



Short Update

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Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: Militarisation and fighting causing fear, travel restrictions, and livelihood challenges in Ler K'Saw Township (January 2024)

This Short Update describes events occurring in Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, in January 2024. State Administration Council (SAC) soldiers from Infantry Battalion (IB) #559 and Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #560 patrolled into a village in Sa Tein village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, setting up a temporary checkpoint and stopping villagers to interrogate them. When SAC soldiers approached L--- area, fighting also broke out between the SAC troops against combined forces of Kaw Thoo Lei Army (KTLA) and People Defence Force (PDF). Due to sudden armed conflict occurring around the village, villagers faced difficulties to flee, and worried about livelihood challenges as they are daily workers and farmers. Consequently, villagers remain anxious.¹

Militarisation and arbitrary checking and questioning of villagers:

On January 5th 2024, 20 soldiers from State Administration Council (SAC)² Infantry Battalion (IB)³ #559 and Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁴ #560, based in C--- village, Sa Tein village tract⁵, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, headed to H--- village, Sa Tein village tract. As reported by local villagers, before the SAC soldiers reached H--- village, while travelling from C-- - [village], they called [stopped] villagers and checked and interrogated them beside the road at Section #9 nearby H--- village, at around 8:30 am. As explained by a local villager from H---

¹ The present document is based on information received in January 2024 and September 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.

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.SA

³ 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.

⁴ A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. Most Light Infantry Battalions 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.

⁵ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

village, Sa Tein village tract, named Saw⁶ P---: *“On January 5th 2024, SAC were patrolling from their army camp in C--- village to H--- village, then they set up a temporary checkpoint on the road [...]. Regarding this [questioning by armed actors], it does not only happen when Burma Army patrolled into our village. Karen armed actors [KNLA⁷] and PDF [People Defence Force⁸] and ‘Pa Ka Hpa’ [a local PDF group] also patrolled into the village [...] everyday within a month and they set up their checkpoint just next to our village as well. In addition, they come into our village to buy food so we, as villagers, need to live our lives worrying every hour and every day and night.”* Reportedly, the SAC conducted shelling whenever they received the information that Karen armed groups were patrolling in the village [so villagers remain in constant fear]. Villagers do not know who sent the information to the SAC [about the presence of Karen soldiers in the area].

After [the SAC questioning on January 5th 2024], at 9 am, they [SAC] patrolled from Section #9 [near H--- village] to L--- area [located about 20 minutes away by motorbike]. Before they [SAC] reached not far from the village, they encountered combined forces of the Kaw Thoo Lei Army (KTLA)⁹ and People Defence Force (PDF)¹⁰ and then fighting broke out. The time when fighting broke out was around 9 am, and it lasted until 10 am. After one hour of fighting, Karen [KTLA] and PDF combined forces retreated from the fighting, [presumably] worrying that this fighting would impact the villagers. Regarding this fighting [occurring suddenly], villagers did not have time to prepare [to flee]. No villagers were injured. However, betel nut trees were damaged [in villagers’ plantations]. As reported by the local villager, Saw P---: *“Since January 5th 2024 to this September 2nd 2024, we need to live our lives with anxiety and fear every day and night. We need to flee through the darkness. And it [the situation] is worse if there is fighting happening when they [all armed actors] are patrolling into the village. Sometimes we got wet while fleeing and we had to sleep on the ground.”*

Displacement challenges:

[Usually,] the SAC does not come out [from their army camps to patrol into the village] during the day. They [SAC] mostly come out at nighttime. So, when villagers hear [receive] the information [from other villagers, about SAC soldiers’ presence], it is already dark so they face difficulties to flee. This is an experience that villagers are facing frequently. Due to Burma Army soldiers entering into the village at night-time and not during daytime, villagers do not have time prepare their packages [with essential items] to flee and sometimes villagers do not even have time to pick up a torchlight when they hear that Burma Army soldiers entering the village.

Villagers are also facing problems to flee during daytime if fighting happens close to the village, hence blocking the road. Villagers also reported on the livelihood struggles during displacement.

⁶ ‘Saw’ is a S’gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person’s name.

⁷ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

Saw P--- explained: “As we [villagers] do not have money [saved up] to prepare ourselves for displacement, it is the challenge for people like us, as we are daily workers. So, it will be better, if there is no fighting [war]. Even if the fighting occurred again, I request [armed actors] to do it [fight] far from the village. There is no way for us to run [flee], if it [fighting] happens in a similar manner as today [as of January 2024], near the village. This is the reason why I would like to request for fighting to take place far from our village.”

Currently, villagers keep wondering when the fighting will occur again, and they need to observe the situation [staying alert, ready to flee].

Further background reading on the situation on fighting and displacement in Mergui-Tavoy District (Southeast Burma/Myanmar) can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- KHRG, [Schools Under Attack : Challenges to the right to education in Southeast Burma \(June 2023-February 2024\)](#), Briefing Paper, July 2024.
- KHRG, [“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.
- KHRG, [“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.

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.

