



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## Situation Update

February 23, 2015/ KHRG #14-85-S1

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## Thaton Situation Update: Bilin and Hpa-an townships, June to November 2014

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Bilin and Hpa-an townships, Thaton District during the period between June to November 2014, including forced recruitment, arbitrary taxation, ongoing militarisation and non-governmental organisation (NGO) activity.*

- On June 4<sup>th</sup> 2014, the Thaung Kyan Thu Hsa Kyin Yay A Pwe (Tha Ka Hsa Hpa) anti-insurgency group led by Moe Nyo forcibly recruited soldiers in Bilin Township. Villages in four village tracts were required to provide recruits based on the number of households in the village.
  - Border Guard Force (BGF) Battalion #1014, which is based in Hpa-an Township, have three army camps which arbitrarily demand tax from cow and buffalo traders. These BGF camps are Law Poo, Meh Poo and Pah Paw army camps.
  - Since the ceasefire, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Save the Children and Bridge Asia Japan (BAJ) are entering Bilin and Hpa-an townships and implementing local development projects. Most of the projects involve building schools and clinics, providing solar panels, as well as providing access to a water supply.
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## Situation Update | Bilin and Hpa-an townships, Thaton District (June to November 2014)

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in December 2014. It was written by a community member in Thaton District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup> This report was received along with other information from Thaton District, including nine incident reports, nine interviews, 148 photographs and ten video clips.<sup>2</sup>*

### Introduction

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains community members in eastern Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When writing situation updates, community members are encouraged to summarise recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important, and present their opinions or perspective on abuse and other local dynamics in their area.

<sup>2</sup> In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's Website.

This situation update is from Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District, [covering events] in Bilin Township and Hpa-an Township areas. [This] situation update covers political, economic and community developments [and the] situation of civilians' livelihoods. The [period of this situation update] is from June 2014 until November 2014.

### **Political situation in Hpa-an Township**

This [section covers the] transition in Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District since the KNU [Karen National Union] and [Burma/Myanmar] government signed [the 2012 preliminary] ceasefire<sup>3</sup> agreement. In Hpa-an Township, the militia, *Tha Ka Hsa Hpa*, is based in Noh Ma Kwee [village] and is led by Moe Nyo.<sup>4</sup> He established basic military training on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2014, beside Noh Ma Kwee village, in Wo Kyain village tract, Hpa-an Township. He trains 70 soldiers a month. I am not certain why he does his planning [recruiting soldiers]. He recruits the soldiers from villages as they [*Tha Ka Hsa Hpa*] have done in the past.<sup>5</sup> In a village, if households are fewer than 50, five people are required for military recruitment and if there are more than 50 households [in a village], six to ten people are required for recruitment. Villagers do not want to be in the *Tha Ka Hsa Hpa* military, but the order is that if you cannot follow their requirements [if you do not serve] the one who is elected to be a soldier must pay 50,000 kyat (US \$48.50)<sup>6</sup> per month. He [Moe Nyo] recruited soldiers in Wo Kyain village tract, Boo Pyer village tract, Aee Heh village tract and Kyoh Moh Thweh village tract.

### **Government military activity in Hpa-an Township**

Regarding government military activity in Hpa-an Township, there is no other activity. The government military [Tatmadaw] have no army camps in this township, they just have Battalion #1014 which is a BGF [Border Guard Force]<sup>7</sup> company. They [BGF] have three army camps, which are Law Poo army camp, Meh Poo army camp and Pah Paw army camp. The BGF established those army camps, which do not seem like army camps. [Instead], they seem like gates to demand tax from cow and buffalo [traders]. Four or five members [BGF soldiers] are there at each gate and have no other activity [than collecting tax]. The government military [Tatmadaw] also have no other activities, except sometimes, if [Burma/Myanmar] administrators are coming to work [in Thaton District] regarding education or healthcare, they [Tatmadaw] provide security [for the

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<sup>3</sup> On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the KNU Stakeholder webpage on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Tha Ka Hsa Hpa* is an abbreviation of *Thaung Kyan Thu Hsa Kyin Yay A Pwe*, which means 'anti-insurgency group' in Burmese. This militia was formed in 2010 by Moe Nyo, a former Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) leader, who split from the DKBA after it transitioned into a Border Guard Force (BGF). Moe Nyo eventually joined the Burma/Myanmar government controlled BGF in Battalion #1014, while still continuing to operate *Tha Ka Hsa Hpa*. See ["Incident Report: Forced recruitment in Thaton District #1, May 2012"](#), KHRG, May 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See ["Thaton Situation Update: Hpa-an and Bilin townships, July to September 2013"](#), KHRG, November 2014 and ["Incident Report: Forced recruitment in Thaton District #1, May 2012"](#), KHRG, May 2013.

