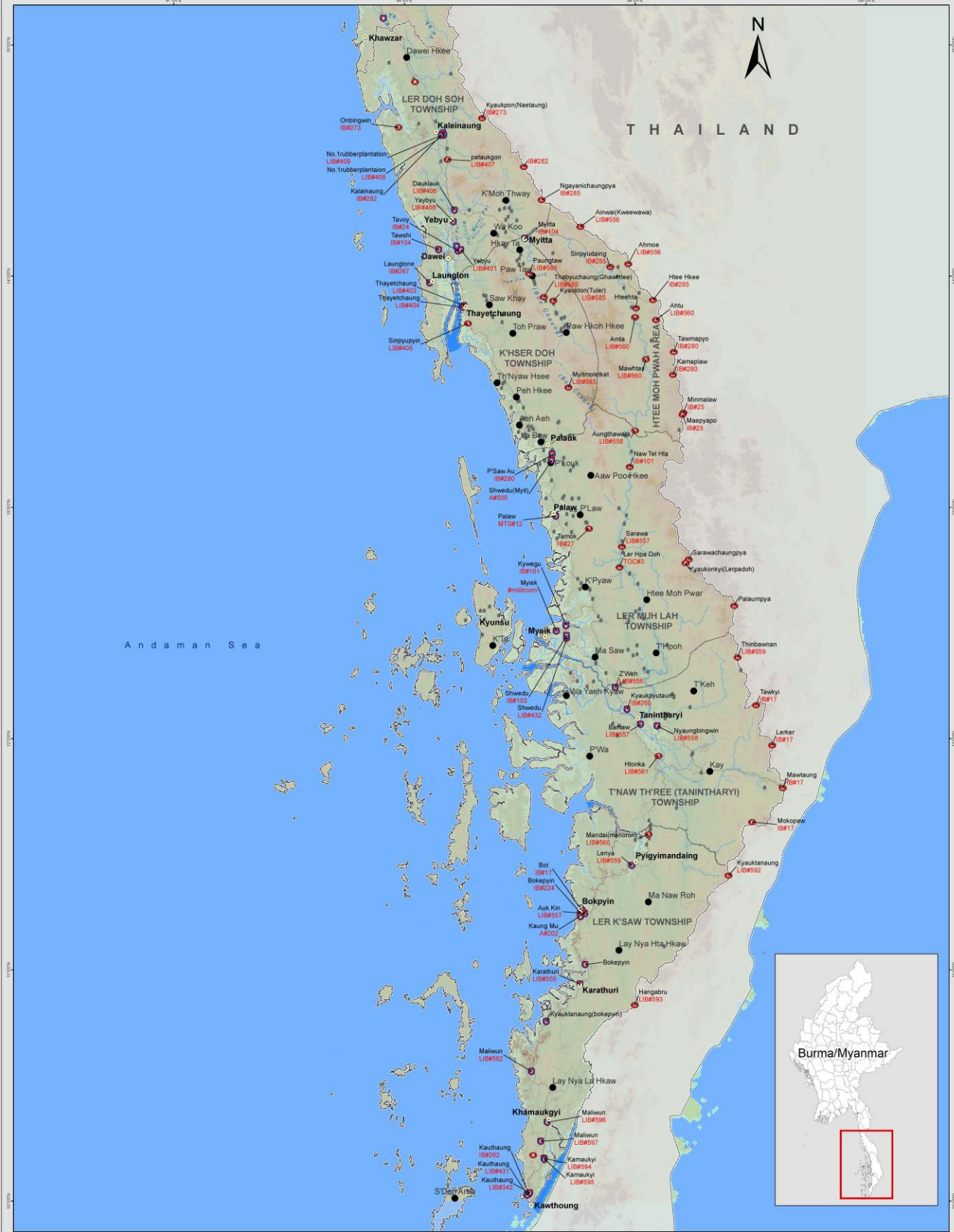
Further background reading on the security and human rights situation in Mergui-Tavoy District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: Killing, house burning, forced portering and use of civilians as human shields, in Ler K’Saw Township, July 2023”](#), December 2023
- [“Why would they target us?: Exploring patterns of the Burma Army’s retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma](#), June 2023
- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Arbitrary arrest and detention, looting and property damage, indiscriminate shelling, SAC militarisation, movement restrictions, and livelihood challenges, June to September 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 District (Tanintharyi Region) Map  
SEVEN KNU ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT



- Legend**
- Town
  - Village
  - Village tract point
  - Army Base
  - Army Camp
  - Major Road
  - - - Sub-Road
  - · - · - Tatmadaw Road
  - Water
  - Kawthoolei Township boundary
  - - - Kawthoolei District boundary

**Elevation (meter)**

-35 - 15	493 - 841
15 - 96	841 - 1,337
96 - 261	1,337 - 2,016
261 - 493	2,016 - 5,711

Map ID: KHRG\_District\_Map\_Mergui\_Tavoy  
Date: 18-Jan-2024  
Size: 33.11 X 46.8 inches