<sup>6</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the January 19<sup>th</sup> 2015 official market rate of 1,031 kyat to the US \$1.

<sup>7</sup> Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burmese government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion numbers. For more information, see ["DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force"](#) *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 2010, and, ["Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District"](#), KHRG, June 2009.

administrators]. They [Tatmadaw] ask permission before they come. [They] ask permission from the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] and if they give them permission they come.

### **Economic situation in Hpa-an Township**

The Mi Cho Taung company was founded in 2014 and is led by Saw P'Lay and it is based in Hpa-an Township. In early 2014, this company has been operating at Meh See mountain mining for copper. They have not yet received results [indicating there is copper]. A KNLA leader who does not want to reveal his name said it [exploratory mining] is still in progress. This company is known as a KNU [owned] company. It was established in Thaton District in 2014. Officer Saw P'Lay is in charge of the company and his secretary is P'Doh Ko Lay. The objective of establishing that company is to increase trading and find funding for [Thaton] District and Brigade [One].

### **Situation in Bilin Township**

[In Thaton District], KNU and KNLA army camps are based in Bilin Township, therefore the Brigade [One] and [Thaton] District headquarters is located in this township. The KNLA established another battalion in August 2014; it is called Battalion #3. In Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District, the KNLA previously had [only] two battalions, which are Battalion #1 and Battalion #2. KNLA Battalion #1 is based in Hpa-an Township. [KNLA] Battalion #2 is based in Thaton Township. Battalion #3 is a new battalion and it is based in Bilin Township. [They] have no other different activities; we just report about them. The KNDO [Karen National Defense Organisation]<sup>8</sup> Battalion #2 is based in Kyaikto Township.

### **NGO activity in Bilin Township**

Since the ceasefire period, NGOs [non-governmental organisations] are coming to Bilin Township for local development projects. The NGOs are (1) SDC [Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation]; (2) BAJ [Bridge Asia Japan]; (3) ADRAM [Adventist Development and Relief Agency Myanmar]; (4) Save the Children; and (5) Nippon Foundation.

### **1. SDC**

SDC came to do local development projects in Bilin Township in 12 villages. The 12 villages are (1) Yoh Klah village; (2) Htee Pa Doh Hta village; (3) Noh K'Neh village; (4) Kyoh Weh village; (5) Baw Naw Nee village; (6) Ta Auh Hkee village; (7) Thoo K'Bee village; (8) P'Ya Raw village; (9) Lay Kay [village]; (10) Ler Hklaw [village]; (11) Ta Paw village; [and] (12) Ta Paw Hkee village. The purpose of these projects are to build schools and clinics, construct roads, and [build] houses for teachers, as well as to install pipes for water supply. This organisation started [their projects] in 2013, but we cannot see any results [yet]. On November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014, I went to collect information in Noh K'Neh village, Kyoh Weh village tract, Bilin Township. I met with a SDC field director. His name is Saw Min Naung.<sup>9</sup> He came to have a meeting in Noh K'Neh village. The purpose of the meeting was to implement an objective of the organisation and establish the community work implementation committee among villagers. When I met with him and I asked about his job he told me that in the villages which had been selected [for SDC projects, those projects] would be finished in 2014. They plan to establish a committee in

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<sup>8</sup> The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on SDC projects in Thaton District in 2014, see "[Thaton Short Update: Bilin Township, October 2014](#)," KHRG, February 2015.

each village in order to achieve this purpose. He elected one person from each village to help him with [financial] accounting.

## **2. BAJ organisation project situation**

The BAJ organisation came to do a development project in Bilin Township. The purpose of the project is to supply water for local villages which are very far from a river. In Bilin Township, the village tracts that they had established a water supply for are Kyoh Weh village tract and P'Ya Raw village tract. Some of these villages are Kyoh Weh village, Baw Naw Nee village, P'Ya Raw village and Lay Kay village. Kyoh Weh village and Baw Naw Nee village requested a school, but the people gave them a water supply [pump] [instead]. I went to meet the Kyoh Weh village head, Tee Zaw Wah, [and] he said to me [the BJA] project started on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 and the villagers have [seen] no benefit as they have not finished their work yet [and have left the village]. So, whether they will come back [and finish the project] or not we cannot say.

## **3. ADRAM**

ADRAM also built clinics and schools for villagers. I am not certain [about this] information, I just heard from the people [villagers].

## **4. Save the Children**

Save the Children came and built nursery schools for the villagers. The villages in Bilin Township which are based in large areas of flat ground and are beside the roads and towns almost all have a nursery school [established by Save the Children]. In some villages we know that the KWO [Karen Women Organisation] already built a nursery school, but this organisation [Save the Children] came and asked the people [villagers] to build another new school. Because of that, one KWO chairperson from Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] Township felt that they [Save the Children] might [unintentionally] create conflict between them [KWO who want children to go their schools] and villagers. [We] see that in Htee Pa Doh Hta village, Bilin Township, KWO had established a nursery school in west Htee Pa Doh Hta village [and] east [Htee Pa Doh Hta village]. In June 2014, that organisation [Save the Children] came [and] asked villagers to build another new nursery school. The [Htee Pa Doh Hta] villagers complained that one village would have three [nursery] schools, so what can we do [with these three nursery schools]?

## **5. Nippon Foundation**

We know that they [Nippon Foundation] had come to support the villagers by providing food, such as rice, and solar panels. In 2013, they came one time to provide [rice and solar panels] in Thaton Township. In August 2014, [they] again came to provide it in four townships. [They] gave each person a big tin<sup>10</sup> of rice and [each household] a solar panel. They focus on supporting small villages which are rural mountain [sites].

## **Development Projects**

Development works include roads and agriculture plantations in Bilin Township. They [people] came to construct a main road from P'Nweh Klah village to Lay Kay village. This main road was given by contract to Htu Company, U Ye Tun, U Win Luin and Sit Engineering Company. [We] also know that the budget for road construction was provided by the [Burma/Myanmar] government. Road construction started in early 2014 and it became just a red [dirt] road. In the summer of this year they plan to cover it with concrete, [but] now because the dry season has not come yet and the road is not done, they have yet to start it.

## **Long-term agricultural plantations**

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<sup>10</sup> A big tin is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One big tin is equivalent to 10.45 kg. or 23.04 lb. of paddy, and 16 kg. or 35.2 lb. of milled rice.

During this year, from June 2014 until now [November 2014] in Bilin Township, some rich people and some villagers who have money are planting teak in almost every village. Because of this, some villagers do not have land [to earn their livelihoods] and hill field farmers have problems when working in the hill fields and grazing their buffalos and cows. In past years, people had been planting rubber plantations and now [they] started to do teak plantations. Because of that, for the villagers who [earn their livelihoods] in daily labour, it will cause big problems for them.

### **Civilians' livelihood**

In Bilin and Hpa-an townships, the civilians are earning [their livelihoods] in the same way. Mostly [they are earning] their livelihoods from working on farms and some are [working] on hill fields. Some [villagers earn their livelihoods] from working on plantations and some [are earning their livelihoods] from daily [labour] work. [They are earning their] livelihoods like that [because] there is no more forest, there is a water shortage, unfavourable weather [conditions] and the quality of the soil is decreasing. [Therefore], year by year, the rice production becomes lesser and lesser. In paddy farms, the soil is not good [to grow rice], therefore most farms became teak plantations and rubber plantations. The consequence [of that] is the youth become migrant workers and [go] to find jobs in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. They are going to find jobs and send money for their families which their families use to buy rice from the towns. Some people went to find jobs and send money for their families, [but] some people who use drugs cannot send money to their families. Some people are ruining their lives in other countries [with drugs]; some have new marriages and become other people's problems. Some leave their kids with old moms [grandmas] and old dads [grandpas], and the children became orphans.

### **Conclusion**

The information that was written in this report is all truthfully occurring in Bilin and Hpa-an townships. Also, we saw [this] by ourselves and [some information] the local villagers told us [and] we report about it.

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

- "Thaton Situation Update: Bilin, Thaton, Kyaikto and Hpa-an townships, September to November 2014," (February 2015)
- "Thaton Short Update: Bilin Township, October 2014," (February 2015)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, April 2014," (January 2015)
- "Field Report: Thaton District, September 2012 to December 2013," (December 2014)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Hpa-an and Bilin townships, July to September 2013," (November 2014)

# Doo Tha Htoo ( Karen)

